

WORLDS OF WORDS:  
Complexity, Creativity,  
and Conventionality  
in English Language,  
Literature and Culture

*Literature Section edited by  
Roberta Ferrari and Sara Soncini*

*Culture Section edited by  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### LITERATURE

#### PREFACE

- ROBERTA FERRARI, SARA SONCINI, *The Intersection between Complexity and Creativity in Literary Studies: A Multifaceted Approach* 5

#### PART I

##### CREATIVE LITERARY PRACTICES: LANGUAGE, STYLE, STRUCTURE

- SERENA BAIESI, *Theatre is “a pleasure for most social kind”:  
Illegitimate Performances as Personal Enjoyment and Social Improvement  
in Leigh Hunt’s Reviews* 15
- PAOLO BUGLIANI, *Sir Thomas Browne’s purple patches:  
The Creative Cosmography of the Self in Religio Medici* 27
- FRANCESCA CHIAPPINI, *Myth, Language and the Urban Nemesis:  
Mina Loy’s Urban Poetry* 39
- ELENA COTTA RAMUSINO, *Elizabeth Bowen’s Idiosyncratic Style* 51
- GIUSEPPE DE RISO, *Palimpsests of Power in Neel Mukherjee’s  
The Lives of Others* 61
- ANNALISA FEDERICI, *Glass, Frames, and Mirrors in Virginia Woolf* 69
- LUCIA CLAUDIA FIORELLA *The Self-Effacing Autobiographer: Recasting Life  
Writing in Summertime by J.M. Coetzee* 79
- ROBERTA GRANDI, *Mason and Pre-Wartime Films: Patriotism and Heroism in  
The Four Feathers (1902) and Fire Over England (1936)* 91

ERICA MAGGIONI, <i>“O! ancient crimson curse!”: A Creative Fusion of Poetry and Painting in Isaac Rosenberg’s Response to the First World War</i>	101
ELISABETTA MARINO, <i>Not just a “plaything of the imagination”: Complexity and Creativity in Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot the Tyrant, by P.B. Shelley</i>	111
GERARDO SALVATI, <i>Creativity and Accessibility: Henry James and the Modernist Preface</i>	121

## PART II

### COMPLEX LITERARY PRACTICES: EDITING, MANIPULATING, TRANSLATING

MARIA CHIARA ALESSANDRINI, <i>The Complex System of Neoplatonic References in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i>	133
ANGELA ANDREANI, <i>Manuscript Transmission and Editing in Meredith Hanmer’s Chronicle of Ireland</i>	143
GIOIA ANGELETTI, <i>Shakespeare for Young People in Contemporary Scottish Theatre: Revisionist Plays by Liz Lochhead and Sharman Macdonald</i>	153
ANDREW BRAYLEY, <i>Complexity in Mary Shelley: The Last Man</i>	165
MARCO CANANI, <i>The Cenci, or the Complex Reception of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Italy, between Translation and Gender</i>	175
MARIA ELENA CAPITANI, <i>Nineties Lear: Neo-Jacobean Echoes in Martin Crimp’s and Sarah Kane’s “In-Yer-Face” Drama</i>	189
FERNANDO CIONI, <i>Post-Holocaust Shylocks: Rewritings and Appropriations of The Merchant of Venice</i>	201
ALESSANDRA CROTTI, <i>Woolf at the Scriblerus Club, or, Orlando Meets the Augustans</i>	213
SIMONETTA DE FILIPPIS, <i>the Gap of Time: the Creative Cycle of a Story</i>	223
MARIA LUIGIA DI NISIO, <i>“The garb of ancient Greece”: Late-Victorian Women Poets and the Gendering of Classicism</i>	235

MONICA MANZOLILLO, *Teaching English Literature from a Chaos and Complexity Perspective: Future Learn E-learning Course on Shakespeare: Print and Performance* 247

ALESSANDRA SQUEO, *Visualizing Variants: Shakespeare's Textual Instability in Digital Media* 257

## CULTURE

### PREFACE

FAUSTO CIOMPI, LAURA GIOVANNELLI, *Glimpses of a Metamorphic Scenario* 273

—

ROGER BROMLEY, *In Between Stories: Gramsci's "Morbid Symptoms" and Changing Narratives in Cultural Studies* 285

NICOLETTA VALLORANI, *Rewording/Rewarding Culture: (Post)Cultural Studies and the Shame of Being 'Different'* 309

ANJA MEYER, *The Disaster Selfie: Images of Popular Virtual Trauma* 321

GIULIA MARIA OLIVATO, *Human Inheritance, the 'DNA Journey' and Bernardine Evaristo's The Emperor's Babe* 331

ALESSIA POLATTI, *Wandering in a Creative Space: The Construction of the Indian City in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance* 343

ANGELO MONACO, *Globalisation into Cyberspace: Hari Kunzru's Transmission and the Indian Transnational Parasite* 353

SERENA PARISI, *Exile as a Creative Choice: Transnationalism and Liminality in Orson Welles's Chimes at Midnight* 365

ANNALISA VOLPONE, *"Stop deaf stop come back to my earin stop": Some Examples of (Tele)communication in James Joyce's Finnegans Wake* 377

AURELIANA NATALE, *Play. Pause. Replay: Performing Shakespeare(s) across Media* 387

PIERPAOLO MARTINO, <i>From Oscar Wilde to Hanif Kureishi: David Bowie and English Literature</i>	395
LUCIA ABBAMONTE, FLAVIA CAVALIERE, <i>Adaptively Evolving Ecosystems: Green-Speaking at Tesco</i>	407
ANGELA ZOTTOLA, ANTONIO FRUTTALDO, <i>'The Shade of It All': Queering Academia via Twitter</i>	423

# LITERATURE



# PREFACE



ROBERTA FERRARI AND SARA SONCINI  
*Università degli Studi di Pisa*

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN COMPLEXITY  
AND CREATIVITY IN LITERARY STUDIES:  
A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

Complexity, creativity, and conventionality are vital notions in literary interpretation, and their exploration may provide substantial help in drawing a map of literary practices. The tension between convention and creativity has long been identified as the central structuring principle of literature *qua* signifying practice, the root cause behind the fascinating complexity of this polymorphic, heteroglossic, multifocal “world of words”. Despite a growing interest in literary creativity and literary complexity in recent years (Attridge 2004; Pope 2005; Swann et al. 2011), however, to date both notions continue to remain rather elusive, due to the absence – actually the impossibility – of a single, authoritative definition of their nature and workings, as well as of a systematic description of their multifarious embodiments.

The creation of literary texts involves various forms of complexity, based as it is on crucial choices at the level of language, style, and structure. Literary language is always the result of a “creative struggle” with conventional language on the one hand, and with the language of previous writers on the other. This battle – to echo Bloom’s confrontational model of literary influence (Bloom 1973) – is fought by ways of invention, contamination, manipulation, interpolation, translation, not only across genres but also across different media, resulting in an in-built intersectionality that seems to call for a horizontal-rhizomatic, rather than vertical-linear, understanding of the workings of literary creativity (Lanier 2014, here with specific reference to the paradigmatic case of Shakespeare adaptation). Moreover, complexity in the structuring of literary texts also involves such key issues as the organisation of their spatial and temporal dimensions, the choice and interplay of poetic and narrative voices, the harmonising of the aesthetic urge with other functions such as the emotional and the ethical. Literary creativity is an essential issue at stake also when considering the ways in which literature deals with life and the world, through representational strategies that range from the mimetic to the self-referential, from the documentary to the fantastic, in order to either consolidate received meanings or challenge them and provide alternative views of reality, of man, and of art itself.

The concept of creativity also plays a fundamental role in the dialectics between originality and normativity which, far from being limited to the historical paradigm of Classicism vs. Romanticism, actually constitutes one of the basic polarities presiding over the development of literature through the centuries. As an index of the statutory complexity of literary texts, the notion of creativity has had a shaping influence on the development of critical practices and ways of reading, specifically with reference to the construction and subversion of normative frameworks, the universalism/historicism binary, and the ever ongoing debate about the literary Canon (Löffler 2017).

Last, but not least, creativity and its implications for the exploration of literary complexity bear crucially on current discussions over the teaching of literature (Doll et al. 2005; Davis and Sumara 2008; Osberg and Biesta 2010; Mansoor and Ayoub 2015), in an age that is experiencing a digital revolution which calls for a continuous updating of methods and tools in order to account for the processual, convergent and often contingent nature of current as well as emerging forms of textuality, literacy and creativity (Bolter and Grusin 1999, McGann 2001; Loizeaux and Fraitstat 2002; Carson and Kirwan 2014; Kalla et al. 2018).

Inspired by the papers presented at the 28<sup>th</sup> biennial Conference of the Italian Association of English Studies, held in Pisa in September 2017, the essays collected in this volume intend to contribute to a reflection on complexity and creativity in literary works, focusing both on the diachronic development of these two concepts through different ages and literary periods, and on their synchronic occurrence within texts and across genres. The wide time span covered by the essays, ranging from the early modern period to the contemporary, enables an extensive charting, as well as an inclusive and in-depth understanding, of an extremely rich phenomenology.

The volume is divided into two sections devoted, respectively, to creativity and complexity, though the frequent overlaps militate against a clear-cut distinction between the two. The essays in Part I engage with the concept of creativity at different levels, unveiling processes at work in the manipulation of language, style, and generic conventions, as well as in the dialogue between literature and the other arts. Part II, instead, presents studies that investigate various aspects of literary complexity with a primary focus on the reception of literary works, as well as on their remediation and refunctionalisation, for instance in teaching practices.

In Part I Paolo Bugliani's essay on Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* throws new light on its often overlooked autobiographical dimension. A close reading of Browne's devotional work betrays the author's intention to share with his reader biographical details that, besides enriching the text's complexity, also contribute to delineating it as a highly creative piece of writing whose ultimate goal is to convey a personal idea of man and of human nature. The creative component of life writing is also explored by Lucia Fiorella in her analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*, the last volume in an autobiographical trilogy that undermines the very premises on which traditional autobiography is based. In *Summertime*, the challenge of the autobiographer as a fictioneer is taken a step further by interpolating verifiable events with fabricated testimonies in order to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, thus subscribing to the typically postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist problematising of the relationship between life and literature. Giuseppe De Riso's contribution likewise focuses on the postcolonial context, namely on Neel Mukherjee's 2014 novel, *The Lives of Others*, taking into account the ways in which the story thematises the dynamics of power in the complex political and social context of India in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Another group of essays address the question of literary creativity at the level of language, style and imagery. Elena Cotta Ramusino discusses the main features of Elizabeth Bowen's highly idiosyncratic style, pointing out her creative use of grammar and syntax. The essay also highlights Bowen's peculiar approach to objects which, in her fiction, are often granted far greater importance than human characters. The symbolic import of objects, in particular glasses, frames, and mirrors, is also scrutinised in Annalisa Federici's essay on Virginia Woolf's modernist prose, where she highlights the way in which such motifs function both as a metaphor for the controversial relationship between life and art, and as a structural objectivising of the very process of writing. In the area of modernist poetry, Francesca Chiappini investigates the creative manipulation of poetical language in Mina Loy's urban poetry. The essay draws specific attention to Loy's appropriation of mythical figures, whom the poetess transplants into the modern city, where they are deconstructed, annihilated, and transfigured through poetic invention. In this sense, Loy's poetry reveals itself as a privileged ground for the exploration of the tension between convention and creativity, normativity and originality.

The complex interaction between literature and the visual arts is foregrounded in Erica Maggioni's study of Isaac Rosenberg's war poetry: drawing on his artistic expertise as a painter, Rosenberg creates a

highly visual poetic language which is intended to overcome the shortcomings of words in the testimony of the tragedy of war. A different kind of remediation, that between literature and cinema, is explored by Roberta Grandi, who takes into consideration two novels by Alfred E. Mason and their film versions, showing how themes and visual elements are transformed in the transfer from one medium into the other in order to meet the needs of war propaganda.

Elisabetta Marino's and Serena Baiesi's contributions shift attention to a different field, that of drama and the theatre. Marino analyses the complexity of Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot the Tyrant*, which she defines as "a truly experimental text" that stretches the boundaries of conventionality as far as formal hybridity and intertextual richness are concerned. The complexity of the play is further witnessed by its ideological dimension, which links it to the political and social context of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. On the other hand, Serena Baiesi throws light on Leigh Hunt's activity as a playgoer and a theatre critic, investigating the close connection between his comments on performances belonging to illegitimate genres and his interest in political radicalism and cultural subversion.

Part I closes on Gerardo Salvati's rereading of Henry James's Prefaces *qua* creative spaces of artistic freedom: instead of merely providing information and advice, in James the preface takes the shape of a sort of "condensed fiction", a text in its own right which becomes completely disengaged from its ancillary position to the novel.

Maria Chiara Alessandrini's study of Neoplatonism in Coleridge's *Rime* opens Part II. Her analysis unveils the complex network of references to Neoplatonic philosophers that animates the poem, broadening its metaphysical background and nourishing its imagery. Complexity is a key concern also in Angela Andreani's discussion of the manuscript sources of Meredith Hanmer's *Chronicles of Ireland* (1633). Focusing on this case study, Andreani's contribution raises crucial questions concerning the editorial vicissitudes of early modern texts in the light of New Philology.

With a more decided slant on re-readings and mis-readings of the Canon, a group of essays in this section – by Gioia Angeletti, Maria Elena Capitani, Fernando Cioni, and Simonetta de Filippis – focus on contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare's texts. Angeletti analyses the works of two Scottish female dramatists, Liz Lochhead and Sharman Macdonald, whose rewritings of, respectively, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* reflect the complexity of the source texts as well as the need to creatively manipulate their materials in order to address a

modern-day young audience. Capitani's essay, on the contrary, explores the ways in which Martin Crimp appropriates Shakespeare's metaphor of blindness and (in)sight in *The Treatment* (1993), a play that is seen as anticipating the in-her-face sensibility of Sarah Kane's take on *King Lear* in her landmark play, *Blasted* (1995). Cioni's investigation of two adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* by Jewish playwrights Maurice Schwartz (*Shylock and His Daughter*, 1947) and George Tabori (*The Merchant of Venice as Performed in Theresienstadt*, 1966) specifically concentrates on the character of Shylock with the aim of revealing the complex ways in which post-holocaust readings of the play have radically altered and reshaped this figure to suit a thoroughly different perception of such issues as anti-Semitism and the Jewish question. In contemporary times, Shakespeare is also frequently appropriated by novelists, as is the case with Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* (2016). Simonetta de Filippis's contribution analyses this narrative reworking of *The Winter's Tale* by emphasising the role of time within a highly creative and deeply personal reappraisal of Shakespeare's story.

Different kinds of reception are explored in another group of essays, which tackle questions connected either with the relationship with past traditions or with the implications of the dislocation of texts in space and time. Maria Luigia Di Nisio, for instance, deals with an interesting phenomenon within late-Victorian culture, namely, the gendering of classicism by women poets like Augusta Webster and Amy Levy, whose revisionism bears witness to a creative appropriation of ancient myth that aims at reconfiguring it from a marginalised female perspective. On the other hand, Alessandra Crotti explores the way Virginia Woolf's bond with 18<sup>th</sup>-century culture and literature helps her redefine the boundaries and potentialities of life writing against Victorian biographical tradition. Adopting a more markedly transnational and cross-cultural perspective, Marco Canani investigates the dynamics of reception from a double point of view: on the one hand, he discusses the influence of Italian literature and culture on P.B. Shelley's writings, in particular on his 1818 tragedy *The Cenci*, highlighting the poet's strongly gendered remediation of Italy; on the other, the essay considers the circulation of Shelley's tragedy in Italy in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its influence on subsequent rewritings of the Cenci story such as Giovanni Battista Niccolini's drama *Beatrice Cenci* and Domenico Guerrazzi's novel of the same title. Another member of the Shelley family, Mary, and her 1826 novel *The Last Man* constitute the focus of Andrew Brayley's essay, which offers a reading of this complex dystopian story as a response to a whole set of contemporary fears and threats, from nuclear bombs to AIDS, down to terrorism and fundamentalism.

The last two essays in Part II draw attention to the implications of the digital revolution on the transmission, fruition, and teaching of literary works, with a specific interest in Shakespearean texts. Adopting a Chaos and Complexity approach, Monica Manzolillo examines the opportunities offered by new technologies – videoconferences, chats, forums, blogs, wiki, repositories for essays sharing – for the teaching of literature. She specifically concentrates on an on-line platform, *Future Learn*, describing one of its courses in terms of its internal organisation and learning strategies. Finally, Alessandra Squeo investigates the fertile interaction between textual scholarship and new digital technologies, by stressing in particular how digital tools may help recover and reconstruct the complexity of Shakespeare’s early modern textuality in a variety of different ways.

The wide-ranging spectrum of the essays presented in this collection, together with the different methodological and theoretical approaches they propose, stand as patent proof of the fact that creativity and complexity represent two privileged standpoints from which literary texts may be not only studied and appreciated, but also shared and taught in a most captivating way.

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PART I

CREATIVE LITERARY PRACTICES:  
LANGUAGE, STYLE, STRUCTURE



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THEATRE IS “A PLEASURE FOR MOST SOCIAL KIND”:  
ILLEGITIMATE PERFORMANCES AS PERSONAL ENJOYMENT  
AND SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT IN LEIGH HUNT’S REVIEWS

*Abstract*

Leigh Hunt was a frequent playgoer and an esteemed critic of the London stage. Although he deplored the “degradation of the modern theatre” (*The Examiner*, 1811), he portrayed theatrical amusement as a means of bringing together different classes (Pratt 2001). In this essay, I explore Hunt’s critical comments on his experiences as a spectator and journalist, especially for performances belonging to illegitimate genres. As a site of “political, moral and indeed generic transgression” (Moody 2000), illegitimate theatre appealed to Hunt for its political radicalism and cultural subversion. He believed that minor houses and illegitimate genres such as pantomime, burletta or extravaganza were endowed with a political connotation that influenced all social classes. Starting with an analysis of these genres and the dramaturgy of illegitimate theatre, I investigate Hunt’s compelling response to the discourse of dramatic illegitimacy.

*Keywords:* Illegitimate theatre; Leigh Hunt; theatrical review; journalism.

“The first time I ever saw a play was in March 1800;  
it was the *Egyptian Festival*” (Hunt 1807: v)<sup>1</sup>

Leigh Hunt was a frequent playgoer and esteemed critic of the London stage. Although he deplored the “degradation of the modern theatre” (*The Examiner*, 1811), he portrayed theatrical amusement as an “imitation of life” (Hunt 2003: I, 11)<sup>2</sup> that brought together different classes. In this essay I explore Hunt’s critical comments on his experiences as a spectator and a theatrical reviewer, especially in regard to

<sup>1</sup> Comic opera performed at Drury Lane by Andrew Franklin and attended by Leigh Hunt when he was 16 years old.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as *SW*.

illegitimate theatre. For my purpose, I define illegitimate theatre alongside Jane Moody's interpretations of such a theatrical form, meaning not only that "category of performances staged at those theatres where legitimate drama (tragedy and comedy) was prohibited", but specifically as a "complex site of political, moral and indeed generic transgression highlighting in which ways the production and consumption of these plays defined assumptions about cultural and social hierarchy" (Moody 2000: 1-2).

Leigh Hunt had been a professional drama critic from an early age. He emerged as a public figure between 1801 and 1808 as a theatre critic for *The News*. The essays he published there were later collected in a volume entitled *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatre* (1807). Hunt then continued his activities as a theatrical reviewer for the *Examiner* (1808-1820), and eventually inserted his 'Play-Goer' column in *The Tatler* (1830-32). Other comments and reviews on the theatre are also to be found in his *Autobiography*. In the almost twenty-seven years following 1805, Hunt wrote over six hundred theatrical papers and reviews, suspending his activity only when he could not actually attend the public houses (as for example when he was imprisoned or during his journey to Italy). Nonetheless, he was continuously involved with theatrical criticism. Clearly, no other contemporary man of letters, whose interests and activities were as widespread as Hunt's, could match his passion for the stage (Thompson 1977: 60).

Hunt has been recognised as the finest and most prolific theatrical reviewer of Romantic drama (*SW*, III, xii)<sup>3</sup>. His criticism engages with a wide range of topics, such as theatrical productions; actors and actresses; opera and ballet; old and new plays and playwrights; as well as offering observations on managers and legal regulations. Hunt provided remarkable descriptions of the theatrical venues, their architecture and inner spaces, the scenery, lighting, music and special effects. Moreover, in his reviews, the writer reflected on the social role of the critic and his independent view on the theatre. He was strictly committed to the reformation of manners, the dissemination of cultural values, and an aesthetic approach to the dramatic art. Hunt was particularly displeased by the practice adopted by many critics of his time who published anonymous puffs for the theatre in exchange of free tickets and dinners. As he put it, "what the public took for criticism on a play was a draft upon a box-office, or reminisces of last Thursday's salmon and lobster-sauce" (Hunt 1828: 402). On the contrary, Hunt strongly advocated his critical impartiality, based on the writer's actual financial independence (*SW*, I,

<sup>3</sup> See also Eberle-Sinatra 2001.

xxix). As Thompson affirms: "By 1805, no one expected an objective review, but, by 1832, when Hunt had ceased writing theatrical papers, such objectivity was firmly established" (Thompson 1977: 61).

Within this large panorama of Hunt's critical material, in terms of the quantity of his writings, but also the diversified issues of its content, my focus falls on his involvement with the illegitimate theatre. In particular, I will draw on some aspects of Hunt's critical essays, which mostly appealed to his critical eye as reviewer and playgoer, such as the role and social diversification of the theatre-going audience and the illegitimate plays performed in royal patent houses as well as in minor theatres.

Starting from the assumption that illegitimate theatres during the Romantic period became important places for theatrical experimentation and points of attraction for an increasing number of playgoers, it is important to note that minor houses also challenged the monopoly of the Royal theatres, becoming a constant reference for a critical survey of the contemporary state of performance. Not by chance did Leigh Hunt predict, in 1831, that in the future "the trade of a theatrical critic" would take place on the south bank of the river rather than in "the once witty neighbourhood of Covent Garden" (*Tatler*, 7 July 1831). These comments were seen as polemical at the time, but Hunt merely intended his criticism to alert his readers to the disintegration of old hierarchies and the emergence of new forms and places of dramatic performance (Moody 2000: 33).

Secondly, illegitimate theatres particularly welcomed minor forms of entertainment, since they staged spectacles, melodramas, ballets, pantomimes, hippo-dramas, burlettas, and burlesques, all genres that were also performed with public acclaim, albeit with suspicious critical judgment, at Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Alongside the spoken dramas of the patent playhouses, these flourishing alternative genres reflected an important aspect of the theatrical culture of the time, such as the heterogeneity of the audience, who gathered together in the theatres despite significant differences in education, manners, and social class. This is the third element that Hunt refers to in his reviews: the importance of the audience and its active role in the theatre. Illegitimate theatres were sites of "political, moral, and indeed generic transgression" (Moody 2000: 2), and appealed to Hunt for their political radicalism and cultural subversion. He believed that minor houses and illegitimate genres had a political connotation that could potentially influence all social classes.

In literary criticism Hunt was primarily an introducer and educator; in theatrical criticism, he was a reformer during – as he acknowledged – the "most unfortunate period of the stage" (Thompson 1977: 61). He

writes: “It cannot, I allow, be denied, that the profession of the stage has been brought into disgrace by the lives of its members; but this very disgrace has become one cause of the moral negligence of actors: the social nature of their errors confounds the fault with it’s [*sic*] power of pleasing” (Hunt 1807: ix). Hunt’s negative comments were meant to alert his readers about the dangerous effects of bad plays and performances on the minds, manners, and morals of the theatre-going public. Hunt criticised not only actors, managers, and critics, but also the ‘mechanics’ of modern plays, in particular comic writers such as Andrew Cherry, Frederick Reynolds, Thomas Dibdin, William Lewis, and Samuel Arnold. In analysing the “appearances, causes, and consequences of the decline of British comedy”, Hunt explained and lamented the popularity of the afore-mentioned writers (Thompson 1977: 62). He identified the problems with theatrical regulation according to the taste of the audience as a vicious cycle. The owners of the theatres responded that in pleasing theatre-goers’ taste they were only satisfying the demands of their audience. While farce and burlesque were frequently performed on the English stage, Hunt argued that it was the excess of these genres that corrupted the social function of British drama.

In an article for *The News* (1807) dedicated to Mr. Dibdin (1771-1841) – a prolific writer of farces and melodramas and a favourite target of Hunt’s scorn – Hunt comments on the public value of the drama:

The wise men of all ages have determined that to corrupt the public taste is eventually to corrupt the public virtue, and the example of this truth is as various as its precept. It is, indeed, every way manifest, that the gradual neglect of virtue follows the gradual forgetfulness of good sense. (*PW*, I, 19)

On the same line he wrote one year later in 1808: “I am really almost ashamed to enter into any serious criticism upon the new burlesque melodrama, which is the most stupid piece of impertinence that has disgraced the English stage for some years past” (*Examiner*, April 10, 1808). He concluded his article affirming that:

I have very good reasons for supposing that the authors of these wretches pieces regard themselves not only as legitimate dramatists, but as ornaments of the British stage, that they claim the honour of supporting the finest singers, and that with a blind self-importance they refer us to the perpetual performance of their operas as a proof of their consummate genius. (*PW*, I, 14)

Hunt continued this line of criticism in his review of George Colman the Elder’s melodrama *Blue Beard* in 1811. Here, he defined the play

as "one of those wretched compounds of pun and parade, which serve to amuse the great babies of this town" (*SW*, I, 166). In particular, it was Kemble's decision to use "horse actors" on the "classical" Covent Garden stage that indicated for Hunt the degree to which the theatres and their managers had to share the blame for the "corrupted state" of the theatregoers. By staging such works, managers materially helped to produce that depravity of theatrical practices. Spectacles and hippodramas were similarly responsible for the degraded state of the public taste. And by consequence, the spectators learnt to like nothing else; and thus in their pursuit of money the managers satisfied the desire of the public. This main problem of corruption in contemporary theatre is identified by Hunt as strictly and dangerously connected, since plays, playwrights, actors and manager were all responsible for the degradation of the theatre as artistic and public venues. The theatre was without doubt a complex realm based on several characters and dynamics.

However, Hunt had still some faith in redemption of public taste, when he affirms that constructive criticism and genuine creativity would awaken its audience:

It is high time for the public to awake to a sense of their own dignity. Almost every nation on the Continent ridicules the present stage and its farces, and wonders at the nation that produced Shakespeare. (*The News*, III, 26 April 1807)

Hunt complained about the use of dog and horses in patent theatres, as well as "nautical afterpieces in the Adelphi style drama", where the pantomime produced in Drury Lane and Covent Garden were inferior to those performed in illegitimate venues.

The Adelphi is constantly producing new pieces that do it great credit; the Olympic, in its light way, promises to do as much [...] and from what we hear of the Coburg and the Surrey, and have seen of a variety of printed dramas which have been sent us, performed at those theatres, and written by Mr. Jerrold, they have been making the most praiseworthy exertions for informing as well as amusing the important multitudes that visit them; a circumstance, we may venture to say, which is not unworthy the serious consideration of the Lord Chancellor, as serving to shew him the importance of exciting intellectual emulation among a variety of play-houses. (*Tatler*, 27 January 1831, 2: 497-8, 498)

This article can be considered a miniature manifesto for a free trade in theatre. Patent houses were "obsolete institutions no longer capa-

ble of dramatic innovation” (Moody 2000: 34). And, when Drury Lane and Covent Garden were threatened by the advances of their minor rivals, they tried to suppress them by law, resulting in a real legal battle between legitimate and illegitimate performances. As a matter of fact, patent theatres would insist on their “full” control over spoken drama when they were also relying upon animal acts. Hunt continues to stress the interconnections between political and cultural issues, writing, for example, at the head of a Political Examiner an *Application to Parliament for a Third Theatre*. He said that “matters of taste and literature are more connected with the political character of the times than most people imagine or than the Pittites and their friends can allow” (1811, *SW*, I, 166).

Another example of how politics and social issues interacted with theatrical life and illegitimate theatre in Hunt’s writing is his description of the “Old Price Riots”. These riots occurred in 1809 upon the reopening of Covent Garden after its earlier destruction by fire. Kemble’s decision to raise prices, add additional expensive boxes, and pay Madame Catalani a very high salary, initiated the extraordinary set of events also referred to by contemporaries as “O.P.” or “O.P. riots”. People protested with demonstrations inside the theatre, essentially blocking the performance of plays until the manager agreed to most of their terms. After the opening night, Hunt immediately objected to Kemble’s policy that penalised the cheaper sections of the theatre in order to expand the luxury boxes for wealthier spectators:

It was ardently hoped by all the lovers of the Theatre, that the Managers of Covent-Garden, in shewing their taste for the fine arts would have shewn also a liberality worthy of the taste, and thus increased the respectability and the true interest of the stage; but people, it seems, are destined to be disappointed, who expect from these men anything but the merest feelings of tradesmen. The new theatre opened on Monday night with the increased price of 4s. to the Pit, and 7s. to the Boxes, and if the town at least expected an increase of comfort on the occasion it was to be disappointed even in that respect. (“Theatrical Examiner” No. 52, *The Examiner*, Sept. 24, 1809)

Hunt not only demonstrated his disappointment with the new prices, but he especially considered the enlargement of the building a disadvantage for the quality of the performance. He writes:

The theatre is altogether as large [...] as the avarice of the Managers and their contempt for a real taste in the drama could make it. In no such theatre can a true taste be excited, because a true drama, which requires nicety of

expression in the voice and countenance, cannot be felt in: Shakespeare may be played to the pit and side boxes, but he will be little better than dumb and blind shew to the people in the basket, who pay seven shillings to hear nothing but noise, or to those in the upper boxes, who pay seven shillings to see nothing but indecency. Naturally therefore the rise of the old prices entirely disgusted the public, and their disgust was increased by various attempts on the part of the Managers and their friends to plead the excuse of *necessity*. ("Theatrical Examiner" No. 52, *The Examiner*, Sept. 24, 1809)

The dimension of the new theatre was a matter fully discussed by Hunt, not only in relation to spoken drama, but also more specifically in regard to illegitimate performances. This is because after the revival of Coleman the Younger's *Blue-Beard* with horses, and the premier of Matthew Lewis's *Timour the Tartar* that exploited the new range of hippo-drama, at least eleven satires on equestrian plays filled London playbills (*SW*, I, 176). What I am arguing here is that Hunt's ironic comment is referred to the crossing of genres staged in the patent houses where appropriate plays should be staged instead of ambitious spectacles. Instead, following economic greed licensed theatres copied "illegitimate performances" that would have been meant originally for the "minor" theatres. Enlarging their stages, Drury Lane and Covent Garden were actually adapting their venues in order to include the new "illegitimate" plays along with their traditional repertoire. This required more space for horses and other animals like mules, zebras, and donkeys; but also water tanks, and other spectacular devices usually found on the South Bank side of London. Hunt looked at this new management of the patent houses with suspicion and used much irony in his articles to comment on the fast-changing face of the London stage in terms of venues, plays, actors and audience.

A final remark should be made about another review of pantomime that Hunt published for the *Tatler* in 1817. Despite his previous negative comments on burletta and other minor genres, the critic defends the popularity of Pantomime as the most "irregular" of the period's dramatic forms rooted in the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. The "harlequinade" was well suited for the British stage, especially during Christmas holidays. In 1817, when all forms of suppression were applied to the circulation of ideas, this kind of pantomime seemed to represent an escape from political repression and control. As a result, the "harlequinade" functioned as a form of entertainment which linked all social classes around the theatre, from boxes to galleries. "We laugh with equal enjoyment", says Hunt in his review, "we have a right to enjoy a good notion of ourselves in a pleasant way, and as long as we are all merry

together; and here we enjoy it with all the advantages of harmlessness. We imagine our superiority, and that is enough" (*The Examiner* 1817 in *SW*, II, 82). Here, I would suggest that Leigh Hunt defended the entertainment value of theatre, within the legitimate aims of sharing a public entertainment without overloading the stage with inadequate elements.

For Hunt, the theatre represented an institution that unified the English people through their participation in an emotional community (Pratt 2001: 29). In one of his later articles entitled the "Play-Goer" (1830), Hunt insists on the social value of a communal enjoyment at the theatre:

We see a large assemblage of human beings, certainly not come to be displeased but the reverse, and enjoying for hours a common sense of pleasure, the nature of which encourages and refines their humanity. The rich learn that the poor are still of account; and the poor, one with another, smile at the same pleasure, and feel their eyes dimmed with the same sympathy; and we breath the exalted air of poetry and rejoice to find it proper to us; and all faces are bent at the same time on one object [...]; You may be certain that an audience at a theatre does not consist of the least intelligent or the least social portion of the town. There is pretty strong evidence, in their love of entertainment, to shew that they belong to a different class. To know therefore that every evening there are large houses, some enormous ones, containing masses of human beings of this sort, is to feel that you have a pleasure at hand of the most social kind, whenever you are able to enjoy it, and that it exists at all events, whether you can relish it or not sufficiently at the moment. ("The Play-Goer", *Tatler*, Dec. 13, 1830, 343)

In his *Autobiography* (1850) Leigh Hunt noted with some regret that:

Forty or fifty years ago people of all times of life were much greater play-goers than they are now. They dined earlier, they had not so many newspapers, clubs, and pianofortes; the French revolution [...] had not yet opened a thousand new channels of thought and interest, nor had the railroads conspired to carry people, bodily as well as mentally, into as many analogous directions. Everything was more concentrated, and the various classes of society felt a greater concern in the same amusements (Hunt 1903: I, 152).

Hunt portrays theatrical amusement as a means to create a sense of a community, to bring together different social classes. Theatrical spectacles are conceived as a creative force that can improve the minds of their audience and bring them together as a nation. What motivates Hunt's theory is his belief that audiences are in need of education. Hunt, together with other critics of his time such as Hazlitt and De Quincey,

not only gave his readers and the theatregoers credit as thinking subjects able to withstand the overwhelming effects of spectacle, but he also gently initiated these groups into modern culture (Nuss 2012: 152).

To conclude, we can affirm that despite its contemporary degradation, theatre remained for Hunt a respected form of art and an important vehicle of reform and education. "The drama", he said, "is the most perfect imitation of human life; by means of the stage it represents man in all his varieties of mind, his expressions of manner, and his power of action, and is the first of moralities because it teaches us in the most impressive way the knowledge of ourselves" (Hunt 1807: 1). As a journalist and as a playgoer, Leigh Hunt gave voice to his concerns about the degradation of English stage, managing and acting, because that was his constant preoccupation, for his strong belief in the importance of the social functions of theatrical production and dramatic criticism.

Hunt's articles on the theatre were deeply invested in social issues, covering such topics as riots against higher ticket prices, the disturbing exploitations of child actors and the effects of economic profit as the driving motive for managers and playwrights. Using the genre of the familiar essay, Hunt's criticism brings the theatre of the day vividly into view, characterising it as the entertainment people enjoyed and eagerly anticipated. Even when he does not relate his reviews to politics, his critical insights are always committed to ideals of equality, tolerance, and compassion (*SW*, III, xiii). Hunt insisted on the crucial impact of the drama on the state of national moral and political values (*SW*, I, 3). Through the pages of *The Examiner*, then, "politics and theatre become interchangeable domains" and at a time of "increasing cultural, social, and political segregation, Hunt's criticism presented theatre as an ideal public sphere" (Moody 2000: 174) where personal and social domains could both be questioned and improved.

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SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S *PURPLE PATCHES*:  
THE CREATIVE COSMOGRAPHY  
OF THE SELF IN *RELIGIO MEDICI*

*Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to isolate some highly personal passages in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* and put forward some hypotheses as to their function in the general design of the work. As a devotional text, *Religio Medici* would seem an unlikely site for life-writing. However, when placed in the tradition of Augustine's *Confessions* and Montaigne's *Essais*, its autobiographical asides acquire a further level of signification within the general framework of Browne's idea of human consciousness.

*Keywords*: Life-writing; inward turn; Sir Thomas Browne; Augustine; Montaigne.

*Sowing purple patches*

Horace's *Ars Poetica* can boast a translator extraordinaire: no other than Elizabeth I who, in November 1598, produced an "englishing" of its initial verses. When Horace, reflecting on poetical openings, states that "Inceptis gravibus pulcrumque et magna professis / *purpureus*, late qui splendeat, unus et alter / adsuitur *pannus*" (Horace 1942: 450; italics mine), Queen Elizabeth fittingly translates "Oft to beginnings graue and shewes of great is sowed / A purple pace, one or more for vewe"<sup>1</sup> (Pemberton 1899: 142). "Sowing purple patches" is thus a practice that ensures a sort of additional formal brilliance, achieved through the subsequent accretion of elements which a poet should attach to his work in order to render it more appealing to certain specific standards of literary evaluation. This is the critical perspective that I will try to apply to some curiously personal and occasionally confessional passages of Sir

<sup>1</sup> "Works with noble beginnings and grand promises often have one or two purple patches so stitched on as to glitter far and wide" (Horace 1942: 451).

Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, isolating them as valuable literary additions to the general religious and devotional tone of the work.

No critical appraisal of *Religio Medici* can omit noticing its evident devotional veneer and any reading of it as a mere "lovable curiosity" (Murphy 2008: 3) is indeed critically dangerous. Nevertheless, ever since Modernism, Browne has metamorphosed into an extremely alluring literary model, thanks to "his playfulness, his intellectual curiosity, and his delight in paradoxes" (Conti 2008: 150) rather than his rigorous scientific or religious opinions.

Even though calling *Religio Medici* an autobiography in disguise would be a critically hazardous move, it is nevertheless undeniable that a reader perusing its pages becomes quite intimately acquainted with its author – something which allows the author's more creative side to break free of the rigid constraints of the religious framework of the *apologia medici*. In light of this consideration, which will be examined from a historiographical point of view further on, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that that these fragments of life-writing purposefully scattered in an apparently devotional narrative occupy a structurally significant position.

### *"The curious shades of our private lives"*

As briefly stated above, Virginia Woolf's admiration for Sir Thomas Browne's prose stemmed from its ability to convey the most private and intimate features of his own particular self: his being, in her own words, "the first of the autobiographers", whose practice of life-writing has "paved the way for all [...] dealers in the curious shades of our private lives" (Woolf 1925: 20). Woolf's appreciation is only possible as the result of an acquaintance with Sir Thomas *the man*, before Sir Thomas *the doctor and intellectual*. The principle of measuring literary value through the degree of self-disclosure an author allows onto the page descended from a romantic aesthetics biased towards the hypertrophy of the self, which was seen as an index of creativity; this logic lay also at the basis of Woolf's "manifesto" of essay writing, *The Modern Essay*. Good essayists must, like Max Beerbohm, ensure that their readers perceive their actual *presence* while they are perusing their works, i.e. they should undertake the task of accompanying the audience through the unfolding of the piece with their personal opinions, idiosyncrasies, and in general, as Browne does, with some artfully placed fragments of their private lives. Their ultimate goal should be to bring "personality into literature, not unconsciously and impurely, but so consciously and purely that we do not know whether there is any relation between Max

the essayist and Mr. Beerbohm the man” (Woolf 1925: 89). It is easy enough to substitute Sir Thomas Browne for Max Beerbohm. This theoretical orientation was applied by Woolf to *Religio Medici* so thoroughly as to make it a sort of antecedent of the famous *stream of consciousness*. In Browne’s own time, however, *Religio Medici* received some quite harsh reviews precisely for the personal quality of its prose, and this kind of criticism was not only an early modern issue: E. B. White was still reacting against complaints that the essay was “the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form” (White 1977: ix) as late as the 1970s.

Before delving into this particular aspect of the problem, and retracing Browne’s autobiographical *purple patches*, however, a clarification of method is required: the term autobiography is here used in its wider etymological sense of the “writing about one’s own life”, and thus as a synonym of the now more widespread hyperonym that encapsulates all literary forms concerned with a revelation of the (/a) specific self on paper, i.e. life-writing. As Hermione Lee has famously stated, life-writing is a term used “when different ways of telling a life-story—memoir, autobiography, biography, diary, letters, autobiographical fiction—are being discussed together” (Lee 2005: 100).

“*So particular a narration*”

The earliest censor of Browne’s *personal passages* (which in his opinion were anything but *purple*), was a certain Sir Kenelm Digby. A scientist, privateer, and Catholic recusant, Digby led a rather turbulent existence through the years of the Civil War. Despite being placed in jail by the increasingly Puritan House of Commons, he found time, near the end of 1642, to pen some *Observations upon the Religio Medici*. In his mordent critique, Digby singled out for blame Browne’s autobiographical asides, thereby revealing his tendency to display his own particular idiosyncrasy – or, to put it in Woolfian terms, his willingness to stoop “suddenly with loving particularity upon the details of his own body” (Woolf 1925: 20) – denouncing it as follows:

What should I say of his making so particular a narration of personal things, and privat thoughts of his owne; the knowledge whereof cannot much conduce to any mans betterment? (Which I make account is the chiefe end to his writing this discourse). As where he speaketh of the soundnesse of his blood at the summer solstice of his age, of his neglect of an epitaph. (Digby 1888: 469)

Digby's critique of the first, unauthorized, version of the *Religio*, can be seen as a sort of disparagement of Browne, who engaged in an epistolary exchange of pleasantries with his early reviewer which Samuel Johnson would later describe as one of "the most risible scenes in the farce of life" (Johnson 1756: xvii-xviii). According to Johnson, neither author was entirely sincere: Browne wasn't when he maintained that the first *Religio* was a private text that was not meant for publication; and Digby wasn't either when he asserted that he would not wish to diminish such a deep and thorough work by publishing his precipitous reactions to it. What is truly engaging in this dialectical exchange between Browne's claims of privacy and Digby's critique of self-disclosure is its ultimate textual outcome, in that this somewhat farcical skirmish gave Browne an opportunity to refashion the manner in which he presented his *self* in the second, authorized, version of *Religio*. The process of self-revelation that Browne inserted in the second version led to a crucial chapter in "the worldly history of authorial struggle over precedence and reception" (Wong 2003: 133), since Browne was now able to "assume the conventional role of the unwillingly exposed writer" (Wong 2003: 123) and thus plan a more "tactical" version of his self in preparation for the 1643 edition.

A complete list<sup>2</sup> of the *purple passages* would exceed the scope of this paper; one example, however, may be sufficient to illustrate those segments against which Sir Kenelm Digby directed his intellectual scorn:

I was never yet once married, and commend their resolutions who never marry twice; not that I disallow of second marriage; as neither in all cases of Polygamy, which considering some times and the unequal number of both sexes may be also necessary. [...] I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that they were any way to perpetuate the world without this trivial and vulgar way of coition. It is the foolieshest act a wise man commits in all his life, nor is there any thing that will more deject his coold imagination, when hee shall consider what an odde and unworthy piece of folly hee hath committed. (Browne 1888: 438)

What Digby did not understand about these *purple passages* was their purpose: since Browne's "candid (or apparently candid) self-portraiture [...] doesn't seem to have a moral purpose, or at least one Dig-

<sup>2</sup> Browne was, among other things, a superstitious man (I: 3), who held mildness of character in great esteem (I: 6) and was assuredly a humble human being (I: 13). He confessed that he was afraid of death (I: 40), that he had a high consideration of friendship (II: 6), and of music (II: 9).

by can discern” (Huebert 2005: 119), he judged them to be not only superfluous, but also positively dangerous. The rhetoric of self-enquiry in which Browne is actively engaging is paralleled by the well-known practice of public human dissection that was becoming common in England following the erection in 1636 of the first anatomy theatre, designed by Inigo Jones for the Barber-Surgeons, at their premises in Monkwell Street in London. The scientific practice of autoptic (open) dissection, however, was soon reflexively directed onto the anatomist himself: if the aim of opening someone else’s body was to achieve a “generalized understanding of the human frame and its creator’s wisdom”, literary outputs could help “the enquiring human subject to a form of self-analysis” (Sawday 1996: 110). As James I’s physician Helkiah Crooke famously maintained in his extremely influential *Microcosmography*: “Whosoever doth well know himself, knoweth all things” (Crooke 1615: 12).

### *The anatomy of a “bad physician”*

The idea that somebody could think of anatomizing his or her own self *per se*, without any discernible devotional aim or outside the textual domain of hagiography, amounted, in the early modern period, almost to a literary blasphemy. Viewed in this light, Digby’s *Observations* play on very safe ground in order to undermine the literary success of Browne’s work, i.e. he describes it as a gossipy sell out, or, to borrow Othello’s famous words, as “mere prattle, without practice” (*Othello* I.i.26, Shakespeare 2009: 4). One may argue, however, that the same didactic drive can be found in one of the most famous and timeless touchstones of life-writing literary tradition, Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions*.

The personal details given out by Augustine, however, have a precise and precisely stated goal. Their edifying moral appears clearly in Book X, clarifying the manner in which the details offered by the author should be properly understood: they are, “utilitarian” acts that aim to help his readers mend their sinful conduct: “cum leguntur et audiuntur, excitant cor ne dormiat in desperatione et dicat, ‘non possum’, sed evigilet in amore misericordiae tuae et dulcedine gratiae tuae” (x: 5; Augustine 1992: 120)<sup>3</sup>. This type of devotional life-writing is intended

<sup>3</sup> “For when they are read and heard, these confessions of my past sins—which ‘you have forgiven and covered over,’ so that you may make me blessed in you, changing my soul by faith and your sacrament—stir up the heart. Then it will not sleep in

to have a protreptic effect on its readers (Kotzé 2004: 53-54), to exhort them, in other words, to rectify their behaviour.

That the *Confessions* can be appreciated even from an aesthetic point of view is also the pivotal issue in Charles Taylor's 1989 seminal history of modern consciousness, *Sources of the Self*: as a matter of fact, the bishop of Hippo is the first of the authors "responsible" for the "inward turn" (Taylor 1989: 177) in Western cultural tradition, which turned its attention predominantly to the intimate musings of the individual consciousness and "made the language of inwardness irresistible" (Taylor 1989: 131). This feature has spawned the illustrious lineage of literary masterpieces (also discussed in Freeman and Brockmeier 2001: 77-79) which Taylor discusses in detail, though he surprisingly leaves *Religio* out of his discussion. Somebody who has not failed to recognize Browne's place in this genealogy is Stanley Fish, who very controversially denounced Browne as being a *bad physician* precisely on account of his penchant for self-depiction. Fish was not interested in Browne's medical training, his aim being to expose him as a mere exhibitionist, who instead of provoking a transcendent metamorphosis in his readers scatters the text with autobiographical shards in a sort of self-centred narcissism. In Fish's words Browne "draws attention not away from, but to, himself; his words are not seeds, spending their lives in salutary and self-consuming effects, but objects, frozen into rhetorical patterns which reflect on the virtuosity of their author; the experience of his prose has its climaxes not in moments of insight and self-knowledge, but in moments of wonder and admiration of the art that has produced it" (Fish 1972: 372). In spite of his iconoclastic intent, this much-contested critical position may indeed be a useful lens, as it were, through which to view the remarkably modern introspective hue of *Religio*, which is today almost unanimously appreciated not for its sound religious and doctrinal bases, but as the work of a "doctor who happens to have some unofficial thoughts about his own religious beliefs and practices", which he recorded with the utmost attention for their "provisional, unorthodox, and fluctuating character, to ensure that they will be understood as private ruminations only" (Huebert 2005: 132).

despair and say, 'I cannot,' but it will awaken in love of your mercy and in your sweet grace" (Augustine 1960).

“*Self-cosmography*”

As a matter of fact, it has also been the fate of the works of another early modern and (supposedly) exclusively religious thinker to be read with specific focus on the purposeful dissemination of autobiographical fragments. In Giordano Bruno’s *Sigillus sigillorum* (1583), for example, as if in a sort of microcosm, one critic has read the private events of his life as alluding to “processi più profondi e più segreti; trascrivono, nella dimensione del ‘minimo’, del particolare, della vita quotidiana il ritmo interiore della realtà, il prodursi – e il comunicarsi – dei ‘massimi’ della vita universale” (Ciliberto 2007: 10). And it is exactly a similarly informed scattered meditation on the significance of the human microcosm that the reader is presented in *Religio Medici* I: 34:

That we are the breadth and similitude of God, it is indisputable, and upon record of Holy Scripture: but to call ourselves a microcosm, or little world, I thought it only a pleasant trope of rhetorick, till my near judgement and second thoughts told me there was a real truth therein. (Browne 1888: 372)

Browne goes on to debate his position in a syllogistic way, through a succinct taxonomy of earthly existence, from raw matter to spiritual essence. In this variegated spectrum man is necessarily “that great and true *amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live, not only like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds” (Browne 1888: 373). Even though Browne suggested that the term microcosm may be a “pleasant trope”, this statement is fundamental to appreciate the idea that he – a man of science who was deeply influenced by continental thought – had of the theological conundrum regarding the exact nature of human personality, which appears from this extract as “a little world because it is the spacious and all-important scene of that battle with the devil that men once waged so earnestly in the immense solitude of the religious conscience” (Dunn 1950: 147).

This standpoint, and its reverberations on the specific value that was beginning to be attributed to individual experience, was also at the centre of Michel de Montaigne’s own stance on self-portraiture – which he repeatedly details in his metaliterary pronouncements (Klaus 1991) – but nowhere more clearly than in his *Preface au Lecteur*, where he explains that his work intends to offer a truthful account of its author, whose hope, it is unambiguously stated, is “qu’on m’y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice: car c’est moy que je peins” (Montaigne 2019: 3).

This “project of self-portraiture”, which is the enactment of “the kind of literary portraits others might have been expected to make of him,

and therefore of his book” (Boutcher 2017: 24) entailed the display of an imaginative and thus entirely creative power, able to “transcend the void that is synonymous with the ontological condition of humankind” (Kritzman 2012: 167). Yet in his *Common Place Book* Browne openly rejected any affiliation with Montaigne’s writings, when an early commentator, Thomas Keck (1656), suggested that he could not imagine Browne to be unacquainted with the work of Montaigne:

In a piece of mine, published long ago, the learned annotator hath paralleled many passages with others of Montaigne’s *Essays*, whereas, to deal clearly, when I penned that piece, I had never read three leaves of that author, and scarce any more ever since. (Browne 1889: 354)

This statement, together with the epistolary exchange with Digby, conveys Browne’s ideal of authorship: he sees himself (at least partly) as a creative writer, and he does not shy away from an opportunity to reinforce his claim to authorial originality. To be fair, while Montaigne’s work is a vast miscellany of opinions, musings, anecdotes about any subject that captured the author’s interest, *Religio* is a work that revolves around a specific theme; nevertheless, it is undeniable that both authors shared a common literary goal, that of placing their inner selves in a suitable literary shrine.

### *Fragments of a self*

Because the similarities between “essayistic portraiture” and Browne’s personal fragments scattered in the midst of a devotional text are too blatant to be ignored, Browne’s autobiographical asides cease to be univocally readable as religiously oriented protreptic *exempla*, and become interwoven circumstantial anecdotes, pointing to *Religio Medici*’s “secular ethics” (Barbour 1992: 74). Another feature that favours a comparison between *Religio Medici* and the *Essays* is the erratic and irregular distribution of personal disclosures in both texts. These seem to appear by chance, thereby implying a vision of human nature as an essentially discontinuous entity that may best be understood through what Galen Strawson has called an “episodic self experience” (Strawson 2008: 190). Postulating the fallacy of the vision of the individual self as a narrative entity, Strawson maintains that our civilisation has produced countless examples of individuals who envisioned a literary rendering of their lives as made up of the sum of atomistic glimpses, unconnected by any chronological principle. If one perceives oneself as episodic, it follows that “one does not figure oneself, considered as a

self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” (Strawson 2008: 190). This vision of the individual as a series of disjointed traits incoherently sewn together, which is most clearly captured by Montaigne’s “[m]oy à cette heure et moy tantost sommes bien deux” (Montaigne 2019: 964), is, albeit more indirectly, also put forward in one of the most illuminating of Browne’s *purple passages* (II: 11):

Now for my life, it is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate, were not a history, but a piece of poetry, and would sound to common ears like a fable. For the world, I count it not an inn, but a hospital; and a place not to live, but to die in. The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast mine eye on [...] That mass of flesh that circumscribes me limits not my mind. That surface that tells the heavens it hath and end cannot persuade me I have any. (Browne 1888: 444)

Browne’s life is a poem, and he the poet, and not a sort of role model that gives his history to his readers as a salvific gift. This helps interpret the decision to insert personal details into *Religio* as a creative act which reflects a particular vision of human identity, one that earns Browne a place in Taylor’s historiographical recognition, not by virtue of continuance of Augustine’s devotional end, but in a specifically, *pace Browne* himself, essayistic manner that strives to collocate the fragments in a singular entity imposing an overall narrative structure the author neither wanted nor needed (Barbour 1992: 69-79).

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MYTH, LANGUAGE AND THE URBAN NEMESIS:  
MINA LOY'S URBAN POETRY

*Abstract*

This article explores Mina Loy's appropriation and re-mediation of classical myth in the so-called "urban poems", which she wrote in New York and Paris in the 1920s. These poems and canvases, which she realised during her stays in the metropolis – meaningfully described by Roger L. Conover as "the land without myth and the land of gender" (Loy [1997]: xiv) – prove ideal for the exploration of urban paradigms of space. In these poems, Loy introduces the myths, chimeras and curses of the city, qualifying them as spatial paradigms, so as to rewrite urban architecture and to renovate aesthetic and literary conventions. In these poems she evokes figures of mythical heritage, who look disoriented and alienated once transplanted into the urban context. Poetic language also hosts frames of dissolution: words look sharp and nude, arranged in space so as to mimic the tensions they explore, from patterns of fall to flatness and anonymity.

*Keywords:* Mina Loy; metropolis; myth; Modernist poetry.

*Introduction*

Mina Loy's varied and miscellaneous corpus has been widely studied since the 1980s, and the author herself has been established in the pantheon of modernist writers. Still, it claims attention by a wide scholarship, who always finds new research angles<sup>1</sup>. This article explores Mina Loy's relationship with literary tradition and convention in her high-

<sup>1</sup> Only in 2013 Sandeep Parmar has read Loy's autobiographic writings exploring the construction of "The Myth of the Modern Woman". British scholar Sarah Hayden has unearthed Loy's previously unpublished prose-work from the archives in late 2015. In 2017 Tara Prescott has published *Poetic Salvage: Reading Mina Loy*, an extensive volume that provides precious reading tips and detailed explications of Loy's most redolent poems.

ly creative and original poetic corpus. More specifically, it focuses on Loy's textualisation of classical myth, a peculiarity that makes her work a beautiful example of modernist exuberance and literary remediation.

This preliminary study wants to draw attention upon Loy's disquieting transfiguration of mythical figures, who, scattered and transplanted into the modern city, parade as alienated icons and unglorified ghosts. Such remediation is enabled by a masterful process of manipulation of the poetic matter where invention intertwines with deconstruction, annihilation and transfiguration. On both fronts of content and form, Loy's poetry explores the tension between convention and creativity, normativity and originality. The rhymes considered in this article encapsulate the dynamic strains of the powerful, sometimes savage creative strain of modernism – a force that, yet through (de)construction, gives life to new tropes, icons and language.

### *Loy's mythical (en)vision*

There is less and less of a consensus nowadays regarding the definition of myth, which can be studied and theorised on multiple levels. Very loosely defined, though, myth combines a multi-referential with a dynamic system of meaning, thus covering a dimension that extends from historical events to heritage and folklore, and that is used either to unfold part of the world or to embody ideals and institutions. Although Levi-Strauss's methodology in *Structural Study of Myth* (1955) could provide theoretical support for the present reflections, the strong presence of myth in twentieth-century literature suffices to assess its timeless validity as a paradigm of thought (Larue 1975; Feder 1977). As myth embodies probably the most ancestral paradigm of both human perception and knowledge, one that connects experience to abstraction, present to past, it is easy to imagine how it fits the experiments of all-times literature<sup>2</sup>.

The creative appropriation of myth has proved in the most diverse ways how it serves as reading-frame for reality, defining it as the site to deconstruct and reassemble connections and to build new relations between reality and human thought. As effectively phrased by Classics scholar Froma Zeitlin, "by uncovering the apparent 'logic' that informs myth, we can both acknowledge the indispensable role of myth and

<sup>2</sup> See Adam J. Goldwyn (2017), *Brill's Companion to The Reception of Classics in International Modernism and The Avant-Garde*. More specifically on women's appropriation of ancient myth, Veronica House (2014), *Medea's Chorus: Myth and Women's Poetry since 1950*.

myth-making for human cognition and at the same time lay bare the operations by which it organizes and manipulates reality” (Zeitlin 1996: 119).

While Eliot’s and Joyce’s own respective mythical methods are probably the best known examples of modernist understanding of the legacy of ancient literature, myth is a thread that is also copiously ramified in women’s modernism (Doherty 2001). As such, it has been addressed by past and present scholarship (Linett 2010). Specifically, Loy’s fluid understanding of myth as a trope of both the image and the word rests upon a rhetorical cornerstone: as an aesthetic and cognitive paradigm myth crosses the boundaries of form, discipline and genre (Rajan and Bahun 2009).

Loy’s relationship with themes and figures of the classical tradition dates back to the very early stages of her training as an artist. So as to understand the powerful visual strength of her icons, it appears of great importance to mention that her career began with the visual arts, and that only in a second moment did she engage in poetry – and even later in her life, prose.

In London, Loy attended several art-schools for women, since her self-respecting bourgeois father believed that artistic accomplishment would increase her marriageability. The first private art school in which she was enrolled was St. John’s Wood School on Elm Tree Road, London, which combined proximity with respectability, and provided with solid connections to the Royal Academy schools<sup>3</sup>. In such a context, Loy acquired deep knowledge of classical culture, icons and role-models. As Burke reports in her biography of Loy, the young painter daydreamt of painting conventional subjects such as a “cupid reposing on the white feathers of an ethereal swan”, or another cupid with “curls and eyes of ebony” (Burke 1996: 39). These words of Loy sound particularly meaningful, especially in light of her later piece of poetry *Pig Cupid* (1916), where the mythical character is described with grotesque tones, with “his rosy snout / Rooting erotic garbage”. The (d)evolution of this iconic figure in the course of Loy’s career well captures the dialectical transformation from *appropriateness* to *appropriation* of

<sup>3</sup> Then, her father sent her to Munich, to the house of a baronial couple whom he had heard of via the British Consulate. Mina stayed in Munich for one year, absorbing the suggestions of the Munich *Jugendstil*. Then, after a brief return to London, she finally moved to Paris. In Paris, her painting style started to gain self-awareness and a personal touch, influenced by Impressionist models (Burke 1985). She caught the attention of critics in the 1906 Salon d’Automne, where she exhibited six watercolours, which clearly show how the fascination of geometry enters Loy’s so far academic canvases.

the academic norm. Furthermore, it partly justifies the sizeable visual strand of Loy's poetry.

Loy's shift from visual art to poetry complies with an aesthetic reflection. Looking at Loy's production as a whole, her artistic evolution from academic painter to avant-garde writer hinges on a process of essentialisation of the drawn line, which gradually appears geometrised in her visual works, to eventually become textured in graphic poetry. Particularly, the years between 1913 and 1920 shaped her poetics starting from the study of the line, which became progressively sharper. Such a process, carried on within the space of both drawing and writing, lies on comparable rhetoric structures and expresses fully the experimental nature of modernism.

The pencil line that she had learned to control with such delicate strength could be reimaged in the poetic line, carving its way sinuously through the formal arrangements of the poem. Similarly, the white spaces around and between words could join in the play of speech and silence, of shape and its shadow. Poetry provided her with a way to explore what she called (in 'Aphorisms') 'the fallow-lands of mental spatiality'. And it made possible the enactment of a female inwardness that she had hitherto depicted from without, in numerous portraits of female subjects limited by the requirements of figuration and perspective. (Burke 1985: 7)

### *Myths, chimeras and the curses of the city*

Once free from the precepts of academic convention that she had absorbed during her training, Loy emancipated from what she perceived as a static and sterile use of icons and models. Her thoughts on modernist art are expressed in a letter from 1924, which provides useful background to the reading of the poems.

Modernism is a prophet crying in the wilderness of stabilized culture that humanity is wasting its aesthetic time. For there is a considerable extension of time between the visits to the picture gallery, the museum, the library. It asks 'what is happening to your aesthetic consciousness during the long long intervals?' The flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect into your eyes, your ears – and you ignore it because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case of tradition. (Rainey 2005: 437)

The linguistic texture of these thoughts embodies the dichotomy between entrenched convention and energetic creativity, between obsolete tradition and dynamic modernity. Modernism is for her a galloping force

advocating that the arts be liberated from convention and canon, frames inapt to contain the new “flux of life”. Loy’s declaration of intentions reverberates in her poems, especially in those that refer explicitly to themes and figures typical of the ancient world. References and hints to tradition are in fact so widespread in Loy’s work, that they invite us to look carefully at her programmatic statement from 1924, where she seems to encourage artists to get familiar with tradition and then to reject it, rather than to just refuse it *tout court*. Only so can poetry voice an aware rupture with the past. Now deserted, museums and libraries host dead masks and ghosts like mausoleums of a decayed culture.

In the poems, myth appears in spatial terms similar to those described in the 1924 letter. It is employed as a “frame” or “glass case of tradition” that projects classical characters in the present, where these figures are distorted versions of their mythical originals. The tension between static and dynamic, between open and closed, is embodied by the contrast between the presence of myth, sign of a grand legacy, and the modern city, quintessential dimension of modernity. The verses, also intrinsically spatial, strengthen the vertical and horizontal force-lines, while their layout mimics the artificial heights and flats of the urban scenery. Loy’s modern city stages a jarring carousel of guests: Greek divinities, Homeric characters, Biblical protagonists all parade on asphalt under street neon-lights to tell their urban stories.

The poem *Lunar Baedeker* (1920-1923), which also gives name to Loy’s first American poetry collection in 1923, introduces the myths, chimeras and curses of the modern city, qualifying them as spatial paradigms, so as to rewrite urban architecture and to re-establish urban spatial hierarchies. *Lunar Baedeker* ranges from mythological to Biblical references, thus perhaps suggesting that the genesis of modernity lies in the degradation of myth.

A silver Lucifer  
serves  
cocaine in cornucopia

To some somnambulists  
of adolescent thighs  
draped  
in satirical draperies

Peris in livery  
prepare  
Lethe

for posthumous parvenues

Delirious Avenues  
lit  
with the chandelier souls  
of infusoria  
from Pharoah's tombstones

lead to mercurial doomsdays  
Odious oasis  
in furrowed phosphorous

the eye-white sky-light  
white-light district  
of lunar lusts

Stellectric signs  
[...]

Onyx-eyed Odalisques  
and ornithologists  
observe  
the flight of Eros obsolete  
And "Immortality"  
mildews in the museums of the moon

"Nocturnal cyclops"  
"Crystal concubine"

Pocked with personification  
the fossil virgin of the skies  
waxes and wanes. (Loy 1923: 81)

The almost sculptural graphic organisation of the verses imitates the verticality of New York skyscrapers, thus visually preparing the setting for the evocation of degenerate classical icons, which include a drug-dealing Lucifer, Cupid's "erotic garbage", and "Eros obsolete". Traditional icons are almost spied on as they engage in their urban activities with uncanny nonchalance, forgetful of their history, identity and legacy. While the degradation of the figure of Lucifer strengthens the vertical motion of (his) fall, the vertical push downwards is reiterated throughout the poem, firstly with the image of the "peris", androgynous

elves of Persian mythology representing the descendants of fallen angels, and then by the continuous tension between earth and sky, street-lights and sky-lights. As the nocturnal atmosphere prepares the setting of a ghostly city, the inhabitants are depicted as “sommnambulists”, ready to cross the River of Forgetfulness in Hades – an image reinforced by the oxymoronic and alliterative pair “posthumous parvenus”. Other alliterations such as “silver” and “serves”, “cocaine” and “cornucopia”, and “waxes and wanes”, enrich the poetic texture, the scenery appears spectral and disquieting. The opalescence of a *virgin* but ghostly moon, whose paleness is degraded to the *sterile* glimmer of the neon-lights, adds nothing reassuring to the scene. If anything, it degrades the image of Diana, mythical moon goddess, who instead of moving tides and regulating the rhythms of life in her mythical time, “waxes and wanes” in the metropolitan night. The portmanteau “stelletric” resonates of the critique to static and codified language, suggesting that traditional language too fails to contain the “flux of life” (1924) and creative impact of modernism. The modern city seems to leave no space for tradition, and while Eros qualifies as “obsolete” – as he is looked at by modern “Onyx-eyed Odalises”, Loy’s phrase for “prostitutes” – “immortality” is declassified to detrimental organisms like “mildews”.

Ironically – given the title *Lunar Baedeker*<sup>4</sup> – the architectural force-lines trace no guide-path for the reader. Modern streets provide no orientation; they constitute rather a labyrinthical scheme, where frames of collapsed knowledge fail to point towards any direction.

### *Semiotic dysfunctions and the urban nemesis*

With the poem *Marble*, written a few years after *Lunar Baedeker*, Loy communicates even more radically her opinion of the classics, which carry no wisdom in the world of modernity.

Greece has thrown                      white shadows  
sown  
their eyeballs with oblivion

<sup>4</sup> Baedeker Verlag was a German publishing house founded in 1827. Intended for those visiting cultural capitals, Baedeker travel guides outlined what was worth seeing, both outdoor sites and indoor museums. Loy’s “travelogue” undermines Baedeker’s ready-made itineraries right from the title, which ironically suggests sightseeing by night. While travel guides are intended to orient readers, readers of Loy’s *Lunar Baedeker* are likely to be disoriented, firstly because of the nocturnal setting to the wandering, and secondly because of the collage-like organisation of sites and frames.

A flock of stone  
 Gods  
 perched upon pedestals

[...]

A colonnade  
 Apollo haunts Apollo  
 with the shade  
 of a lost hand.

Loy expresses explicitly that the icons of the past have no role in modernity, and are instead relegated to shadows. Once knocked off their pedestals in museums and galleries, they are left thrust, numb and oblivious on the streets. Coherently with such contents, verses appear unpunctuated and fragmented. This disaggregation of the line, understood as both “verse” and “graphic sign”, emphasises the empty spaces on the page, almost as if the words too were, like the mythical frame, mere *signifiers* emptied of their *signified* content. Looking for the substance behind the form – as if peeking through the holes in a “colonnade” (metonymic for myth) – modern man finds but a self-referential, discouraging and disquieting sign – “Apollo haunts Apollo”.

In this poem more than in those commented so far, Loy plays with the semiotic triangle: while the signal (the icon) is familiar, the analogical connection from the sign to its meaning is altered. As a consequence, the traditional icon proves incapable of referring to a further dimension and perpetually goes back to the sign – in the phrasing of Loy’s scholar Sarah Hayden, icons are a “network of false and chimerical connections” (Loy [1991] 2015: xvii). While the classical icon evolves into its own nemesis, the modern reader, and, by extension, modern man remains trapped in such a faulty semiotic connection. This distorted semiotic relation puts the reader in the uncomfortable position of continuously going back to the sign, which becomes self-referential.

Regardless of Loy’s familiarity with Saussurian linguistics<sup>5</sup>, her reflection on the relationship between form and referred content of the sign extends to consider the role of the artist in the semiotic system of the icon. In the *Apology of Genius* she calls artists and writers “the watchers of the civilized wastes [...] the sacerdotal clowns who feed

<sup>5</sup> Certainly, Loy wrote too early in time to be ascribed to the structuralist approach of Lévi-Strauss, who thirty years later described myth as a kind of language that could be analysed borrowing the principles of Saussurian linguistics.

on [...] pulverous pastures of poverty” (Burke 1996: 308). Parallel to the evolution – actually *devolution* – of icons from symbols into museum simulacra, artists are little more than museum watchmen. In line with the viewpoint of other modernists, Loy too agrees that the artist has no longer a prophetic role in the modern world. However, in line with some other voices of the international avant-garde, deconstruction seems to be but a necessary stage in the creative process. Stripped of, or perhaps *unloaded* of the burden of memory, mythical characters epitomise modern man, who struggles to find his own identity in a panorama of devastation and uncertainty. On this note, Loy concludes the *Apology of Genius* with the possibility for new meaning-making processes, and potentially with a new role for the artist – encapsulated once again in mythical terms: “In the raw caverns of the Increate / we forge the dusk of Chaos”. While poetry and art become the site for endless manipulation, disarticulation and re-articulation, fantasising and projection, the artist, also unloaded of the burden of memory and responsibility, orchestrates the chaotic, polymorphous and unstable raw-matter of modern poetry.

### *Re-born from the ashes*

A final, however brief, consideration of Loy's work on the poetic language is necessary to show the extent of her deconstruction of poetic normativity. Her study of and secession from traditional poetic language goes through different phases: there is the imitation of the classical forms in the first few Londoner experiments; the futuristic exercises with phonetic poetry in the Italian period; and the bewildering “logopoeia” (Pound 1917) of the American Dada, for which she was hailed by Ezra Pound as one of the greatest modernists of the time. In a phase that places itself (meaningfully) *after* the Futurist experience but before Dada and Surrealism, Loy also explores the limits of conventional poetic language with great clarity of intents, yet without the extremes of word-blending and portmanteau.

During this phase she calls her poems “apology”, or “sonnet”, or “song” (Loy, 1923). Yet, these alleged “lyrics” and “songs” only display accidental rhymes and apparent tercets and quatrains. The sense of estrangement generated by the ironic stretch of the titles of these poems is in the end very similar to the one created by the presence of the icons of the past. In a poem from 1922, that pays tribute to Joyce's *Ulysses*, Loy signals her support to Joyce's novel, as well as advocating that language be liberated by literary convention.

[...]  
 Phoenix  
 of Irish fires  
 lighten the Occident

with Ireland's wings  
 flap pandemoniums  
 of Olympian prose

[...]

Master  
 of meteoric idiom  
 present

The word made flesh  
 and feeding upon itself  
 with erudite fangs  
 The sanguine  
 introspection of the womb  
 [...]

As Loy praises the creativity of Joyce's language, which rises from the ashes of tradition, she too uses in her poetry schemes and devices proper of the poetic tradition. Like the other poems quoted in this essay, "Joyce's *Ulysses*" has a dense rhetoric texture that ranges from alliteration to allegory, from hyperbole to metaphor. To the reader's bewilderment, though, such a rich rhetorical matter is not sustained by a traditional versification. Despite the occasional and rather playful structural division into tercets, words are etched in space with a visually disquieting lack of continuity. The uneven alternation of one-word lines with slightly longer ones conveys a sense of steepness, to which the lack of punctuation adds a relentless vertical dynamism.

The contrast between the extensive use of rhetorical devices on the one hand and of the disruption of poetic forms on the other hand generates an uncanny feeling in the reader – one that is similar, in fact, to that inspired by the presence of alienated traditional icons on the urban scene. Looking at both content and form, as well as at the graphic outline, the paradoxes generated by the coexistence of tradition and innovation, of deconstruction and renovation produce vibrant and contradictory effects. The reader, left destabilised and confused, perhaps even jarred and betrayed, has no choice but to keep moving alongside

the vertical force-lines and the scary voids on the page – that ultimately echo those of the urban scene, with its skyscrapers and open spaces.

### *Conclusion*

At first sight, the process of deconstruction that both content and form undergo in Loy's poems declares that tradition and convention prove unapt to express the complexity, dynamism and diversity of modernity. While ancient myth finds its nemesis in the crowd of alienated icons that flood into the modern city, language fails as it does not succeed in carrying meaning or knowledge. Yet, tradition and convention need to be conjured up so as to ignite the semantic and formal revolution of modernism. As she applauds Gertrude Stein for being the "Curie of the laboratory of vocabulary" to find the "radium of the word", Loy too partakes in this creative revolution.

To conclude, Loy's method is certainly not systematic or chronologically progressive; nor is it explicitly theoretical or always consistent. Each experiment has to be understood in the context and phase where it was carried out. The peculiar 'mythical method' of the 1920s, which differs from Eliot's and Joyce's respective techniques for one too many reasons, employs traditional figures and patterns as practical sites, where the complexity of the relationships between past and present, legacy and creativity, normativity and originality can be explored in its disharmonic and fascinating facets.

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## ELIZABETH BOWEN'S IDIOSYNCRATIC STYLE

### *Abstract*

Highly successful during her own life, but fairly neglected until the 1990s, Elizabeth Bowen has received widespread critical acclaim since then. Certain idiosyncratic features of her writing lead to Bowen's style often being defined as *odd*, a difficult trait to pin down. She wrote extensively in prose: from short stories to novels, from autobiographical writing to reviews and articles. The typical features of her style appear in both her fiction and non-fiction.

What most characterises her writing is a shift of agency from humans to inanimate things. This is achieved by a combination of syntactical and grammatical choices, such as the use of the passive mode, the impersonal form, double negatives, inversions, and ellipses. Objects in general, houses in particular, are given primacy to the point of making them almost into characters, rendering them intrusive at times, certainly over-charged; humans, conversely, are dwarfed.

This article will undertake that most difficult task: understanding what makes Bowen's style *odd*; in other words, highly idiosyncratic.

*Keywords:* Elizabeth Bowen; style; fiction; non-fiction; objects.

Elizabeth Bowen is among the major authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though her status has undergone some changes: very successful in her own time, and seen almost as a rival to Virginia Woolf, she was nearly forgotten after her death, especially in academic circles, where she tended to be considered as middle-brow. Hermione Lee's *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, first published in 1981, contributed to changing this state of things. Bowen was a productive writer of short stories, the genre she chose at the beginning of her career, while later on she turned to novels and non-fiction. In *Encounters*, published in 1923, she collected stories that had been previously rejected by magazines, but the peak of her short story production was in the 1930s and '40s: her wartime

stories are considered among the best of the whole century. Bowen also wrote ten novels: the first, *The Hotel*, was published in 1927, the last, *Eva Trout*, in 1969. Starting from the '60s, there was a slackening off of her production of both novels and short stories, as she increasingly devoted herself to contributions to magazines or prefaces, but especially to lecturing on creative writing, mostly in the United States.

Bowen also wrote autobiographical prose during the war years, a period which strongly stimulated recollections, as the turmoil, instability and danger of the present brought with it the need to reflect on the past, its origins and roots, in search of stability and comfort. *Bowen's Court* and *Seven Winters* were both published in 1942. Roughly thirty years later, towards the end of her life, she planned another autobiographical work, but the enterprise was interrupted by her death. Consequently, *Pictures and Conversations* could be published only posthumously in 1975. As for her non-fiction, *The Shelbourne Hotel – A Centre in Dublin Life for More than a Century* (1951) centres on the history and the role of the hotel, “that icon of Ascendancy tradition” (Walshe 2011: 19) situated in the centre of Dublin, while *A Time in Rome* (1960) “is not a guide-book: it is a very personal account of Elizabeth’s feelings about Rome – its atmosphere, its architecture, its history. It is full not only of sensation, but of deflected emotion” (Glendinning 1977: 214).

Bowen’s style has often been defined as “odd”: Maud Ellmann, in her ground-breaking work, defines her as “one of the strangest [writers of fiction]” (Ellmann 2003: x); she speaks of the “arresting oddness” (Ellmann 2003: x) of her novels, and of her fiction as “profoundly disconcerting” (Ellmann 2003: x). Ellmann also quotes Lee’s definition of Bowen’s novels as “ambushing oddness” (Ellmann 2003: 12). Corcoran claims that her writing is “often deeply unconventional in its syntactical and grammatical structures” (Corcoran 2004: 3); and Sinéad Mooney writes of Bowen’s “narrative oddities, frictions, and gaps” (Mooney 2007: 238) and of her “wilful disordering of English syntax” (Mooney 2007: 239). Roy Foster argues that “[h]er writing comes freighted with sensuous language, baroque humour, oblique psychological insights, penetrating moral issues and overall strangeness.” (Foster 2002: 184). Even Antonia Byatt opens her “Introduction” to *The House in Paris* acknowledging that “[m]y relationship with [this novel] has been odd, continuous and shifting” (Byatt in Bowen 1998a: 7). The recurrence of this terminology by such accomplished critics cannot but highlight a general critical response which acknowledges a certain resistance to standard in Bowen’s style, which is what makes it so original. As Neil Corcoran writes: “[t]he ‘vibrating force’ of her language is the force which precedes everything else in her; and it is, before everything else,

why she is worth our attention" (Corcoran 2004: 4). It is this characteristic oddness and forcing of the language and the syntax that has led recent criticism to consider Bowen's work as part of the modernist canon. All these remarks share a common element: they indicate a very personal use of language on Bowen's part. The aim of the present work is to analyse Elizabeth Bowen's peculiar style, by identifying those features that make it so original; and by showing that her stylistic idiosyncrasies, which reach their peak in her fiction and are a constitutive element of it, are also at work in her non-fictional prose, even if to a lesser degree.

One of the major features of Bowen's prose is the recurrent de-humanisation of humans and a corresponding humanisation of objects. This is achieved by means of a combination of different authorial choices: to begin with, her use of the passive mode, which is strictly connected to personification, a major and recurring trope in her writing that goes hand in hand with her use of the impersonal to create "[t]he fabulous atmosphere as of people under a spell" (O'Faolain 1957: 157). Other characteristic elements of her syntax are repetitions, double negatives, inversions and ellipses. In addition to all this, Bowen shows a peculiar use of language, as her vocabulary is at times contorted.

Her use of the passive mode shifts agency usually from humans to objects and "creates the sense that every object has a psyche; in fact, her objects even have neuroses" (Ellman 2003: 6) and "scrutinise their own beholders" (Ellman 2003: 6). As a result, human feelings are attributed to objects, and as "consciousness escapes into the object" (Ellman 2003: 7), human beings are left empty, dwarfed and obscured. This is often achieved by making inanimate things rather than humans the subjects of actions: "Bowen's prose conspires to efface the human subject. Action is imputed only to unliving things [...]" (Ellmann 2003: 67). Chosen to shift agency away from humans – as in "[t]wice over had there been realized the Admiral's alternative to love" (Bowen 1999b: 710) – "[t]his syntax mocks the notion that human beings can command their destiny" (Ellmann 2003: 67). At times, even objects which are the pivots of action are subjected to external agency, as in "[b]y the concrete roadway the clock would be struck, not to strike again" (Bowen 1999b: 635). The preface to *The Last September* offers a striking example of personification, as the novel itself becomes the subject of the action: "I do not idealize that September of 1920, the month in which this novel *chose* to be set" (Bowen 1962: 96, emphasis mine).

The marginalisation of humans is also achieved by Bowen thanks to her use of the impersonal: as Sean O'Faolain wrote, a "source of this sense of inertia is the grammar of the style: the use of the passive voice,

the impersonal pronoun, the impersonal verb”. In *The Last September*, for example, Lois, talking about herself, says: “‘But panic,’ [...] ‘is beyond one’” (Bowen 1998b: 12). This is followed a few pages later by: “there was life to go on with” (p. 17), a statement which contributes to the creation of the stylistic texture mentioned by O’Faolain. In *Friends and Relations*, it is not the syntax but the adverb “involuntarily” that expresses the passivity of the subject: “they both lived on involuntarily” (Bowen 1999c: 4).

Maud Ellmann is very subtle in her analysis of Bowen’s prose, pointing out an important difference between Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf – to whom she had been compared – in their treatment of objects. Ellmann argues that

[i]n Woolf’s novels, objects serve as springboards for flights of consciousness – a technique that emphasises the superiority of mind to matter. [...] In Bowen, on the contrary, things behave like thoughts and thoughts like things, thus impugning the supremacy of consciousness. (Ellmann 2003: 5)

Elke D’hoker expands this concept, stating that “[i]n Bowen’s stories [...] the thoughts and feelings evoked by objects are projected back onto those objects and translated into characteristics of material reality itself” (D’hoker 2016: 57). Ellmann underlines that

‘this perceptual instability’ [...] distinguishes Bowen’s world from Woolf’s, in which the object functions as a passport to the heights of thought. Such sublimation is impossible in Bowen, because the object is too ‘overcharged’ to be transcended; it hovers on the threshold of hallucination, [...] confounding reality with fantasy. (Ellmann 2003: 7)

Among the wide range of objects that populate her prose, an important role is played by buildings in general, houses in particular, and by windows – which often play the role of eyes – mirrors and furniture. Indeed, as Elke D’hoker has perceptively pointed out, the house is “the single most important spatial image in the work” (D’hoker 2016: 53) of Elizabeth Bowen; it carries “multiple and often conflicted meanings: bearing the weight of the characters’ feelings, houses are also the repositories of cultural and ideological meaning” (D’hoker 2016: 53). This is such an enormous area in Bowen’s writing that only a few examples can be given here. In *The Last September* we read that “[r]ooms, doorways had framed a kind of expectancy of her” (Bowen 1998b: 14).

Houses have a life of their own – “Each house seems to live under its own spell” (Bowen 1950: 195) – and have the gift of sight – “the

faded, dark-windowed and somehow hypnotic stare of the big house" (Bowen 1950: 196) – she writes of big houses in Ireland. They can also be hostile: "one would think you were afraid of the house" (Bowen 1999b: 77) or even spiteful, as in "a suspicion that the house was sneering at him" (Bowen 1999b: 56). Windows can be both: "[h]e often felt as though those windows were watching him; their gaze was hostile, full of comment and criticism. The sound of the wind among the bushes in the garden was like whispered comparisons" (Bowen 1999b: 80). As to furniture, among the countless instances, only a handful can be mentioned here: "[t]he chairs and sofas had retreated into corners" (Bowen 1999b: 64); "there was little light in the corners of the room; armchairs and cabinets were lurking in the dusk" (Bowen 1999b: 22), immediately followed by "a bamboo table groaning under an array of photographs" (Bowen 1999b: 22). The predominance of objects over humans is asserted in the following example: "even the way furniture was arranged at No.17 held me so that I couldn't get away" (Bowen 1999b: 57). As to mirrors, in "Coming Home" – defined by Bowen as "transposed autobiography" in her Preface to the 1949 edition of *Encounters* (Bowen 1986: 121) – the twelve-year old Rosalind sits in front of one in her mother's bedroom and wonders: "[s]upposing all that had ever been reflected in it were imprisoned somewhere in the back of a looking-glass" (Bowen 1999b: 97).

Houses and buildings – important in the Anglo-Irish mindset, but also connected to the centrality of place in Bowen's writings and affections – are also the protagonists of two of her non-fictional works: *Bowen's Court* and *The Shelbourne*. Place is never a backdrop: as she famously claimed, "[n]othing can happen nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it" (Bowen 1986: 283). This concept is central to a much earlier text: "[a] Bowen, in the first place, made Bowen's Court. Since then, with a rather alarming sureness, Bowen's Court has made all the succeeding Bowens" (Bowen 1999a: 32). Place interacts with its inhabitants, playing a key role in their lives; it responds to feelings, taking part in an emotional relationship: "[t]he land outside Bowen's Court windows left prints on my ancestor's eyes that looked out: perhaps their eyes left, also, prints on the scene? If so, those prints are part of the scene to me" (Bowen 1999a: 451). Bowen often compares buildings and writing: "[i]n building as in writing, something one did not reckon with always waits to add itself to the plan" (Bowen 1999a: 31-32). Bowen describes the material constituting the heart of a plot as "luggage left in the hall between two journeys, as opposed to the perpetual furniture of rooms.

[...] It is destined to be elsewhere. It cannot move till its destination is known. Plot is the knowing of destination” (Bowen 1986: 35).

After discussing the ways in which Bowen succeeds in de-humanising humans while at the same time humanising objects, it is now necessary to give attention to other characteristic elements of her style such as repetitions, double negatives, inversions and ellipses, which, by hampering understanding, force readers to stop and re-read a sentence, a paragraph or a cue, in order to understand the text.

Repetitions are extremely interesting in Bowen, and they pervade all her prose. An excellent example is taken from *The Heat of the Day*: “I only have time to have what you have without having time” (Bowen 1998c: 37). At times, repetitions seem to echo her life-long stammer: “For, for Southstone dividends kept their mystic origin” (Bowen 1999b: 691). Repetition is sometimes combined with variation, as in “[t]here is something in anything’s being here at all” (Bowen 2010a: 148), or with noun inversion, as in “for that ‘time being’ which war had made the very being of time” (Bowen 1998c: 119). In her posthumously published autobiographical piece *Pictures and Conversations*, for instance, repetition is coupled with the non-standard collocation of the adjective ‘bewildered’, here referred to gardens: “[t]he deserted rooms, downstairs in summer often embowered in shadows of the syringa embowering the bewildered gardens” (Bowen 1986: 279).

Double negatives are scattered everywhere in her writing, both fictional – “no step could not be his” (Bowen 1998c: 29) – and non-fictional – “nothing did he not know about damp and chills” (Bowen 2010a: 155). They can be found even in her letters: “there is *never nothing* to say, is there (to use a famous EB double negative)” (Glendinning 2009: 432).

Inversion – the unusual placing of words – is a strategy which Bowen uses to shift and focus attention: “[p]rivate they formerly were” (Bowen 2010a: 175); “[t]o please she was willing, but never to please at all costs” (Bowen 1986: 179). Ellipses, be they grammatical or rhetorical, invite readers’ co-operation in filling in what is missing in the text: “[y]et, gone, it is not as though it had never been” (Bowen 1986: 272). Suspension hyphens and suspension points are scattered throughout her fiction and non-fiction alike, as are question marks expressing the characters’ difficulty in understanding interlocutors, as in ““?”” (Bowen 1999b: 714), where only the punctuation mark appears, without any words.

Moreover, Bowen has a peculiar use of language, her vocabulary often creating unexpected compound words which cause “the affray of words [whose] unforeseenness” (Bowen 1962: 214) catches the readers’ attention. A passage from *Notes on Writing a Novel* comes imme-

diately to mind: “its none-otherness, its only-possibleness” (Bowen 1986: 36), while a certain strain is to be found in the same essay: “[t]hey must not only be see-able (visualizable); they must be to be felt” (p. 38) along with playful eccentricity in “the approach of the figure is momentous, accompanied by fear or rapture or fear of rapture or a rapture of fear” (Bowen 1950: 269). At times, it is the author’s choice of surprising collocations that catches the readers’ attention and, as in “the attentive shops” (Bowen 1999b: 691), it may be combined, once again, with agency conferred on inanimate things. Bowen also plays with antonyms, as, for example, in “that had made him by turns agreeably disagreeable and disagreeably agreeable as a little boy” (Bowen 1999b: 633), or in “the coldly intimate look he had found new in women since his return” (Bowen 1999b: 610).

At other times, unusual collocations serve to provide proleptic clues to the interpretation of a text, as, for example, Bowen’s use of the verb ‘possessed’ in “[Miss Trevors] possessed an aunt” (p. 767) in the short story *Hand in Glove*, which is centred on greediness and desire to possess. Moreover, Bowen’s stamp can also be seen in inventive and brilliant metaphors: “[i]n spring their young [the cranes] make a noise like a roomful of typewriters” (Bowen 1999a: 30), or “[w]hen the sun is low, in the early mornings or evenings, the house seems, from the outside, to be riddled with light” (p. 22).

The present survey of the key elements of Elizabeth Bowen’s style shows that they are at work in her fictional (many examples have been taken from her short stories and her novels) and her non-fictional prose alike. As to her non-fictional volumes, in *Bowen’s Court* all the stylistic devices illustrated above can be found: from syntactical and lexical repetition to the repetition of images which return throughout the text, such as the reflection or modulation of light; from the personification of objects and the house, its windows in particular, to the use of the passive mode and the impersonal form. In *Seven Winters*, her other autobiographical work, she plies the language to render a sense of arresting immobility, which is also typical of her fiction. The feeling of suspension enables her to present a picture of her early life, before turmoil and dislocation entered it. *A Time in Rome* shows many instances of double negatives, eccentric vocabulary, and peculiar adverb position, as well as the ever-present passive mode, while *The Shelbourne* is her non-fictional volume which least reveals these characteristics, although some can be observed. However, as the examples provided have shown, the stylistic characteristics of her writing can also be found throughout her shorter non-fictional production – her reviews, introductions and essays – thus revealing the pervasiveness of the authorial cipher in the

different facets of her writing. A cipher which, to return to the opening remarks of this essay, tends to force the syntax and the language so that readers are compelled to actively take part in the interpretive process.

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PALIMPSESTS OF POWER IN NEEL MUKHERJEE'S  
*THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

*Abstract*

My paper takes into consideration Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* as an opportunity to interrogate the effects of the timeserving practices of leading political parties in India during the first decades following the Partition separating India and Pakistan. They were made possible by the instrumental employment of military forces following an internal reorganisation in the '50s and '60s. The then young Indian state *de facto* deprived tribals of their lands for profit with the complicity of the police and the military, whose repressive force was employed not only to repress and stifle any form of dissent or protest, but also to "creatively" produce normative discourses which represented a constant threat to national growth and development. By blurring the line between truth and fantasy, the military decisively contributed to the symbolic binding of tribals to an imaginary of fear which proved instrumental to the emergence of the "modernity" of the nation-state. From this perspective, Mukherjee's novel highlights how such biased forms of knowledge traversed the different networks composing the social body in its entirety.

*Keywords:* India; Naxalbari movement; postcolonial criticism; otherness; palimpsest; tribalism; paranoia.

The present essay offers a reflection on Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014) as an opportunity to think about the palimpsestic overlapping of different layers of power in postcolonial India. Set during the years which saw the emergence and subsequent stifling of the Naxalite rebellion, from the late sixties to the mid-seventies, the novel focuses on Supratik, first born of the well-off Ghosh family, who renounces his privileged life as main heir of the business in the manufacturing of paper in order to assist the victims of India's persisting feudalism. He leaves his house, his comfortable lifestyle and moves to the rural areas

along the borderlands of Bengal, where landowners and moneylenders preyed upon indigent farmers by turning them into slaves through indebtedness or cheating them out of their possessions.

The region was plagued by a feudal structure of exploitation deeply rooted in the discrepancies within the Indian legal system, as well as on contradictions often created on purpose with the excuse of modernisation. These helped landlords gain control over peasants' land and means of production through mortgages, forceful dispossessions, illegal occupations and usurpations which set farmers apart from their homes. Guided by his strong belief in Maoist ideals of social equality, Supratik is convinced that in order to change this state of affairs and improve the living conditions of the oppressed, it is necessary to start living the lives of "others": that is living just like the poor, sharing their daily reality in all its aspects. To pave the way for the revolution of the working class, Supratik becomes a Naxalite and settles in rural Bengal, more specifically in Majgeria, together with other bourgeois activists. Majgeria is a tiny hamlet where Nitai Das, a small farmer, had coldly massacred his wife and children after receiving death threats by Bankim Barui, his landlord, because he was unable to pay off the interests on his first loan.

He [Nitai] couldn't pay the interest on the loans he took out in desperate times, loans of money and rice, and had to sell that scrap of land of his, the land that could have kept his family just about surviving until times improved. The interest accumulated. Nitai had to service it with labour on the land the moneylenders owned, but this time it was labour for which there were no wages, not even, sometimes, the subsistence meal given to the daily labourer working someone else's land. (Mukherjee 2014:134)

Through Supratik's recount of his experiences living among farmers and peasants, readers are possessed by a sense of discomfiting resignation. It derives from the gradual realisation that the problem for people on the margins of society, the helpless and most vulnerable, does not lie in uncaring institutions heedless of their existence. On the contrary, the feeling of desperation represented in the novel comes from the fact that a fundamental contribution to this state of affairs derives from those who formally declare to be engaged in defending the less privileged. This is an aspect which has been discussed, for example, by Gayatri Spivak (2010) with regard to the condition of tribal women in the northern part of India, who were somehow damaged or hurt even by those exponents of the so called intelligentsia or mindful intellectual elites formally and even practically fighting for their emancipation.

The prime example in the novel is given by the Communist Party of India, CPI(M), in which Supratik himself had been directly involved as a representative of the student wing during his years at President College. However, Supratik had soon come to realise that the Party had really no intention to defend those who were subjugated by power, those who were ceremoniously proclaimed to be the sole object and interest of the Party's political activities. The CPI(M)'s official strategy was referred to as "piecemeal solution", a political line of conduct aiming at solving the problem gradually. Change was tactically claimed to be brought about one piece at a time, not abruptly. Slow, or even small, progress was to be preferred to lack of progress. What hid behind this apparently cautious forward-looking reasoning was nothing more than opportunism and greed to achieve a more solid political stronghold through elections.

Their mask slipped when Naxalbari happened. They had not reckoned for this – they had wanted the peasants to stay within the boundaries set by them. They underestimated what would really happen if the landless were given a taste of their own power. (Mukherjee 2014:108)

Naxalbari (so-called because it started at the village of Naxalbari, West Bengal, in 1967) is the historical event through which Mukherjee chooses to reveal the strategic importance of police and military forces. In the years immediately preceding the beginning of narration, peasants had been prompted by leftist parties to organise and fight together against the plague of land grabbing practiced by landowners. They were able to regain some of the land that the latter had oftentimes illegally obtained thanks to the *laissez-faire* of the police who, with the agreement of the CPI(M), let peasants drive forward what was considered a true democratic force emerging within the country. In reality, this was only part of a concerted plan to gain consent from the lower classes with the hope to obtain more votes during the following elections. Again, the police's complicity here was aimed at giving the illusion that an actual redistribution of land and resources was possible.

Naxalbari armed insurrection, inspired by the Maoist revolution of peasants in China, came as an unexpected side effect to the members of the Communist Party of India. It demanded food for the starving communities of the area and lasted with varying degrees of intensity up to the 1990s. Political leaders of the CPI(M) were scared that their consent, even a tacit one, to revolts like Naxalbari could upset the central government, preventing their rise to autonomy. Mukherjee notes how this offered landlords the opportunity to bribe the leaders of the party

so that they could receive “protection” from armed peasants. The presence of Naxalites came thus handy to the landlords who, having top politicians on their pay books, could obtain a massive military presence in sensitive areas. Under the pretext of contrasting terroristic presence, military forces were used as personal bodyguards of landlords, who could thus carry out their shady practices without fearing attacks from the people. The ambivalent behaviour of the political elites in the post-colonial nation relied on the police as a strategic instrument of exploitation and surveillance, which helped read “otherwise” any opposition to the new order. The presence and activity of movements such as the Naxalites was experienced and inscribed in a way convenient to political parties and landlords through a palimpsestic overlapping of powers which also required the employment of military forces to answer the demand of the new “democratic present” for a strong narrative capable of hiding its rapacious attitude behind a benevolent façade.

However, the interaction between the triad made up by political power, the military, and armed mass movements like the Naxalite may reveal how, in the novel, they all work with the participation of an emotional layer which, drawing on Homi Bhabha (1994), may be grasped in terms of paranoid projections on the part of the younger Naxalite intellectual elite of bourgeois origins. Rebels such as Supratik, who came from a wealthy family in Calcutta, are not just a positive polarity countering the exploitative ambitions of different networks of power in a simplistic binary opposition. They, too, participate in the miserable conditions of peasants and farmers at the borders of civility, an involvement that can be revealed through mechanisms of linguistic reversal and projection.

After getting to Majgeria, Supratik and his comrades try to closely reconstruct what had happened to Nitai and the circumstances under which he was led to the desperate extermination of his family. Supratik interrogates those who may provide him with information about Nitai and help him piece together the elements leading to his tragic demise, even in light of the general distrust towards people like him and the reluctance to speak of a topic that had become “taboo” in the village. Just like the police, Supratik asks questions sometimes with an almost obsessive tenacity. It is as if Supratik demands a narrative from the Other, of the Other, as some kind of plea or confession, an indirect order to the Other to speak or, to quote Derrida, “to extort it from him like a secretless secret” (Derrida 1979: 87). In an indirect demand for authorisation of the self, Supratik poses as main question a “What happened?” which seems to express a narcissistic desire for the Other to recognise his own prime concerns and motives. At every moment, the presence of Supratik among the people for whom he has chosen to fight holds

the expectation that they confirm, through language, the possession of specific qualities and needs about their way of living.

The resistance he meets from peasants is present at all times in the novel, frustrating Supratik's attempts at getting an admission of the necessity of his presence among them. This is not dissimilar to the strategy of making the native "calculable" during colonial times in India discussed by Bhabha (1985). Supratik, as an exponent of Calcutta's bourgeoisie, tries to somehow dominate the Other "by positing the truth that the subject has but does not know" (Bhabha 1994: 141). In other words, the question about what had really happened is to be translated from "Tell me the truth that you know" into "Tell me the truth that I know". Supratik needs such confirmations as a way to legitimate and bestow authority upon the action of bourgeois-turned-rebels like him, and create the basis for their demands and claims.

What he finds is a reality that exceeds his own expectations. Indeed, he meets people consumed by decades of abuses, oppression and extreme living conditions. "Because their lives were like this" (Mukherjee 2014: 181), they have apparently no desire to improve their lives through armed rebellion, simply because they cannot imagine a different life for themselves anymore. Supratik admits he is surprised at their acceptance of their own troubles, which is indeed a very peculiar kind of incredulity. Supratik's surprise does not derive from the fact that he discovers his fantasies to be different from the peasants' actual conditions. On the contrary, he is astonished to acknowledge that his suppositions were so true, in fact, as to surpass what he himself had imagined. One must be careful not to miss the paradoxical outcome of this over-coincidence between reality and fantasy: the "excess" of reality produces in Supratik a diminution of his own sense of reality. This shattering feeling is better understood in Slavoj Žižek's recount of Sigmund Freud's<sup>1</sup> bewilderment at the site of the Acropolis in Athens:

When, exactly, does the experience of the 'loss of reality' take place? Not, as one would expect, when the abyss that separates 'words' and 'things' grows too large, so that 'reality' no longer seems to fit the frame or horizon of our symbolic pre-understanding, but, on the contrary, when 'reality' fits 'words' too closely, i.e., when the content of our words is realized in an excessively 'literal' way.  
[...]

<sup>1</sup> As reported in an open letter Freud, who at the time was eighty years old, wrote to his friend Romain Rolland on the occasion of his birthday on 29th January 1936.

our sense of reality disintegrates the moment reality too closely approaches our fundamental fantasy. (Žižek 2012: 667)

In fact, the most revealing truths in the novel are the ones Supratik already knows, but which he has to utter himself if he wants them to come out, because no one knows or seems to be able to formulate them in language. This becomes evident in the moment when Supratik discusses with his comrades the role of the police in protecting the zamindars to the detriment of farmers. On that occasion, Supratik is almost astonished by the revealing force of that claim, which in his eyes was simply a matter of fact. He seems to wonder how it is possible that something he deems so obvious is also ultimately so clear as to precipitate in a condition of complete transparency, resulting in invisibility. The obvious truth of the relationship between police forces and landowners must be stated, uttered, pronounced in its entirety to become real.

No one spoke for a long time. Samir asked – But what were the police doing? Was it a rhetorical question? Did he really not know? Still I felt the need to answer him – They were standing guard. They were protecting Basudeb Ray and his servants as they transferred rice to the lorry to be taken to Calcutta or to cities in other states, Bihar, Orissa, where it will be sold on the black market at prices much higher than the official rate. Saying something as barely factual as that did something to me and I could not stop myself from saying more, spelling out the obvious –The police were protecting the rich jotedaar in his act of avoiding the state’s procurement levy [...] Samir cut me short – Protecting from whom? There was another silence. Dhiren answered him – Protecting the criminals from the honest. Hasn’t that always been the reason for the existence of the police? (Mukherjee 2014: 160-161)

Once Supratik starts to shape such fact or “truth” into words, he feels almost urged to finish it, to let it come out loud, as if suddenly stopping speaking may cause him to lose it. Just saying it, or suggesting it is not enough. He has to listen to it from his own mouth. In this circumstance, Supratik’s voice is caught in the experience of *s’entendre-parler*: he seems to be caught in the act of hearing himself speaking. The figure of Supratik appears to be almost split, doubled in and through language. Supratik appears to be at one time speaker and hidden listener, both subject and implied object of his own discourse. According to Žižek, this situation, while continuing to give the speaking subject the impression of transparent presence to itself, simultaneously threatens to subvert it. Through this operation Supratik ends up

somehow coinciding or identifying with the police he is talking about, becoming their double. This discourse reflects the bourgeois' will to speak for the otherness represented by people living in rural areas of India, and in a reflexive structure which projects the self outside by speaking of itself as other. According to Bhabha, this kind of vision of the Other is two-dimensionally narcissistic, because it is characterised by an inherent and unabatable anxiety due to the presence of an empty third space, "the other space of symbolic representation" (Bhabha 1994: 143), hidden from sight and, consequently, to the position of the subject of power.

The anxiety deriving from this blindness, in the case of Supratik and the group of people he represents, makes the subject paranoid in his need to invent the "Other", as Derrida discussed in his *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (2007), as a myth or allegory characterised by ideas of anger and rebellion on the part of people victim of obscure practices of control and manipulation. These psychologically hurt and scare at much deeper levels than direct and apparent episodes of violence, since psychic wounds are much harder to heal than those suffered physically. This kind of perception of territory and life reflects the etymological unsettling contained in the word territory, which, as Bhabha observes: "derives from both terra (earth) and terrere (to frighten) whence territorium 'a place from which people are frightened off'" (Bhabha 1994: 142).

"What are they doing?" is a question that, in trying to solve the problem of "fixing" peasants as the oppressed objects of state power, reveals a bourgeois demand for a legitimising narrative which is directly bound to its inverted narcissistic double, the police, as a simulacrum and its specular image. By inquiring why the police was on their territory, the language of persecutory paranoid projection in which it is formulated points to the substitution of the personal pronoun which is hidden (or embedded) in the real question: "What are WE doing here?" Mukherjee thus confronts with the question of the palimpsestic overlapping of powers in the development of the emerging Indian democracy to reveal the shifting stratigraphy characterising mercurial layerings of historical and political experiences which try to territorially, and symbolically, contain or freeze certain social identities for their own resolutions by emerging alongside, parallel, against or even despite one another.

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## GLASS, FRAMES, AND MIRRORS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF

### *Abstract*

Images of glass, frames and mirrors represent basic tropes playing a significant role in Virginia Woolf's fiction, and are frequently used to reveal the nature of things in an act of visual perception (conceived as a tenuous point of connection/disjunction between the inner and the outer worlds), or the essence of a "scene" or character which is the object of scrutiny. For such reasons, framing and reflective devices provide both structural frameworks to her novels (in so far as they delineate the disputed border between life and art), and a metaphor for the act of literary creation, a symbolic materiality which reflects on the materiality of the text. This essay explores the frame and looking-glass motif as a recurrent feature of Woolf's writing by analysing some relevant occurrences in different kinds of texts – non-fictional works such as *Moments of Being*, as well as the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* – in an attempt to show how it variously functions as a surface upon/within which the self may be reflected or envisioned, and as a structural metaphor for the very process of writing.

*Keywords:* Virginia Woolf; glass; mirror; frame.

Images of glass, frames and mirrors represent basic tropes playing a significant role in Virginia Woolf's fiction, and are frequently used to reveal the nature of things in an act of visual perception (conceived as a tenuous point of connection/disjunction between the inner and the outer worlds), or the essence of a "scene" or character which is the object of scrutiny. For such reasons, framing and reflective devices provide not only repeated themes but also structural frameworks to her novels (in so far as they delineate the disputed border between life and art), as well as a metaphor for the act of literary creation, a symbolic materiality which reflects on the materiality of the text. This essay aims to explore the frame and (looking) glass motif as a recurrent feature of Woolf's

writing, by analysing some relevant occurrences in different kinds of texts – non-fictional works such as *Moments of Being*, as well as the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* – in an attempt to see how it variously functions as a surface upon/within which the self might be reflected or envisioned, and as a structural metaphor for the very process of writing.

Woolf is notoriously concerned with dual realms: subject and object, interiority and exteriority, boundaries between life and art as well as merging of the two worlds. In this perspective, glass, frames and mirrors both separate and fuse, and provide metaphors for these double states of existence. In her pioneering monograph *Virginia Woolf: Reflections and Reverberations*, Marilyn Kurtz has pointed out that “the inner and outer worlds of consciousness and objective reality reflect each other as Virginia Woolf moves back and forth between the thoughts of her characters and their relationships to people and objects outside themselves” by means of specific textual frames providing analogues to fictional form (Kurtz 1990: 5). In particular, “at the window and at the mirror there is constant double motion: separating and merging as windows and mirrors become both unifiers and dividers” (p. 6). Accordingly, the imagery that the author uses captures the essence of such movement and becomes a means through which the text focuses on the boundary between the character’s mind and the world of the novel, or between the fictional world and the real one. Moreover, it highlights the importance of visual perception in her work, and self-consciously hints at the central issues of mimesis, narrative representation and self-representation, or the relationship between fiction and reality. While glass combines solidity with transparency, two essential qualities of a work of art according to Woolf, the notion of reflection appears to be an equally complex and resonant one. It may refer to the actual image sent back by a mirror (which not only encloses a scene within a frame, but also reproduces it), as well as to the characters’ states of consciousness, or the processes inherent in the creative imagination, thus indicating a modernist absorption with self-reflection. It can, therefore, be said to embody the essence of Woolf’s writing, particularly when the epiphanic ‘moments of being’ she constantly pursues take place by means of framing, transparent or reflective devices. In this sense, the author uses the window or mirror frame to create a holding pattern representative of the ordering powers of art, a metaphor for the present moment – both in life and in fiction – capturing what otherwise becomes caught up in the fleetingness of life.

Several occurrences of mirrors, glass, frames and windows characterise the autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past”, some of which

have mainly received feminist or psychoanalytic interpretations<sup>1</sup>. Much more relevant to the purpose of this essay are a couple of passages in which the transparent or reflective medium is connected with sensory perception transmuted into a moment of revelation, and ultimately into artistic creation through a sort of alchemical conversion. The following extract consists of two interlaced memories, where the mind becomes a reflector: the image of an arch of glass burning with light, and a sudden “feeling of transparency in words” on reading out a poem to her sister Vanessa in the “hot grass”:

It was sunset, and the great glass dome at the end of the station was blazing with light. It was glowing yellow and red and the iron girders made a pattern across it. I walked along the platform gazing with rapture at this magnificent blaze of colour [...]. The contrast of that blaze of magnificent light with the shrouded and curtained rooms at Hyde Park Gate was so intense. Also it was partly that my mother’s death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant. Of course this quickening was spasmodic. But it was surprising – as if something were becoming visible without any effort. To take another instance – I remember going into Kensington Gardens about that time. It was a hot spring evening, and we lay down – Nessa and I – in the long grass behind the Flower Walk. I had taken *The Golden Treasury* with me. I opened it and began to read some poetry. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem (which it was I forget). It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. I was so astonished that I tried to explain the feeling. [...] no one could have understood from what I said the queer feeling I had in the hot grass, that poetry was coming true. Nor does that give the feeling. It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets on the scent. (Woolf 1989: 103-104)

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the famous passage in which Woolf describes what she calls her own “looking-glass shame” (Woolf 1989: 76): a strong feeling of guilt that lasted all her life, and that she first associated with the act of looking at her face in the hall mirror at Talland House at the age of six or seven. The author, then, connects physical embarrassment at seeing herself caught in the glass with the traumatic experience of being molested by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth. In another emblematic episode, she tells about a dream, or possibly a vision, in which the horrible face of an animal suddenly showed up over her shoulder while looking in a mirror. For a feminist or psychoanalytic reading of such momentous events see Squier 1981 and Deppman 2001.

In both emblematic episodes, what is by nature solid, opaque or impenetrable is changed into something transparent, the experience of which is no longer “shaded” or “dormant”, but quickened and “intensified”. Sensory (mostly visual) perception first generates a “pattern” – which Woolf constantly pursues in daily life experiences, and especially in literary creation – then a feeling of “rapture”, also typical of unexpected moments of being and of equally spontaneous creative moments. Such an instant of heightened perception becoming suddenly manifest or intelligible is likened to the effect of a burning glass placed over something dull and muffled: the transparency of the medium allows vision of a reality which is already there, but adds an illuminating and intensifying touch to it. The object of vision – words, for instance, in the second experience – finally becomes real, clear and pregnant with deep meaning, a process matching the ineffable thrill and rapture Woolf feels in writing.

In another interesting passage, the author describes the private retreat of her room (a frequent metaphor for the human mind in Woolf’s writings) at 22 Hyde Park Gate as a markedly bipartite inner space:

My room, the old night nursery, was a long narrow room, with two windows; the fireside half was the living half; the washstand half was the sleeping half. [...] In the living half was my wicker chair, and Stella’s writing table [...]. On it stood open my Greek lexicon; some Greek play or other; many little bottles of ink, pens innumerable; and probably hidden under blotting paper, sheets of foolscap covered with private writing in a hand so small and twisted as to be a family joke. The sleeping side was dominated by the long Chippendale (imitation) looking glass, given me by George in the hope that I should look into it and learn to do my hair and take general care for my appearance. Between it and the washstand, under the window, was my bed. On summer nights, I would lie with the window open, looking up at the sky, thinking, for I recall a story I wrote then, about the stars and how in Egypt some savage was looking at them; and also listening. Very far off there was a hum of traffic. In the mews one heard the stamp of horses; a clatter of the wheels and buckets. (Woolf 1989: 135)

The “living half” of the room is the symbol of young Virginia’s freedom, of her irreverent break with Victorian conventions, her love for literature, her own will to spend time reading and writing instead of vainly caring for her physical appearance. The choice to favour interiority over exteriority is well represented by her envisioning the room as a secluded place in which she could practise “private writing”. On the contrary, her brother George’s Chippendale mirror, dominating the

“sleeping half”, stands for family and sexual constraints, and has the power to reflect, as Woolf has already explained, what she considers an extremely unpleasant image. The internal division of the room into two halves duplicates the separation between inner and outer space mediated by the liminality of the window as a boundary, margin or border. The window frame normally encloses a hard though transparent surface, allowing vision beyond it; in this scene, however, the barrier is almost inexistent because the window is wide open in the summer heat and lets in innumerable sounds and images. The window represents a point of connection between the inner and the outer, between mind and world, and reveals the nature of things through visual and auditory perception. Such sensory world becomes the world of imagination, associated with literary creation: the fantasies generated by noises and sights result in the act of writing a story. Through Woolf’s imaginative wanderings from inside the room out beyond the window, life in its complexity and wonder came to her and found expression in writing.

Since the notion of duality is inherent in elements such as glass, frames and mirrors – suffice it to think of the split between the self and its image in the mirror, or the separation of interior and exterior spaces at the window – it seems evident that this sort of imagery acquires special momentousness in Woolf’s fictional as well as non-fictional writings. Claudia Olk maintains that “images of glass and fabric become a means through which the text focuses on the boundary between the character’s mind and the world of the novel and renders perceptual experience as mediated” (Olk 2014: 54). Furthermore, the narrative use of glass, frames, and mirrors is closely related to the notion of semi-transparency and semi-permeability – allowing for both mediated vision, as it happens at a window, and reflection, as with the opacity of the looking glass – which represents a familiar image for Woolf, connected with the sensory sphere as well as with the realm of literary creation<sup>2</sup>. We might argue, therefore, for an analysis of the aesthetic function of framed glass – whether transparent or opaque – as metaphor for the compositional process, since it formalises the flux of experience into a significant pattern, imposing order upon the ceaselessly changing.

<sup>2</sup> In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf famously describes “the feeling [...] of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow” (Woolf 1989: 74) as one of the childhood memories upon which her personality and sensibility as a writer rest. Then she adds: “if I were a painter, I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. [...] I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent. I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline” (p. 74).

Not only in “visual” short stories such as “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection”, but also in her experimental novels, Woolf relies on unconventional frames – chiefly windows and mirrors – to illuminate the unescapably two-dimensional quality of fictional character and to emphasise her struggle to represent the self in a narrative text. In the emblematic opening scene of *Mrs Dalloway*, the window constitutes a threshold between the inner world of the mind and the outer world of vivid sensations, but also between the present and the past, thus immediately establishing the double structural (the coexistence of opposites) and temporal frame of the novel. Clarissa flings the window open on a June day in London and lets in life, sensory perceptions and memories of her youth at Bourton some thirty years before: “what a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air” (Woolf 1963: 5). Throughout the novel, the protagonist meditates on her self, her past, her relationships, her future as she contemplates her image on various kinds of reflecting surfaces. By catching sight of her figure in shop windows or at her dressing table, by gazing at the old lady in the window opposite, by envisaging the image of Septimus throwing himself out of a window, she perceives her many selves. The mirror encounter is always an instant of heightened perception in which the character hangs suspended, arresting the flow of life in a moment of being that reveals her own identity as definite and composed. In the following scene, as she sits amid the glass, Clarissa collects herself and realises her wholeness as well as her parts:

Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there – the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings, seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together [...]. (Woolf 1963: 41-42)

The effects of the window and the mirror, of transparency and opacity, combine in one final moment of revelation that Clarissa experiences during her party, when she withdraws in an empty room and looks

out through the transparent windowpanes. As it happens elsewhere, the character's retreat into a private, secluded space parallels the narrative focus on interiority. Furthermore, the act of gazing through a window is conceived as a tenuous point of conjunction between the inner and the outer world (of both the room and the mind, which is like a room), and is ultimately used to reveal the genuine nature of things in visual perception, the true essence of a 'scene' or character, or the meaning of life. In other words, perception becomes what Woolf conceives as 'vision' through the intermediary function of glass. In this extract – where Clarissa looks through the window and sees the old woman, her double, going to bed – the window turns into a mirror: the windowpanes, though transparent, reflect back a picture (the lady staring at Clarissa) that the protagonist recognises as an image of her self. Here the reciprocal gaze allows for a moment of recognition, in which Clarissa becomes suddenly aware of the meaning of her existence reflected in that of Septimus or the old lady; of life and death; of how her doubles chose or approach death, while she must opt for life:

She parted the curtains; she looked. Oh, but how surprising! – in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! [...] She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (Woolf 1963: 204-205)

The pervasiveness and evocativeness of the window – a framed pane of glass – in *To the Lighthouse* has been frequently noted by critics. Miller aptly suggests that “windows may be seen as effecting certain syntheses Virginia Woolf wished to achieve in her writing” (Miller 1988: 100). For instance, they combine “the mirror's sheet of glass, the room's creation of an inside and an outside, and the threshold's posi-

tion as a passage between the two spheres” (p. 100). Moreover, “since rooms often serve as metaphors for the mind in Virginia Woolf’s works, it is not surprising that windows are connected with the eyes, which usually represent metonymically the various ways in which the mind apprehends the external world” (pp. 100-101). From the very beginning of the novel, Mrs Ramsay is frequently depicted sitting at the window with her son James, musing and gazing at the lighthouse. More generally, she is often seen in association with a window, a liminal space which can be approached from both sides and where characters can, literally as well as metaphorically, look both outward and inward. Despite the emotional distance between husband and wife emerging from the initial scene, Mr and Mrs Ramsay are allowed to experience a later moment of spiritual communion taking place precisely at a window. In this passage, once again, visual perception mediated by a transparent medium enclosed in a frame, generates a moment of insight:

But through the crepuscular walls of their intimacy, for they were drawing together, involuntarily, coming side by side, quite close, she could feel his mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind [...]. Getting up she stood at the window with the reddish-brown stocking in her hands, partly to turn away from him, partly because she did not mind looking now, with him watching, at the Lighthouse. For she knew that he had turned his head as she turned; he was watching her. [...] Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying any thing she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness) – ‘Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet to-morrow’. She had not said it, but he knew it. (Woolf 1967: 189-191)

In the famous dinner scene, another instant of communion holds together all the guests, causing Mrs Ramsay to come across her most intense moment of being. Glass, frames and windows create a boundary of perception or a threshold, and clearly foreground notions of semi-transparency and semi-permeability, ultimately calling attention to the materiality of mediated vision. The dining room is depicted as a microcosm, markedly separated from the external world by panes of glass which prevent an osmosis between inside and outside; in fact, they establish a neat demarcation between the inner space – solid, orderly and composed – and the outer space, a fluid and elusive reflection of it:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. [...] and now the same effect was got by the many candles in the sparsely furnished room, and the uncurtained windows, and the bright mask-like look of faces seen by candlelight. (Woolf 1967: 151-152)

The window, with its disjunction between inner and outer, is evidently a central metaphor for Woolf's conception of the literary experience, since the character gaining a new perspective on things through a transparent medium and a frame can be seen as emblematic of the oscillating movement between consciousness and reality, the inner life and the external world, that the author tries to capture in writing. This is exactly what Mrs Ramsay does when, in a fleeting but also eternal moment of vision, she feels the need to arrest the flow of life, to arrange experience by crystallising it and transforming it into a scene. The framed picture becomes a holding pattern representative of the ordering powers of art, and a structural metaphor for the very process of writing:

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, [...] of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby [...]. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain. (Woolf 1967: 163)

In conclusion, the pervasive presence of glass, frames and mirrors in Woolf's fictional and non-fictional texts suggests the cultural and psychological hold that such kind of imagery had on her as a writer. These numerous references to liminal spaces serve to emphasise the dualism and interpenetration of life and art, especially when the characters remain suspended, hesitating at a threshold, while the enclosed scene they behold momentarily acquires the unity and consonance of a work of art. Going back to "A Sketch of the Past", we might recognise that in

Woolf's *oeuvre* a picture glimpsed in a mirror or through the outline of a window coincides with the manifestation of what she was incessantly pursuing: "a revelation of some order [...] a token of some real thing behind appearances", the accidental pattern hidden "behind the cotton wool" of daily life (Woolf 1989: 81).

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THE SELF-EFFACING AUTOBIOGRAPHER:  
RECASTING LIFE WRITING IN *SUMMERTIME*  
BY J.M. COETZEE

*Abstract*

In *Summertime* (2009) J.M. Coetzee brings to an end his autobiographical trilogy with a *coup de theatre*, staging his own death in what must be received as a brilliant piece of autofiction, which in turn reorients the reading of the first two volumes, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002). In fact, those works seemed to conform to traditional autobiographical conventions in that they feature two very conventional titles, a retrospective look, a chronological sequence of events, a balance between factual account and introspection, and a consistent focus on the same subject. What is strange, though, is that the subject whose life is being recounted is never referred to as an “I” and the narrative tense is the present; and what is lacking, though, is the author’s commitment to tell “the truth” about himself – a commitment that a postmodern, postcolonial and poststructuralist subject just cannot undertake, as the foundational assumptions of modern autobiography (self-transparent subjectivity, sincerity of one’s motives, fidelity in representation) have been swept away by several waves of structuralisms. The autobiographer is, by necessity, a fictioneer; and the only way to be sincere and truthful is to openly acknowledge these limits – which is an issue Coetzee has dealt with implicitly and explicitly since the beginning of his career as a writer.

Yet, what astonishes in *Summertime* is certainly not Coetzee’s acknowledgment of these constraints but rather the deliberate interpolation of verifiable events in his life and the fabrication of testimonies whose only purpose seems to be that of creating a disagreeable image of himself. The book is in fact the ostensible rough-draft of a biographical project by a certain Mr. Vincent who embarks on a series of interviews with people (mostly women) who were close to young Coetzee. Their accounts are manifestly biased, and the biographer’s goal of disclosing the literary celebrity’s intimate life borders on gossiping. The result is that readers close the book with the perception of knowing even less on Coetzee than what they knew when they first picked it up.

*Keywords:* Coetzee; autofiction; autobiography; death; *Summertime*.

In our time, few authors have received as much critical commentary as J.M. Coetzee has. An attention that has grown immensely after he was awarded the Nobel prize for Literature in 2003 and which is sustained by the complexity and creativity of his narrative, to the extent that his novels have often been perceived as fictional traps for critics (Coetzee himself is an outstanding scholar); he has attracted intense interest from many a philosopher, fascinated by the thoughtful, intricate, self-reflexive nature of his writing. His works are not easy reading for the general public, and have often been described as puzzling and gloomy. In my experience as an instructor of Postcolonial Literature, I have received this kind of feedback more than once.

Coetzee requires, and deserves, strong readers – who are numerous and have responded enthusiastically to his challenges, as it is proved by the planetary success of at least two novels (namely, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, the latter also adapted for the screen); readers who have shown constant appreciation in the face of major changes in his writing style and concerns. In fact, from the Lacanian allegories and the postmodern rewritings of his early works (such as *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg*), Coetzee has gradually shifted towards a more distinctly autobiographical narrative, culminating in the publication of the so-called “trilogy” of *Scenes from Provincial Life* (2011). This turn does not come as a surprise to those who are acquainted with his long-standing preoccupation with self-representation and related issues, but it is certainly true that after *Disgrace* (1999) Coetzee has had to come to terms with his new status of internationally renowned and eventually Nobel laureate writer. Being an extremely reserved character, jealous of his own and his dear ones’ privacy, Coetzee has repeatedly thwarted the ambitions of journalists and academics who have tried to capitalise on his success, with the result that what was not known began to be made up. In the last few years, though, Coetzee has agreed to comply with the biographical projects of two very different but equally appreciated scholars, John Kannemeyer and David Attwell (the latter former editor of *Doubling The Point*, the dialogic intellectual autobiography that Coetzee published in 1992). Both studies (issued in 2012 and 2015 respectively) are based on interviews with Coetzee and the archive of his papers (now housed at the University of Texas in Austin), but their nature is profoundly different as different are their authors’ motives, concerns, and focus. It is important to note that none of these biographies has been “authorised” by Coetzee, as this would go against the grain of his construal of authorship and auto/biographical writing. The very fact of the diversity of these biographies confirms the platitude that there cannot be “the” story of one’s life, whether written

by the person who has lived that life or by somebody else; but more importantly, they provide a stark contrast, belying them as semi-fictional, to the accounts of his life that Coetzee himself had been working on and publishing over the span of twenty years. He had in fact been writing about his childhood in South Africa since at least 1987 (though *Boyhood* was released in 1997), his formative years in Britain (*Youth*, 2002), and then about the early 1970s, when he relocated to South Africa and published *Dusklands* (*Summertime*, 2009). Nor can these versions of the self be considered conclusive, as the author felt the need to revise them for the aforementioned 2011 omnibus edition collecting them under the same title (formerly, their subtitle) omitting and adding more than few details but anyway confirming their semi-fictional nature (see Hughes 2011).

This preamble is needed as I believe there cannot be any critical discussion of *Summertime* if one neglects the context of the author's life stage, the place of the book in his overall production, and his biographers' works. It is now time to better qualify the meaning of the term "autobiographical" as applied to Coetzee's narrative, as this shall disclose his ability to question received literary conventions and their underpinning ideological assumptions in highly inventive and original ways. He has done so not only in his creative but also in his academic writings, devoting several critical pages to this subject since at least the early 1980s (see for example Coetzee 1985). In 1992, being asked to elaborate on his understanding of autobiography, Coetzee famously replied that "all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (Coetzee 1992: 17). Yet, such a short (and therefore cryptic) quotation results in a trivialization of his reasoning, reduced to a facile equation among different prose genres. A larger excerpt shows how Coetzee acutely rephrases the question about autobiography as an inquiry about one's ability to tell the truth (on oneself, on the world, on oneself-in-the-world); and then focuses on the nature of this truth, distinguishing between a "truth to fact" and a "higher truth". He argues that even the notion of "truth to fact" is debatable since any account of one's experience or reality is always the result of a selection, and therefore already an interpretation of what is being offered as pure factuality. He then abstains from elucidating what a "higher truth" could be, but states that it is attained through writing and is not known beforehand:

[Y]ou write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be

quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. (Coetzee 1992: 18)

I do not agree with those who read these lines as echoing Barthes's (or Genette's, or Foucault's) "death of the Author" or as an evidence of some form of structuralist constructivism (see for example Powers 2016). Barthes certainly looms large on Coetzee's progress, to the extent that he complains in the manuscript of *Boyhood* that Barthes "stands in his way" (quoted in Sheehan 2016: 8); but this is a case of "anxiety of influence" as Coetzee is referring here to his own paralysing admiration for *Roland Barthes* (1975), the autobiography *he* wanted to write; and which is a paradoxical confirmation, on the part of the French critic, not of the death, but of the subversive agency of authorship (this is a point I have argued elsewhere: see Fiorella 2011). In the same perspective, Coetzee describes writing as a form of self-revelation (he repeats "reveals" twice) as well as a semi-conscious act of self-creation ("it sometimes constructs what you want to say"); which may be a fiction, or a number of fictions:

The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction (shades of *Tristram Shandy*!) – does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself? (Coetzee 1992: 17)

It is here that Coetzee connects the idea of "truth" (a word carrying religious overtones) with the practice of "fiction" (having negative religious nuances) elaborating the latter as truth-bearer: a paradox. Fiction has always been opposed to the so-called historical writings (history, biography, autobiography) that throughout the centuries have been constructed as rigorous disciplines capable to establish the truth. Yet, their credibility lies (and this is the point Coetzee makes in a famous talk on realism: Coetzee 1988) on their compliance with a set of conventions; namely, a commitment to tell the truth, a chronological order in the narrative, a retrospective look, inner consistency and cross references to outside sources; and, in the case of autobiography, the onomastic coincidence between author, narrator and subject, first person and past tense narrative, a consistent focus on oneself, and a balance between factual account and introspection. In Coetzee's view historical writing is not ontologically different from fiction; they are both constructions, fabrications, provisional arrangements of our life experience: "The cat-

egories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality” (Coetzee 1988: 4). Elsewhere he refers to this construction as “illusionism” or “illusionistic realism”<sup>1</sup> (Coetzee 1992: 27): here Coetzee is applying to autobiography what Hayden White had argued on historical representation and has become common currency since *Metahistory* and *The Content of the Form*.

*Summertime* is the latest and more radical fruit of a progressive, painstaking deconstruction of the foundational assumptions of modern memoirs (self-transparent subjectivity, sincerity of one’s motives, fidelity in representation) begun with the publication of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, which share common narrative structures and strategies. Both of them apparently comply with the law of the genre. Their titles remind of a host of childhoods and educations in general and Tolstoy’s in particular; they focus on both the outer and the inner life of the subject; the narrative is retrospective and told in a predominantly chronological order; *Youth* is clearly conceived as a *Bildung* of the artist as a young man. However, a few major formal infringements to the norm disclose a substantial departure from traditional autobiographical practices. In the first place, both works are told in the present rather than in the past tense – which does not preclude retrospection but certainly conveys the idea of an on-going, still-to-be-settled experience that clashes with the “settling” purposes of mainstream autobiography. Secondly, and more importantly, the narrative is told in the third, rather than the first, person. If this is not a complete novelty (as Max Saunders has shown in an insightful book published in 2010, real novelties are definitely rare in the literary realm), the choice of referring to the subject almost exclusively by the pronoun *he* is very unusual: only once or twice is the first name “John” mentioned in the narrative of both books – which incidentally confirms them as autobiographical according to the onomastic coincidence prescribed by the genre (see Lejeune 1989). This practice is consistent with any subject’s use of the first person pronoun to refer to him or herself (I do not use my first name when I think or talk about myself: “my” first name is actually used by others). Yet, the unrelenting use of the third person pronoun results in an estrangement of the narrated subject, shrouded in a cloud of mystery that strikes as the opposite effect of what a memoir should produce: a reunion, an identification, a clarification, even a reconciliation of the writing self with

<sup>1</sup> The full quotation reads: “Illusionism is, of course, a word I use for what is usually called realism. The most accomplished illusionism yields the most convincing realist effects”.

his/her younger selves. Instead, it is as though Coetzee hesitated over sharing his name with these earlier versions of himself.

Besides these formal markers of deviation from the standard, only partially made up for by a deft use of the paratext<sup>2</sup>, the overall picture of these younger selves does not pursue what Lejeune identified as the primary objective of the autobiographer's purpose: to "honour one's signature" (Lejeune 1989: 14). John the child is tormented with guilt and fear, and he seems to be leading a double life as a model student at school and a hard-hearted tyrant at home; as a young man, the portrait is far harsher, depicting an ambitious, self-deluded, introvert lad unable to connect with – or take on responsibilities for – others, especially women. Surely self-humiliation may originate from a variety of personal motives, and double bind theories have clarified that they are not transparent to the subject; however, I strongly disagree with psychologising understandings of this practice in Coetzee's case (see for example Parks 2010: 3) as indeed in the case of any other well-informed writer: self-abasement in confessional narrative is an aesthetic pattern that enjoys a long-established and enduring tradition, as it has been variously shown by scholars such as Zambrano ([1943] 2004) and Brooks (2000), and also by Coetzee himself (1992: Brooks actually quotes and discusses Coetzee). It can be dated back to Saint Augustine and seminal texts in this field are of course Rousseau's *Confessions* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*; the present overflow of narcissistic exhibitionism can be considered its latest development.

Since this choice cannot be read naively, one should try to explain Coetzee's reasons for self-degradation, particularly because documentary evidence proves that he is omitting a notable part of his London years in *Youth*, a part that could actually redeem him: his marriage to Philippa Jubbart, which gives the lie to the picture of the young *émigré*'s complete isolation and inability to establish lasting relationships with women. If this contradiction cannot be detected by readers who are not acquainted with Coetzee's biography, even the most superficial readers shall notice that *Summertime* is actually fabricated on the counterfactual death of its author, whose name stands out on the book cover. The narrative is ostensibly the unfinished work of a certain Mr Vincent, an academic who plans to reconstruct an early stage in the late writer's career, and he intends to do so by interviewing a few people (mostly women) who were close to John Coetzee (sic) in the years 1972-1977. The book opens with no mediation on a series of dated fragments from the writer's notebooks, penned in the same style used in *Boyhood* and

<sup>2</sup> *Boyhood* is merchandised as memoirs whereas *Youth* is labeled as fiction.

*Youth* (third person and present tense narrative); they are interspersed with italicised phrases suggesting an on-going revision on the part of the author, and tell about the miserable life John leads in Cape Town sharing a cottage with his widowed father after his relocation from the U.S. – a house-sharing which in fact never happened, as Coetzee was living with his wife and children at that time, and his mother died much later, in 1985. The fragments are followed by the alleged transcriptions of five interviews with people who are described as having been close to John in those years but whose identities are fictional, and whose relationships with the writer are likely to be made up. These “testimonies” are then ended by another series of fragments, this time undated, from Coetzee’s notebooks, showing close continuity with the former and thus coming full circle.

So much for the structure; but before addressing the substance of the narrative, a few observations on Coetzee’s sharp departure from the solution experimented in his previous works are needed. With this book, in fact, Coetzee enters decidedly into the realm of autofiction: one thing is omitting part of one’s experience, another thing is to manifestly manipulate verifiable events and other people’s roles in one’s life. Coetzee would disagree, and say that there is no difference in principle, it is just a matter of emphasis, which is certainly true: but the impact on the readership is widely different. Readers of *Boyhood* and *Youth* have no reasons to suspect they are being given only a partial picture; whereas readers of *Summertime* are compelled to wonder about the nature of a narrative which is offered as autobiographical (because it shares the same author, title and narrative strategies, at least in the fragments, of the previous installments) but that in fact does not correspond to the biographical truth. This of course extends the suspect of fictionality to the whole trilogy.

I would like to make a point about autofiction. In my understanding of the term, it does not refer to the simple combination of facts and fiction but to the deliberate and *manifest* manipulation of verifiable events in a spirit of inconsistency and self-contradiction as ultimate assertion of the subject’s freedom. This kind of writing is fully appreciated when the reader possesses extratextual knowledge about the author, and its success is partially due to the mediatisation of the figure of the artist and the narcissistic exposure of the self that is a major feature of contemporary society. It has an unmistakably meta-narrative quality, and it is no wonder that major examples in the field have been set by authors who are also academics (for example, beside Coetzee, Jeanette Winterson, Phillip Roth, Edmund White): they all play with their own celebrity, their public personas or aura, giving a

performance of themselves. This practice may be openly discussed in the narrative or remain implicit; in any case, readers are frequently called to an exercise of disbelief and to reconsider their idea of autobiographical truth. Autofiction does not aim to be truthful in the traditional sense of the term; its truth lies in the generative relation between the author and his/her self-portrait; it is an authorial act. It provides a second degree truth which acknowledges the blind spots of any truth-seeking text.

In *Summertime*, Coetzee stages his own death – that is, the Death of the Author, in ironic counterpoint to Roland Barthes’s seminal text. Developing a technique he had experimented in *Diary of a Bad Year* (another brilliant example of autofiction: see Fiorella 2014), he leaves behind the monologism of the third person narrator handing the floor to five fictional “witnesses”, four women and one man: Julia, a psychotherapist who had an extramarital affair with John and who insists in depicting him as a minor role character in her own life story; Margot, John’s affectionate cousin, sharing his strong attachment to the family farm in the Karoo; Adriana, a Brazilian dance teacher John had an obstinate crush on to the point of making himself ridiculous; Martin, who was a fellow-candidate for a lectureship at the University of Cape Town; and Sophie, a French colleague in the same University who had a brief liaison with John. From their individual and partial perspectives, in various guise and with different emphasis, they convey a substantially coherent picture of the deceased author; one that actually confirms, to a considerable extent, Coetzee’s self-portrait in both *Youth* and the fragments ascribed to him in *Summertime*. An isolated, thoughtful, bookish individual whose project to emigrate to the U.S. has failed and who has relocated with a father he is not able to communicate with; an autistic type, socially inept, even “not fully human” (Julia, Coetzee 2009: 83); cold, impersonal, withdrawn, “not made for conjugal life” (Adriana, p. 171); “a misfit” (Martin, p. 214); a writer whose “work lacks ambition” (Sophie, p.242).

If these testimonies were authentic, one could say that *Summertime* is an attempt at a “relational autobiography”, based on the notion of intersubjective identity; but they are not, and shed less new light on the writer’s character than what they do on the interviewees’ constructed oneness. Adriana’s is possibly the best example. She bears grudge against John for having, though unintentionally, turned her daughter against her, and persecuted her as a suitor; but even before that, she was ill-disposed towards him on the ground of a negative first impression:

[h]e struck me at once, I can't say why, as *célibataire*. I mean not just unmarried but also unsuited to marriage, like a man who has spent his life in the priesthood and lost his manhood and become incompetent with women. Also his comportment was not good [...] He seemed ill at ease, itching to get away. He had not learned to hide his feelings, which is the first step toward civilized manners. (Coetzee 2009: 159)

The smart irony of this passage suggests the limited reliability of Adriana's but also Julia's and Sophie's perspectives, since, as Martin points out (p. 217), lovers and suitors are the least impartial sources. This in turn casts doubts about the biographer's methods and objectives, who relies on dubious informants neglecting the author's works, as again Martin is quick to observe<sup>3</sup>; but indeed, all the interviewees express misgivings about the way Mr Vincent conducts their conversations, transcribes and uses their accounts.

In the orchestration of these voices, one can easily detect a preemptive strategy against prospective aggressive biographers – something Kannemeyer was perfectly cognizant of<sup>4</sup>. But there is more than that. In fact, besides questioning the methods of contemporary biographical writing, in *Summertime* Coetzee reinstates the author as ineludible source about himself. Secondly, he invites his readership to look for his autobiographical profile in his writings *as a whole* – and not only in those reading “memoirs” on their back covers; something which of course recalls De Man's understanding of autobiography as a figure of *reading* instead of a literary genre (De Man 1979: 70). And indeed there can be no doubt on the fact that for example *The Master of Petersburg* is paradoxically a much more personal text than *Summertime*, as it deals with the heartbreaking loss of a child. Thirdly, (and here I would like to return to a question I left unanswered) by projecting a self-disparaging image of himself as a man and a writer, Coetzee divests himself of the authority of the artist, and especially of the potential political and ethical influence of the acclaimed Nobel prize winner. It is a point he has argued several times in both his creative and academic works (well-investigated by Attwell 2006 and Danta 2011), which explains why he usually reads excerpts from his fiction when asked to attend public venues. It is a penitential, almost ascetic discipline to avoid any temptation of power.

<sup>3</sup> “I repeat, it seems to me strange to be doing the biography of a writer while ignoring his writing” (Coetzee 2009: 217).

<sup>4</sup> The irony of fate has been that Kannemeyer – who devoted a few pages to distinguish between “historical” and invented events in *Summertime* – actually died before Coetzee in 2011, and his manuscript on the novelist's life and work was edited and published by others.

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MASON AND PRE-WARTIME FILMS:  
PATRIOTISM AND HEROISM IN *THE FOUR FEATHERS* (1902)  
AND *FIRE OVER ENGLAND* (1936)

*Abstract*

Alfred Edward Woodley Mason (1865–1948), though almost forgotten today, was a prolific novelist and playwright, a politician, a soldier, a traveller and a mountaineer. Mason's literary career started in the theatre but he achieved his biggest success in 1902 with the novel *The Four Feathers* (which was adapted for the cinema several times). A symbol of cowardice, the white feather represented for the protagonist both a crippling accusation and an occasion to regain the lost honour. At the beginning of WW1, inspired by Mason's novel, the White Feather Brigade, a paramilitary group of women, gave white feathers to men not in uniform with the purpose of calling them to their duty (Gullace 1997). Even though this practice was later harshly criticised, the novel was adapted (for the fourth time) for the cinema just before the outbreak of WW2 and released the day after Britain declared war to Germany, with a new use of the symbolic feather and a strong focus on duty and heroism.

Mason gave new light to the themes of courage and loyalty to the country a few years before the Second World War in the novel *Fire Over England* (1936) which depicts the adventures of a young Elizabethan secret agent who tries to save his country from the invasion of the Spanish Armada. A eulogy of Francis Drake and of the dedication and resourcefulness of the British people, *Fire Over England* was immediately adapted for the cinema in 1937. The story, though deeply transformed from the novel, embodied an overt call "for military preparedness" (Dunn 1996: 165) and a "propagandist warning to Hitler to keep 'Hands Off' by stressing the failure of a previous invasion attempt" (Everson 2003: 301). So effective were some of the scenes that they were re-used in the wartime propaganda film *The Lion Has Wings* (1941). The essay focuses both on the novels and on the film adaptations highlighting how and why visual elements and themes were preserved or transformed in the passage from one medium to the other.

*Keywords:* Mason; *The Four Feathers*; *Fire Over England*; adaptation; cowardice; WW1; WW2.

Born in 1865 into a middle-class family, Alfred Edward Woodley Mason was destined to an unusual fate: becoming one of the most popular authors in life and being almost forgotten soon after his death (in 1948). He was educated at Oxford and, after a few years spent acting in touring companies, he settled in London to become a playwright. Even though he wrote several plays, it was his prose which brought him real success: his second novel, *The Courtship of Morrice Buckler* (1896), was hailed by critics as a “classic of the decade”<sup>1</sup> and the following, *Lawrence Clavering* (1897), was one of the best sellers of the year. The novel, however, which still grants him a place in the English canon is *The Four Feathers*, published in 1902. Mason became thus one of the greatest names of the British literary scene: his production amounts to 31 novels – including the popular detective series of Inspector Hanaut and other masterpieces like *Fire Over England* (1936) and *Königsmark* (1942) – several plays, non-fiction books, more than 20 films based on his novels<sup>2</sup> and even more numerous adaptations for the stage.

Mason’s life was untiringly eventful: he was a mountaineer and a traveller and was deeply committed in the social life of his country. In 1906 he ran for parliament and was elected MP for the constituency of Coventry where he served for a term and at the beginning of the First World War he was involved in writing for propaganda<sup>3</sup> together with his friend J.M. Barrie and other popular authors. But “Mason was not content to sit down and write pamphlets” (Green 1952: 136): he enrolled and served first in the Manchester Regiment as infantry officer and then was sent to the Spanish coast as an undercover agent for the newly formed Secret Service. As can be expected, this experience deeply affected the writing of *Fire Over England* just like his exploration of Sudan in 1901 and his personal awareness of the fine line between fear and courage had been portrayed in *The Four Feathers* (Kestner 2010: 112). These two novels, thanks to their popularity and their treatment of the themes of heroism and patriotism, were considered precious propaganda material and were adapted for the cinema just before the Second World War broke out.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Green 1952: 61.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete list of all films see Weedon 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For a clear definition of the term propaganda see Cull 1995: XI (Terminology).

### *Heroes and Feathers*

*The Four Feathers* was first published in instalments in 1902 in *The Cornhill Magazine* and it sold so well that the publisher Smith Elder and Co decided to print it as a novel in the same year. By 1918, Mason's work had gone into four editions and by the end of WW2 nearly a million copies had been sold (Gullace 1997: 189; and Green 1952: 89, 91). A typical adventure novel and the "archetypal imperial melodrama" (Daly 2000: 3), the novel tells the story of a British officer, Harry Feversham, who decides to resign from the army when he learns that his regiment is going to join the Anglo-Egyptian forces fighting in Sudan against the Mahdi<sup>4</sup>. When three of his comrades find out about it, they decide to charge him with cowardice by sending him three white feathers. However, the fourth feather is the most painful for Feversham because it belongs to his fiancée, Ethne, who gives it to him while breaking off their engagement. After this, he decides that he must rehabilitate himself by saving the lives of his defamers.

The main theme of the novel revolves around the traditional image of the hero who declares himself to be a coward but shows "a wrist of steel when swords are out" (Green 1952: 65), an idea which seems to have been at the centre of Mason's thoughts since his very first works. It is possible to find traces of this theme in the novels *The Courtship of Morrice Buckler* (1896) and *Lawrence Clavering* (1897) and also in the short story *The Coward* (1901), but it is certainly nowhere stronger than in *The Four Feathers*. As Green, Mason's biographer, records, "The basic idea had been with him for some time, had grown from the tradition of the 'cowardly' hero in the 'cloak-and-sword' school of romance, who is never a coward in anything but his own opinion" (Green 1952: 88). It is indeed an excess of sensibility and insight that cripples him, not a lack of courage: Feversham has always feared his inadequacy in front of a dangerous situation – "All my life I have been afraid that someday I should play the coward" (Mason 1902: 15) – and has always been aware of the dangers of war in a way that was unknown to his father, who had been an officer in the army himself,

'My father,' he resumed, 'would, nay, could, never have understood. I know him. When danger came his way, it found him ready, but he did not foresee. That was my trouble always, I foresaw. Any peril to be encountered, any

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting contextualisation of the historical events which influenced Mason's work see Boddy 2005.

risk to be run, I foresaw them. [...] I foresaw the possibility of cowardice” (p. 15).

When he receives the feathers, though, Feversham seems to be suddenly freed from the fear that had paralysed him. He decides to regain his honour by saving the lives of the soldiers who had accused him and force them, in this way, to take their feathers back. The feathers thus become the spur to act for Feversham and a constant reminder of his mission. When Lieutenant Sutch, an old, trustworthy family friend, is surprised to find out that Feversham keeps carrying them with him he explains: “‘Indeed, I treasure them,’ said Harry, quietly. ‘That seems strange to you. To you they are the symbols of my disgrace. To me they are much more. They are my opportunities of retrieving it’” (pp. 19-20). And now that he has nothing to lose, that he is “known for a coward” (p. 14), and that his worst fear has come true, Feversham proves a real hero, who, in the face of danger, reacts in the bravest way, without recoiling or even hesitating. Apparently, there also seems to be a very poignant self-referential element in this theme. As Green points out:

The idea had been further strengthened by Mason’s own experiences – his first mountain climb, his first jump out hunting, his first sail from Oban to Lismore with a strong wind from the south – ‘One was afraid before’ he noted, ‘but not at all once one was in it’. From all this grew the idea of the boy growing to manhood in the belief that he is a coward, forced into the army by tradition and by a father without imagination, losing his honour and with it his fiancée – not by fear, but by the fear of fear – and finding, when it seems too late, that his is that finest bravery of all which can endure danger and pain in spite of the vivid imagination which urges him to run away. (Green 1952: 88-89)

Fear can be paralysing but it is also the natural instinct of an intelligent mind, an instinct which the hero can control thanks to his courage: this is the message that proved to be of paramount importance for war propaganda together with the image of the white feather which became the visual correlative of the stigmatization of the coward. White feathers were an ancient symbol that connected the idea of cowardice with the image of fighting cocks: the pure breed (the best for fighting) had no white in their tails. Hence the white feather denoted crossbreeds implying that they were less apt to fight (Gullace 1997: 188-9). The symbol was used in the army but it was not so commonly known by civilians until its popularization in Mason’s novel made it extensively recogniz-

able. Thus, it became a precious tool for propaganda and a means of inclusion and participation in the war efforts for women.

Indeed, the fourth feather, the worst and the harshest, is Ethne's, Feversham's fiancée. In a dramatic scene full of suspense and pathos, the novel depicts her as she takes a feather from her white fan and adds it to the three that Harry has just received. The action is terrible and irrevocable, and it provoked violent reactions in the readers who often wrote to Mason condemning it as "unnatural" and "hard" (Green 1952: 90). To these accusations, Mason replied in a lecture pointing out how Ethne's young age was a crucial factor for her behaviour: "Youth is apt to be hard out of its mere ignorance. She definitely hadn't the power, until distress and remorse taught her, nor the imagination, to stand behind others" (Green 1952: 90). But what was a clear fault in a young and unexperienced heroine, became for a short period of time a source of inspiration for many women. Her idealistic devotion to the army and the romanticised idea about what an English hero should do for his country is conveyed in the novel with a surprisingly violent tone: "The thing which she had done was cruel, no doubt. But she wished to make an end—a complete, irrevocable end; [...] she was really tortured with humiliation and pain. [...] Their lips had touched—she recalled it with horror. She desired never to see Harry Feversham after this night" (Mason 1902: 16).

So it happened that, at the beginning of WW1, inspired by Mason's novel, the White Feather Brigade, a para-military group of women, started giving white feathers to men not in uniform with the purpose of calling them to their duty. The Brigade was founded by Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald on August 30, 1914. "The purpose of this gesture was to shame 'every young slacker found loafing about' and to remind those 'deaf or indifferent to their country's need' that 'British soldiers are fighting and dying across the channel!'" (Gullace 2002: 73). The initiative was successful and a great number of women began to roam around the main cities giving white feathers to men in civilian clothes. They also seemed to reproduce Ethne's words, not only her action, in some of the slogans which they proposed: "Why don't you fellows enlist? Your King and Country want you. We don't" (Gullace 2002: 84). Furthermore, just like in the novel, the white feather was both the symbol of the soldier's humiliation and the instrument of his redemption, and this gave women the empowering hope to be able to transform those men from cowards into heroes.

Even though at the beginning this practice was encouraged and supported by the authorities, it soon led to a feeling of hostility and repulsion in the population. Many of those women were indeed very young

and gave out their feathers in too superficial a manner. Sometimes giving them to men who had already been on the front, who had been awarded a medal or who had been injured. Other times, the men who received the feathers were deeply affected by the offense to their honour, to the point that some of them committed suicide (Gullace 2002: 74). All this, in the end, “placed white-feather-giving outside the boundaries of acceptability, as a sort of emblem of all that was wrong with female patriotism” (Gullace 2002: 84).

More than twenty years later, *The Four Feathers* was used again in pre-war propaganda thanks to the work of one of the most famous cinema producers of the time: Alexander Korda. A Hungarian expatriate, Korda was a patriot and a fervent supporter of the British Empire. In the thirties he had joined the wave of historical films which celebrated the past kings and queens of England, with works such as *The Private Life of Henry the VIII* (1933) and *Fire Over England* (1937) the adaptation of Mason’s novel (Dalrymple 1957). The film was a disappointment for Mason because of the vast changes to the original plot but it led to an unexpected outcome: the direct collaboration of the novelist with the producer for *The Drum* (1938) and *The Four Feathers*, which was released in 1939.

The film was a great success, it was awarded a prize at the Biennial International Film Exhibition and it increased even more the popularity of the book, pushing sales up to twenty-eight thousand copies in four months (Green 1952: 226). With its stress on courage, duty and honour it stood out “as a strong call for the heroic defense of the Empire” (Dunn 1996: 165). Directed by Korda’s brother, Zoltan, it cast the young talent June Duprez and the international star Ralph Richardson, who joined the Royal Fleet Air Arm soon after shooting the film. The spectacular Technicolor battle scenes became a cinema classic but, even though, as Dunn points out, “it would be misleading to regard the film solely in terms of pre-wartime propaganda, its role in this regard cannot be denied” (Dunn 1996: 165).

As in Korda’s first adaptation of *Fire Over England*, Mason was not entirely satisfied with the film because of some radical changes that the editing of the script had made to the plot. What is interesting to notice is that some of the most relevant elements which were modified were exactly those that were perceived as problematic in the novel. The film explains Feversham’s reluctance to join the war with an anti-militarist attitude but also shows a scene in which the protagonist, a few moments after resigning his commission, watches the troops parade towards the harbour with an unmistakable expression of regret. At the same time, the most controversial episode, Ethne’s fourth feather, is here trans-

formed into the very first moment in which Feversham starts his rebirth of honour: in Korda's version it is the hero himself who takes the fourth feather from Ethne's fan declaring that "there should be four feathers here"<sup>5</sup>. In this way the patriotic message, the need to join the war because they are "born into a tradition, a code which [they] must obey" – in the words of historian Charles Drazin "a way to address the conflict between public and private duty"<sup>6</sup> –, is immediately joined with the theme of honour and courage. In this film, the hero doesn't even need to be shamed to regret his decision and decide to "join the common cause" (Dunn 1996: 165).

### *The Queen and the Spy*

As already mentioned before, during WW1, while serving in the Infantry, Mason was asked by Admiral Hall to join the Secret Service Department. Hence, he was sent "wandering about the Mediterranean in a steam yacht [pretending] he was just one of these mad Englishmen [...] enjoying himself" (Green 1952: 139). His mission was to collect all relevant information from the Spanish coast, tracking warships and U-boats and all the movements of the German troops. This experience, together with his great love for the Elizabethan Age (he published a biography of Francis Drake in 1941), gave Mason the inspiration for a new novel: *Fire Over England*. It is a classic cloak and sword story in which a young boy is sent to Spain to rescue his father but also to find out every important detail about the Spanish Armada. Walsingham himself recruits the boy with this mission: "I have no news out of Spain, [...] From France, from Italy, all that I need. But from Spain and the Portugals none" (Mason 1936: 24).

It is certainly not by chance that Mason started writing this novel when the international situation, in particular the growing German threat, made England feel in danger. In his preface to the novel he wrote:

The differences between then and now are in the main superficial [...] but in the deeper circumstances of character and opinion, and the conduct which springs from them, these two turbulent epochs have much in common which they manifest in the same way. [...] The same passion for peace is accompanied by the same quiet and staunch belief that if war must come the nation cannot be beaten. (p. 5)

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the films have been transcribed by me directly from the film themselves.

<sup>6</sup> Audio commentary to the DVD edition by Criterion Collection.

Thus Mason draws an immediate parallel between Elizabethan England, dreading the Spanish Armada, and modern Britain, anticipating a new war. And indeed the fear of an invasion is eloquently expressed in the novel by Walsingham: "Shall Spain foul this land?" he cried in a low voice. "Her soldiers trample its gardens? Put to fire its honest, friendly people? Fire over England? No!" (p. 101).

Alexander Korda was in those years experimenting with historical films and, lunching with Mason in May 1935, he was instantly interested in the new book the novelist was writing and decided to make a film version as soon as it was published in 1936 (Green 1952: 214-5). Korda altered the plot to adapt it to his actors, two of the biggest stars of the moment, Lawrence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. The film was released in 1937 and was a great success. In particular, the biggest hit was the character of Elizabeth I as played by Flora Robson: the Tilbury Speech, which Robson modified according to her taste, was so powerful and effective that it became one of the most popular sequences of the film (Melman 2006: 222).

However, just like in *The Four Feathers*, the most meaningful modifications were performed in order to stress the patriotic element, i.e. the correspondence between the Elizabethan antagonism with Spain and the modern clash with Germany. As Carlson clearly illustrates:

The movie was overtly concerned with the struggle against European fascism and the need for military preparedness. Philip II's Spain represented all fascist powers; the Inquisition was the Gestapo with tonsures and cowls, and the king's courtiers were demonstrably afraid to speak truth to power. This was all in stark contrast to the frank discussion that took place between Elizabeth and her councillors, a shining example of cabinet government in a democracy, and the queen herself moved freely among her people (in spite of the real danger of assassination) in contrast to Philip II, who never left his palace. (Carlson 2007: 425)

The particular focus of the film on the preparations against the possible arrival of the Spanish Armada was extremely effective in stressing the need to be prepared against the enemy. It showed the fires lit by "the good people of England" along the coast to inform all the population of the arrival of the Spanish ships, thus presenting a nation which was ready to defend itself: a clear "warning to Hitler to keep 'Hands Off'" (Everson 2003: 301).

*Fire Over England* also had great value as an export to the U.S.: in 1939-1940 the country was still neutral and any involvement in the European war was carefully avoided. Korda's movie, however, by being la-

belled as a historical film, managed to avoid the censorship. Nonetheless, the film's construction of the parallelism between the past and the present situation was not missed by the American audience. The novelist Gore Vidal remembered watching the film in Washington as a boy and recalled that it "caused our heads to nod solemnly as we realized that our common Anglo past was again in peril" (in Chapman 2005: 40).

To conclude, it is worth remembering a final interesting example of the effectiveness of the filmic version of *Fire Over England* for war propaganda. As Melman points out, "the allusions to the present [made in *Fire Over England*] were priceless" (2006: 223) and some scenes became so popular and recognizable for the audience that they were selected and re-used (a common practice at the time) in the same year in a propaganda film: *The Lion Has Wings*. At the beginning of the war, Korda was personally involved in the efforts of the Ministry of Information: *The Lion Has Wings* was put together in record time (only 3 months) and released in November 1939. It was a combination of a documentary (explaining the strength of the Royal Air Force) and a melodrama (depicting romantic scenes of men going to war and women waiting bravely at home): "The opening shots juxtaposed peace-loving Britons riding seaside donkeys with ranks of Nazi's astride their war horses on parade in Berlin, champing at the bit for conquest" (Cull 1995: 49). It also juxtaposed a speech by King George VI and Elizabeth's Tilbury speech taken from *Fire over England* with the purpose of strengthening the parallel between two moments in history in which great sovereigns had led the country to victory. Moreover, the fire beacons sequence was combined with scenes of German air raids to evoke the idea that Britain was ready to react to any attack, whether it be from the sea or from the sky (Chapman 2005:39; Dalrymple 1957: 304). Even though, as Korda himself confessed, it was "propaganda in the crudest sense of the word" (Cull 1995: 49) the film was surprisingly not censored in the US and the American audience granted the film an unexpected box office success just like they had done with *Fire Over England*.

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“O! ANCIENT CRIMSON CURSE!”:  
A CREATIVE FUSION OF POETRY AND PAINTING IN ISAAC  
ROSENBERG’S RESPONSE TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

*Abstract*

This paper aims to analyse the creative and complex ways in which Isaac Rosenberg, poet, painter and soldier, elaborated his response to the First World War, by fusing the poetic medium with the pictorial one.

While attending the Slade School of Art in London, Rosenberg became involved with the lively art scene of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when European avant-gardes challenged the outmoded English portrait and landscape tradition. The young painter developed an attentive eye for detail and a preoccupation for the human body which he would later exploit in his trench poetry. Inspiration also came from his much-admired predecessors William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, with whom he shared the twofold vocation.

The close reading of Rosenberg’s first two war poems, *On Receiving News of the War* and *Marching – As Seen from the Left File* will reveal his ability to channel his talents into the creation of a rich and original imagery that makes him stand out among the other war poets, while drawing him closer to the Modernist war artists.

In conclusion, it will be argued that the recourse to painting techniques in Rosenberg’s poems stems from the need to visualise and communicate the unprecedented experience of war, which defied representation and understanding. Through the fruitful fusion of two different media, the painter-poet succeeds in challenging the limits of language and producing a complex, but relatable work of art of great imaginative power and intense witnessing.

*Keywords:* war poetry; war painting; Isaac Rosenberg; First World War.

Isaac Rosenberg is mainly remembered as a war poet, a soldier who served in the British army for almost two years and left poignant poetic accounts of his experience, before he died on the Western front in 1918. Less known is the fact that he was also a painter, or at least an aspiring

one, who took advantage of his art training to add a peculiar quality to his writing. One of the first to acknowledge such distinctive character of Rosenberg's production was fellow war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, when he was asked to pen the preface to the *Collected Works* in 1937. He borrowed the vocabulary of art and sculpture to describe a writing style which he found highly original and effective:

His experiments were a strenuous effort for impassioned expression; his imagination had a sinewy and muscular aliveness; often he saw things in terms of sculpture, but he did not carve or chisel; he modelled words with fierce energy and aspiration, finding ecstasy in form, dreaming in grandeurs of superb light and deep shadow; his poetic visions are mostly in sombre colours and looming sculptural masses, molten and amply wrought. (Rosenberg 1979: ix)

Later, scholars have agreed in recognising “the painter's eye”<sup>1</sup> in Rosenberg's poems and have hinted at the influence that his training as an art student might have exerted on his style. As comments on the topic are limited and scattered, the aim of this article is to provide a brief overview and some examples which might offer an introduction to the relation between painting and poetry in Rosenberg's works, with a peculiar focus on his first response to the war. His sources of inspiration and the art works of his contemporaries are also investigated to better understand the elements that contributed to the creation of his rich imagery.

Brought up in poverty in the Jewish district of London's East End, Isaac Rosenberg had always shown an interest in painting and poetry. His talent for drawing was apparent early on, at primary school, where the headmaster encouraged him to take part in competitions and gave him extra time for practice, while his passion for writing began during the teenage years, as he became inspired by the reading of the Bible and the works of 19th-century poets. Unsurprisingly, his first models were William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who shared with him the twofold vocation for painting and poetry. He especially admired their imagination and creativity which allowed them to conceive extravagant pictures and poems, of a dream-like quality. Like them, he looked at myth and religion as sources for inspiration, but also added the personal elaboration of Jewish motifs. This resulted in the creation of a complex and symbolic imagery, which sometimes verged on obscurity

<sup>1</sup> The expression is used, among others, by Sisson 1971: 92; Bergonzi 1996: 109; Maccoby 1999: 163; and Das 2007: 93.

and attracted the criticism of his first readers and friends Edward Marsh and Gordon Bottomley. They frequently, though amicably, pointed out a lack of clarity in his verses and encouraged him towards greater simplicity of thought and language. Rosenberg’s debts to Blake are quite clear in early works such as *In the Heart of the Forest*, a poem about ghosts, whose manuscript is illuminated, on the model of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Traces of Blake can also be found in later poems written during the war; the soldier’s casual conversation with a rat found in *Break of Day in the Trenches*, for example, may be reminiscent of Blake’s address to the tiger and the lamb. As for Rossetti, Rosenberg regarded him as a master in both poetry and painting and learned from him the ability to capture details in the description of nature, as well as a frequent use of personification.

After an apprenticeship at an engraving firm, a job he loathed for its monotony and lack of creativity, Rosenberg was fortunate enough to meet some wealthy Jewish patrons who decided to sponsor him for a year at the Slade School of Art in London. At 21, he was therefore able to enter one of the leading art institutions of the country, a place which could boast acclaimed painters such as Fred Brown as its Director, Philip Steer as a teacher and Augustus John as a notable alumnus. “Going to the Slade has shown possibilities – has taught me to see more accurately” (Rosenberg 2008: 246), he wrote in 1912. That keen capacity for observation is one of the most important lessons he learned at the school, a lesson he would apply again and again both in his painting and writing. Founded in 1871 at University College London with the money donated by lawyer, philanthropist and art collector Felix Slade, the school had the reputation of being an innovative and liberal college as it allowed women to take the same classes as men and followed what were called “French methods”. The first Directors, Poynter and Legros, had studied in France and adapted the Slade school curriculum to their education, which meant more emphasis was placed on life drawing and the study of the human body. After some training, students were allowed to draw from real models, instead of reproducing pictures and casts, as was the tradition in English academies<sup>2</sup>. In the years leading to the First World War, a generation of particularly gifted students, including Stanley Spencer, CRW Nevinson and Paul Nash, attended the Slade. These painters soon went on to become the leading British artists of the twentieth century, thanks to their experiments with Modernism

<sup>2</sup> The main art schools in England were the Royal Academy Schools and the National Art Training School (later Royal College of Art). See Owens 2013.

and their work as war artists, in the official scheme set up by the government<sup>3</sup>.

Isaac Rosenberg was also a student at the Slade during the same years, but he did not shine. His artistic production was not particularly original, but rather reflected the influence of his teachers and the trends in modern art. Some works show the tendency towards Impressionism that Steer and Brown had introduced into English art, as can be seen in the landscape *Trees*, with its emphasis on the effects of light and shade; other pieces are affected by the new techniques of Post-Impressionists, the French painters who gained public attention after the revolutionary exhibitions of Roger Fry in the 1910s (MacDougall and Dickson 2008: 38). *Sacred Love*, for example, embraces the simplification of form and flattening of space of Gauguin, from whom Rosenberg also borrowed the symbolic use of colour, while his self-portraits and portraits of women lack in definition and details in favour of boldness of colours and strong vertical brushstrokes, thus moving away from the naturalistic tradition of English paintings.

After leaving the Slade in the spring of 1914, Rosenberg decided to move to South Africa, where his older sister lived, hoping to improve his frail health and find more opportunities to paint. The difficulty of making a living with his art had made him anxious and depressed, and the news of the outbreak of the war worsened such mood. However, his initial response was somehow detached, partly because in South Africa he was far from the centre of mobilisation, fear and enthusiasm. Bergonzi found that the poet's distance from Europe at the early stages of the war allowed him to see "the catastrophic nature of war much more clearly than most of his contemporaries" (Bergonzi 1996:108). The immigrant background of his Lithuanian family and their pacifist Jewish culture also affected his reaction to the conflict: he had no patriotic feelings for Britain and never caught the war fever, which characterises most war poetry written in 1914.

The poem *On Receiving News of the War* is emblematic in showing his early awareness of the imminent disaster and is also characterised by a strong visual component. As Banerjee has noted, the author here manages to achieve "superior linguistic control, economy of words and precise imagery" (Banerjee 1976: 67):

Snow is a strange white word;  
No ice or frost

<sup>3</sup> Studies on war artists include M. Harries and S. Harries 1983; Malvern 2004; Gough 2010.

Have asked of bud or bird  
For Winter’s cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow  
From earth to sky  
This Summer land doth know,  
No man knows why.

Rosenberg makes recourse to the symbolic image of snow which transfigures the outbreak of the war in a visionary descent of evil on the world. The first line “Snow is a strange white word” has been defined as “the first truly unforgettable line” (Corcoran 2014: 38) of the poet’s production. Indeed, the original idea, the musical alliterations, and the fusion of concreteness and abstraction make it a particularly striking opening. The twofold vocation of the painter-poet emerges in this verse as he fuses both his talents in the alliterative couple “white word”. The comparison that Rosenberg creates between the summer snow in South Africa and the outbreak of the war is grounded upon the fact that both are unexpected and traumatic events<sup>4</sup>. Snow, in association with ice and cold, is a universal symbol of paralysis and danger, a connotation which is enhanced by the slow rhythm and sound effects of the first line. Even if the First World War began in summer, Rosenberg was not the only poet to associate winter and war: Wilfred Owen expressed a similar idea in his poem *1914*, when he wrote “War broke: and now the Winter of the world”<sup>5</sup>. The deadly effects of this metaphorical winter are revealed by Rosenberg in the following stanzas, when it becomes clear that just as snow kills birds and buds, war kills men:

In all men’s hearts it is.  
Some spirit old  
Hath turned with malign kiss  
Our lives to mould.

Red fangs have torn His face.

<sup>4</sup> The poem was written between July and August, which are winter months in South Africa so snow is possible. However, it is more likely on the mountains of the Western Cape rather than in the city of Cape Town, where the poet lived. Rosenberg refers to a “Summer land” because as an Englishman he considers his country’s calendar and snow in summer is therefore surprising.

<sup>5</sup> Owen’s verse was inspired by Shelley (1818: 205) “this is the winter of the world; – and here/ We die”.

God's blood is shed.  
 He mourns from His lone place  
 His children dead.

O! ancient crimson curse!  
 Corrode, consume.  
 Give back this universe  
 Its pristine bloom. (Rosenberg 2008: 71)

As a painter, Rosenberg relies on the symbolism of colours to deliver messages and therefore uses the red colour to convey the image of blood. In the final two stanzas, “red”, in emphatic position, collocates with the noun “fangs”, hinting at the brutality and violence of war, while “ancient crimson curse” powerfully restates the connection between war and red. Here, Rosenberg uses the more specific adjective crimson<sup>6</sup>, which better describes the deep hue of blood and is functional in creating effective alliterations with “curse”, “corrode” and “consume”. This last verb also recalls the destructive power of fire, also regularly associated with red. The use of colours to convey symbolic meanings might also derive from the Bible, which is one of the most productive sources for Rosenberg’s imagery throughout his poetic production. For instance, the colours red and white, in association with blood and snow, are present in the Book of Isaiah, here quoted from King James Bible<sup>7</sup> (Authorised version) which Rosenberg himself owned: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

Back in London in 1915, Rosenberg eventually enlisted as a volunteer, mainly motivated by the prospect of finally being able to provide for himself and his family. Even if he kept believing that “nothing can justify war” (Rosenberg 2008: 288), he chose to join the army, as his painting and writing careers were in a stall. During his military training

<sup>6</sup> “Crimson” is especially used in war poetry in reference to blood. Sassoon uses it in *To Victory* when he wishes he can soon replace the “woeful crimson of men slain” with the colours of nature and life: “Return to greet me, colours that were my joy [...] I want to fill my gaze with blue and silver, / Radiance through living roses, spires of green” (Sassoon 1961: 13). See also Owen’s poem *I Saw His Round Mouth’s Crimson Deepen as It Fell* (Owen 1994:17).

<sup>7</sup> Still a young boy, Isaac received a Bible from his father (Moorcroft Wilson 2008a: 27). At the front, he kept reading it as a comment in a letter shows: “I often find bibles in dead mens clothes and I tear the parts out I want and carry them about with me” (Rosenberg 2008: 312).

at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, he wrote his first poem as a soldier, *Marching – As Seen from the Left File*, which well exemplifies his use of pictorial techniques in writing and documents the impact of his background as an art student. The second part of the title indicates the point of view of the speaker and reminds of the title of some paintings, such as *Sheerness as Seen from the Nore* by J.M.W. Turner. Here, as elsewhere in Rosenberg’s works, the insider perspective of a private makes the representation of war experience particularly intense, if compared to the poetry written by officers and civilians<sup>8</sup>. The speaking voice is that of an ordinary soldier who has reluctantly become part of the war machine and describes it from the inside:

My eyes catch ruddy necks  
Sturdily pressed back –  
All a red brick moving glint.  
Like flaming pendulums, hands  
Swing across the khaki –  
Mustard-coloured khaki –  
To the automatic feet.

As if in front of a painting, the reader is presented with a series of images in quick succession and almost feels like he is following the soldiers in their march. The fact that the speaker is marching is highly significant because it prevents him from stopping or shifting his glance, and thus forces his description in one single direction. The first detail which is mentioned is therefore what he sees just in front of him, the necks of the other soldiers, “ruddy” because of the fatigue and the heat. The expression “all a red-brick moving glint” is rich in visual details with the precision of the painter visible in the choice of the “red-brick” hue, which also bears connotations of solidity and strength. There is a reference to light in the glistening skin of the sweating men, another detail which could have been easily transferred on a canvas or paper, if Rosenberg had had the chance to paint while in the army. From the necks, the glance moves down to another element of the human body, the hands, that swing with the regular rhythm of the march as if they were “flaming pendulums”. This unusual metaphor communicates the monotony of the repetitive movements, later confirmed by the modern and Futuristic expression “automatic feet”. At the same time, the “flam-

<sup>8</sup> Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Charles Sorley were all officers, while Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling were civilians.

ing pendulums” recuperate the visual details of the first lines, the red colour and the glint, through the association with flames. The word *kha-ki* adds further shades of colour to the picture since in English military jargon it indicates the soldiers’ olive uniform and its original meaning in Hindi is a light shade of yellow-brown. As a painter, Rosenberg is even more precise as he defines it “mustard coloured”, so of a darker tone that resembles culinary mustard.

In the second stanza, Rosenberg moves from a concrete description to a more abstract reflection, another writing technique he often uses in his poetry and that might develop from his pictorial training. As the marching prevents the soldier from looking elsewhere, he turns to the “inward eye” of the imagination to complete his description of the scene:

We husband the ancient glory  
 In these bared necks and hands.  
 Not broke is the forge of Mars;  
 But a subtler brain beats iron  
 To shoe the hoofs of death,  
 (Who paws dynamic air now).  
 Blind fingers loose an iron cloud  
 To rain immortal darkness  
 On strong eyes. (Rosenberg 2008: 102-103)

Vision is again central as the poem reaches its conclusion: the eyes that were the first word of the poem are also the last, suggesting a cyclical form, but with a negative ending. If in the opening the eyes could see colours and light, at the end they are blinded by the “immortal darkness” which falls on them through the weapons.

This painter’s poem (Das 2007: 94) documents Rosenberg’s need to visualise and give shape to his first experience as a soldier; unable to use his colours and brushes, but frustrated with the limits of traditional poetic language, he translated the images in his writing. These verses, as well as others he wrote at the front, call for a comparison with the works of the official war artists of the First World War. As previously mentioned, many of them had studied at the Slade and were later employed by the government’s Department of Information with the initial aim of visual propaganda and later of commemoration. The British government was one of the first to recognise the cultural value of artistic war records and allowed considerable freedom to the painters, who were able to experiment with style and content. This resulted in some of the best art of the century and a great contribution to the way in which the war has been remembered. *Marching – As Seen from the*

*Left File* reminds me of CRW Nevinson's *Returning to the Trenches*, a Modernist representation of soldiers marching as a single body, a military whole, full of energy and power, with red and khaki as emblematic colours. Nevinson stated that in this picture he had “tried to express the emotion produced by the apparent ugliness and dullness of modern warfare” (Corbett 1997: 47) and Rosenberg's poem does the same. Similar comparisons may be drawn between other works. *Spring in the Trenches, Ridge Wood* by Paul Nash adopts the same imagery of poems such as Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches*: the pastel light of the dawn, the soldiers in a moment of rest, the devastation of nature, yet the resilience of some of its inhabitants. Infernal scenes of utter desolation and death on the battlefields are found in poems such as *Dead Man's Dump*, as well as in paintings such as *Zonnebeke* by William Orpen and *The Mule Track* by Paul Nash. The dark atmosphere, the distinctive elements of barbed wire, craters and mud abound in all these works, both in writing and painting.

In conclusion, I suggest looking at Isaac Rosenberg as a peculiar kind of war artist, one who found that the strategies and attitude he had acquired at art school could also be used in the writing mode; one who did not just record the war, but played an active part in it, and used his pencil instead of his brush to present it to his public. Like other war poets, he found himself at a loss for a language which could adequately describe the unprecedented nature of the conflict, therefore he turned to his pictorial training to add meaning and truth to his words. Some of his poems come across as paintings in verse; they stand out for their vivid and intense quality and give us a glimpse into an artist's experience of the founding event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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NOT JUST A "PLAYTHING OF THE IMAGINATION":  
COMPLEXITY AND CREATIVITY IN *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*,  
OR *SWELLFOOT THE TYRANT*, BY P.B. SHELLEY

*Abstract*

Up until recently, *Swellfoot the Tyrant* has been largely overlooked by scholars, whose critical efforts have been mostly directed towards *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, the other two, highly acclaimed, theatrical pieces composed by the poet in the same period, between 1819 and 1820. Conversely, this paper sets out to highlight and explore the extreme complexity of *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, an experimental text in which Shelley's creativity forcefully succeeded in stretching the boundaries of conventionality.

*Keywords:* Intertextuality; mental theatre; P.B. Shelley; political satire; *Swellfoot the Tyrant*.

In her "Note on *Oedipus Tyrannus*", Mary Shelley (1939a: 416) described P.B. Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820) as "a mere plaything of the imagination"<sup>1</sup>, thus establishing a neat divide between this satiric play (regarded as a trifle) and the poet's elevated and politically engaged output. As well as confessing her initial hesitation to publish it, for fear it would not "do honour" (p. 416) to her late spouse, Mary disclosed the ludicrous incident that had prompted Percy to begin his play in August 1820. During the couple's stay at the Baths of San Giuliano (near Pisa), the artist's reading of his *Ode to Liberty* had been amusingly accompanied by the loud grunting of a herd of swine, gathered for sale in a nearby square on the day of the local fair. Reminded of Aristophanes' frogs, he had instantly decided to write

<sup>1</sup> In her "Note on *Peter Bell the Third*", she considered Shelley's satirical poem "a plaything", "like the burlesque drama of *Swellfoot*" (Shelley 1939b: 393).

“a political-satirical drama on the circumstances of the day” (p. 415), whose chorus would be humorously composed of pigs.

Up until recently, *Swellfoot the Tyrant* has been largely overlooked by scholars, whose critical efforts have been mostly directed towards *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, the other two, widely praised, theatrical pieces released by Shelley in the same period, between 1819 and 1820. Even Newman White, the author of one of the first essays focused on the play, began his study with a rather dismissive remark: “few readers of Shelley devote much time to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, or *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, and for a very good reason. Intrinsicly the play is not worth it” (1931: 332). Conversely, this paper sets out to highlight and explore the extreme complexity of *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, a truly experimental text in which Shelley’s creativity forcefully succeeded in stretching the boundaries of conventionality. First of all, following a short but necessary outline of the plot, the originality of its textual construction will be emphasised. Secondly, the intricate intertextuality of the play will be the object of a thorough investigation. Lastly, the insightful intersection between *Swellfoot the Tyrant* and the contemporary political and historical scenario (the “circumstances of the day” Mary Shelley hinted at in her “Note”) will be analysed; as will be shown, more than likely, Mary wished to downplay the importance Percy himself attached to his challenging dramatic piece, in order to protect his legacy, and to rehabilitate his posthumous reputation.

The play opens with the jarring contrast between the corpulent and overbearing King Oedipus (literally translated into English as Swellfoot), a worshipper of the Supreme Goddess Famine, and his starving subjects, a multitude of ravenous pigs and boars, whose flesh is actually used as meat to feed the upper classes. The swine long for the fulfilment of a prophecy that foretells the end of Swellfoot’s despotic rule: in fact, according to the oracle, Iona Taurina (the King’s unjustly repudiated wife) will soon return to restore justice and prosperity to the kingdom. Fearing riots and civil unrest, the King’s ministers and wizards devise a treacherous plot aimed at “the uglification of the Queen” (Shelley, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant. A Tragedy in Two Acts, Translated from the Original Doric*, I.i.409) through calumny, depicted by one of the dignitaries as “worse than death” (I.i.351). Pretending to grant her the opportunity to prove her innocence, they claim they intend to use the supposedly tell-tale contents of a mysterious green bag (a revealing potion) to ascertain whether or not she had truly committed adultery. What the swine ignore, however, is that the potion is actually poisonous: far from exposing the real nature of the subject undergoing the test, it turns “innocence to guilt, and the gentlest looks/ to savage,

foul, and fierce deformity” (I.i.363-364). Aware of the dark conspiracy, Iona Taurina cunningly manages to snatch the green bag from the hands of one of the ministers, thus pouring the concoction over Swellfoot and his followers, immediately transformed into “filthy and ugly animals”<sup>2</sup> (II.ii) on the run. The final scene features the Queen riding the Minotaur, engaged in a fierce hunt for her enemies together with her swinish subjects, acting like dogs.

*Swellfoot the Tyrant* may be ascribed to the Byronic category of *mental theatre*, an expression frequently used as a synonym for *closet drama* (the so-called unstageable plays, essentially composed for private reading rather than public production). Nonetheless, the very genre it seemingly belongs to is remarkably elusive, bearing witness to Shelley’s determination to defy conventions. The play was published anonymously by Joseph Johnson as a pamphlet, at the end of 1820<sup>3</sup>. Despite its comical and satirical connotations, it is advertised in the title page as “a tragedy in two acts”, a rather peculiar articulation, if compared to the classical convention of five acts Shelley was undoubtedly familiar with, since he had adopted it in *The Cenci*, identified as “A Tragedy in Five Acts” in its subtitle. Conversely, the two-act structure of this “mock-epic drama”, borrowing the words of Lilla Maria Crisafulli (1989: 98), is typical of burlesques, popular theatrical entertainments that parodied serious works, written primarily for the stage and published only if they proved successful, as Jacqueline Mulhallen (2010: 226) has elucidated. In the scholar’s view, “performance is critical to the perception of [*Swellfoot the Tyrant*’s] quality” (p. 234): the widespread failure to acknowledge an essential aspect of this “very performable” (p. 234) play has to be held responsible for the lack of critical interest it has received for many decades. The magic transformations of human beings into brutes, and the meticulous attention paid by Shelley to stage directions (which, especially in the conclusive section of the final act, illustrate long sequences of mimed actions), clearly indicate that pantomimes were another fertile source of inspiration for the writer. What is more, the constant interaction of verbal and non verbal codes, the display of spectacular acrobatics, the author’s “unusual ability to portray animal and human characteristics simultaneously”, quoting Jacqueline Mulhallen (2010: 222), reveal that substantial influences of the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte* added to the complex hybridity of the text.

<sup>2</sup> The passage is included in the stage directions.

<sup>3</sup> The *Society for the Suppression of Vice* threatened to prosecute the play; hence, Johnson decided to withdraw the slender volume from circulation, after selling only seven copies.

*Swellfoot the Tyrant* explicitly draws from classical mythology (the Minotaur, Io, and Pasiphae – Iona Taurina’s grandmother – are either presented on stage or mentioned) and ancient Greek literature: Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, Aesop’s animal fables, and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* are among the most evident sources. Yet, Shelley’s dense net of intertextual relations is further complicated by the creative manipulation, the reinvention of established models. *Oedipus Rex* is part of a trilogy (the ‘Theban plays’) that includes *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*; likewise, the anonymous fictional author of the *Advertisement to Swellfoot the Tyrant* claims his text is nothing but the faithful translation, “from the original Doric” (Shelley 1939: 393), of the only surviving tragedy of an ancient triad, penned by “some learned Theban” (p. 393). Readers are even provided with the titles of the other two lost tragedies (*Swellfoot in Angaria* and *Charite*), besides being informed of their possible translation, should the manuscripts be eventually found. The animal imagery employed to portray the population in *Swellfoot the Tyrant* is also fraught with intertextual references to modern and contemporary works. The expression “swinish multitude” recurrently used to depict the King’s subjects is actually a quotation from Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790); indeed, the Irish statesman thus voiced his deep concern over the negative impact the French Revolution and its democratic excesses would have on culture, refinement, and education: “learning will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude” (Burke 1826: 98). The metamorphosis of an ignorant mob into a herd of animals is also a common feature of satirical vignettes printed in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Charles Williams’s *The Smithfield Parliament, i.e. Universal Suffrage – The New Speaker Addressing the Members* (1819) offers a perfect example: in the popular etching, donkey-headed Henry Hunt, the radical speaker, delivers a speech in front of a peculiar audience, composed of farm animals standing up on their hind legs. Furthermore, the cannibalistic attitude exhibited by one of the starving sows – “I could almost eat my litter” (Shelley, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant. A Tragedy in Two Acts, Translated from the Original Doric*, l.i.50) – reminds readers of another satirical pamphlet, namely *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to their Parents or Country* (1729), written by Jonathan Swift. As Dana Van Kooy (2016: 95) has underlined, following in the steps of Michael Scrivener, *Swellfoot the Tyrant* may also be interpreted as Shelley’s bitterly ironic response to the Malthusian theory of population, articulated in his 1798 study entitled *An Essay on the Principle of Population* which, as recorded in Mary Shelley’s journal,

the poet began to read on October 3, 1818<sup>4</sup>. According to Malthus, the human population grew exponentially while food production increased in a slow arithmetical ratio: consequently, shortages of resources, the misery of famine, and the resulting proliferation of diseases would be mankind's lot, unless family size was strictly regulated. Malthus also expressed strong reservations against the Poor Laws, a system of poor relief that, in his view, posed a serious threat to human survival, since it could unwisely encourage the lowest strata of society to procreate. It is not surprising, therefore, that Shelley's 'swinish multitude' starves to death, besides being affected by the most horrible ailments, as the *Chorus of Swine* sadly remarks: "we catch/ the murrain and the mange, the scab and the itch" (Shelley, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant. A Tragedy in Two Acts, Translated from the Original Doric*, I.i.43-44). Nevertheless, the poet's abiding aversion to tyranny and social inequalities (subtly implied in Malthus's theory) is palpable in the sarcastic depiction of Swellfoot, with his bloated "kingly paunch" and the repulsive "layers of fat" (I.i.6) accumulated in his cheeks. Samuel Gladden (2001) has noticed that, in Shelley's play, "tyrants gorge, and subjects starve" (the latter are actually treated like livestock by the aristocrats); accordingly, when the hopeful swine begin to gather around Iona Taurina, perceived as their saviour, their roles strikingly reverse: Swellfoot loses his voracious appetite and develops gout, a mocking interpretation of the name Oedipus/Swellfoot.

Before delving into the details of the historical and political innuendoes embedded in the play, a few preliminary observations might help cast light on the complex interplay between fiction and reality in *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. The choice of the category of *mental theatre* – favoured by several Romantic writers as an instrument to foster social reform and communal regeneration (Cox 1996: 247) – also stemmed from Shelley's intention to avoid the stage, thus eluding the scrutiny of the examiner of plays, who refused to license any theatrical piece containing religious or political allusions. A witty reference to censorship (and its insidious effects) is cleverly inserted in the *Advertisement to Swellfoot the Tyrant*. The anonymous compiler cannot refrain from drawing the reader's attention to the accuracy and faithfulness of his translation: "no liberty has been taken with the translation of this remarkable piece of antiquity" (Shelley 1939: 394); on the other hand, he candidly admits what he deems perfectly reasonable and acceptable, i.e. the suppression of "a seditious and blasphemous Chorus of the Pigs and Bulls at the last Act" (p. 394). Even the aforementioned influence of pantomimes

<sup>4</sup> "S. reads Malthus" (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 1987: 228).

and burlesques on *Swellfoot the Tyrant* might acquire a deeper meaning, if the exemption from the examiner's scrutiny enjoyed by illegitimate performances is taken into consideration. As David Worrall has observed, "pantomime, under th[ose] conditions of censorship was one of the most forward means of staging political commentary" (2007: 53). In her "Note on *Oedipus Tyrannus*" Mary Shelley (1939a: 415) offered scant explanation of the "circumstances of the day" that had inspired Shelley's play; she just hinted at "Queen Caroline's landing in England, and the struggles made by George IV to get rid of her claims" (p. 415), as well as citing the "Green Bag" (p. 415) of documentary evidence, aimed at proving the woman's guilt. The future King George IV had married Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel in 1795 for purely economic reasons. Despite the birth of one daughter (Charlotte), they had always led entirely separate lives, often indulging in illicit liaisons and excesses. In 1814, Caroline even resolved to live in Italy, in a state of voluntary exile, from which she decided to return on June 6, 1820, to claim the title and dignity of Queen after the death of George III. Eager to obtain the dissolution of their marriage, the Prince Regent first tried to lure his spouse into divorce, by promising her a large sum of money to be paid yearly. When this attempt proved unsuccessful, he appointed the so-called Milan Commission to produce evidence of Caroline's adultery with one of her Italian attendants, Bartolomeo Pergami, "a foreigner of low station" (Anonymous 1821: 3); the proofs of her alleged unfaithfulness were gathered in the infamous "Green Bag". The public trial to the Queen that followed ended with the unexpected acquittal of Caroline, unconditionally supported by ordinary people, ready to burst into revolt had she been found guilty. Still, she was prevented from participating in the coronation ceremony of the monarch (in July 1821), and died three weeks later. P.B. Shelley, who had openly conveyed his hostility towards the British rulers in poems such as *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), felt no sympathy for Caroline, a "vulgar cook-maid they call a Queen" (Van Kooy 2016: 69), as he used to label her. In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock sent from Leghorn on July 12, 1820, he also regretted the foolishness of his countrymen in siding with the Queen, in spite of her far too obvious faults:

Nothing, I think, shows the generous gullibility of the English nation more than their having adopted her Sacred Majesty as the heroine of the day [...] I cannot help adverting to it as one of the absurdities of royalty, that a vulgar woman, with all those low tastes which prejudice considers as vices, and a person whose habits and manners everyone would shun in private life, without any redeeming virtues, should be turned into a heroine because she

is a queen, or, as a collateral reason, because her husband is a king. (Ingpen 1914: 801f)

As Michael Erkelenz has argued, however, Caroline ended up being universally regarded as an icon of resistance to tyranny and injustice: “in prosecuting the Queen’s cause”, therefore, “the protestors were also consciously prosecuting their own” (1996: 512). In another letter, written a few days later to Thomas Medwin, Shelley compared Caroline to Pasiphae (thus highlighting her dubious morality), besides associating the royal couple to “Punch and his wife” (Ingpen 1914: 806), the two comic protagonists of a popular and rather violent puppet-show, developed in Britain from the *Commedia dell’Arte*. Probably, this very likeness served as a model for the main characters of *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, featuring the fight between a devious queen and an arrogant king, ruling over a dehumanised and abused mob, doomed to remain perpetually in its beastly and subjugated state. Swellfoot’s already noticed voracity and boundless greed perfectly mirror George IV’s lust for power and riches<sup>5</sup>. Caroline’s sexual urges, her *generosity* in donating herself across social classes are paralleled in Iona Taurina’s resolution to throw “herself, her cause, her life, her all/ her innocence, into [the] Hoggish arms” of her “grunting nation” (II.i.161-163). Moreover, she is so enticing and alluring that, when the pigs imagine her transfiguration into a goddess, after passing the “Green Bag” test, they voyeuristically think of her “flying above [their] heads, her petticoats/ streaming” (II.i.96-97).

The play is interspersed with other thought-provoking references to the contemporary political scenario. To name a few, according to Jeffrey Cox, Laoctonos (one of Swellfoot’s ministers) describes “a charge with those battalions bold” (I.i.312) against the swine that might recall the attack “on a peaceful reform meeting known as Peterloo Massacre” (Cox 2006: 78). The 1819 Gagging Acts are also evoked, in the words on another dignitary, Mammon, who disinherited his son because he

attended public meetings, and would always  
stand prating there of commerce, public faith,  
economy, and unadulterated coin,  
and other topics, ultra-radical. (I.i.197-200)

<sup>5</sup> Be it noticed incidentally, Shelley’s physical description of the tyrant is laced with images connected with the British colonial venture: his protruding stomach “swells like a sail before a favoring breeze” (Shelley, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant. A Tragedy in Two Acts, Translated from the Original Doric*, I.i.4), his plump cheeks are like “Egypt’s pyramids” (I.i.7).

On the contrary, his daughter Banknotina had happily married the best catch in the country, “the gallows” (I.i.204), thus generating “promising children”, “the gibbets” (I.i.212-213), who peacefully enjoyed their weird pastimes: “the young playing at hanging, the elder learning/ how to hold radicals” (I.i.214-215).

In conclusion, as this paper has tried to demonstrate and as Mary Shelley herself must have certainly realised, *Swellfoot the Tyrant* is positively *not* “a mere plaything of the imagination”. Composed in the same years as *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, it may be interpreted as the third section of a major work, dealing in different ways with the themes of tyranny and human resistance to oppression: through violence in *The Cenci*, by means of mercy and endurance in *Prometheus Unbound*, with a sneer and a laugh in *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. The complex construction of the play, the intricate texture of the plot, the provocative intertextual references turn this theatrical piece into an accurate example of how P.B. Shelley’s creativity compellingly challenged literary conventionality.

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CREATIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY: HENRY JAMES  
AND THE MODERNIST PREFACE

*Abstract*

In *Prefaces to Volumes of the New York Edition* (1907-1909), Henry James provides a detailed critical introduction to his oeuvre. Prefaces have traditionally been studied as prime domains for authorial communication to the reader about a work of fiction – its design and the circumstances of its composition – as a form of *captatio benevolentiae* and so on. However, Henry James makes a different use of the preface. Arguably, the author sacrifices the accessibility and reception of his works in favour of creativity and artistic freedom. Instead of being the *locus* of directives and simplification, James's prefaces become an opportunity to redefine the relation between the paratext and the text it accompanies. The present study aims to demonstrate that James applies to the construction of the preface the same artistic vision that characterises his fiction, that is to say, the *house of fiction* model. It follows that James's prefaces are not designed to provide information and guidance for reading but are, rather, a form of exercise in style which presents the same narrative structure that James adopts in his novels. In this way, combining his artistic vision with reception, the author responds to the legitimate demand for intelligibility in a somewhat unusual way: a strategy that does not coincide with a dilution of the content, as is typical of the preface, but, on the contrary, with an increasing intricacy and complexity of the form.

*Keywords:* Henry James; preface; creativity; accessibility; friction.

*Introduction*

Prefaces have traditionally been studied as prime domains for authorial communication to the reader about a work of fiction – its design, the circumstances of its composition and the author's intentions in writing it – as marketing devices, as a form of *captatio benevolentiae* aimed at readers, as instruments of control, and as artistic manifestos. However,

Henry James makes a completely different use of the preface. Indeed, it can be argued that the author – to paraphrase James’s own words – immolates the accessibility and the reception of his works on the altar of creativity and artistic freedom (James 1962: 26). Instead of regarding his prefaces as a mere medium for providing instructions and explanations, the present study will reconsider the relation between the paratext and the text it accompanies, and evaluate its very nature. For this reason, starting from the assumption that James applies to the construction of the preface the same peculiarities that inform his fiction, the present study aims to show that James’s prefaces are not envisaged as offering strategies to facilitate comprehension, but that they are, instead, exercises in style which present the same narrative structure that the author employed in his novels. In other words, the preface loses its corollary status and appears to possess the same elements and characteristics as his fiction.

The definition of the preface given by Genette in his seminal work *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997) will be employed as the point of departure for the present paper. According to the French theorist, paratexts are those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside a book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader: titles, forewords, epigraphs, prefaces and publishers’ jacket copy are part of a book’s private and public history. Such a notion of the paratext cannot be applied to James’s prefaces because, contrary to Genette’s interpretation, they lose their boundary status and their *para* condition. According to Genette, the main function of the paratext lies in its illocutionary force because it is “the privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public” (Genette 1997: 2). In other words, paratexts are “verbal statements” (p. 1) situated at the margin of the main text.

While the notion of paratext and its subcategories will be used in accordance with Genette’s definitions, several amendments need to be made to his assessment of their functions in order to suit the specifics of the present analysis. Indeed, it may be argued that the paratext plays a far more crucial role than that signalled by Genette. Specifically, Genette codifies paratextual data as lower-level information, intended to impart instructions to readers before they tackle the main text, but fundamentally without any chance to significantly modify the text and the reader’s relationship with it. That is to say, the paratext has a heteronomous and subsidiary nature that is at the service of something else which embodies its right to exist: the text. Indeed, according to Genette:

No matter what aesthetic or ideological pretensions ('fine title', preface-manifesto), no matter what coquetry, no matter what paradoxical inversion the author puts into it, a paratextual element is always subordinate to 'its' text, and this functionality determines the essentials of its aspect and of its existence. (p. 269)

### *Henry James and the Modernist Preface*

James's prefaces have been celebrated and consecrated as models of criticism. Moreover, James's elaborate writing style has always made reading his works a demanding experience. For this reason, Paul B. Armstrong maintains that "whenever I teach a work from the New York Edition, I tell students not to read James's prefaces until after they've finished the novel" (Armstrong 1995: 125). This claim might sound surprising to anyone who is not familiar with James's writing style and who thinks that a preface is just a preliminary statement by the author, setting forth the book's purpose and scope.

In addition, the opacity of James's prefaces is highlighted by the fact that they do not function as a sort of Foucauldian panopticon. In other words, they do not outline the structure and themes of the novels they are related to, as attested by the feelings of discomfort and perplexity of the inexperienced reader whose horizon of expectation, to paraphrase Jauss, does not coincide with the author's. The prefaces to the volumes of the *New York Edition* (1907-1909) gave James the opportunity to revise his works with the addition of 23 introductory essays. In addition, the ambiguous nature of James's prefaces is underlined by the fact that the author takes the themes and motifs of his artistic production for granted in order to reread and comment retrospectively on certain aspects of his novels, which could suggest that James was addressing those who had already read his texts. If this is the case, it may appear illogical to publish an edition for previous readers, given that James had always lamented the poor reception of his works.

The oddity of James's prefaces is noted by Armstrong who maintains that "if James's prefaces are the result of his own rereading [...] of the works of the New York Edition, then it is only reasonable for him to assume readers who know his texts well enough" (p. 126). Reading James's prefaces is equivalent to scrutinising *Daisy Miller* (1879) or *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), because the reader is not dealing with a preface which outlines the book's purpose, its objectives, its structure and the potential audience for whom it was written, but rather he must perform a simultaneous act of decoding the imaginative world of fiction and the interpretation of another consciousness – that of the author –

which experiences and reflects on that world. Reading the prefaces on their own terms, as the fictionalisation of Henry James's re-encounter with his former self, is the lens through which I shall observe them. The essayistic nature of his prefaces has been underlined by scholars and critics who have either investigated them as commentaries to the novels they precede or considered them as James's primary reference point for his theory of the novel (Mochi 1982; Volpe 1991).

Neither line of inquiry, however, has focused on the prefaces' real mode of operation. There is some evidence that the prefaces may be read not simply as a critical explanation of his novels but also as a reduplication or a continuation of James's works. Indeed, the fictional nature of the prefaces already emerges explicitly from the first pages of the *New York Edition*. As anticipated above, the narrative substance of his prefaces is made manifest in many aspects and intersects various levels of James's fiction. The first work discussed by James in the *New York Edition* is *Roderick Hudson* (1875). The preface immediately shows its nature as a narrative work, with the employment of words and phrases from the semantic field of fiction, when the author writes that it will be "a thrilling tale" (James 1962: 4). Similarly, in *The Ambassadors* (1903) James maintains that the preface is "the story of one's story" (p. 313). Moreover, in the first paragraph of *Roderick Hudson*, James seems to clarify the peculiar nature of his prefaces when he writes:

This is why, as one looks back, the private history of any sincere work, however modest its pretensions, looms with its own completeness in the rich, ambiguous aesthetic air, and seems at once to borrow a dignity and to mark, so to say, a station. [...] I find myself, all attentively, in presence of some such recording scroll or engraved commemorative table from which the 'private' character, moreover, quite insists on dropping out. (p. 4)

From the above quotation, it emerges that not only is Henry James tracing the artistic path he wants to follow but he is also emphasising the peculiarity of the artistic form of his prefaces. Indeed, employing such locutions as *sincere work*, *history*, and shortly before, *story*, *process*, *tale* and such expressions as *the continuity of an artist's endeavour* or *wondrous adventure*, the author is illustrating a language whose richness is comparable to that used for his novels (Martinez 2001).

In addition, his prefaces make use of another fictional device, namely, invented dialogue<sup>1</sup>. This is particularly evident in *The Awkward Age* (1899) when James writes:

Dialogue, always ‘dialogue’! I had seemed from far back to hear them [readers] mostly cry: “We can’t have too much of it, we can’t have enough of it, and no excess of it, in the form of no matter what savourless dilution, or what boneless dispersion, ever began to injure a book so much as even the very scantest claim put in for form and substance” (p. 106).

The fictional nature of the prefaces is even more evident when the author maintains that the story of the novels’ writing is nothing less than “the history of the growth of one’s imagination” (p. 47). This statement is reinforced by the distinctive nature of his prefaces, given that James seems reluctant to expose the themes of each novel and the technical issues regarding their composition. However, it is in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* that the fictional quality of his prose becomes most evident. James describes the writing process of the novel:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. [...] They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. (p. 46)

Aside from being one of the most famous passages from James’s prefaces, the above quotation becomes significant because it anticipates the tangible fulfilment of his theory of the novel<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, shortly thereafter, James adds:

The point is, however, that this single small cornerstone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of ‘The Portrait of a Lady’. It came to be a square and spacious house or has at least seemed so to me in this going over

<sup>1</sup> Other invented dialogues can be found in the prefaces to *Princess Casamassima*, *The Aspern Papers*, *The Lesson of the Master*, and *Daisy Miller*.

<sup>2</sup> See Lombardo 1974, 2004; Meneghelli 1997. Both scholars maintain that *The New York Edition* constitutes a collective attempt to appreciate the full complexity of Henry James’s construction of self and authorship.

it again; but, such as it is, it had to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation. (p. 48)

The above excerpt can be read as a piece of fiction because the preface begins with an account of the author writing the novel while gazing through the windows of his house in Venice, and then passing from the real house to the description of Isabel Archer as a centre of consciousness around whom the house of fiction in *The Portrait of a Lady* is built. In other words, according to the features of the “house of fiction” model, we read of and therefore see James, the narrator of the preface, standing in the house of fiction and looking out of it through a certain literary form that allows him to see and depict that which constitutes his specific subject. The output of this creative achievement is *The Portrait of a Lady*, a novel that represents another house of fiction built around Isabel Archer. This means that Isabel’s mind is a house in which the reader sits and, through her eyes, perceives the events of the fictional world.

Similarly, in the preface to *The American* (1877) James underlines that the reader is seated at the window of Christopher Newman’s consciousness when he writes that “My concern, as I saw it, was to make and to keep Newman consistent [...] I must have argued, his tangle would be sensible enough; for the interest of everything is all that it is his vision, his conception, his interpretation: at the window of his wide, quite sufficiently wide, consciousness we are seated, from that admirable position we assist” (p. 37). When James writes that his prefaces are a story of one’s story he means that his paratexts must be considered as independent narrative pieces. Specifically, we witness a reduplication of the “house of fiction” model, as if the prefaces were something like Chinese boxes. Indeed, just as in James’s fiction, when the reader tackles the preface, s/he stands in the house of fiction of the focalising character, who is not one of James’s characters but James himself, who sees what his characters think and experience. This means that James – the narrating instance – stages himself as one of his fictional characters.

The application of such a representational scheme has various consequences. Aside from the performative and symbolic implications<sup>3</sup> of such a choice, the most relevant aspect of my investigation is James’s choice to depict himself as a centre of consciousness reading another

<sup>3</sup> See Blair 1995; Cameron 1989. Both scholars argue that the windows in the house of fiction have a symbolic connotation because they are portals through which the reader gains views of other worlds and consciousnesses.

such centre. This means that James equips himself with the same mental patterns as his characters. Indeed, James, as a centre of consciousness, speaks of the world that another centre of consciousness – represented by the mind of one of the characters he has created – sees and perceives.

This process of binary reading is reinforced by the fact that, from the very beginning, James introduces himself not only as the author of his novels but also as the narrating instance who re-experiences what his younger self wrote years before. In this way, his prefaces shape a multiple reading process in which the older James reads his former self, who created the novel which is eventually read by the common reader. As a consequence, James's prefaces appear to become increasingly self-referential (Perniola 1966: 22). Indeed, in the preface, our understanding of the fictional world is subordinate to a double filter: that of James's consciousness and that of his characters' consciousnesses. Reading James as a centre of consciousness in his own prefaces seems to be validated by Paul B. Armstrong when he writes that "The peculiarity of James's concerns in the prefaces makes him seem like one of his registers —like a Fleda Vetch or a Lambert Strether whose eccentric ways of seeing are themselves a matter of interest in their own right and compel criticism of the screen through which things are observed in order to see them adequately" (Armstrong 1995: 129). In other words, the complexity of James's prefaces lies in the fact that the reader must give form to the narrative world of the characters and at the same time decode the interpretative act of another consciousness that perceives and interprets that world (Volpe 1991: 60). This hypothesis seems to find clear evidence when James writes in the preface to *The Reverberator* (1888) that his prefaces are not a representation of the external world but of the author's subjectivity, because they are "the highest degree documentary for myself" (James 1962: 196). Reading James as a centre of consciousness in his own prefaces is witnessed by the author's words when he writes:

These notes represent, over a considerable course, the continuity of an artist's endeavour, the growth of his whole operative consciousness and, best of all, perhaps, their own tendency to multiply, with the implication, thereby, of a memory much enriched. Addicted to stories and inclined to retrospect, he fondly takes, under this backward view, his whole unfolding, his process of production, for a thrilling tale, almost for a wondrous adventure, only asking himself at what stage of remembrance the mark of the relevant will begin to fail. (p. 4)

Such an approach provides us with solid grounds for a rethinking of those liminal devices – prefaces – where, to use McWhirter’s words, James “is still very much an active, responsible agent in his text, though perhaps no longer the purveyor of the ‘lessons’ habitually attributed to this master” (McWhirter 1995: 3). James seems to apply a sort of imagist logic to his prefaces – namely, the direct treatment of the things without any further explanation. In other words, the author, staging himself as a centre of consciousness, instead of describing the house of fiction trope, reproduces it, and makes us *see* it.

### *From Fiction to Friction*

The fundamental shift operated by Henry James’s prefaces lies in the fact that there is a revision of instances such as *author*, *text*, and *reader* as well as of the relations between them. Indeed, reading one of his texts, whether a preface or the fiction it accompanies, is not simply an experience of decoding or interpretation: the main challenge of modernist narratives for readers may be the dialectic tension between the artistic beliefs – namely, James’s theory of the novel – that inform his narratives and the strategies for textual analysis that readers use to convert them into more simplified kinds of narratives. In relation to Henry James, the conceptual model around which prefaces are built is the same as that which supervises the novels and through which the author reveals the presence of a representational pattern – the depiction of the mental processes of his characters – that undermines the very ideas of balance and structure that we might expect in a traditional text, whether a work of art or not. As a consequence, among other purposes, the prefaces are intended to make readers familiar with a new way of thinking about the author-text-reader relation.

This aspect has a twofold explanation: on the one hand, it expresses a new vision of art that breaks away from the conventional approach to the text, and on the other, it represents a subtle strategy that is in open contrast with the market logic of the time. Henry James’s attitude toward the publishing market is well documented. Recalling the studies of several scholars (Anesko 1983; Cooper 2004; Mull 1973), it is plausible to assume that James devoted his entire life to the achievement of a balance between two opposite ideals: on the one hand, he staged himself as the elitist artist who never got his hands dirty with the coarse demands of the marketplace and on the other hand, he was fiercely committed to succeeding in that field. The conflict between the figure of the detached artist and that of the unscrupulous business mediator is extremely evident in *The New York Edition* and may explain

the reason why James conceived his prefaces as a form of condensed fiction. Instead of fulfilling its expectations, James partially tried to rewrite the rules of the market by promoting a new way of thinking that defamiliarised the modernist text in its immediate fruition, as preface and novel respectively lost their traditional function and their consequentiality. Thus, as they were not intended to provide information and guidance for reading, James's prefaces lost their complementary status to become "texts" in their own right.

Intermingling his inventiveness with the logic of the marketplace, the author responded to the demand for intelligibility in a very peculiar way: a strategy that did not coincide with the dilution of content which is typical of prefaces but, on the contrary – due to its literary nature – with an increasing sophistication and complexity of the preface in its meaning and functions. In this way, James bypassed the massified requirements of the market and gave life to a labyrinthine partnership with the reader where the latter was asked to stop being a passive recipient and start playing an active role, not only in the decoding of the novel but also in the hermeneutics of the preface – an operation which was unconventional in the early 1900s. From this perspective, not only can James's prefaces be classified as fiction but they can also be defined as being in *friction* with the market. They constitute one of the most genuine examples of James's creativity and at the same time embody a significant study of the self-generating skill of literary language.

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PART II

COMPLEX LITERARY PRACTICES:  
EDITING, MANIPULATING, TRANSLATING



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THE COMPLEX SYSTEM OF NEOPLATONIC REFERENCES  
IN *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER*

*Abstract*

This paper aims to analyse the intricate system of Neoplatonic references, both explicit and implicit, present in S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Neoplatonism, indeed, provides the metaphysical basis for the poem. Some of the allusions to Neoplatonic theories, as will be shown, are unambiguous (at least in the 1817 version, thanks to the adding of the Gloss), while others are more cryptic (for example those in the 1798 version, in which there are subterranean reminiscences of Thomas Taylor, the English Neoplatonist, and the figure of the *torch bearer*). In order to understand them fully it is necessary to keep in mind the authors and works studied by Coleridge. In particular, the poem is indebted to Plotinus's *Enneads* and Michael Psellus's dialogue *De Dæmonibus*. Firstly, as for the parallelism between *The Rime* and the *Enneads*, the main themes to be identified are the distinction between the One and the "many" and the cosmic circle of emanation and return to the source (or epistrophe). Secondly, this paper will focus on the spirits and daemons in the poem. As a matter of fact, at a deeper level, these supernatural characters can be recognised as the typical figures of Neoplatonic metaphysics: the daemonic and spiritual agencies. For their arrangement Coleridge draws from the classification proposed in Psellus's dialogue. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is, therefore, to be understood as a multi-layered work, whose complex intertextual web is enhanced by the fact that every word and image conceals a world of hidden meanings to be unveiled.

*Keywords:* S. T. Coleridge; *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; Neoplatonism.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a complex work marked by elements of both creativity and conventionality. Apparently, it is a conventional poem as far as structure and style are concerned, but it

is complex in its intricate system of explicit as well as implied Neoplatonic references.

This essay intends to analyse this web of allusions, which makes the poem a composite work, indebted to several sources and eliciting different readings. In addition to the more common interpretations focusing on biographical, religious and aesthetic aspects, *The Rime* can be read by taking into account how its complex system of Neoplatonic references intersects with mythological traditions and oriental religions.

Some of these allusions are unambiguous, while others are more cryptic, and, in order to understand them fully, it is necessary to bear in mind that Coleridge's interests are deeply rooted in philosophy, that he considers himself a true philosopher and thinks that poetry and philosophy should go hand in hand. As we can read in *Biographia Literaria*,

The early study of Plato and Plotinus, with the commentaries and the *Theologia Platonica* of the illustrious Florentine; of Proclus and Gemistius Pletho; and at a later period of the *De immenso et innumerabili*, and *De la causa, principio et uno* of the philosopher of Nola [...] had all contributed to prepare my mind [...]. (Coleridge [1817] 1975: 80)

In the composition of *The Rime*, Neoplatonism provides the metaphysical basis. Among several other sources, the text is particularly indebted to Plotinus's *Enneads*<sup>1</sup> and Michael Psellus's dialogue *De Dæmonibus* (*On the Operation of Dæmons*)<sup>2</sup>. The parallelism between *The Rime* and the *Enneads* is not explicit, while it emerges in the main themes and in the classification of characters. The themes at the core of the poem are the distinction between the One and the "many" and the cosmic circle of emanation and return to the source (or epistrophe). This relationship between the One and the many is the basic question at the heart of the *Enneads*. The One "overflows (without diminution of itself) into an other, and so on into all existing things, through a series of stages, or 'hypostases' – first, mind [...], then soul [...], and at the farthest possible limit, the material universe" (Abrams 1971: 147). The hypostases "descend along a scale of ever increasing 'remoteness' from the One" (p. 147), thus a scale of increasing division and multiplicity.

A similar distinction occurs in *The Rime*, in which the One coincides with God, while the many are numerous – both animals and human

<sup>1</sup> Plotinus's work was published by Porphyry at the very beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, about thirty years after Plotinus's death.

<sup>2</sup> The dialogue by Michael Psellus was composed approximately at the beginning of the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

beings. In the animal world, they are divided into creatures living in the sky, such as the Albatross and the other birds (in *Part the fifth*), and those of the deep, such as the water snakes, at first despised by the Ancient Mariner but later recognised in their beauty and therefore blessed. All these figures seem to be arranged according to the hierarchical system typical of Neoplatonism: at the highest level, the creatures of the sky with the Albatross on top, and, at the lowest level, the water snakes.

The human characters, as is well known, are the Ancient Mariner and his crew, the Wedding Guest, the gallants and the bride, the Hermit, the Pilot and the Pilot's boy. According to their behaviours and personalities, some can be related to the three types of men classified by Plotinus, of which the first and the third one find correspondence in *The Rime*. In the *Ninth Tractate (Ennead V)* Plotinus states that "All human beings from birth onward live to the realm of sense more than to the Intellectual" (Plotinus mcmxvii-mcmxxx: 434). In particular, the first category of men consists of those who are "Forced of necessity to attend first to the material" (p. 434); they are enslaved to the senses, "the sweet and the bitter of sense are their good and evil" (p. 434), and "they feel they have done all if they live along pursuing the one and barring the doors to the other" (p. 434).

It is possible to associate the first order of men with the crew. As a matter of fact, they are fickle persons, superstitious and slaves to the senses. They are considered as a group and, as such, they think and act. Their behaviour is changeable and inconsistent, aiming at pursuing what they need (i.e. fair weather) and to escape difficult situations, symbolised by the fog. At first, they condemn the Mariner's act, that is the killing of the Albatross – "Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay, / That made the breeze to blow!" (Coleridge [1817] 1990: 8, ll. 95-96) – but, when the fog clears off, they justify his deed, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime: "'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, / That bring the fog and mist" (p. 9, ll. 101-102)<sup>3</sup>.

As far as the third order is concerned, it refers to

those godlike men who, in their mightier power, in the keenness of their sight, have clear vision of the splendour above and rise to it from among the cloud and fog of earth and hold firmly to that other world, looking beyond

<sup>3</sup> According to Plotinus, the men belonging to the second group, instead, "lift themselves a little above the earth; the better in their soul urges them from the pleasant to the nobler, but they are not of power to see the highest and so, in despair of any surer ground, they fall back in virtue's name, upon those actions and options of the lower from which they sought to escape" (Plotinus mcmxvii-mcmxxx: 434). However, there seems to be no reference to this group in *The Rime*.

all here, delighted in the place of reality, their native land, like a man returning after long wanderings to the pleasant ways of his own country. (Plotinus mcmxvii-mcmxxx: 434)

In the poem, the Hermit is related to the third order. Indeed, he is defined as a “holy man” (Coleridge [1817] 1990: 37, l. 578) and presented as a man of prayer, the character closest to God, to whom he consecrates his life:

I saw a third — I heard his voice:  
It is the Hermit good!  
He singeth loud his godly hymns  
That he makes in the wood.  
He'll shrieve my soul, he'll wash away  
The Albatross's blood. (p. 33, ll. 512-17)

Also the structure of the poem, mirroring the tripartite process of change which the Mariner undergoes (from sin, through penance, to repentance and redemption) can be read through the lens of Neoplatonism. Indeed, the Neoplatonic circle of emanation from the One ends with the epistrophe, or the return of the many to the source. In the poem there are two different types of return: that of the angelic spirits to the Absolute and that of the Mariner to his homeland. The first occurs after the angelic spirits have accomplished their mission: they have energised and vivified the bodies of the crew, they have taken the command of the ship and directed it back to the harbour. The return of the angelic spirits to the Absolute takes place in an atmosphere of light:

And the bay was white with silent light,  
Till rising from the same,  
Full many shapes, that shadows were,  
In crimson colours came. (Coleridge [1817] 1990: 32, ll. 484-87)  
They resemble a seraph-band:

This seraph-band, each waved his hand:  
It was a heavenly sight!  
They stood as signals to the land,  
Each one a lovely light:  
This seraph-band, each waved his hand,  
No voice did they impart—  
No voice; but oh! the silence sank  
like music on my heart. (pp. 32-33, ll. 496-503)

In these lines, it is possible to identify two important elements of Neoplatonic metaphysics: light and music. Indeed, in the *Enneads*, the One is compared to light, while the Intellect is compared to the sun and the Soul to the moon: “We may use the figure of, first, light; then, following it, the sun”. (Plotinus mcmxvii-mcmxxx: 417). The image of light returns also when man reaches the One, after separating himself from exterior things:

Thus we have all the vision that may be of Him and of ourselves; but it is of a self wrought to splendour, brimmed with the Intellectual light, become that very light, pure, buoyant, unburdened, raised to Godhood, or better, knowing its Godhood, all aflame then — but crushed out once more if it should take up the discarded burden. (p. 623)

Music is also important in the *Enneads*, as it represents one of the ways through which man can move towards the intelligible world: “And harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear and wake the Soul to the consciousness of beauty, showing it the one essence in another kind” (Plotinus mcmxvii-mcmxxx: 59).

In *The Rime*, music celebrates the Mariner’s recovery of life. Stanza fifteen (in *Part the Fifth*), tells how the music that comes from the crew reverberates in the sky. The music is characterised by a variety of tone, as we can read in the following lines:

And now ’twas like all instruments,  
Now like a lonely flute;  
And now it is an angel’s song,  
That makes the Heavens be mute. (Coleridge [1817] 1990: 25, ll. 367-70)

Music celebrates also the Mariner’s renewed awareness of the beauty of creation: if, at first, he sees in a new way the beauty of the creatures of the deep, now he hears in a new way the beauty of the creatures of the sky.

Apart from the One (God) and the many (animals and humans), several other characters in *The Rime* may be linked with Neoplatonic metaphysics. They are spiritual and daemonic agencies acting as intermediaries between God and men, between the sensible and the intelligible worlds. In this case, they are indebted to Michael Psellus’s dialogue *De Dæmonibus*.

As a matter of fact, as several critics remark, Coleridge is acquainted with Psellus, as well as with other Neoplatonic authors. In a letter to his friend John Thelwall, dated from Bristol, November 19, 1796,

Coleridge asked for a volume of Neoplatonic writings (edited by Marsilio Ficino), including, among other texts<sup>4</sup>, the dialogue *De Dæmonibus*, a work about the daemons of the elements.

The daemons of the elements are classified by Psellus according to six main varieties: the Leliurium — a name meaning “igneous” and referring to an order of daemons “which haunts the air above us” (Psellus 1843: 31) —, the Aërial, the second order which “occupies the air contiguous to us” (p. 31), the Earthly — “the Aërial and Earthly, with art and cunning stealthily approach and deceive men’s minds” (pp. 31-32), the Aqueous and Marine, the Subterranean — “the Aqueous and Subterranean are worse than the merely bad” (p. 32)— and the Lucifugus, “eminently malicious and mischievous” (p. 31). Moreover, “All these species of dæmons are haters of God and enemies of man” (p. 31); in short, they are incomparably evil and the Aqueous, the Subterranean and the Lucifugus are particularly malignant.

The spirits and daemons have a pivotal role in *The Rime*; indeed the events the poem describes are controlled by a sort of supernatural machinery. Even though the arrangement of these figures is not original, as Coleridge draws inspiration from the classification proposed by Psellus, the final result is creative<sup>5</sup>. If we contrast the 1798 and the 1817 versions, we can notice that in the latter, these characters make their first appearance in the Epigraph, where they are labelled as “Naturas invisibiles” present in the Universe<sup>6</sup>. Further allusions are made explicit in the 1817 text, thanks to the addition of the Gloss mentioning these daemonic and spiritual agencies and the ancient authors who talked about them:

A spirit had followed them; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consult-

<sup>4</sup> The other texts were Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis Ægyptiorum, Chaldæorum, Assyriorum*; Proclus, *In Platonicum Alcibiadem de Anima atque Dæmone*; Porphyrius, *De Divinis atque Dæmonibus*; Psellus, *De Dæmonibus*; and the *Pimander* and *Asclepius* of Hermes Trismegistus.

<sup>5</sup> As regards Coleridge’s arrangements of the daemons in *The Rime*, James Twitchell states that “[...] a careful look at these airy spirits shows that, although the result may be creative, the arrangement of the daemons is not. In fact, Coleridge lifted these spirits almost *in toto* from their places in the Ancients’ cosmic plan” (Twitchell 1975: 104).

<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, in the first edition there is no Epigraph, only an Argument which briefly introduces the story and where there is no reference to these intermediary forces.

ed. They are very numerous and there is no climate or element without one or more. (Coleridge [1817] 1990: 11, Gloss to lines 131-38)

The first daemon in *The Rime* is the Polar Spirit, who protects the Albatross and therefore requires vengeance for its killing. This “baleful genius” (Cooper 1905: 108) belongs to Psellus’s fourth division, the Aqueous or Marine, as he comes from the land of mist and snow. There are also some references to “dæmons of earth or middle air”, (Coleridge [1817] 1990: 24, Gloss to lines 349-354) which, according to Cooper, would belong respectively to the third and first divisions<sup>7</sup>. Finally, there are spirits that seem to be hybrid, as is the case with “The Polar Spirit’s fellow dæmons, the invisible inhabitants of the element” (Coleridge, [1817] 1990: 26, Gloss to lines 397-405). Referring to them, Cooper states that “there might seem to be a confusion of species” (Cooper 1905: 108). Two of them are called First and Second Voice and their abode can be either water (as companions of the Polar Spirit, that is a water daemon) or air, as they are heard talking in the air above. However, as Cooper suggests “whether or not their proper abode is the water, an escape from their usual habitat should give us no concern” (p. 108). The dialogue between First and Second Voice is entirely in English, following Psellus’s theory according to which daemons employ the language of the nations they belong to: “It is impossible to ascertain the peculiar tongue of each particular dæmon [...] but as in the case of the angels of the nations, different angels being appointed over different nations, different angels must associate with each other, they use each the tongue of their respective nation’s” (Psellus 1843: 43-44).

The influence of Neoplatonism on *The Rime* is not confined to the distinction between the One and the many, the cosmic circle of emanation and return, and the spiritual and daemonic agencies. Even though in the 1817 edition the system of Neoplatonic references is clarified by the Epigraph and the Gloss, implied allusions to the Neoplatonic world are also present in the 1798 version of the poem. As a matter of fact, in the 1798 text there are subterranean reminiscences of Thomas Taylor, the English Neoplatonist, the most important translator and exponent of Neoplatonic mysticism, whose theories Coleridge was familiar with. The allusions to Thomas Taylor in *The Rime* are linked to the figure of the torch-bearer, a character appearing in Taylor’s *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*, in which he is identified as the interpreter of the mysteries.

<sup>7</sup> For the classification of the daemons in *The Rime*, see Cooper 1905: 108.

Indeed, there are some lines in the 1798 edition which have the torch as their central image:

I turn'd my head in fear and dread,  
And by the holy rood,  
The bodies had advanc'd, and now  
Before the mast they stood.

They lifted up their stiff right arms,  
They held them strait and tight;  
And each right-arm burnt like a torch,  
A torch that's borne upright.  
Their stony eye-balls glitter'd on  
In the red and smoky light. (Coleridge [1798] 2013: 19-20, ll. 489-98)

It is possible to establish a parallelism between the torch-bearer and the Mariner. At the end of the journey of sin-penance-repentance-redemption, the Mariner “has been initiated into the meaning of the central mystery of the universe” (Beer 1990: 163), namely that Platonic and Neoplatonic ideal according to which “all human beings are in communion with God and, therefore, in harmony with one another” (p. 162).

In conclusion, we have seen how *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a multifaceted work, indebted to several sources and allowing different readings. The philosophical interpretation taking into specific account all the philosophical sources known by Coleridge is just one of the possible perspectives from which the text can be approached. This reading shows how, with its complex intertextual web, *The Rime* is a poem in which every word and image has several hidden meanings.

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MANUSCRIPT TRANSMISSION AND EDITING IN  
MEREDITH HANMER'S *CHRONICLE OF IRELAND*

*Abstract*

This paper surveys the extant sources of the *Chronicle of Ireland*, a work written by the Church of England clergyman Meredith Hanmer between 1594 and 1604 and published posthumously in 1633 by the Irish scholar and antiquarian Sir James Ware. The author's copy of the *Chronicle* is not known to survive, nor do any early manuscript versions appear to be extant; yet, the specific circumstances of the 1633 publication and the survival of Hanmer's papers in the archives make the study of this text a particularly relevant test case for new philology. While we might not have sufficient textual evidence to assess the degree of intervention by the later editors of Hanmer's *Chronicle*, manuscript evidence can significantly advance our knowledge of the development of this work and expand our understanding of the "mechanics" of early modern scholarship.

*Keywords:* Meredith Hanmer; *Chronicle of Ireland*; new philology; manuscript tradition; editing.

The *Chronicle of Ireland* is the first history of Ireland written by a Church of England clergyman around the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The work covers the mythical origins of the Irish people, their language and history up to 1284<sup>1</sup>. It was published in 1633 as part of Sir James Ware's *The Historie of Ireland*, where it appeared side by side with Edmund Spenser's *View of the present state of Ireland* and Edmund Campion's *Historie of Ireland*. The author, Meredith Hanmer (ca. 1545-1604), was himself a highly educated man with a Doctoral degree in Divinity from

<sup>1</sup> Hanmer's *Chronicle* begins with the mythical arrival of the first inhabitants in Ireland and a discussion of the origins of the Irish language. It then follows the history of invasions, wars and divisions of the land into kingdoms until the birth of Christ. With the arrival of Saint Patrick in 430 begins the Christian history of Ireland, which is chronicled until 1284.

Oxford, a translator of ecclesiastical histories<sup>2</sup>, a preacher and religious converter<sup>3</sup>, and an erstwhile opponent of Edmund Campion<sup>4</sup>.

Hanmer's connection with Ireland dates to the early 1590s, when the Elizabethan government enlisted him to preach and convert in the newly established Munster plantation. Hanmer was one of a small cadre of English reformed clergymen who left England to join the circles of officials, soldiers and adventurers settling in Ireland, and when the war broke out in 1594, he became a military preacher. In a little over ten years Hanmer held several benefices in Dublin and Munster, and whilst serving in the army he pursued research into the antiquities of Ireland. These studies would later become the *Chronicle*, a work of great cultural and political import, and the first Protestant history of Ireland.

The *Chronicle* must have taken shape and been developed during the years of Hanmer's service in Ireland, between 1593 and 1604 (the year of his death), but it was only published thirty years later and no manuscript version is known to survive. This poses the editor the difficult question of how best to deal with a text lying at an unknown number of removes from the author's original. While we have no integral copy to assess the degree of editorial intervention on the text, the specific circumstances of its early seventeenth-century publication and the exceptional survival of archival materials make the study of Hanmer's *Chronicle* a particularly relevant test case for the possibilities of new philology.

<sup>2</sup> He translated three early Church histories which were published as *The Auncient Ecclesiasticall Histories* in London by Thomas Vautrollier, 1577 (first edition). Hanmer was reportedly the author of an ephemeris of the saints of Ireland that is no longer extant (Wood 1691: 279).

<sup>3</sup> He published a sermon on the baptism of a Turk in London in 1586.

<sup>4</sup> Hanmer was presumably enlisted by the government against the first Jesuit mission to England and engaged in an incendiary disputation with Edmund Campion in 1581: M. Hanmer, *The great bragge and challenge of M. Champion a Jesuite co[m]monlye called Edmund Campion, latelye arriued in Englande, contayninge nyne articles here seuerallye laide downe, directed by him to the lordes of the Counsaile / co[n]futed & aunswered by Meredith Hanmer*, London, Thomas Marsh, 1581 and *The Iesuites Banner. Displaying their original and successe: their vow and othe: their hypocrisie and superstition: their doctrine and positions: with A Confutation of a late Pamphlet secretly imprinted and entituled: A Briefe Censure vpon two bookes written in answere to M. Campions offer of disputation &c. Compiled by Meredith Hanmer M. of Arte, and Student in Diuinity*, London, Thomas Dawson and Richard Vernon, 1581.

### *Extant versions of the Chronicle*

The printed versions of the *Chronicle* include the first edition printed by Ware in 1633 (STC 25067) and reissued with a cancel title page (STC 25067a) and an 1809 reprint of the STC 25067 edition<sup>5</sup>. In extant copies of Ware's edition the three texts by Spenser, Campion and Hanmer appear in different orders. A variant has Hanmer's *Chronicle* bound first and a cancel dedication by Matthew Manwaring replacing that of James Ware. According to R.B. Gottfried the texts were printed separately: Spenser's *View* was first published as a single volume, then Campion's *History* was added to the *View*, and next Hanmer's work was added and a separate title-page was supplied for the Campion and Hanmer section; finally, a general title-page for the three works was added (Gottfried 1977: vii). Bart Van Es argued that Spenser's *View* had no place in the original collection conceived by Ware and observed that Ware's earliest title-page listed only Campion followed by Hanmer (2002: 81-2). This order was reversed in a later version (the variant with cancel dedication) due to the intervention of Hanmer's son in law, the Matthew Manwaring of the cancel title page, who seemingly objected to the precedence that had been given to Edmund Campion, the Jesuit martyr and Hanmer's opponent (Johnson 1933: 51-3).

If the archives preserve extensive evidence of both Spenser's *View* and Campion's *Historie* complex textual histories, the same cannot be said for Hanmer's *Chronicle*, which is not known to survive in copies other than Ware's 1633 edition. Yet, a collection of papers once owned by Meredith Hanmer and now preserved at The National Archives, Kew, bears strong connections with the *Chronicle* that call for closer scholarly scrutiny.

The collection SP 63/214 is a miscellany of 321 folia, and the only evidence of what once must have been a much larger library. Significant variation in the size and quality of paper, in scripts, ink, and hands clearly suggests that what now appears as a volume is in fact a compilation of heterogeneous texts that were produced at different stages and collected from various sources. In fact, the binding and the sequence of papers as they appear today in the SP notes are the product of the work of Victorian archivists<sup>6</sup>. The first clear indication that these materials

<sup>5</sup> Ware's edition was reprinted as *Ancient Irish Histories. The Works of Spenser, Campion, Hanmer, and Marleborough*. Dublin, 1633 (Reprint, Dublin 1809).

<sup>6</sup> The Victorian re-organisation caused partial dismemberment and incorporation of single documents and enclosures that had previously formed part of Hanmer's notes into separate volumes. The editorial notes accompanying replaced documents in the Calendars allow us to reconstruct the original extent of Hanmer's historical notes, at

were not originally meant as a single volume comes from paper: large folia sit alongside several smaller papers and atypical paper formats, probably the result of trimming. In addition, in the collection we find papers in the hand of Hanmer conjoined with papers of different origin and in different hands.

Often what has survived are only fragments; yet, the papers in Hanmer's hand demand attention. Indeed, the several notes on Irish saints, genealogies and legends establish close textual links with the *Chronicle* in print; moreover, the heterogeneous nature of the collection makes the analysis of its relationship with the printed text a particularly interesting case study, since it calls for an approach capable of accounting for both textual and material details.

A brief survey will give a taste of the kind of materials that can be found in the SP collection. A number are connected to the city of Waterford, where Hanmer held a benefice as treasurer of the Cathedral; these range from notes to the copies of historical documents, like a commission by Henry VIII to the Mayor of Waterford (SP 63/214, f. 5). There are a number of notes for sermons to be preached (SP 63/214, f. 113), and evidence of inquiries into the Irish language<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, in the notes there are also copies of what is now known as the *Hatfield Compendium*, defined by Christopher Maginn and Steven G. Ellis as one of the key documents through which the Tudors and their administrators learnt of Ireland in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (2015: 16)<sup>8</sup>.

Sketches of lives and legends of Irish saints and martyrs appear on scraps of paper that have been glued onto the pages of the SP volume by later archivists. In a number of instances, the lives appear in the *Chronicle*, but there is little correspondence between the stories in manuscript and print. For instance, five paper clippings salvaged from loss and included in the SP notes bear brief entries on St Fiacre, St Comgall, St Maeldok, St Cartak and St Catald (ff. 108 and 109). They are itemised by feast-day, suggesting that the original, integral document presented the full calendar of the saints for the month. As an example, the second clipping reads:

least in part. On some of the issues connected with the Calendars see Andreani 2015: 591-3.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, scattered among the notes there are samples of translation of toponyms from English into Irish.

<sup>8</sup> It was evidently not recognised as a discrete unit by the Victorian archivist who collated the collection, so that integral and fragmentary copies of the compendium are still bound with Hanmer's notes in SP 63/214.

- 10 maij Sct Congall an abbot whose birth was shewed unto Sct patrik lx yeres before & to an *other* bishop at whose baptisme sprung a well & a blind priest was restored to sight.
- 13 maij Sct Maeldoke a confessor Ireland
- 14 maij Sct Cartak \Ireland/ a b. of whome was had revelation before his birth. he went unto an *other contrey* & took *with* him eight hundred & forty monkes *which* he brought through a great water that by his blessinge was [dev]ided in maner of the childere of Israel through the read sea. (SP 63/214, f. 108)

The notes are interspersed with interlineal annotations and “vide” for further reference that point to the *Martyrolog*, Capgrave, and *Liber Houth*, among others<sup>9</sup>. In the *Chronicle* the lives of the saints are significantly expanded but the legends annotated in the SP notes are not mentioned; the references are expanded and fully incorporated in the text, as shown in the following extracts (bold mine, italic in the original), beginning with Saint Comgall:

Agilulphus King of Lombardie received him most honourably, and in Italie hee died, **saith Beda in his Martyrologe**, though **Capgrave write** it was in Almaine whose report of him I may not omit. (Hanmer 1633: 57)

Saint Maeldok:

The **martyrologe of Sarum** calleth him *Maeldock*; my Author yeeldeth the reason, writing how that his mother conceiving with childe of him, his father dreamed that he saw a starre fall from heaven upon his wife, the mother of this *Aedanus*, and therefore when he was borne, he was called in Latine, *filius stellae*, in Irish, *Moedog*, that is, the sonne of the starre. (Hanmer 1633: 64)

The version of Saint Catald in the notes tells the legend of a healing stone created by his touching a marble stone with his head (SP 63/214 f. 109). Following this story, in a few lines Hanmer tells of the king of Ireland Indrak and his sister Dominica who went to Rome and became beggars. The legend of the healing stone did not make it to print, though the *Chronicle* preserves the story of the royalty turned beggars (Hanmer 1633: 79).

<sup>9</sup> Hanmer’s sources range from authors like Venerable Bede, Gerald of Wales, John Capgrave and William Camden, and manuscripts like the *Sarum Martyrology* and the *Book of Houth*.

In the transition from manuscript to print, therefore, the text of the *Chronicle* has undergone substantial emendation. Though notable are the correspondences, also notable is the pattern of alteration, which in the cases of the saints legends examined entails excision of part of the legendary material and incorporation of the quotation of the source into the main text in print. What this textual evidence potentially highlights is the process of research and elaboration of the scholar: from the manuscript sketch for personal use, complete with notes for reference, to the edited version for publication. Given the circumstances surrounding the publication of the *Chronicles*, however, it is difficult to disentangle the authorial developments from those that could have been made by the later editors.

There are in fact also examples of near complete transcriptions. It is the case of the lives of Saint Mumbolus and Saint Eloquius, which appear on folio 120 of the notes and page 77 of the *Chronicle*. The text was printed essentially complete, with the main alterations concerning the structure but not contents. It is interesting to observe that the manuscript text presents evidence of readership. Proper nouns are underlined in the SP notes and these appear in italic in the *Chronicle*. Tentatively, this is a reader's mark that could point at a stage of revision of the text. The hand of the main text is Hanmer's, and underlining might have served a purpose of reorganisation of his notes into a first draft of the *Chronicle*. However, given the number of hands in the SP manuscript, and its posthumous editorial vicissitudes, there is a number of later candidates who may have very well been active readers of this text. In fact, the passage also seems to have been crossed out. Could this be an editorial mark to indicate that the text should not be incorporated into the *Chronicle*? But such an hypothesis would seem to be disproved by the examples of crossed out passages that were printed.

Two final small pieces of evidence deserve mention. These are small fragments of a couple of inches that display the material and textual characteristics of letter addresses. In the one we read "To the worshipfull very assured lovinge friend doctor Hanmer at Waterford I geve these" and in the other "To his lovinge father doctor Hanmer at Waterford delivere this". They appear glued to f. 109v and 273v respectively, and traces of fold lines and discolouration suggest that they were written on an outer leaf, most likely used to wrap some kind of packet or letters<sup>10</sup>.

Hanmer became treasurer of Waterford Cathedral in 1593. In all likelihood this was one of his richest benefices, thus presumably the

<sup>10</sup> Outer leaves were in use as wrappers to protect privacy and indicate recipient before the introduction of envelopes.

one he elected as his chief residence, where he would receive his correspondence. Surely, the several notes on the history of Waterford included in the collection support the idea of a special connection with the cathedral town. But these fragments of letters most crucially prove Hanmer's participation in active networks of manuscript circulation. Certainly, at the time, the Irish antiquary Thady Dowling was also in Ireland, and another contemporary, the distinguished William Camden, is an author frequently cited among Hanmer's sources. Such evidence stands as a precious testimony of the intellectual labour of an individual part of a community of scholars, which makes these manuscript notes a key source for understanding our author's research, his language, as well as the textual and linguistic development of a work for publication.

### *Editing the Chronicle*

Thirty years after Hanmer's death, the publication of his *Chronicle* was a collaborative enterprise between figures of the standing of the historian and antiquarian Sir James Ware (1594-1666), the Church of England Bishop of St Asaph John Hanmer (1574-1629), nephew to our Hanmer, and the renowned Anglo-Irish scholar, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland James Ussher (1581-1656). An exceptional document of this collaboration survives. In a letter from Bishop Hanmer to Archbishop Ussher we learn that the edition of the *Chronicle* was in progress in 1627, and that at this date a manuscript existed "penned by my uncle, and perfected by Mr. Molineux", thus adding another eminent collaborator, the Ulster King at Arms Daniel Molineux (1568-1632), to our editorial team.

The author's manuscript of the *Chronicle* had crossed St George's Channel and reached Bishop Hanmer at St Asaph in Wales together with the *History of Ireland* compiled by Campion. They were both going to be sent to the printers in London for review. The letter also specifies that the printers' copy would be sent back to Bishop Hanmer who would "bring all passages to perfection, and agreement with the printer" (Elrington 1824: 378). The question of the distance of the *Chronicle* from this lost copy is hard to assess, but we can certainly work on what is known of the editorial practices of Sir James Ware thanks to a number of important studies on Campion's *History* and Spenser's *View*.

Campion's *History* enjoyed immediate manuscript circulation and is extant in several libraries (Kilroy 2015: 79, 113-115). According to a contemporary editor of Campion's *Historie* it is not known what was Ware's manuscript or printing copy, but, to be sure, he did not work on the best manuscript extant (Vossen 1963: 105). About twenty manu-

scripts of Spenser's *View* have been discovered, which demonstrate the wide circulation and influence of this work (Hadfield 2014: 336-339). According to Andrew Hadfield, Ware almost certainly worked on a manuscript that he had acquired from Archbishop Ussher, whose father had worked with Spenser in Dublin (520n1). There is no mention of a manuscript of the *View* alongside the ones of Campion and Hanmer in the 1627 letter from Bishop Hanmer, which would seem to support Van Es' claim that Spenser was a later addition to Ware's *Histories*.

In his preface in 1633 Ware expressed the hope that those "who have leisure, desire, and ability to erect and polish a lasting structure of our Irish affaires" lead the writing of an Irish history which might compare with the English histories of Camden and others (Ware 1633: ¶2v). Such are the editorial intentions, and the cultural underpinnings of the compilation. In Campion's work, Ware noted "many slips, through want of necessary instructions", but the work might still be turned to good account by historians (¶2). As observed by Vossen, the text was edited in about one thousand passages but Ware's method was not consistent (Vossen 1963: 105). With regards to the *View*, Ware famously argued that had it been written forty years later it would have been much more moderate. Ware felt free to edit the text accordingly and tone down the most extreme anti-Irish sentiments there expressed (Hadfield and Mailey 1997: 143 and table of variants).

The work printed in 1633 was therefore the brainchild of men who lived at a specific historical moment, had a cultural programme in mind, and held views about their role as editors<sup>11</sup>. The alterations to the text of Spenser's *View* and the edited passages in Campion's *History* prove that Ware's degree of elaboration could be extensive, and in the case of Hanmer's *Chronicle* we must both account for the role of his son-in-law in the structuring and organisation of the final work as well as for the involvement of Daniel Molineux in the editorial process. The *Chronicle* must then be understood as a collaborative product, in which the language, scholarship and worldview of two generations of intellectuals and clergymen came to be combined. Furthermore, as Bart van Es' critical insight reminds us "Ware's title-pages, like the annotations, both expose and obscure the underlying tensions that exist between the three works collected. While the final version of the general title-page sug-

<sup>11</sup> The essential reference for James Ussher and the historiography of the Church of Ireland is Alan Ford; see especially Ford 2007 and chapters in the recently co-edited collection Empey, Ford, Moffitt 2017. Illuminating research on the scholarly relationship between James Ussher and James Ware has been undertaken by Mark Empey, see especially his chapter "Creating a usable past: James and Robert Ware" in the same collection (Empey, Ford, Moffitt 2017, 36-56).

gests an inspired collective enterprise, an earlier state (which included only Campion and Hanmer) shows the fragility of that construct” (81-2).

From a preliminary philological and codicological examination, we can conclude that the SP notes are a compilation of materials evidently related to the *Chronicle*, but substantially varied in terms of hands, composition, purpose and physical outlook. The SP notes are predominantly a working manuscript not intended for outside viewing and most likely not the copy from which Ware worked. The letter endorsements and the papers in different hands alongside Hanmer’s make the volume an invaluable piece of evidence for the study of active networks of scholarship at the turn of the century in Ireland. Indeed, the notes are also a mine of precious materials for philological inquiry and an exemplar through which to explore the potential of “new” philology. In conclusion, the complex textual history of the *Chronicle* leaves us with two texts separated by about three decades and several illustrious names of intellectuals, but the material evidence of the SP notes can help us bridge this gap to arrive at a deeper understanding of scholarship and editing in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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SHAKESPEARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY  
SCOTTISH THEATRE: REVISIONIST PLAYS  
BY LIZ LOCHHEAD AND SHARMAN MACDONALD

*Abstract*

From the 1970s onwards, Scottish theatre has seen the emergence of women dramatists sharing the intention to confront, challenge and revise the literary Canon. Liz Lochhead's *The Magic Island* and Sharman MacDonal'd's *After Juliet*, *sui-generis* rewritings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* for young readers and spectators, are part of this trend. However, rather than highlighting the critical edge involved in such textual transformations, the essay aims to show how Lochhead and Macdonald live, in their own idiosyncratic ways, what Charles Marowitz defined as "the Shakespearean experience", reprising and refashioning the Bard's works in order to meet the expectations of a child audience (in *The Magic Island*), and of a generation of young people torn by unresolved conflicts and inner tensions (in *After Juliet*). Ultimately, both playwrights allow their audiences, too, to live a full "Shakespearean experience", thus showing the transhistorical and transcultural hermeneutic potential and adaptability of Shakespeare's theatre.

*Keywords:* Scottish theatre; Liz Lochhead; Sharman Macdonald; William Shakespeare; rewriting.

"He was not of an age, but for all time!", Ben Jonson famously wrote in *To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare*, one of the dedicatory poems prefacing the 1623 Folio of *Comedies, Histories & Tragedies* (Shakespeare 1876: unnumbered page). What is now generally read as a well-worn catchphrase becomes relevant if we refer it not so much to the taken-for-granted universality of Shakespeare's *opera omnia* but to the innumerable possibilities that Shakespeare offers us to "rethink and reshape him across time and space, to turn the reading and watching of the plays into a creative encounter between 400-year-old texts and active, creative readers and audiences in the present" (DiPietro and Grady 2013: 1). Charles Marowitz has

summed up the endless ways readers, critics and other writers have of engaging with the Bard's work in a phrase: the *Shakespearean Experience*. Shakespeare, he wrote, is "like a prism in which I discern innumerable reflections of myself and my society and, like a prism, it refracts many pinpoints of colour, rather than transmitting one unbroken light" (Marowitz 1991: ix). Like all classics, Shakespeare's plays express permanence and change, an openness to forms of spatial and temporal adaptations which makes them – in Frank Kermode's words – "complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities" (Kermode 1975: 121).

On the one hand, Marowitz's idea of a 'recycling' of Shakespeare whereby his works "[dissolve] into a new compound" (Marowitz 1991: 31) may arouse some aversion in literary critics. On the other hand, it effectively suggests what Shakespeare's *oeuvre* has undergone from the seventeenth century up to today through countless appropriations, refashionings, adaptations, and reconfigurations produced by writers, film directors, and artists all over the globe. The two Scottish plays examined in the present essay, Sharman Macdonald's *After Juliet* (1999) and Liz Lochhead's *The Magic Island* (2003) are part of this huge corpus<sup>1</sup>, in particular as regards the revising and rewriting of Shakespeare's works for a young audience. In the following paragraphs, first they will be presented as reprises identifiable within a specific theoretical frame; then, they will be examined comparatively, despite representing two different examples of Shakespearean *transtextuality* and *Shakespearean experience*.

### *What kind of reprises?*

The present assessment of the two plays under scrutiny rests on a number of theoretical notions informing the most notable critical studies which, from the late 1980s onwards, have been dedicated to Shakespeare's multifarious heritage, following in the steps of two ground breakers such as Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964) and Ruby Cohn's *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (1976)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Among the most significant 20<sup>th</sup>-century rewritings of *The Tempest* are: W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest* (1944); David Greig, *A Savage Reminiscence* (1991); Suniti Namjoshi, *Snapshots of Caliban* (1984) and *Sycorax* (2006). As to *Romeo and Juliet* the most innovative contemporary versions come from cinema, like *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann in 1996 and *Gnomeo & Juliet* directed by Kelly Asbury in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Relevant studies published in Italy include: Anzi 1989; Caliumi 1993; and Scarlini 2001. Noteworthy contributions outside Italy are, *inter alia*: Taylor 1990;

Underlying both reprises is first of all a *sui-generis* application of the concept of *presentism*, not so much the theory that the present always influences our interpretation of the past as the fact that it sanctions “an unending dialogue between present and past”, to borrow Terence Hawkes’ words (Hawkes 2013: xi). In fact, despite the risk of anachronism, presentist theories relevantly underline how hermeneutics is always chronotopic, inextricably linked, that is, to the aesthetic practices and ideas of an interpreter at a specific time and in a specific place. In this light one should read Marowitz’s claim that, “if the word classic has any meaning at all it must refer to a work which is able to mean again, and perhaps mean something else” (Marowitz 1991: 7) in the present of its reception. In literary and language theories, these ideas are embedded both in Mikhail Bakhtin’s belief that all communication is dialogic (Bakhtin 2000) and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s theory of the “cosmopolitan conversations” (Appiah 2006) triggered by narratives and myths that travel, diachronically or synchronically, across different cultural contexts. As a master of *mythopoiesis*, Shakespeare created par-excellence travelling tales whose complexity and plasticity have given rise to endless repetitions with variations throughout the centuries, thus showing the power of imagination to bridge geographical and temporal boundaries.

In structuralist terms, Lochhead’s and MacDonald’s revisionist versions of *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively are “palimpsests”, according to Gérard Genette’s terminology, establishing different forms of “hypertextuality” with the source texts (Genette 1997: 5). The critic of reception studies Lorna Hardwick would probably taxonomise the former – a rewriting of the Shakespearean romance for children – as an *adaptation* “of the source developed for a different purpose or insufficiently close to count as a translation”, and the latter – a sequel to *Romeo and Juliet* – as a *refiguration* “selecting and reworking material from a previous or contrasting tradition” (Hardwick 2003: 9-10). From a different perspective, moreover, the two Scottish female playwrights’ confrontation with their English literary father may be also read through the lenses of feminist theory and criticism, particularly Susan Gubar’s, Sandra Gilbert’s and Adrienne Rich’s concepts of “revisionist imperative” and “revisionist mythmaking”, according to which revision is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 1972: 19). There is no denying the fact that both Lochhead and Macdonald look back at Shakespeare and

see him “with fresh eyes”; however, as will be shown, only Macdonald enters the hypotext “from a new critical dimension”.

*The Magic Island* and *After Juliet* are not isolated examples of Shakespearean revision in 20<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary Scottish theatre. Already in the late 1960s and early 1970s another Scottish woman dramatist anticipated their creative metamorphoses of the Shakespearean text by similarly deconstructing, revising and re-envisioning it in accordance with the requirements and expectations of the contemporary audience. In the same years in which Charles Marowitz, Tom Stoppard and Edward Bond were staging in London their versions of Shakespeare, Joan Ure (*nom de plume* of Elizabeth Carswell) presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival her *sui-generis* travesties of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*<sup>3</sup>. Like later Macdonald in *After Juliet*, Ure is among those “voleuses de langue”, to borrow a phrase from feminist critic Claudine Herrmann (1976), who, by means of a variety of ironic and parodic strategies, appropriate and change pre-existing narratives to restore centrality to silenced or marginalised female experiences, as is suggested, for example, by the titles of the twin *pièces* *Something in it for Cordelia* and *Something in it for Ophelia*. As the following analysis will show, in *After Juliet*, Macdonald implicitly claims that there must be “something in it for Rosaline”, Romeo’s first sweetheart in *Romeo and Juliet*, who disappears from the scene at the very moment in which Romeo meets Juliet.

### *Rewriting vs. Sequel*

As has been said, *The Magic Island* and *After Juliet* deal with their respective hypotext in different ways. However, they respond to a common purpose: both Lochhead and Macdonald appropriate the original plays to remould their stories and refashion their themes so as to appeal to a young audience. Indeed it is well known that *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*, together with *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*, are “the most frequently adapted plays for young people” (Rokison 2013: 2).

From Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) up until today, many writers, dramatists and theatre managers have revisited Shakespeare from the perspective of “edutainment”, or the education

<sup>3</sup> Ure’s idiosyncratic responses to Shakespeare are entitled *Seven Characters out of “The Dream”* (1968), *Something in It for Ophelia* (1971), and *Something in It for Cordelia* (1971).

of young people through entertaining stories<sup>4</sup>. Most of the reworkings with this aim “help young people to see connections between their own lives and those of the characters” (Rokison 2013: 9), as well as they encourage debates on the timeless questions which Shakespearean drama poses to its audience no matter where and when. Lochhead’s and Macdonald’s refashionings adhere to this didactic programme. *The Magic Island* was commissioned by the Unicorn Theatre of London in 1993 for an audience aged seven to eleven years old<sup>5</sup>. Macdonald’s *After Juliet*, mainly targeted for teenagers, was written in 1999 for the BT National Connections Scheme coordinated by Susy Graham-Adriani (National Theatre’s Education Department), and designed to promote youth theatre across the UK<sup>6</sup>. Macdonald’s “was commissioned as one of the ten plays by leading British playwrights, written to be performed by actors aged 13-19 in theatres around the country” (Rokison 2013: 167). Interestingly, in the same year it was performed at the Teatreno in Mantua as part of the Festival of Literature, directed by Barbara Nativi and acted by the students of the Liceo Scientifico Enriquez Agnoletti and of the ITC Calamandrei of Sesto Fiorentino.

To what extent do *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* shine through in Lochhead’s and Macdonald’s recreations? On the one hand, both authors preserve the original stories as well as the core meanings embedded in

<sup>4</sup> The examples in this field are too many to list. They include: the projects The Globe’s “Playing Shakespeare”, The Young Shakespeare Company (YSC) and Shakespeare 4 Kidz; teen films such as Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), Christine Edzard’s *The Children Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2001); young adult novels, such as Matt Haig’s *The Dead Fathers Club* (2006) and Alan M. Gratz’s *Something Rotten* (2007); animated films like BBC Channel 4 *Animated Tales* (1992-4), *Romeo and Juliet: Sealed with a Kiss* (2006), and *Gnomeo and Juliet* (2011); and of course plays such as Tim Crouch’s *I, Shakespeare* series (2003-2012) including five rewritings: *I, Caliban, I, Banquo, I, Peaseblossom, I, Malvolio* and *I, Cinna (the Poet)*.

<sup>5</sup> Lochhead wrote other plays for children: *Shanghaied* (Borderline, 1982), *Elizabeth* (Royal Lyceum Theatre, 1998), published in the double bill *Britannia Rules*; and *Cuba* (RNT Connections, 1997). Another noteworthy version of *The Tempest* in the field of edutainment is Michael Rosen’s *The Magician’s Daughter* (2011), commissioned by Little Angel Theatre Company in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company, a sequel in this case to *The Tempest* aimed at 3-year-old children.

<sup>6</sup> Other plays participating in the same programme were Lucinda Coxon’s *The Eternal Not* (2009, sequel of *All’s Well That Ends Well*) and Michael Lesslie’s *Prince of Denmark* (2010, prequel of *Hamlet*), both commissioned by the NT (London National Theatre) Discover programme. Rokison noted that “The three plays bear comparison, focused, as they are, on the younger generations of Shakespeare’s plays, freed from the control of the older generations who dominate their Shakespearean counterparts” (Rokison 2013: 167).

them – albeit in different ways. *The Magic Island* is a sparky version of *The Tempest*, maintaining the same central events from Prospero’s staged revenge to the final general atonement, although the *dramatis personae* are reduced from over twenty to seven main characters (Prospero, Miranda, Ariel, Caliban, Ferdinand – here Fernandelle–, Trinculo – here Drinculo –, and Antonio). Lochhead appropriates the semantic complexity of *The Tempest* while reformulating it so as to reach her young audience more directly. Firstly, she capitalises on the relationship between wonder, childhood and the *Unheimlich*: although all the characters in *The Tempest* experience amazement, in both hypotext and hypertext the strange is mostly associated with Miranda, Ariel and Caliban – figures of wonder, innocence and childhood. Lochhead gives prominence to this theme from the very title – *The Magic Island* –, and in order to meet her young spectators’ expectations, she incorporates elements from the Scottish popular traditions of the pantomime and the music-hall.

Secondly, Lochhead keeps and even reinforces the relationship between Miranda and Prospero through stage directions and speeches meant to focus on father and daughter’s reciprocal love, yet also on the changes it necessarily undergoes in time – “he’s still my Dad and I still love him”, Miranda says addressing the audience, “but, see, nowadays I don’t seem to need to think he’s perfect, not all the time, not the way I did then when I was little” (Lochhead 2003: 111). Finally, like its Shakespearean counterpart, this “magic island” is a metaphor of the stage and theatricality, as well as a purgatorial place in which all the characters experience exile and metamorphosis as means of self-awareness, liberty and reconciliation with the other.

Being a sequel to *Romeo and Juliet*, *After Juliet* stages a story which begins after the truce reached at the end of Shakespeare’s tragedy but which could not exist without its precedent. In fact, the sequel proves the temporality of that truce now that “the barriers are up again” (Macdonald 2001: 83), and the continuous influence of public life on the characters’ private relationships and intimate desires. This impact of the public on the private sphere is one of the central themes in *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>7</sup>. Although this time only the younger generations of the Capulets

<sup>7</sup> See Paolo Bertinetti’s comment on this aspect of the tragedy: “Il rilievo che l’aspetto pubblico assume nella storia viene ribadito dalla parte finale, con l’ampio spazio dedicato alla ricostruzione degli avvenimenti e alla riconciliazione tra le due famiglie. Questa parte, che spesso, facendo calare il sipario sul suicidio di Giulietta, viene tagliata perché ritenuta superflua, è in realtà il suggello coerente al disegno complessivo della tragedia” (Bertinetti 2001: xiv). [the importance that the public aspect assumes in the story is confirmed in the final part, where large space is dedicated to the reconstruction of the events and the reconciliation between the two families. This part, which on stage

and Montagues are involved in the events, the text continuously refers to the long-standing hate between the families, to Romeo's and Juliet's death and the trial of the people deemed responsible for it. Moreover, although it does not end tragically, Romeo's best friend Benvolio's impossible love for Rosaline replays that of Romeo for Juliet. Whether they will cement their relationship is never known. Thus, Macdonald re-presents the momentous theme of partisan politics and how it can ruin individual lives by focusing on the innate impulse to violence of the younger generations.

On the other hand, being imaginative metamorphoses of the Shakespearean text, Lochhead's and Macdonald's plays present various kinds of transformation involving the narrative point of view, the time and place setting, and language. Both style and register are of course adapted to their specific audiences.

By giving Miranda the first speech or prologue, in *The Magic Island*, Lochhead clearly reframes the original story from her perspective:

I no longer live on the island. I'm not sad or anything, don't get me wrong, it's nice to live here. Honest. [...]. I was delving in the hamper [...] two or three of these greeny-silver sequins stuck to my hand and they reminded me of fish-scales, and that reminded me of the island. It was magic on the Magic Island! Until I was twelve I always lived on the island, just me and my dad... (Lochhead 2003: 49)

It is through the reminiscence of a grown-up and self-confident Miranda that we re-trace the storyline of *The Tempest* – Prospero and Miranda's shipwreck, their residence on the island and final return home. Moreover, everything concerning Miranda is heightened for a very young audience, including her relationship with "Ferdinand". In fact, in Lochhead's play the son of the King of Naples is replaced by Antonio's younger daughter Fernandelle, that is, Miranda's cousin, in order to foreground friendship and sisterhood instead of love between a man and a woman. Fernandelle is described as "a girl as almost identical as possible to Miranda in appearance" (Lochhead 2003: 117), which, according to Anne Varty

[s]uggests how the self must recognize itself as both unique and other to take an adult role. Miranda, and indeed Fernandelle, must learn to recognize themselves from the outside as well from within. At the same time, each

is often considered secondary, so that the curtain is lowered after Juliet's suicide, in fact consistently validates the overall structural plan of the tragedy].

girl is introduced to a community of sameness, so that the experience of the uncanny is matched by the comfort of recognition, and resonates with every child's wish to be the same as their friends (Varty 2013: 111).

The "magic island" will eventually be renamed the "Isle of Friends" to enhance the conciliatory power of human relationships and sympathy.

If *The Magic Island* privileges a specific point of view, *After Juliet*, on the contrary, presents us with shifting internal focalisations. However, one voice undoubtedly prevails over all the others, since Macdonald wrote the sequel to rescue it from the oblivion affecting it in *Romeo and Juliet*. After watching *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* directed by Baz Luhrmann, Macdonald's daughter, the actress Keira Knightley, asked her "what happened to [Rosaline] ... Who was she?" (Rokison: 169). "I have forgot that name" (Shakespeare 2003: II. 3. 46), Shakespeare's Romeo says to the Friar after seeing Juliet, but Macdonald refused to forget it, and, in order to satisfy her daughter's curiosity, she reconstructed the story of this jilted, marginalised figure by focusing on common adolescents' experiences, such as rejection in love, and jealousy for a rival – in Rosaline's case for Juliet, who is here her cousin, as shown in this passage:

Rosaline:  
 Your spirit haunts me, Juliet [...]  
 We were hardly close as cousins.  
 You were too small, too pretty, too rich,  
 Too thin and too much loved for me to cope with.  
 [...]  
 You wanted my favourite doll.  
 And of course you got it.  
 [...]  
 Later you stole my best friend  
 [...]  
 Later still, you took my love  
 And didn't know you'd done it;  
 Then having taken him  
 You let him die. (Macdonald 2001: 29-31)

By rehabilitating the subaltern figure of Rosaline, both giving her a voice of her own and turning her into a self-determined woman, a cross-dresser and a leader aspiring to succeed her cousin Tybalt as the new Prince of Cats, Macdonald, unlike Lochhead, "enters" the Shakespearean antecedent "from a new critical direction" which implies a

pervasively – albeit ambivalent – feminist edge. The fact that in the play young women are associated with violence as much as young men suggests that Macdonald intended to challenge the model of male dominated societies representing women as always victims and oppressed.

*The Magic Island* and *After Juliet* also differ in the ways in which they change the setting of the hypotexts, through strategies of actualisation and generalisation that similarly suggest how “openness to accommodation” (Kermode 1975: 44) and permanent essence are intermeshing ingredients of Shakespeare’s theatre. Lochhead resorts to a target-oriented replacement of the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century aristocratic world with the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century world of the music-hall and pantomime: Prospero is no longer Duke of Milan and wizard but a juggler in a theatre; his brother Antonio is still, in a sense, his usurper, but simply because, as the money-minded manager of the theatre, he decides to oust live art in favour of cinema, thus causing Prospero to lose his job, and look for another one elsewhere. No wonder he is employed on the famous liner the Titanic, so that Lochhead, as part of her edutainment, can tell the story of a shipwreck most schoolchildren would encounter in their history textbooks.

As regards, in *After Juliet*, although the characters wear “punk Elizabethan” clothes (Macdonald 2001: 20), Macdonald deliberately avoids setting the story at a specific time and place, so as to suggest that violence, disrespect of differences and desire of prevarication are execrable behaviours ever and everywhere. Hence two stage directions explain that the place “*could be Verona. Or it could be Edinburgh, Dublin, New York or Liverpool*” (Macdonald 2001: 7) and the time “*could be 1500; 1900; 2000; or 3000*” (Macdonald 2001: 25)

Connected with these setting variations is the question of language adaptation. Generally speaking, both Lochhead and Macdonald reproduce the effects generated by the alternate use of verse and prose in the Shakespearean source texts. For clearly educational reasons, on the one hand, Lochhead maintains blank verse in the most lyrical passages, such as Caliban’s famous “the isle is full of noises” speech, which she reproduces almost faithfully in order for her young readers and spectators to experience the allurements of Shakespeare’s poetry. On the other hand, through reduction and modernisation strategies, she generally changes Shakespeare’s language so as to tailor-make it for a very young audience, for example turning Caliban’s song “Ban, ’Ban, Ca-Caliban” (Shakespeare 2001: II.2.179) into a pantomime song: ““Bub-a-ban, Bub-a-ban, ban, Caliban!” (Lochhead 2003: 191). Lochhead’s choices reflect the typical features of theatrical representations conceived for a young audience, “an interdisciplinary language”, in the words of theatre direc-

tor Letizia Pardi, “able to encompass writing, gesture, movement, sound, imagery and signs all elements contributing to give sense and meaning to both individual and community life” (Santini 2013)<sup>8</sup>.

As to Macdonald’s linguistic choices, she appropriates Shakespeare’s register heterogeneity by combining the informal youth jargon of the characters with a more formal register as well as with intertextual references to the 1562 poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke, on which Shakespeare based the plot of the tragedy. Macdonald acknowledges this source and, at the same time, the hypertextual complexity of her work, observing that it “was, in turn, a translation from the Italian of Bandello’s *Romeus and Juliet* (1554)” (Macdonald 2001: 5).

### *To conclude ...*

Lochhead and Macdonald create their own Shakespearean experience, “[re-imagining the] themes and [reconstituting the] fables” (Marowitz 1991: 31) of their literary father, whose authority they invoke but, at the same time, liberate from its fixed mythic stature. How, in their own idiosyncratic ways, they metamorphose Shakespeare confirms the malleable complexity of his plays, and that each of them is, as it were, an “opera infinita” (Fusini 2016: 46) or “unlimited poem”, to adopt the definitions that Nadia Fusini and Harold Bloom respectively gave of *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*. This sense of complexity and infiniteness is ultimately conveyed by the final open-endedness of both *The Magic Island* and *After Juliet*.

At the end of *The Magic Island*, after the conclusion of her tale, the spotlight focuses on Miranda in the present time, no longer on the magic island. Then, addressing the audience, her friend Fernandelle says: “I don’t know what I make of [the island]. I never did. I bet I could have told you a totally different true story. Same magic island. Different story” (Lochhead 2003: 299). The magic of Shakespeare’s theatre, in other words, will never end, as *The Tempest* will always live again through countless readings, retellings and rewritings.

Macdonald concludes *After Juliet* on a different note. At the end, there is no neat resolution, no *Liebestod*, no suggestion that Romeo and Juliet’s

<sup>8</sup> These are her original words in an interview: “un linguaggio interdisciplinare in grado di contenere dentro di sé la scrittura, il gesto, il movimento, il suono, l’immagine e il segno, elementi che concorrono a dare un senso e un significato alla vita di un individuo e di una comunità”.

<sup>9</sup> See Harold Bloom’s 2003 study *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*.

deaths were a sacrifice necessary for the restoring of peace, but rather there is an enduring sense of unquenchable violence and hostility between the rival parties – “it’s never going to end”, Rosaline says. The “glooming peace” (Shakespeare 2003: V. 3. 305) at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* is now replaced by a “glooming chiaroscuro/ Over all” (Macdonald 2001: 49), and the final symbolic blackout on stage. Terence Hawkes has challengingly argued that “Shakespeare doesn’t mean: we mean by Shakespeare” (Hawkes 1992: 3). Ultimately, Lochhead and Macdonald together “mean by Shakespeare”, in the sense that they allow their audiences to live a full Shakespearean experience, by giving new shapes to what is one of the most compelling achievements of Shakespeare’s theatre: the representation of the disturbing coexistence of greatness and misery in human life.

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## COMPLEXITY IN MARY SHELLEY: *THE LAST MAN*

### *Abstract*

This paper analyses Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826), which describes a plague that wipes out the entire human race with the exception of the narrator. The aim is to show how the novel has taken on new meanings in the context of a world which is very different from the world that Mary knew. An example of this is the invention of the atomic bomb: Mary imagines the extinction of the human race by means of a plague and while it seems unlikely that the AIDS pandemic will do this, nuclear weapons could do so. Another question that the novel raises is that of Islamic fundamentalism and the Islamisation of Europe which at the present time is very topical. In addition to these issues we have the question of republicanism and air travel.

*Keywords:* Mary Shelley; plague; AIDS; atomic bomb; Islam; republicanism; air travel.

### *Introduction*

Mary Shelley, who was born in 1797 and died in 1851, came to Italy in 1818 with her husband Percy and her step-sister Claire Clairmont. They stayed in Pisa from 1820 to 1822 and were members of the famous Pisan circle which also included Byron, who stayed in *Palazzo Lanfranchi*, not to speak of many others such as the *improvvisatore* Tommaso Sgricci and the Greek patriot and champion of Greek independence Prince Mavrocordato. She returned to England in 1823, a year after her husband's death by drowning.

Her novel *The Last Man* was published in 1826. In this novel she imagines the extinction of the human race as the result of a plague. Only the narrator Lionel Verney who, although a man, represents Mary, survives, thus becoming the last man of the title. The theme was topical but the title was not original as in 1823 Thomas Campbell had published a poem entitled *The Last Man*. It mirrored, however, Mary's state of mind as she had lost not only her husband but also three of her four children

as well as some of her friends such as Byron. In May 1824 she confided the following words to her *Journal*:

The Last Man! Yes! I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me. (Shelley M. 1987: II, 476-7)

We might add, in passing, that the theme of the last man was popular not only in Mary's day but that it is also popular in our own: in America the television series *The Last Man on Earth* ran from 2015 to 2018.

The novel is set in the year 2073 and the war for Greek independence in which Byron fought and died is still going on while England has just become a republic, something of which Mary's husband Percy would have approved as he was a fervent republican and had a particular dislike for the Prince Regent who in 1820 ascended the throne as George IV. This dislike was reinforced by the fact that the journalist Leigh Hunt, who was the editor of the liberal periodical *The Examiner* and a friend of Shelley, together with his brother John, went to prison for two years for insulting the Prince Regent. Shelley was later to satirise George IV in *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820).

The former royal family has been given the name of Windsor (here Mary prophetically anticipated this choice of name) and when the last king dies his son Adrian inherits the title of Earl of Windsor. Adrian is an idealised portrait of Percy Shelley: "[...] he was endowed with genius and surpassing talent" (Shelley M. 1998: 32) and "displayed a tameless love of freedom" (p. 32). Although the son of the late king and the ex-queen he is a convinced republican and has no interest in restoring the monarchy:

The accounts furnished him, however distorted, of a great and wise nation asserting its right to govern itself, excited his admiration: in early days he became a republican from principle. (p. 32)

Just as Adrian is based on Mary's husband so the figure of Lord Raymond, who dies in Constantinople while fighting for the independence of Greece from Turkey, is based on Byron. Mary writes:

Lord Raymond was supremely handsome, every one admired him; of women he was the idol. He was courteous, honey-tongued – an adept in the fascinating arts. (p. 40)

She also sees him in the role of Cincinnatus:

He writhed beneath an injury he was unable to revenge; and he quitted England with a vow not to return, till the good time should arrive, when she might feel the power of him she now despised. (p. 39)

Apart from air travel by balloon the lifestyle of the people is similar to that of the early nineteenth century and the novel makes a number of references to horses and hackney carriages, as well as to steamboats which had just begun to come into service. For this reason, although the novel is set in the future it cannot be compared to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty – Four* (1949) or Robert Hugh Benson's *Lord of the World* (1907).

When the novel was first published many of the reviews were very unfavourable. To quote Miranda Seymour's biography of Mary:

The reviews were bad. Most of them pointed out that it was strange to find hackneys and postchaises being employed in an age of intercontinental air-travel; this was the mildest of their objections. (Seymour 2000: 361)

Apart from this objection the reviewers used such expressions as "sickening" (*The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*, in Shelley M. 1998: XXI) and "diseased imagination, and...polluted taste" (*Monthly Review*, xxi), as a result of which, unlike *Frankenstein*, the novel was soon forgotten and not republished for well over a hundred years. And when in 1951, the year of the centenary of Mary's death, Muriel Spark published a biography of Mary – *Child of Light* – she provided a résumé of the novel because she had had access to one of the few extant copies. "*The Last Man*", she wrote in the revised version of her biography – *Mary Shelley* – published in 1988, "was available only as a bibliophile's item" (Spark 2002: x).

### *The extinction of the human race*

Coming now to the theme of our conference – complexity – the following comment by Richard Holmes in his biography of Percy Shelley sheds light on the relevance of this novel to the world we live in:

Shelley believed that a great masterpiece had a quality of self-regeneration: it took on new forms and significance as it moved beyond its own time, and its own culture. (Holmes 1987: 644)

And in fact Richard Garnett, writing in 1891, declared: “When *The Last Man* is reprinted it will come before the world as a new work” (Garnett 1891: ix). In the event it was reprinted in 1965.

We have already seen that critical reaction to the novel tended to be very unfavourable. Muriel Spark, in the revised version of *Child of Light*, to which we have already alluded, writes that:

It is possible that *The Last Man* will hold a more pertinent appeal for present-day readers than it did even in Mary’s time, when it was received as an entertaining though highly fantastic story. (Spark 2002: 179-80)

Obviously those who derided the novel must have been aware that there had been many plagues in the course of history but as the human race had not been wiped out they evidently felt that Mary, to use a colloquial expression, had gone over the top. But when in 1951 Muriel Spark wrote *Child of Light* perspectives had changed. Just six years previously America had dropped an atomic bomb first on Hiroshima and then on Nagasaki thereby forcing Japan to surrender, but at an immense cost in terms of human lives.

It became clear to the world that Man now had the means of destroying himself and that the entire human race could be wiped out. Here we have an example of what Holmes calls a quality of self-regeneration. Mary was prophetic in a way she had not foreseen: so far at least, no plague has wiped out the human race but nuclear weapons could do so. But it is interesting that as far back as 1938, when it was becoming increasingly clear that another war was likely, Glynn Grylls wrote that:

[...] her description of the devastation wrought by a plague which sweeps the world and brings in its train a breakdown, more nightmarish than death itself, of the organisation on which civilised existence depends takes on a heightened reality to a generation threatened by an extinction as complete as the man-made plague of war [...] (Grylls 1938: 321)

Of course, during the Cold War many people ruled out the possibility of a nuclear holocaust because of the so-called balance of terror but this argument was, to say the least, tenuous. A trigger-happy dictator, in answer to a provocation, could launch a missile with a nuclear warhead towards an enemy country and thus spark off a nuclear war.

As we have seen, Mary’s critics dismissed as fanciful the idea that a plague could destroy the human race and it may well be that Mary pursued this idea because she saw herself as the last relic of a beloved race or to quote Barbara Johnson: “One could affirm that in writing

*The Last Man* Mary Shelley only painted her mourning on a universal scale” (Johnson 1993: 263). At the same time, however, the outbreak of the AIDS pandemic nearly forty years ago has shown that her novel was curiously prophetic even if all the evidence suggests that humanity will survive. There are few, if any, countries which have been spared and in some countries, such as those of sub-Saharan Africa, the results have been absolutely devastating but in western countries too the death toll has been distressingly high.

According to statistics published by UNAIDS in 2018 in 2017 an estimated 36.9 million people were living with HIV. In the same year 940,000 people died of AIDS-related diseases. Since the start of the epidemic 77.3 million people have become infected with HIV and 35.4 million people have died of AIDS-related illnesses (UNAIDS, web).

Naturally, the extinction of the human race carries with it the corollary of the complete breakdown of family life and the destruction of society and in the novel we find some graphic descriptions. For example: “[...] the vessel of society was wrecked, and the shattered raft, which carried the few survivors over the sea of misery<sup>1</sup>, was riven and tempest tost” (Shelley M. 1998: 320) while London is described thus:

The overgrown metropolis, the great heart of mighty Britain, was pulseless. Commerce had ceased. All resort for ambition or pleasure was cut off – the streets were grass-grown – the houses empty – the few, that from necessity remained, seemed already branded with the taint of inevitable pestilence. (p. 261)

It may well be that such descriptions are too drastic to be applied to the havoc and destruction caused by AIDS, even in Africa, but at the very least they should serve as a warning against complacency just as *Frankenstein* serves as a perennial warning against tampering with Nature.

### *The Islamisation of Europe*

The quality of self-regeneration is also to be found in connection with a question which is alluded to briefly in the novel: Islamic fundamentalism and the Islamisation of Europe. As we saw earlier, although the novel begins in the year 2073 the war between Greece and Turkey is still going on and Byron/Lord Raymond is in charge of the Greek forces

<sup>1</sup> Shelley’s poem *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills* (1818) speaks about “The deep wide sea of Misery” (line 2).

but dies in Constantinople. Speaking of Raymond and Turkey Mary uses very strong language:

[...] he wished [...] to eradicate from Europe a power which, while every other nation advanced in civilization, stood still, a monument of antique barbarism. (p. 175)

Similarly she writes that:

[...] in his hope of the conquest of Constantinople, he counted on an event which would be as a landmark in the waste of ages, an exploit unequalled in the annals of man, when a city of grand historic association, the beauty of whose site was the wonder of the world, which for many hundred years had been the strong hold of the Moslems, should be rescued from slavery and barbarism, and restored to a people illustrious for genius, civilization, and a spirit of liberty. (pp. 176-177)

Needless to say, the question of Islamic fundamentalism and the corollary of terrorism is one of the key issues at the present time. One has only to call to mind the attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001, sometimes known as 9/11, the destruction wrought by the so-called Islamic State not only in terms of human lives but also of ancient monuments, not to speak of the terror attacks in Europe during the last few years which are believed to be the work of Islamic fundamentalists. At the same time there is also the question of the Islamisation of Europe and the related question of the *sharia*.

In the novel Mary hints, through the mouth of Lord Raymond, at a Christian *reconquista* of Constantinople similar perhaps to that of Spain in the fifteenth century under Ferdinand and Isabel. Speaking to Verney he says “[...] wait till you see the cross on St. Sophia” (p. 184). St. Sophia, of course, was until 1453 a Christian basilica. Similarly Mary writes that “The empire of the Mohametans in Europe was at its close” (p. 189) while the Greek forces are described by their enemies as “Christian dogs” (p. 191).

This reference to the Cross reminds us at a stroke of the conflict between Christianity and Islam, between the Cross and the Crescent which has characterised relations between the two religions since the days of Mohammed. Just to limit ourselves to comparatively recent times we may recall the Siege of Malta of 1565 in which the numerically superior Turkish forces were defeated and whose outcome was greeted with relief even by the Protestant Queen Elizabeth (Bradford 1964: 190), the

battle of Lepanto of 1571 in which the Turkish fleet was defeated, and the Siege of Vienna of 1683 which halted the advance of Islam.

It seems a reasonable assumption that when Mary wrote these pages on Islam and Europe she had in mind her husband's poem *Hellas*, written in 1821 to draw the attention of the English people to the war for Greek independence and dedicated to the Greek patriot Prince Mavrocordato who was, as we have seen, a member of the Pisan circle. The spirit of these pages may be considered an echo of the following verses sung by a chorus of Greek women in Shelley's poem:

The moon of Mahomet  
Arose and it shall set:  
While blazoned as on Heaven's immortal noon  
The cross leads generations on. (221-24)

As we have already seen, the figure of Lord Raymond is based on Lord Byron and the reference to the cross on St. Sophia would seem to shed light on Byron's character. He was brought up as a Protestant but, in spite of his dissolute lifestyle, he had a certain admiration for the Catholic Church. He wanted his daughter Allegra, the fruit of a brief affair with Claire Clairmont, to be brought up in the Catholic faith and had a robust exchange of views on the subject with Claire who detested what she considered to be an abominable superstition. Ironically Claire, towards the end of her life, became a Catholic.

Byron, both in his letters and in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, praises the Catholic religion. In the poem Italy is referred to as "Parent of our Religion" (Canto IV, XLVII) and St. Peter's as "Christ's mighty shrine above his martyr's tomb" (Canto CLII).

The strong language used by Mary would suggest that she saw Islam in decidedly negative terms and that possibly Byron was in agreement with her. In this connection we may quote Seyed Mohammed Marandi who, speaking of Byron's poem *The Giaour*, writes: "[...] Islam is still portrayed as barbaric and inferior to the West and Christianity" (Marandi 2006: 141).

The reference to the conflict between the Cross and the Crescent leads us to a statement made by the late Cardinal Giacomo Biffi of Bologna. He said in an interview in about 1990 that in the twenty-first century Europe would either become Christian once again or would be Moslem (Biffi 2000: 15). He stigmatised what he called *la cultura del niente* and declared that:

Questa 'cultura del niente' (sorretta dall'edonismo e dalla irrazionalità libertaria) non sarà in grado di reggere all'assalto ideologico dell'Islam, che non mancherà [...] (p. 16)

As things stand there are few signs that Europe is about to become Christian once again. Christianity is visibly declining in Europe (but not in Africa or in Russia) and a symptom of this decline was the refusal to mention Europe's Christian heritage first in the European Constitution which in the event was not ratified and then in the Treaty of Lisbon. In some European countries such as France it would seem that there are more practising Moslems than Christians.

At present Moslems are still a minority in European countries and their presence is seen in terms of integration: they should be able to worship Allah in their mosques but at the same time they must accept and respect the values of the host countries and not try and impose their point of view on these countries. Integration also means that everything must be done to avoid the creation of ghettos.

If, on the other hand, the Moslem population were to increase dramatically in conjunction with the decline in the birth rate in many European countries the situation might change and could lead to an attempt to impose the Islamic way of life in Europe. In recent weeks and months we have seen how several European countries have tried to block the number of immigrants at their frontiers.

This fact is a sign that the situation is becoming increasingly explosive and that every effort should be made to go to the root of the problem in such a way that people no longer need to leave their country and migrate to Europe.

### *Republicanism*

Having spoken at length about Mary and Islam we come now to the Republic of England for, as we have already seen, in the novel England has become a republic. While Mary's decision to call the former royal family the House of Windsor turned out to be curiously prophetic the fact remains that England still has its monarchy. It is an institution that has weathered many storms, not least the abdication crisis of 1936, the *annus horribilis* (1992) and the death of Princess Diana (1997). The crisis of 1992 led some people to suggest that the time had come to replace the monarchy with a republic. Others suggested that on the Queen's death Prince William rather than Prince Charles should ascend the throne (this of course remains to be seen). It was even suggested that if anything happened to the House of Windsor there might be a return of the Stuarts!

However, even if England, so far at least, has not become a republic the novel does raise a question that has proved to be topical: the question of hereditary titles. In the novel Parliament is ruled by a so-called Protector whom it has elected and during the election campaign for a new Protector one of the candidates, a certain Ryland, who would seem to be a caricature of William Cobbett, the populist journalist and editor, campaigns in favour of the abolition of these titles. The attitude of the nobility is aptly summed up in the following words: “Yet could England doff her lordly trappings and be content with the democratic style of America?” (Shelley M. 1998: 222).

What is significant is that in 1999 Tony Blair got Parliament to approve the *House of Lords Act* which declared that “No one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage” (Wikipedia, *web*) although 92 hereditary peers were allowed to remain, albeit temporarily. At the same time there is the possibility that in the not too distant future all the members of the House of Lords will be elected.

### *Air travel*

We come now to the question of air travel by balloon. For some of Mary’s critics it was strange that such an innovation could go hand in hand with pre-Industrial Revolution means of transport such as hackney carriages and postchaises. One is tempted to surmise that for these critics the very idea of air travel was fanciful and absurd.

Little did they imagine that less than a hundred years later – in 1903 – the Wright brothers would invent the first motor-powered aeroplane to leave the ground, albeit for a minute or so and that this invention would not only revolutionise transport but also be a weapon of war. Mary seems to conceive of air travel as a modern form of sea travel: the balloon is variously referred to as a “sailing balloon” (Shelley M. 1998: 70), “the airy pinnacle” (p. 71), the “aerial bark” (p. 216) and “the light boat” (p. 216).

In the novel we have a brief description of a flight from Ancona to Dieppe which probably provoked some wry smiles from the novel’s critics, but which is something we take for granted:

Beneath are the plains of Italy, or the vast undulations of the wave-like Apennines. (p. 216)

and

We were lifted above the Alpine peaks, and from their deep and brawling ravines entered the plain of fair France. (p. 216)

The critics may have smiled or laughed but it was Mary who had the last laugh.

### *Conclusion*

Summing up, we may say with Richard Garnett that when the novel was republished it would come before the world as a new work. We have also seen how, in homage to the principle of complexity, it has taken on new forms and significance as it moved beyond its own time and its own culture. The world Mary grew up and lived in was a very different world from ours but I have tried to show that, in spite of this, the questions she raises in her novel are relevant to our age albeit in ways that she could not always have imagined.

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THE CENCI, OR THE COMPLEX RECEPTION OF PERCY  
BYSSHE SHELLEY IN ITALY, BETWEEN  
TRANSLATION AND GENDER

*Abstract*

Expanding on existing scholarship, this article explores the Italian reception of Percy Bysshe Shelley with a dual focus on gender and translation. In this regard, I will examine *The Cenci: A Tragedy in Five Acts* which Shelley wrote in 1818. In his Preface, the poet offers a visual representation of Beatrice Cenci that is based on the portrait, allegedly by Guido Reni, which he saw at Palazzo Colonna in Rome. However, I suggest that the “beautifully tender and serene” demeanour of the painting does not find its counterpart in Beatrice as depicted by Shelley, who stresses the young woman’s opposition against patriarchal authority and its abuses. Accordingly, I shall first explore Shelley’s verbal remediation of the portrait he saw in Rome. As a second point, I shall consider whether the circulation of *The Cenci* in Italy might have been stirred by similar discourses of gender. To this end, I shall focus on Giovanni Battista Niccolini’s drama *Beatrice Cenci* (1844) and Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi’s 1854 homonymous novel as paramount examples of Shelley’s reception in the mid-nineteenth century.

*Keywords:* Romantic literature; Percy Bysshe Shelley; gender; Anglo-Italian studies; adaptation studies; reception studies.

Written in Italy between May and August 1819, *The Cenci* holds a significant place within Percy Bysshe Shelley’s literary production. Begun shortly after he had concluded the first three acts of *Prometheus Unbound*, the tragedy preceded its publication, its first edition being printed in Leghorn in September 1819. In the dedicatory letter to Leigh Hunt he ambiguously dated 29 May 1819, Shelley describes *The Cenci* in a way that echoes the Keatsian chameleon poet, and establishes a *terminus post quem* in his writing:

Those writings which I have hitherto published, have been little else than visions which impersonate my own apprehensions of the beautiful and the

just. I can also perceive in them the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience; they are dreams of what ought to be, or may be. The drama which I now present to you is a sad reality. I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor, and am content to paint, with such colours as my own heart furnishes, that which has been. (Shelley 2003: 314)

Shelley believed that *The Cenci* marked a turning point in his oeuvre. Writing to Thomas Love Peacock in July 1819, he expresses his hope that the play might be staged at Covent Garden, with two of the leading actors of the time – Elizabeth O’Neill and Edmund Kean – to be cast as Beatrice and Count Cenci (Shelley 1964: 103). The poet’s correspondence confirms that *The Cenci* was the first work he had “expressively written for theatrical exhibition”, but it also reveals his fears that the fortunes of the play might be tarnished by his ill reputation (Shelley 1964: 178). As he was about to send to England 250 copies of the play, Shelley (1964: 127) assured his publisher, Charles Ollier, that the tragedy included “no reference, direct or indirect, to politics, or religion, or personal satire”. The following April, however, he confessed to Leigh Hunt he suspected that the play had been turned down on personal grounds. “The very Theatre”, Shelley writes, “rejected it with expressions of the great insolence. I feel persuaded that they must have guessed at the author” (1964: 181). Indeed, Ollier refused to print a second edition of *The Cenci*, although a recently discovered letter, dated 27 August 1820, suggests that Shelley still believed the tragedy might prove a success: “Prometheus [...] is *intended* only for the esoteric readers of poetry, – but indeed the Cenci *ought* to sell” (qtd. in Marggraf Turley 2009: 55)<sup>1</sup>.

Notwithstanding its nineteenth-century English reception, *The Cenci* is the work that most significantly traces Shelley’s early critical fortunes in Italy, marked as they were by a discontinuous and contradictory response (cf. Crisafulli 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Only around Shelley’s first centenary – that is, around 1892 – did his fame become established in the country, just as critics began to explore his “links with the cultural heritage, art, landscape and, less insistently, history of Italy” (Bandiera 2008: 75). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Nobel

<sup>1</sup> According to Curran (1970: 13-14), the scarce favour that *The Cenci* was met with was to affect Shelley’s creativity in such a considerable way that he was later unable to “sustain the fertile productivity of the *annus mirabilis* in which he plumbed the deepest resources of his imagination”.

<sup>2</sup> For an accurate study of Shelley’s Italian reception, see also Crisafulli Jones 1990: 93-123; Bandiera 1998 and 2008 provide a detailed investigation of the Italian translations of Shelley’s works in the nineteenth century.

Prize Giosuè Carducci would still point out a significant inconsistency between the Italian translations of Shelley's works and their actual circulation. In his Preface to Ettore Sanfelice's translation of *Prometheus Unbound* (1894), Carducci claims that

L'Italia non inorridisce più ai Cenci, non li legge. E non legge neanche la sublime idealità del Prometeo, e non legge nulla della ricchissima e così varia, tra grandiosa e delicata, produzione di Shelley. Non legge, ma traduce. [...] Lo traduciamo, è vero, tutti i giorni; ma tradurre non c'è obbligo che significhi saper leggere. [...] [N]on credo l'autore del *Prometeo* poeta da esser molto gustato e compreso in Italia oggi. (Carducci 1904: 1240; 1243)

The gap that Carducci hints at seems rooted in the uneven distribution of cultural capital. His remarks point to a gulf separating the taste of readers – who, he argues, hardly appreciate Shelley's works – as opposed to the interest of intellectuals, critics, and writers. From this perspective, *The Cenci* is an interesting case in point. From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the play and its legacy both fascinate and contaminate Italian culture. Shelley's tragedy was the object of a number of translations, as well as adaptations and imitations, which often refashion the original text from the viewpoint of gender. Taken as a whole, these texts offer a wealth of interesting elements testifying to the complex and dialogic relationship between Shelley and Italian culture<sup>3</sup>.

### *The Cenci in Italy: imitation, adaptation, translation*

While Shelley's Italian reputation was consolidating, as Carducci's remarks suggest, his name was strongly associated with *The Cenci*. Other writers had evidently contributed to the creation of this literary myth during the nineteenth century. Stendhal's *Les Cenci* first appeared anonymously in the *Revue des deux Mondes* in July 1837 and was later included in *Chroniques italiennes* (1855), while Alexander Dumas's *Les Cenci, 1598* was published as part of his *Crimes célèbres* (1839-40). These novellas were arguably circulating among Shelley's readership since, as Alfredo De Bosis was to argue in *Il Convito* towards the end of the century, most Italian readers were still

<sup>3</sup> The author wishes to thank Donatella Cantele of the Centro Stendhaliano at Biblioteca Sormani, Milano, whose assistance has been precious in the preliminary stages of this research.

familiar with *The Cenci* through its French translations<sup>4</sup>. From the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century, however, Shelley's play appeared in four different Italian translations. The one by Giuseppe Aglio, significantly titled *Beatrice Cenci*, was included in the 1858 anthology *Opere poetiche scelte di Percy Bysshe Shelley*. The other three were published after the poet's centenary: Ettore Sanfelice's appeared in 1892, Alfredo De Bosis's in 1898, and Gualtiero Guatteri's in 1912.

Before translations helped popularise Shelley's *The Cenci*, two works had already contributed to its fortunes in Italy, Giovanni Battista Niccolini's play *Beatrice Cenci* (1844) and Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi's historical novel *Beatrice Cenci. Storia del secolo XVI* (1854). Both writers explicitly acknowledge Shelley's tragedy among their *Ur-Texts*, which suggests viewing their works – or at least significant sections of them – as, respectively, instances of imitation and adaptation processes. These two concepts are employed here as the reinterpretation of established texts through a process implying either a change of medium or their relocation into a different cultural setting (cf. Sanders's [2006] 2016: 24). From this critical perspective, the study of cultural-determined amendments becomes predominant over the long-debated issue of fidelity to the source text, leading to interpretative possibilities that might as well be applied to translation. Accordingly, Niccolini's and Guerrazzi's works are discussed here alongside Sanfelice's, De Bosis's, and Guatteri's translations of *The Cenci* in order to sketch a more complete picture of Shelley's reception in Italy.

Insofar as Niccolini did not refer to his play as a translation of Shelley's work – with the whole range of changes and domestication strategies that the very act of translation implies –, his *Beatrice Cenci* raised various charges. For De Bosis (1898: 874), Niccolini “segue il suo testo inglese come un cieco segue la guida”, whereas White (1922) accused him of plagiarism. White, however, neglects *Discorso sulla tragedia greca* (1844), where Niccolini admits that Shelley's *The Cenci* was the main source of his play and explains that he imitated the English text by expanding the number of scenes and making changes to the dialogues. In addition, Niccolini's *Discorso* should be mentioned here in that it testifies to a significant turn in the Italian

<sup>4</sup> In particular, De Bosis mentions Tola Dorian's translation “*Les Cenci*”, *drame de Shelley* (1883) – which was published with a preface by Algernon Charles Swinburne – and Félix Rabbe's 1887 French edition of Shelley's *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (De Bosis 1898: 872).

reception of Shelley. He praises Shelley's poetry by placing him next to Aeschylus inasmuch as his work discloses a poetic genius grafted on a classical spirit that England was still struggling to acknowledge:

*L'Agamennone e la Beatrice Cenci*, tragedie, la prima delle quali io tradussi da Eschilo, e la seconda imitai dallo Shelley, offrono sulla scena due misfatti atrocissimi: [...]. Il primo di questi drammi è scritto dal più antico dei tragici greci, il secondo da uno dei più recenti poeti d'Inghilterra, del quale mal dir si potrebbe se la sua patria si glori, o si vergogni. Lo Shelley ebbe per certo un ingegno possente; e della greca tragedia, in particolar modo dei Cori, studiosissimo, fu preso di così grande amore per Eschilo, ch' egli tentò alla sua pazza maniera un Prometeo liberato, o a dir meglio, un empio miscuglio di splendide immagini e di astrazioni metafisiche, figurando l'uomo sciolto da ogni credenza religiosa, mercé della vittoria di Demogorgone su Giove, cioè del Panteismo il quale trionfa della Fede. (Niccolini 1844: xi)

Niccolini's choice to imitate *The Cenci* does not simply stem from his desire to contribute to the circulation of Shelley's work. His play is not only an adaptation based on logics of domestication of the source text, it is also a response to the negative reviews of the tragedy in England and Scotland. Anticipating Carducci's remarks, however, he adds that the taste of modern English poetry is scarcely compatible with Italian culture. This awareness, the writer maintains in his *Discorso*, explains why he chose not to translate "la Beatrice colla timida fedeltà d'un interprete, ma bensì la imitai [...] con libero ardimento di poeta" (1844: xiv).

As for Guerrazzi, the writer acknowledges his debt to Shelley in the tenth chapter of *Beatrice Cenci*, which is framed by extratextual elements that clarify the relationship of the novel to its hypotext. Titled "Il convito", the chapter begins with an epigraph from Francesco's speech to his guests from *The Cenci* I. iii:

*Cenci*. "Benvenuti, amici e gentiluomini; benvenuti, principi e cardinali, colonne della Chiesa, che onorate il nostro festino con la vostra presenza [...] quando avremo ricambiato insieme un brindisi o due, voi vorrete putarmi carne e sangue come siete voi, peccatore invero; da Adamo in poi siamo tutti così; ma compassionevole, mansueto e pietoso".

SHELLEY, *Beatrice Cenci*. (Guerrazzi 1854: 159)

In this short prose translation of Francesco Cenci's speech, Guerrazzi follows Shelley's lines quite literally. However, he deliberately omits Count Cenci's reference to his transgression of socially accepted codes

of conduct – explicitly as a hermit, and implicitly as guilty of violent and incestuous practices – which Shelley hinted at in the first lines of the same passage:

I have too long lived like an Anchorite,  
And in my absence from your merry meetings  
An evil word is gone abroad of me. (I.iii.4-6)

A footnote at the end of the chapter further strengthens Guerrazzi's relation to his hypotext. The writer points out that Count Cenci's words and actions in this chapter were based to a considerable extent on Shelley's play. By admitting his debt, Guerrazzi – like Niccolini – also attempts at reassessing Shelley's poetic value, paving the way for De Bosis's, Carducci's, and D'Annunzio's contributions in establishing the poet's reception in Italy:

Parecchie idee dei discorsi tenuti nel presente capitolo da Francesco Cenci furono tratte dalla Beatrice Cenci di Shelley. Questo scrittore è mal noto in Italia: amico fu a Lord Byron: annegò nel Tirreno, recandosi a Genova su barca senza ponte: ne arsero il cadavere sulla spiaggia a Bocca d'Arno, presente Byron. Io lo conobbi; fu magro e piccolo, e dava nell'etico: metafisico, più che poeta; ma poeta ancora d'infinito valore. (Guerrazzi 1854: 181)

If one is to take *The Cenci* as Niccolini's and Guerrazzi's hypotext or *Ur-Text*, this paratextual evidence, as well as the very titles of their works, interestingly point towards a gendered refashioning of Shelley's play. This interpretative possibility also accounts for Guerrazzi's reiterated misquotation of the title of Shelley's tragedy, and finds confirmation in the title of Aglio's translation – *Beatrice Cenci*. Although this article does not aim to engage in a strict reading of *The Cenci* from the viewpoint of gender representation and politics, this aspect was clearly relevant in the Italian reception of the tragedy. In her endurance of suffering, and in the dignity with which she comforts Lucretia and faces punishment after committing parricide, Beatrice stands out as the heroine of Shelley's work.

### *Shelley's Beatrice in Italy: refashioning gender*

In his preface to *The Cenci*, Shelly particularly stresses Beatrice's almost virginal purity and innocence, which he configures as being corrupted only by ill circumstances. In his view, Beatrice is "one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without

destroying one another: her nature was simple and profound” (Shelley 2003: 319). Although the drama is largely based on the manuscript “Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci” that Mary Shelley would include in her 1840 edition of Shelley’s works, his characterization of Beatrice is considerably stirred by what he believed to be Guido Reni’s portrait of Beatrice Cenci. In the Dedication to Leigh Hunt, Shelley states his purpose in pictorial terms, explaining that “I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor, and am content to paint, with such colours as my own heart furnishes, that which has been” (Shelley 2003: 314). Thus, in the long description that closes the preface, Shelley highlights the girl’s pathetic and melancholic nature, her delicacy and forbearance, as well as her serenity in spite of sorrow:

There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. [...] The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched; the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. (Shelley 2003: 318)

As is known, Shelley notoriously misattributed the painting to Guido Reni. In so doing, he fuelled an artistic legend that was to persist well into the twentieth century, fascinating writers such as Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne<sup>5</sup>. In his account of the Cenci trial, published in 1909, Padre Ilario Ranieri harshly questioned Shelley’s highly idealistic characterization of Beatrice, which he argued was precisely the result of his misinterpretation of the painting. “That [Beatrice]”, the historian claims, “never existed, except in Schelley’s [*sic*] somber imagination or in an imaginary canvas”. The poet’s fault had consisted in recognising Beatrice Cenci in a painting whose features “have in

<sup>5</sup> In *Pictures from Italy* (1846), Dickens observes that the portrait is “almost impossible to be forgotten. Through the transcendent sweetness and beauty of the face, there is a something shining out, that haunts me. [...] The head is loosely draped in white; the light hair falling down below the linen folds. She has turned suddenly towards you; and there is an expression in the eyes – although they are very tender and gentle – as if the wildness of a momentary terror, or distraction, had been struggled with and overcome, that instant; and nothing but a celestial hope, and a beautiful sorrow, and a desolate earthly helplessness remained. [...] The history is written in the Painting; written, in the dying girl’s face, by Nature’s own hand” (Dickens [1846] 1998: 147-48).

common with the real portrait of that fierce Roman what an odalisque's turban has with the hairpins of a girl from the Roman suburbs" (qtd in Donati 1934: 67). Only recently has scholarship put an end to such an artistic myth, suggesting that the portrait, possibly representing a sibyl, was most likely painted by the Baroque artist Ginevra Cantofoli (1618-1672). This claim is all the more plausible by a technical comparison of the portrait with other works by Cantofoli, as for instance her alleged self-portrait at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, or the study of a girl's head now at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (cf. Pulini 2006: 20-21; Terzaghi 2007: 143).

In her study of Milton's influence on Shelley, Callaghan (2013: 484) remarks that the empathic response that his Beatrice elicits in the reader is the result of Shelley's ability to represent the girl's sufferings without excusing her ordeal, which makes *The Cenci* a play of "potential and doubt". From this perspective, the portrait of Beatrice might be defined as a projectional space, shaping Shelley's idealistic representation of the young girl as much as it was shaped by it. In other words, it served as a white canvas assimilating the meanings that the poet attributed to the girl it represents.



Fig. 1. Alleged portrait of Beatrice Cenci, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Roma (Wikimedia Commons).



Fig. 2 . Ginevra Cantofoli (?), Girl's head (or a Sybil), Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum inv. GE-192 (Pulini 2006: 21)

Beatrice's delicate and innocent nature, however, progressively fades away in the fourth act. Faced with Orsino and Marzio's hesitation in murdering Count Cenci, Beatrice appropriates Lady Macbeth's words "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done 't" (II. ii.12-13), as she seizes the dagger and says, "Hadst thou a tongue to say, / 'She murdered her own father,' I must do it!" (IV.iii.32-34). In the following scene, the girl's warning to Lucretia that

'Tis like a truant child  
To fear that others know what thou hast done,  
Even from thine own strong consciousness, and thus  
Write on unsteady eyes and altered cheeks  
All thou wouldst hide [...]. (IV.iv.36-40)

is similarly reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's advice to dissimulation:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men  
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,  
Look like the time. Bear welcome in your eye,  
Your hand, your tongue; look like th' innocent flower,  
But be the serpent under 't [...]. (I.v.60-64)

If Shelley's Beatrice should be considered as an actor wearing a mask and a mantle provided by circumstances, as the poet points out in the preface (Shelley 2003: 319), her performance entails a change which is worth discussing from the point of view of gender representation. Beatrice's female, childlike passivity progressively yields to a resolute will to action. However, it must be observed that "unnatural" is the word that most frequently recurs in the play, suggesting a reversal of the established order – which again echoes the subversivity of *Macbeth* – rather than a simplistic inversion of gender attributes. Towards the end of the tragedy, Beatrice's relationship with Lucretia subverts the traditionally expected mother/daughter relationship insofar as she comforts her mother.

These elements acquire specific relevance in Beatrice Cenci's late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian afterlives. Niccolini especially stresses her shrewdness during the trial, transforming her plea for innocence into false testimony. When Savella questions Beatrice to pry out her confession and find out if she had desired or ordered the Count's death, Shelley's Beatrice promptly states that "It would have been / A crime no less than his, if for one moment / That fierce desire had faded in my heart" (IV.iv.130-32). Whereas the answer provided by Shelley's Beatrice suggests her belief in the necessity of the deed, Niccolini's heroine is way more resolute. She claims that "Un solo istante / Non mi cadde in pensier questo desio" (Niccolini 1847: 426), that is, "Not for a single moment / Did I ever make that wish". Accordingly, Beatrice's attempt at stirring Savella's sympathy turns into calculated deceit in Niccolini's text.

De Bosis harshly criticized Niccolini's "bold imitation" in the commentary he added to his own translation of *The Cenci* in 1898. As its richly decorated frontispiece in *Il Convito* suggests, De Bosis's *I Cenci* offers similarly interesting considerations from the viewpoint of gender. Based on classical iconography, the image portrays a girl holding a dagger, a detail that hints at her guilt. Right above the girl's head, the illustration is decorated with the image of a Medusa. According to the myth, it is worth remembering, medusas were winged females with venomous snakes in place of hair, but they were also endowed with the power to turn to stone those who would look at their faces. Psychoanalytical and feminist criticism have attributed a specific symbolical significance to the myth of Medusa, associating their image to castration, female rage, and suppression of patriarchal authority. The choice of such an illustration thus associates Beatrice with a well-defined set of images. Despite its at times excessive verbosity, however, De Bosis's translation is overall faithful to the original text. His representation of Beatrice does not particularly linger on the "medusan" qualities evoked by the frontispiece, although, as he points

out in his “Nota”, the girl is not the “gazzella timida e inesperta di cui parla Orsino” (De Bosis 1898: 243).

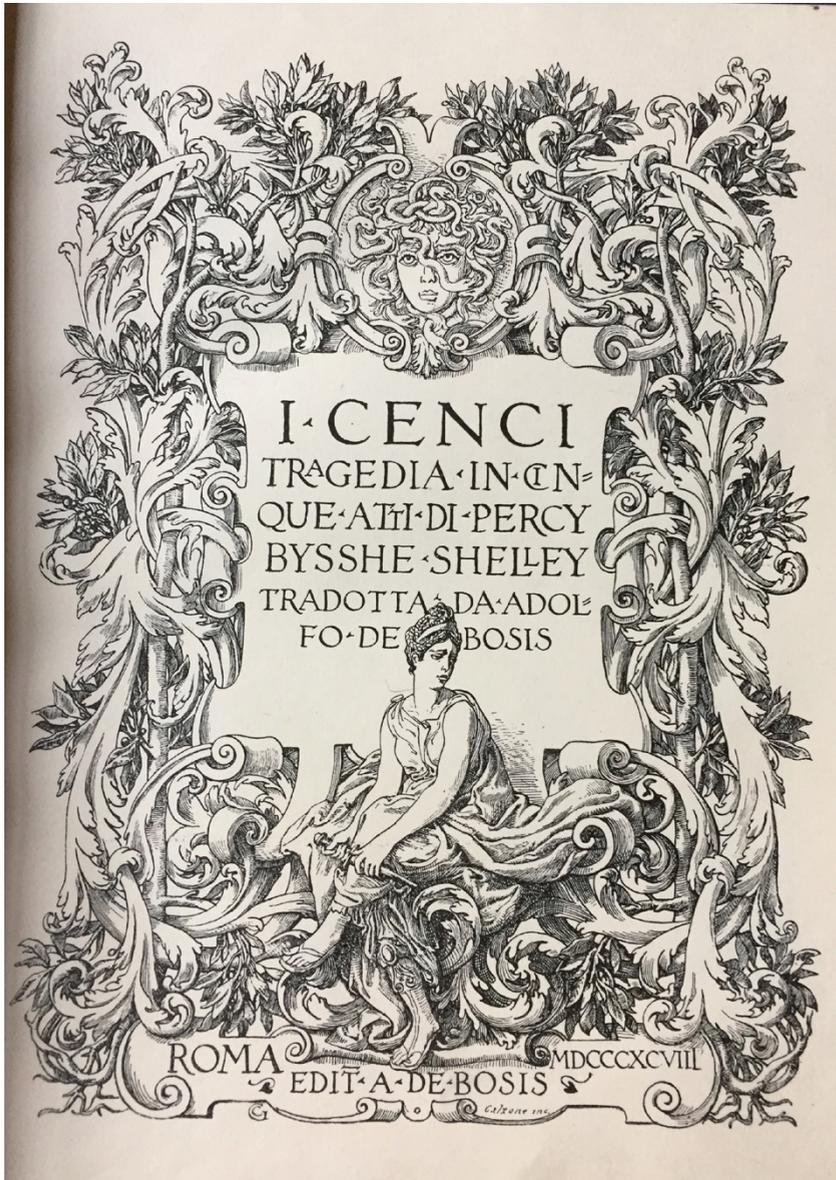


Fig. 3. *I Cenci*. Tragedia in cinque atti di Percy Bysshe Shelley tradotta da Adolfo De Bosis, *Il Convito* 10-11 (1898), frontispiece.

### *The modernity of The Cenci*

Shelley's representation of Beatrice is far more complex than the portrait that had inspired him. In an article published in *Nuova Antologia* in 1904, Mario Pratesi would discuss the poet's characterisation of Francesco and Beatrice Cenci, praising his anatomical, almost sculptural ability. For Pratesi, Beatrice stands out as an embodiment of redemption. Her decision to commit parricide, the critic argues, is certainly based on a desire to deliver her family and herself from abuse. Yet parricide also allows Beatrice to obtain salvation for her father, preventing him from further committing deadly sins, and hence from perpetual damnation. It is in Beatrice's countenance during the trial staged in the final act that Pratesi sees the clearest proof of Shelley's poetic genius. As Shelley

attacks evil, fraud, hypocrisy, injustice through the lips of his Beatrice, she attains manly eloquence, her dialectics is uncommon in a young girl. Her argument is subtle, she screams like Prometheus when he is bound, her imagination is as wide as the wings of an eagle of the Alps, but she no longer has the grace of the female word, which may also be sublime [...]. Shelley's Beatrice does not always have such divine measure, yet she especially has it in the most tragic and obscene scenes, when, one might say, she is more of a woman and more of a martyr. (Pratesi 1904: 639; my translation)

Like Shelley, De Bosis had a specific female type in mind when he began to work on his translation of *The Cenci*. In July 1819, Shelley had told Peacock that "The principal character Beatrice is precisely fitted for Miss O'Neill" (Shelley 1964: 102), the Irish actress who had gained fame for her interpretation of Shakespeare's Juliet. In 1818, however, Shelley had been particularly impressed by O'Neill's performance as Bianca in Henry Hart Milman's *Fazio: The Italian Wife* (1815), a tragedy set in Renaissance Italy. In a similar manner, De Bosis dedicates his work "To Eleonora Duse", whom he believed "Shelley would have elected as Beatrice". Known for her romantic involvement with the Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, who was to play a crucial role in the circulation and appreciation of Shelley's work in Italy, Duse was praised by notable playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. Particularly Hugo von Hofmannsthal describes Duse's acting technique in terms that sound fit for Shelley's Beatrice, remarking that her "fluttering, fine, half secret gestures of the body betray the quicksilver movements of the soul" (Fleischer 2007: 95). That De Bosis found in Eleonora Duse the Italian Beatrice further hints at the element of modernity he recognised in Shelley's work, just as the poet's fame was beginning to rise in Italy.

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NINETIES *LEAR*: NEO-JACOBEOAN ECHOES IN MARTIN  
CRIMP'S AND SARAH KANE'S "IN-YER-FACE" DRAMA

*Abstract*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* has inspired an extensive range of contemporary British rewritings, from Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) to Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1989). This article examines the impact of the tragedy on Martin Crimp's *The Treatment* (1993), a dark play set in "the Big Apple" whose scene of eye-gouging anticipated the horrors staged in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995). Rewriting the Bard, Crimp appropriates the metaphor of blindness and (in)sight and becomes a literary father for Kane.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare; *King Lear*; Martin Crimp; *The Treatment*; Sarah Kane; *Blasted*; appropriation; in-yer-face theatre.

*King Lear* – which, in R. A. Foakes's words, "stands like a colossus at the centre of Shakespeare's achievement as the grandest effort of his imagination" (Foakes [1997] 2009: 1) – has inspired a wide array of contemporary appropriations, including Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971), Joan Ure's *Something in It for Cordelia* (1971), Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987), Barrie Keeffe's *King of England* (1988), and Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1989). This article explores the influence of Shakespeare's work on Martin Crimp's *The Treatment* (1993), a city drama set in New York whose violent scene of eye-gouging anticipated the vast range of atrocities staged in Sarah Kane's notorious *Blasted* (1995). As I will show, through a complex web of Shakespearean references and echoes, Crimp rewrites the metaphor of blindness and (in)sight and, along with the Bard (and Beckett), becomes a literary father for the *enfant terrible* of British theatre.

In 1993, Stephen Daldry – the new artistic director of the Royal Court – programmed an American Season (significantly advertised as "Welcome to the Decade of Fear") which included the British premieres of Howard Korder's *Search and Destroy* (1990) and David Mamet's

*Oleanna* (1992). Interestingly, Daldry's project did not start with a play written by an American dramatist, but with Crimp's *The Treatment*, first performed at the Theatre Downstairs on 15 April 1993, under the direction of Lindsay Posner. Initially entitled *Playwright in New York (Broadway Boogie-Woogie)* (based on Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* and Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*), the play originated from a three-week trip as part of the Court exchange programme with New Dramatists, an American organisation promoting new writing. Before that stimulating experience in "the Big Apple" in 1991, Crimp was stuck in a creative impasse. As he declares in an interview: "New York was for me filled with a kind of terminal energy. [...] There is almost a sense that I have used New York as a convention, in the same way that certain Jacobean writers use Venice as a convention. They took their own decadence, sexual anxiety and violence and distanced it by setting it in Italy" (quoted in Sierz [2006] 2013: 38). The same kind of distress, sexual drive, (im)moral ambiguity, and violence intriguingly percolates through Crimp's *The Treatment*.

This dark and savage play tells the story of a young woman, Anne, who – after leaving her abusive husband Simon (an electrical engineer who used to tie her up and stick tape over her mouth) – meets two cynical film producers, Andrew and his wife Jennifer, interested in making a movie out of her story. Sucking her narrative like two vampires, these sinister and parasitic figures subjugate Anne to their needs and brainwash her into thinking that they are transforming her life into art. Clifford Webb, a middle-aged, derelict playwright who had a couple of Broadway hits in the 1950s and is now selling crockery in the street, is hired to adapt Anne's story and write the film script. In order to "experience" the "real" Anne, Clifford is invited to bear witness to a curt sexual intercourse between the unaware protagonist and Andrew. After that, a profoundly upset Anne asks her husband to avenge her by tearing out the voyeur's eyes with a fork. As Vicky Angelaki observes, Anne descends into the depths of depression, being "reduced to a soulless subject for a film that feeds on her life, but whose creators take many liberties, re-conceptualizing her into a different version of herself" (Angelaki 2012: 55). Even more humiliatingly, the main role in the film is played by the office assistant Nicky, who becomes the protagonist of Anne's story. The movie is launched, Anne has vanished and Andrew finds her gagged in the flat where she lived with Simon. He frees her, but Anne runs away and is (inadvertently?) shot dead by Jennifer.

In his review of the play, Michael Billington suggests that "[w]hat is extraordinary is the way Crimp combines a vivid portrait of

the labyrinthine strangeness of New York with a self-referential post-modernism" (Billington 1993: 434). In this light, displaying a stratified texture rich in dramatic echoes, *The Treatment* explores, appropriates, and rewrites the eye imagery of *King Lear* in fascinating ways. In an interview with Sierz, Crimp acknowledges his debt to Shakespeare:

As I was speeding through the play I grabbed a lot of stuff on the way. Because some scenes took place in the street, I thought of Jacobean tragedy. But the Shakespearean references come from a party I went to at New Dramatists. I remember an elderly writer telling me that his plays were continuously rejected because they were seen as old-fashioned, and I put his joke about Shakespeare into the play. Then I thought of Shakespeare in the Park, and of being blinded as in *King Lear*. The process went like that. I would catch an idea and run with it (quoted in Sierz [2006] 2013: 99).

The first (explicitly) Shakespearean element in this city drama is indeed the sixty-year-old playwright's joke about being considered *passé* by younger theatregoers and critics. This scene (the second one of the first act) is set in Canal Street, a major street in Lower Manhattan, where Clifford sells household goods to make a living. Anne's husband, Simon, observes the items and seems particularly interested in a fork, the same antique with which he will stab Clifford's eyes later in the play:

SIMON: How much is the fork?

CLIFFORD: I'll take five for the fork. I send out scripts. Once in a while I have a meeting with a young person like yourself who tells me my work is old-fashioned. I say to them that's also true of William Shakespeare (*He chuckles*). (Crimp 2000: 291)

After introducing his towering literary father through this seemingly unimportant reference, Crimp takes another step in the Shakespearean direction by incorporating a play-within-the-play into *The Treatment*: the second scene of the fifth act of *Othello* opens Act Two. Crimp's scene is set in Central Park: a naïve Anne, who does not want to go back with her husband, lies on the grass and tells Simon that she has shared her story with two film producers who are genuinely interested in her. She speaks without paying attention to two movie stars performing *Othello* outdoors, whose voices are amplified by throat mikes:

MOVIE STAR 1 (*as Othello*)

He, woman:  
 I say thy husband; dost understand the word?  
 My friend, thy husband – honest, honest Iago.

MOVIE STAR 2 (*as Emilia*)  
 If he say so, may his pernicious soul  
 Rot half a grain a day! He lies to th' heart.  
 She was too fond of her most filthy bargain.

MOVIE STAR 1  
 Ha!

MOVIE STAR 2  
 Do thy worst:  
 This deed of thine is no more worthy heaven  
 Than thou wast worthy her.

MOVIE STAR 1  
 Peace, you were best.

MOVIE STAR 2  
 Thou hast not half that power to do me harm  
 As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!  
 As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed –  
 I care not for thy sword; I'll make thee known,  
 Though I lost twenty lives. Help! help, ho! help!  
 The Moor hath kill'd my mistress! Murder! Murder! (Crimp 2000: 319-320).

Aptly, Crimp opts for the scene in which Emilia, Desdemona's maid, rebels against the male authority by threatening to denounce the murder of her mistress, without fearing Othello's sword. Through this play-within-the-play, Crimp juxtaposes Emilia's courageous stance with Anne's attempt to free herself from her domestic subjugation, inviting the audience to reflect on the transhistorical nature of gender oppression. Adopting (and adapting) this powerful dramatic technique, as Clara Escoda Agustí suggests, Crimp also intends "to involve spectators in a reflection regarding their own positions *as* spectators [...], thus encourag[ing] the real audience not to remain passive but, instead, like Emilia, to become positive, active witnesses with respect to the different types of (gender) violence present in their late capitalist context" (Escoda Agustí 2013: 68).

A few scenes later, Andrew seduces Anne in his Upper West Side apartment and Clifford – who needs a voyeuristic experience of reality to write a credible film script – watches their brutal sex act:

*Andrew shuts the door.*

*He approaches Anne who moves onto her back. She expects and is willing to have intercourse with him – but not at all prepared for the sudden brutality of it. Andrew penetrates her without any preliminaries.*

*He comes immediately, immediately lifts himself away and drops onto his back. Clifford appears in the room – not through the door, but from where he’s been standing in the shadows. He drags on a cigarette. (Crimp 2000: 334)*

Utterly humiliated and shocked, Anne meets her husband and asks him to help her to exact her revenge on a man who has seen too much. They reach the place where Clifford sells crockery and, like Regan and Cornwall in *Lear*, gouge out the eyes of the voyeur:

ANNE: DO IT.

SIMON (*matter of fact*): Revenge.

CLIFFORD: Listen, why don’t we –  
*Simon stabs the fork into Clifford’s eye.*

ANNE: TWIST IT.

*Simon twists the fork, lets it fall.*

The other eye. Simon!

*As Simon backs away Anne rushes forward and stabs the fork into Clifford’s other eye as he lies on the ground. Immediately a siren sounds. Simon and Anne run off. (Crimp 2000: 368-369)*

This climactic in-yer-face scene, so typical of the kind of theatre staged in Britain in the “Nasty Nineties”, rewrites Shakespeare’s tragedy and more generally appropriates and refashions a powerful motif – that of blinding – which, as Escoda Agustí observes, dates back to Sophocles’ tragic masterpiece *Oedipus the King* and “has become archetypal in Western literature”, representing “the punishment of vanity and self-aggrandizement” (Escoda Agustí 2013: 92).

This scene is highly reminiscent of *King Lear*, but the motifs of blindness and (in)sight permeate the drama throughout, becoming “the central metaphor in the surrealist scenes that frame the play”, as Heiner Zimmermann observes (2003: 72). Indeed, Crimp inserts a couple of (re)visionary specular scenes (the fourth of the first act and the very last one of the play), which stage a blind taxi driver who does not know where he is going and tries to orient himself in the urban jungle through

the indications of his frightened passengers. In Act One, after eating sushi with the couple of film producers, Anne takes a taxi and finds herself entrapped in this very Beckettian situation. After being initially scared to death, she starts trusting the driver's instincts and does not get out of the cab:

ANNE: Do you have a visual problem? Is your sight impaired? Are you blind?

DRIVER: I was *born* blind. [...]

ANNE (*intense panic*): *Oh fuck. Oh Jesus Christ.*

[...]

Let me out.

[...]

STOP THE CAB! LET ME OUT OF THIS CAB!

*Silence.*

*The taxi has stopped. Anne recovers her breath. Very slowly the driver turns his face towards her.*

DRIVER: Is this where you want to get out?

[...]

You have to tell me the fare. That's the situation here. One of trust. Some nights I have dreams about those drops. I dream that I can see. I dream about light which I have never seen.

ANNE: Just drive on. (Crimp 2000: 306-307)

As Billington notes, in the final scene of the play “the echo of *King Lear* comes full circle” (Billington 1993: 434). Here, Crimp stages the blind encounter between the taxi driver and the recently blinded Clifford, “*clutching a sheaf of papers*” which “*are swept away by a current of air*” (Crimp 2000: 386). The double blindness around which this episode revolves creates an even more absurdist *cul-de-sac*: the Gloucester-like figure is being driven nowhere by another man who cannot see:

DRIVER: Do I have a green / light?

CLIFFORD: Are you mocking me? I'm blind. *Look* at me.

DRIVER: I'm not mocking you.

CLIFFORD: OK.

DRIVER: Were you blind at birth?

CLIFFORD: No.

DRIVER: D'you have a *disease*?

CLIFFORD: I don't want to talk.

DRIVER: So I just / drive?

CLIFFORD: Just drive. Yes.

[...]

Where are we going?

DRIVER: I've no idea, Clifford. But isn't that one of the joys, one of the great joys of this city? (Crimp 2000: 387-389)

The powerful image of blindness exerts a profound impact also on Sarah Kane's most controversial piece. The sequence of graphic atrocities and the extremely innovative structure of *Blasted*, first presented at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995 under the direction of James Macdonald, left critics and audiences profoundly shocked and cast a long shadow over the writer's career and later reception. In fact, the plot of what Jack Tinker of the *Daily Mail* described as a "Disgusting Feast of Filth" (quoted in Sierz 2001: 94-95) is quite simple. Ian, a racist, sexist, and homophobic middle-aged tabloid journalist suffering from lung cancer, walks into a highly expensive hotel room in Leeds with his former lover Cate, a twenty-one-year-old woman who stutters when nervous and has seizures. Ian wants to have sex with Cate, but she resists him. Nevertheless, he rapes her during the night. Towards the end of Scene Two, a soldier gets into the room and suddenly a bomb blows the hotel apart. Before the violent explosion, Cate has escaped through the bathroom window. The reporter, who suddenly finds himself in a war zone, becomes the victim of a series of physical abuses: the soldier rapes him, then sucks his eyes out and eats them before shooting himself. Cate returns carrying a baby whom a woman has given to her and who soon dies. Ian masturbates, cries, hugs the soldier's dead body, exhumes the little corpse and eats it. Then Cate generously feeds him with the remaining food and he thanks her.

Originally conceived as the account of an abusive relationship, *Blasted* was profoundly influenced by the atrocities of the siege of Srebrenica and the subsequent violence suffered by thousands of people. *Blasted* was a long journey for Kane, who wrote different versions of the play. She was not aware of the impact of *King Lear* on her in-yer-face drama until after she finished the first draft:

Someone actually said to me after they read the first draft, 'Have you read *Lear*'? And then I read *Lear* and I thought there's something about blinding that is really theatrically powerful. And given also that Ian was a tabloid journalist I thought in a way it was a kind of castration, because obviously if you're a reporter your eyes are actually your main organ. So I thought rather than have him castrated, which felt melodramatic, I could go for a more kind of metaphorical castration. (quoted in Saunders 2004: 72)

Kane scholar Graham Saunders examines how the *enfant terrible* of contemporary British theatre rewrites the Bard's tragedy (Saunders 2004: 69-78). As he makes clear, the Shakespearean hypotext surfaces in its rewriting in various ways. As far as the setting and warfare are concerned, a parallel can be established between the vagueness of *Lear*'s locale and lack of background information on the civil war and Kane's choice to remove specific geo-cultural references in her final version and replace them with more general ones, in order "to universalise the play and generalise its politics" (Sierz 2010: 56). Both plays oscillate between the local and the universal, microcosm and macrocosm, personal acts of cruelty and large-scale violence and destruction, and both playwrights investigate themes such as misogyny and gender oppression.

Kane affirms that, for her, *Lear* is "a play about fatherhood" (quoted in Saunders 2004: 72). This becomes quite clear in *Blasted*, a piece peopled with "sinister or absent fathers" (Saunders 2004: 72): the perverse father-daughter relationship between Ian and Cate, rooted in obsession and co-dependence, epitomises the idea of dysfunctional fatherhood (and love) and, in a sense, echoes the exclusive relationship between Lear and Cordelia. Initially a racist, sexist, and homophobic man, in the second part of the play Ian turns into a vulnerable, needy, but very stoic character. The final scene of *Blasted*, Charles Spencer wrote on the occasion of the Court's revival in 2001, "is one of charity and desperate, courageous endurance that puts one in mind of *King Lear*" (Spencer 2001).

Ian's transition echoes Lear's and Gloucester's violent loss of patriarchal power and severe psychophysical distress. However, as Saunders points out, the Bard "neatly divides physical suffering and mental torment between Gloucester and Lear, whereas Kane makes Ian undergo both the blinding of Gloucester and the psychological disintegration of Lear" (Saunders 2004: 73). In Shakespeare, the blending of suffering and insight reaches its climax during the storm on the heath, in which Lear's authority crumbles under the weight of natural forces. Even if in the Nineties hypertext the outdoor location has been displaced and replaced by a Pinterian (hotel) room, the storm scene exerts a substantial impact on Kane's theatrical imagination: at the end of Scenes Three and Five rain pours down upon the blinded Ian, who is forced to face his own descent into hell. Moreover, it is worth noting that the title of Kane's play more or less consciously comes from Shakespeare's storm scene:

I knew it was about someone who got drunk a lot, so he [a man who script-edited the play] came out and I said, 'I'm going to call it *Blasted*'. It was only kind of when I was into about the fourth draft I suddenly thought, 'Of course, it's the blasted heath!' And by that time I was already reading *Lear*, and it was beginning to influence it, but it was just sheerly coincidental, but once that happened I thought that maybe there was some subconscious drive to rewrite that play. (quoted in Saunders 2004: 73-74)

As with the storm image, Kane includes a reworking of the scene set in Dover in her appropriation of *Lear*: "I struggled with Scene Four for a long time. It was a void in the play – I knew *something* went in there, I just couldn't think what. And then it dropped into my head. 'It's Ian's Dover Scene.' As straightforward as that. A blatant rewrite of Shakespeare" (quoted in Saunders 2004: 75). Here Kane re-imagines the encounter between Gloucester and Edgar by staging the blinded Ian asking Cate to kill him to put an end to his suffering.

The analysis of these two appropriations of Shakespeare's *King Lear* may benefit from some final reflections on the intertextual relation between Crimp and Kane. Remarkably, when asked about her favourite dramatist by Caroline Egan of the *Guardian* in 1998, Kane chose Crimp, a writer who had stimulated her to explore new theatrical territories:

Martin Crimp is one of a small number of living dramatists whose plays inspire me to push my own work in new directions. A lot of attention is focused on the more fashionable and inaccurately named New Brutalists because it's possible to sensationalize the content of their plays, but for sheer quality of writing I think Martin is one of the best. He's remorselessly unsentimental and has some very hard edges. His work doesn't scream for attention, but he's one of the few genuine formal innovators writing for the stage. He's constantly refining his language to find more accurate theatrical expression, marrying rhythm and skill with real beauty. His precision compels. (quoted in Saunders 2009: 49)

Indeed, Crimp's masterpiece *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) formally influenced Kane's last dramas, *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), which belong to what Eckart Voigts-Virchow describes as her "linguistic turn" (2010: 204). Even more relevantly, Sierz argues that the explicitly brutal images in Crimp's *The Treatment* (oral sex and eye-gouging) were an anticipation of in-yer-face sensibility and a source of inspiration for Kane and Ravenhill (Sierz 2013: 168). We should also remember that Crimp himself wrote a biting introduction to his *Plays Two* (2005) consisting of four prose pieces, one of which, entitled "When the Writer Kills Himself", presumably deals with Kane's suicide

and subsequent lionisation. Even if this satirical text is about a male playwright, Crimp's words implicitly refer to the young woman whose death prematurely ended her promising career.

The fact that Crimp also admires Kane throws into relief the reciprocal esteem between these key protagonists of contemporary British drama, who seem to share, among other features, a considerable dissatisfaction with naturalistic theatrical conventions, a purist attitude towards language, and a remarkable Shakespearean and Beckettian influence. Both playwrights, whose highly original (and deeply unsettling) output was regarded with suspicion in Britain and appreciated on the Continent, explore the darker sides of the human and the complexity – as well as the deepening crisis – of contemporary subjectivity by dis-membering and re-membering the work of their literary fathers.

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POST-HOLOCAUST SHYLOCKS: REWRITINGS AND  
APPROPRIATIONS OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

*Abstract*

In contemporary theatre, as in culture at large, the classics are updated, modernised, in order to free them from tradition and enhance their relevance. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries witness a number of revisions and rewritings of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, a work that has been challenged ideologically, critically, and historically, and treated more as a pretext than a pre-text. The essay will explore Maurice Schwartz's and George Tabori's post-Holocaust rewritings and appropriations of *The Merchant of Venice*, and in particular of the character of Shylock.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*; Shylock; Tabori; Schwartz.

In its stage history, *The Merchant of Venice* has been accused of anti-Semitism, and most of the adaptations and rewritings deal with the elimination of this anti-Semitism by inserting new parts or by changing the point of view of the play, from a Christian one to a Jewish one. The rewriting rises often as contraposition (ideological, critical, historical) to another text, as its revisitation, or merely as free creation departing from the source, which is treated more as a pretext than a pre-text. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries offer a variety of offshoots of *The Merchant of Venice*, ranging from sequels and prequels to updatings, revisions, and rewritings. Adaptations and rewritings are forms of interpretation, but "interpretation of a particular kind; their main objective is not so much to explain or elucidate as it is to stretch the texts in new directions, testing the resiliency of their characters and structure, and trying out alternative scenarios" (Rozett 1994: 7).

In post-Holocaust days a number of Jewish actors and directors have performed and staged the play emphasising Shylock's Jewishness and trying to erase with their own Jewishness the anti-Semitic features of

the character and to give him back his dignity. In this revision and rehabilitation of the character of Shylock, Shakespeare is on the one hand acquitted as great poet and, on the other hand, accused of having created a character who has helped to spread anti-Semitism: “his portrait served to crystallise and reinforce an anti-Semitic literary stereotype for centuries to come” (Wistrich 1991: 102). It is not by chance that *The Merchant of Venice* was the most performed Shakespearean play on the Nazi German stage. In 1933 alone more than twenty different performances were staged in Germany; between 1934 and 1940 *The Merchant of Venice* was staged two hundred and eighty-one times by fifty-two different theatre companies (Bonnell 2008: 225-26; Werch 1985; Bayerdörfer 2006). From this point of view, Shakespeare supposedly helped the spread of anti-Semitism, and, as Arnold Wesker affirms, provocatively and provokingly, he was even responsible for that common feeling that led to the Holocaust:

Shylock is meant to be a villain. He is also a Jewish villain. He did not have to be: Christians were money-lenders too, and the story would have worked perfectly well with a Christian villain ... he belongs, inescapably, to the history of anti-Semitism ... at no point does anyone (any other character) suggest that there might be a distinction to be drawn between his being a Jew and his being an obnoxious individual. The result is ugly ... the ground for the holocaust was well prepared. (Wesker 1993: 2)

The first attempt at a global revision of *The Merchant* from a Jewish point of view was Ari Ibn-Zahav’s novel, *Shailok ha-yehudi mi-venetsiyah* (1943).<sup>2</sup> Ibn-Zahav intended “to counter the Shakespearean image of Shylock as an avaricious, bloodthirsty, non-Christian Other” and to “undermine the very basis of Shakespeare’s views and rewrite the story to reflect a ‘truer’ approach to Jews” (Chaver 2011:28, 29). The novel was turned into a play by the Yiddish American actor and playwright Maurice Schwartz, *Shylock and His Daughter* (1947), who assumed that Shakespeare did not know Jewish culture and that Shylock should be presented not as a medieval character but as a real Jew. Before the war, Schwartz had performed Shylock in Vaudeville theatres, tailoring

<sup>1</sup> See also the polemics between RSC director David Thacker and Arnold Wesker on *The Merchant of Venice* 1994 RSC production (1994: 4).

<sup>2</sup> The novel was translated into Yiddish in 1947 with the title *Shylok un zan tokhter; a roman fun amol un its* (*Shylock and his daughter: a novel about past and present*), serialised on *The Morgen-Zhurnali* from 12 September 1947 through 22 February 1948. Its publication coincided with the premiere of its theatrical adaptation by Maurice Schwartz, on 29 September 1947. The novel was translated into English in 1948.

his interpretation of the Jew to the taste of the vaudeville audience. He saw Shylock as “a quiet, peace-loving Jew, whose mainstays in life are his learning and religion. The loyalty to the memory of his wife, the abounding love for his daughter and his inner dignity guided his life”. (Schwartz 1930). In order to humanise Shylock and to make him understandable, he thought that Shylock had to be divested “of the stinging avarice and the vituperative bitterness accorded him as a rule” (*Ibid*). After the war the world had changed drastically, and inevitably Shylock with it. After the Holocaust, how could a Jewish actor, director, or a theatre company, produce *The Merchant of Venice*? “If Shylock in any way contributed to the problem of anti-Semitism”, as Joe Berkowitz writes, “perhaps the best way to address that contribution would be to reinvent Shylock from a Jewish perspective” (Berkowitz 2002: 198).

In Schwartz’s adaptation, as in the novel, the character of Bassanio is removed, and Antonio has been married to Portia for fifteen years. Shylock is no more a usurer, now he owns a bank, is an eminent member of the Jewish community, and is engaged in rescuing the Jews condemned by the inquisition. Lorenzo, a broken aristocrat, is appointed Christian supervisor of Shylock’s bank. Jessica is tempted by no-Jewish culture and sees in Lorenzo the opportunity to fly from the ghetto. In order to marry her, Lorenzo plans to bribe Launcelot and Stephano, Shylock’s servants, to get Jessica out of the ghetto. Jessica, unlike her Shakespearean character, does not take her father’s money. Antonio borrows money from Shylock for Lorenzo, but, in a difference from Shakespeare’s version, Shylock offers the three thousand ducats without charging interest. Antonio insists upon Shylock’s usual terms, however, and the Jew inserts the point about the pound of flesh into the contract as a joke. When Antonio’s ships sink, he is brought to trial for the forfeit. Portia does not win the case, but Shylock realises that a Jew cannot shed blood:

For the martyrs put to death by Torquemada, for those buried alive in prison-graves, for those who died in the Inquisition flames, for all the innocent souls who have been tortured, strangled, drowned, slain by the sword, for the theft of our children’s souls, for the honor of Israel trampled in the dust by viciousness and brutality, I raise my hand in vengeance against one preacher of Christian love! (*Murmurs*) Do not weaken, shamed father and tormented Jew. Strike for your child, for your people. (*Drags himself, with last spurt of strength, to the cell-door. Grows erect, sinks, rises to full height. He is illuminated by the morning sun. Portia’s soft weeping is heard. Suddenly he lifts the scales high above his head, and speaks in measureless pain*). I cannot shed blood. I am a Jew! (Schwartz 1947:145)

At the end Shylock, evicted from the synagogue for having put in danger the Jewish community,<sup>3</sup> receives the news that Jessica, forbidden to come back to the ghetto after her conversion, has committed suicide:

MORRO: Father, our Jessica has returned to us! Forbidden to come back to her people, she drowned herself by the Ghetto-shore! (Schwartz 1947: 145-146)].

As in Shakespeare, Shylock does not have his bond. What saves Antonio is not Portia's ingenuity, but the Jew's mercy. The merchant and the Jew seem to have finally reconciled after four centuries. Shylock's last words are a response to death and tragedy: "I praise thee, God, for thy loving kindness. *Baruch dayan emet*" (Schwartz 1947: 146), "Blessed is the true judge". This traditionally evokes the blessing of "Blessed is the true judge", i.e. "Blessed are You, Lrd our Gd, King of the universe, the True Judge". Only those who underwent a tragedy (like Shylock) can use the full God's name. This is clearly anticipated by Shylock's words that open the last scene: "*Gam ki elech begei tzalmavet* – though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me" (Schwartz 1947: 143), the famous words from Psalm 23, that the Jewish teachers made the children sing in the concentration camps. So, Shylock's tragedy is not only Jessica's death, it is, in Schwartz's post-Holocaust perspective, also what occurred off-stage, the Holocaust.

The first attempt to re-conceptualise *The Merchant of Venice* after the Holocaust is George Tabori's *The Merchant of Venice as Performed in Theresienstadt*, staged at the Berkshire Theater Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1966. As the long title reveals, Tabori was influenced for the structure of his performance by Peter Brook's *Marat/Sade*, that opened the Theatre of Cruelty season at Stratford in 1964. Like Peter Weiss's play (*The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of Charenton*), Tabori's production is presented as a *play-within-the-play*, set in a concentration camp, with the inmates who are forced to play in front of a Nazi audience. As Michael Shapiro argues, "Tabori created a world and radically altered the text in order to highlight the potential Holocaust lurking at the heart of the

<sup>3</sup> "Rabbi. (*Approaches Duke*) Protector of justice, we have excommunicated the accused one. No Jew may stand within four cubits of him. His victory is not our victory. Let not his guilt fall on the heads of the Jews of Venice and Italy" (Schwartz 1947: 142).

play” (Shapiro 1966: 7). Anat Feinberg gives a vivid report of the opening of the performance:

The curtain strung on a wire across the slanted bare stage were filthy stained blankets with swastikas drawn along their lower edge. The few props used – prominent among them a large portrait of Hitler in the background – were illuminated by pitiless incandescent bulbs. The actors, some with shaved heads, wore striped prisoner’s uniforms, burlap sacks with armholes for coats... sheets for dresses. (Feinberg 1999: 12)

Before the beginning of the performance, “An emaciated being crawled out, then collapsed. Men and women prisoners gathered obediently, silently, onstage as the song Lili Marlene was heard. Nazi officers stormed in and took their seats in the front row while prisoners were carrying the sagging body away” (212-13). One of the most meaningful moment of the performance was Shylock’s speech “Hath not a Jew Eyes?”. Alvin Epstein interpreted it in a frantic way, tearing out his orange wig and throwing away his aquiline nose, both stereotype elements of the stage Jew and of Anti-Semite Nazi propaganda. Epstein remembers how Tabori got to this configuration of Shylock:

I worked out my performance with George in our workshops. We decided that the actor who played Shylock would play him as a caricature, since we, the prisoners, were forced to perform against our will; to do the caricature in an extreme way, so that the ridiculousness of the caricature would be apparent. When I ripped my false nose off I stood at the front of the stage, looking right into the audience, the Germans, so to speak. It was as if I were accusing them of the caricature.<sup>4</sup> which they forced me to play. The spirit that infused the performance was the double vision of Shylock: as a real human being and as a caricature.<sup>5</sup>

The performance ended abruptly with the trial scene. Portia, who for all the performance appeared aimless with a blank stare, as if she had been abused, reminds the audience of “the quality of mercy”, calling for justice. At this point, a Nazi officer irritated by her speech, climbs up onto the stage, replaces the Judge, and orders Shylock to kneel and beg forgiveness. Tabori had thought of two finales, both

<sup>4</sup> “Interview with Alvin Epstein”, quoted in Feinberg 2010: 59.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Warner Kraus’ depiction of the Jew in Vienna in 1943, who with a red wig, an aquiline nose, and a yellow shawl on a filthy black gown wanted to give “a pathological picture of the Eastern European Jew in all his internal and external dirtiness” (Horowitz 2007: 14).

performed at the premiere. The first was that referred by Viveca Lindfors, who played Portia: “the rest of the inmates, sensing their life and death is at stake, have entered the stage. [...] The Jew playing the Merchant looks around, then slowly goes down on his knees. But he is not alone for long. Portia, played by me, is the first to join him. One by one, the other inmates follow”. (Feinberg 1999: 213). The second finale, more violent, was suggested by the American director Arthur Penn. Suddenly, Shylock draws a knife, ready to cut the pound of flesh from the Nazi officer, and attacks him, but is killed by the prison guards (Feinberg 2010: 59). The prisoners, as they had done at the beginning of the performance, start crawling toward the front. After a sudden blackout, the lights come up again: piles of actor’s clothes are left on the stage, recalling the undressing area leading to the gas chamber.

Tabori radicalised this approach to *The Merchant* in *Ich wollte meine Tochter läge tot zu meinen Füßen und hätte die Juwelen in den Ohren. Improvisationen über Shakespeares Shylock* (Hereafter *Improvisations*), performed in Munich in 1978. In his introduction to the play, Tabori compares the end of Shakespeare’s heroes and heroine with Shylock’s, finding his last words outrageously banal:

At the end of the play Shylock is deprived of everything is worth living for, or, if you prefer, everything is worth dying for. The author, who seems to understand the Jewish character better than most of us who are here now, denies him even words of sympathy. To Othello, Lear, Hamlet, Cleopatra, Macbeth and to all the others, he gives the opportunity to meet their annihilation saying wonderful last words. Shylock says only he is not well. The banality of his exit is huge. (1979: 11)

Originally, Tabori wanted to stage the play in and around Dachau with the actors as prisoners. Both actors and audience would travel by bus from Munich to the camp, overtly evoking the journey of the Jews to the gas chambers. Actors and audience would be taken, by surprise, by SS troopers, who would divide them into groups, and stitch a yellow star on their coats. During the journey to Dachau scenes from the *Merchant of Venice* would be performed. Once in Dachau, the actors would perform scenes from the play in the barracks, under a constant menace of the Nazis. In the end, the audience had to go back to Munich, leaving the lonely Shylock just baptised. The authorities denied permission for the use of Dachau site, and the play was performed in a cellar, once used as boiler room in a factory. Tabori’s *Improvisations* consist of a prologue, seventeen scenes, and a final song following Shylock’s chris-

tening. The audience, entering the performing area, found on the stage a piano in the centre, a few plastic bags, scattered suitcases, and baskets full of clothes. Under the piano there was a pool of blood, that became bigger and bigger during the performance. From the heating wires a few badly dressed dolls hung; they had a suitcase and a yellow star stitched on their dresses. The actors were standing around the piano; suddenly one of them, the only one who did not play another character besides Shylock, jumped on the piano and started to sing *The Song of Shylock* in a vaudeville style. The song is taken from the Elizabethan ballad “Shewing the crueltie of Gernutus a Jew”<sup>6</sup>, that tells the same story of Shylock, presented as a wicked usurer. During the song, the other Shylocks set up a pantomime on the wicked Jew, crawling on the stage and among the audience: “they wear crooked noses, lick their lips greedily, grimacing and staring bloodthirstily into the eyes of the audience. They show the ‘Stürmer’ – caricature of Jews, as an anti-Semite would expect it” (Diedrich 2011: 148). The prologue ends with a reference to Shoah. Each actor takes a doll, which represents a Jewish prisoner, tears off her dress and the yellow star, tortures her, mutilates her, and, at random, throws a hand or a leg to the audience. What remains is placed under the piano, a clear allusion to the mass graves in the camps. Suddenly there is a blackout, Shylock enters with a lamp, looking for his daughter among the audience. He stumbles on heaps of clothes, shoes, and other objects, evoking the purloining of all the belongings of the Jews as they arrived in the camps. Shylock searches in the heaps and finds a ring and a piece of bloody meat, references to his most precious goods: his beloved wife Leha, and his daughter, his “blood and flesh” stolen by the Christians (see Orlandini 2008: 207).

The first six scenes follow Shakespeare’s plot, cutting all the Belmont scenes. The seventh scene is an interpolation from Heinz Hegger’s *The Men with a Pink Triangle* (1994), a vivid report of the violence against homosexuals in the camps. The scenes that follow continue the Shakespearean plot, with interpolations of lines from the fifth act into scenes 8 and 10. This second part opens with ‘The Night of the broken glass’, that resumes *The Merchant of Venice* 2.5.39-42; Shylock’s advice to Jessica before she leaves the house, and 2.6.27-40, Jessica’s elopement. Unlike Shakespeare’s version, here Jessica does not consent to the flight. Lorenzo attacks her, asking for the basket of jewels. When the basket is found it is shown to the audience: it is full of golden teeth,

<sup>6</sup> Tabori, who cuts twenty-nine quatrains out of forty-one, assigns the ballad to Samuel Pepys, as it was found in *Pepys Collection*. It is not clear if it precedes or follows *The Merchant of Venice*.

ducats, hair, evoking the very first moments in the camps where the Jews were shaved and all their goods stolen. The twelfth scene dramatises Shylock's desperation and rage when he discovers his daughter's flight, which in Shakespeare was told by Salanio in 2.7-14-22. The following scene represents the climax of the *Improvisations*; the Shylocks perform the Jews' rage and desperation over and over:

Shylock's outrage at Jessica's elopement was played thirteen times, by all thirteen actors in their individual interpretation, which transformed the scene alternately into slapstick, burlesque, tragedy, and so on. One actor expressed his grief in a low and subdued voice. Another maintained that Shylock's lamentation must have been louder so that he ran over the stage screaming and howling. A third actor was convinced that Shylock had spoken in dialect; a fourth imitated Fritz Kortner playing Shylock; a fifth transformed the scene into a musical. By staging a variety of re-enactments rather than giving a single coherent interpretation of either scene or role, Tabori underscored the bewildering array of possibilities that Shakespeare's Shylock has represented for every actor and director since the Holocaust. (Schülting 2017: 236)

Shylock's most famous speech is addressed not to Salarino and Solanio, but to Jessica, who has betrayed his Jewishness. Jessica looks like a prostitute who hugs and kisses her father. Shylock draws a knife, but he is stopped by the other actors. Slowly, he takes off his clothes and turns into the Duke for the trial scene, while another actor plays Shylock. The trial scene is the longest of the *Improvisations* and follows, with the cut of Bellario's letter (4.1.148-62) and some minor cuts, Shakespeare's 4.1 until line 190, when Shylock answers Portia's question, asked here by Balthazar, ("Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?", vv. 389-90): "I'm content".

The *Improvisations* end with Shylock's christening, where the Jew is turned into a Catholic Aryan. His hair and his complexion are lightened with powder and make-up, the rosary is put round his neck, and he is given the name of Antonio. During the christening a clarinet plays the theme of *Kol Nidre*, the prayer said three times at sun set for Yom Kippur eve. In the end, Shylock gets near the pianist who drapes his shoulders with the Tallith, the Jewish shawl for praying: "Shylock's forced assimilation was partly reversed, his identity as goy once more overwritten with Jewish religious identity, staging the victims' assertion of selfhood in the face of persecution" (Diedrich 2011: 150).

With the final song, all the actors take off their costumes, face the audience and ask “which side are you on?”, that of the executioner or that of the victim?

It's possible in the afternoon  
To play both books and preludes and fugues  
And spend the evening gassing Jews

It's possible in the summertime  
To write the bill of rights due to man  
And spend the winter skinning Indians

What kind of world is this  
Where monsters play in string quartets

And artists practice genocide  
And which side are you on

*All*

It's our world – welcome to it  
Where you been livin' up till now anyhow.  
Where you been livin' up till now anyhow, anyhow.  
It's our world, It's our world. (Tabori 1979: 84)

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WOOLF AT THE SCRIBLERUS CLUB, OR,  
ORLANDO MEETS THE AUGUSTANS

*Abstract*

In *Orlando* (1928), Virginia Woolf defines a potential path towards the renewal of biography, a path that, while moving away from tradition, maintains a strong bond with eighteenth-century culture. The paper considers how Woolf's engagement with this particular past articulates her modern point of view on life writing. I am most interested in those aspects of eighteenth-century culture that work subversively against the hierarchical and androcentric aspects of the Victorian biographical tradition. In particular, looking back at James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), Woolf seems to encourage a *form of "copartnership"* between Orlando's biographer and his/her elusive subject aimed at preserving human complexity and hybridity in biographical portrayals; moreover, the experimentalism of the Augustan female rake and Woolf's awareness of some early attempts at female self-representation inform her understanding of the place of women, as biographers and as subjects, within the English biographical tradition.

*Keywords:* Virginia Woolf; biography; genre; gender.

In March 1926, feeling Vita Sackville-West slip through her fingers<sup>1</sup>, Virginia Woolf wrote: "I wish you could live in my brain for a week. It is washed with the most violent waves of emotion... And you think it all fixed and settled. Do we then know nobody? – only our own versions of them, which, as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves" (Lee 1997: 485). In Woolf's mind, Vita lived as a restless, ambiguous woman, a challenging subject to any biographer and therefore the most

<sup>1</sup> Discussing the relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Hermione Lee underlines that, because they used "exaggerated versions of themselves" as "their routes to intimacy [...] they had many misunderstandings. Of all her close relationships, that with Vita made Virginia most aware of how little we know of the people we are closest to" (Lee 1997: 485).

fitting model for the protagonist of “a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando: Vita*; only with a change about from one sex to another” (Woolf [1953] 2012: 116).

The shape-shifting nature of the individual is at the heart of Woolf’s understanding of biography, a perpetual preoccupation and a constant presence in her life and career. As Leslie Stephen’s daughter, Woolf felt biography as an intimate and familiar presence, but her understanding of biography does not rely solely on the Victorian tradition. In fact, Woolf became a writer in a period of transition, in conversation with the eighteenth-century culture of change and experimentalism; as such, the Augustan culture shaped, in many ways, what Woolf often referred to as *new biography*, the result of her interest in a tradition from which she was excluded both as a biographer and as a biographical subject. In her diary entries, essays and novels, biography and fiction often overlap: Woolf uses biographical sketches and imaginary biographies to discuss her idea of fiction, while her fictional works – and *Orlando* itself – are nourished by experiments and insights on biography. Therefore, my purpose in this paper is to draw attention to some of the ways in which Woolf experiments and dramatises in *Orlando* some of her ideas on biography heavily indebted to eighteenth-century culture. As I shall discuss later, Woolf’s understanding of James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) informs the way in which she imagines the task of the twentieth-century biographer in relation to the biographical subject. Moreover, looking back to the Augustan female rake, Woolf envisions the renewal of the biographical genre as a gender revolution, and uses the eighteenth century as a fertile ground to depict the dawn of a new female biographical tradition.

Woolf’s distance from conventional ideas of biography implies scepticism towards the legacy of eighteenth-century culture. In her essay *The New Biography* (1927), she argues that “in the old days, the biographer chose the easier path” (Woolf 1958: 150), that is confronting biography either as an autopsy or a portrait (Lee 2009: 38f). Both analogies entail a hierarchical disparity between the biographer and the biographical subject. Such disparity is embodied by the gaze of the biographer, or rather the act of looking. The biographer as a medical examiner looks *down at* the biographical subject, imposing scientific criteria to formulate a coherent and rational depiction devoid of the subject’s inherent complexity; on the other hand, the biographer as a painter looks *up to* the biographical subject, producing a partial and idealised picture. Both paths lead to the erasure of hybridity, complexity and elusiveness, intrinsic human characteristics that, in Woolf’s view, the twentieth-centu-

ry biographer should preserve. Indeed, in the attempt to fulfil their duty to produce a truthful biographical account, early biographers believed that “the true life of [the] subject shows itself in action which is evident rather than in that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul” (Woolf 1958: 150).

In the same essay, Woolf mentions Boswell’s work as an early example of the blend of truth and personality that would make a biography successful and a biographical subject real: after having heard Johnson’s voice “booming out from Boswell’s page [...],” she writes, “all the draperies and decencies of biography fall to the ground. We can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality. Something has been liberated beside which all else seems cold and colourless” (1958: 150). Boswell’s success, it seems, lies in his disregard of the traditional hierarchy at the heart of the relationship between biographer and biographical subject: in spite of Boswell’s open admiration for Johnson and – consistent with his contemporaries, such as Roger North and Samuel Johnson himself – of his faith in authenticity and accuracy, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is neither an autopsy nor a portrait but, in H. Lee’s words, a *form of “copartnership”* (2009: 98), in which both Boswell and his subject appear as fickle, yet real entities. Despite its promising progenitor, Woolf notes, the Victorian biography preserved the hierarchical relation between the biographer and his subject, a “fossil [that] was once a living man” (1958: 151). As a consequence, the personality of the Victorian worthy subject, although present, remained trapped under an “amorphous mass” of words and “countless documents” (p. 151).

In *Orlando*, Woolf adopts the satirical vein that distinguished the Scriblerus Club’s social commentary to talk back to the Victorian biographical tradition, setting the tone of the “fight between the victims of the patriarchal system and the patriarchs, of the daughters against the fathers” (Woolf [1925] 2002: 61). Parodying the Victorian hierarchical approach, Woolf fosters the return of the form of copartnership adopted by Boswell and Johnson. Mocking the haughty attitude of her biographer, she describes Orlando as a subject “to look at” (Woolf [1928] 1993: 12). Woolf’s biographer approaches him/her both as a medical examiner and as a painter, “recording” (p. 12) Orlando’s life without invoking “the help of novelist or poet” (p. 12). As a painter s/he tries to immobilise Orlando in colourful sketches; as a pathologist, s/he tries to dissect and violate his/her subject: the “first duty of the biographer,” s/he writes, “is to plod [...] in the indelible footprints of truth; unnoticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump

into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads” (p. 47). However, Orlando is neither a dead body nor a still model, but shares Vita’s liveliness. As such, s/he resists the immobility imposed by the painter by becoming un-representable, as suggested by his/her shifting image captured in the illustrations Woolf included in the book. Similarly, Orlando resists the scientific approach of the medical examiner by breaching the laws of nature – s/he is genderless and ageless, in him/her “change is incessant, and change perhaps would never cease” (p. 124), his/her mind is a “phantasmagoria”, “a meeting place of dissemblables” (p. 125); nature made him/her “of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite” (p. 55). The biographer’s attempt at caging Orlando within the limits of biographical authenticity quickly fails – Orlando is in fact too authentic in his/her multiplicity to be biographically authentic.

Thus, in accordance with Woolf’s essays on biography, depicting Orlando would entail bringing the “granite-like solidity” of truth and the “rainbow-like intangibility” (Woolf 1958: 149) of personality together. Woolf admits that such “problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it” (p. 149). Discussing Harold Nicolson’s *Some People* (1927) as an exemplary, if imperfect instance of twentieth-century biographical writing, Woolf pinpoints an “inward change” (p. 152) caused by the alteration of the biographer’s point of view: “the author’s relation to his subject is different. [...] Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal” (p. 152). Therefore, according to Woolf, the new biographer ought to re-embrace Boswell’s approach to his subject: their relation should consist in the reversal of their “difference in size” (p. 151), that is the dissolution of the hierarchical distance between them. While the Victorian biographical subject is an unapproachable, “above life size” (p. 151) example of unreachable goodness, Dr Johnson is real and his voice audible because Boswell freed himself “from a servitude which is now seen to be intolerable,” so that “we may sit, even with the great and good, over the table and talk” (p. 150). Following Boswell’s example, the new biographer shall enter his own narration, not as a pathologist or a painter, but as an equal, so that his size may match the one of his subject.

At first, the presence of the biographer in *Orlando* cannot be seen as a co-partnership, but as a necessity produced by the subject’s subversive attitude. In Woolf’s mocking tone, the biographer shares with the reader his/her difficulties in either looking down or up to Orlando. At the same time, the biographer is used as a tool to parodically depict the old biographical tradition and to experiment with the figure of the new biographer. In Woolf’s mind, the biographer should be “as much the subject

of his own irony and observation” (Woolf 1958: 153) as his subject; indeed, in any successful twentieth-century biography, “we realize that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author. Each of the supposed subjects holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection” (p. 153f) of the biographer him/herself. And, as Orlando observes Boswell and Johnson having tea together, a change in the biographer’s attitude takes place. Such change may be described as the gradual disappearance of the biographer, whose voice becomes decreasingly loud and intrusive until, in the twentieth century, it fades into silence. The disappearance of the biographer can also be envisaged as a consequence of the biographer’s and Orlando’s downsized dimensions, or as the gradual breakdown of the biographical hierarchy: the biographer slowly ceases to be a *chronicler* and becomes Orlando’s equal, not looking *at* her but *with* her, sharing her point of view and reaching that “queer amalgamation” (Woolf 1958: p. 155) of fact and fiction, truth and personality, granite and rainbow<sup>2</sup> that, in Woolf’s opinion, makes successful biographical portrayals, such as Boswell’s Dr Johnson<sup>3</sup>, memorable and real.

Discussing the way Woolf engaged with the contemporary debate on biographical writing, Hermione Lee argued that, to Woolf, the revolution of biography was primarily sexual, so that thinking about genre would be equivalent to reflecting on gender<sup>4</sup>. Woolf was aware that, despite its inward change, the biographer’s gaze, as well as the biographical tradition, remained predominantly male and, therefore, exclusionary. As a consequence, women and the female body remained inert objects of male scrutiny and were not allowed self-representation. In *Orlando*, Woolf charts the exclusion of women from the English biographical tradition, both as biographers and as biographical subjects.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf explores the relation between fact and fiction in twentieth-century biography, underlying the biographer’s difficulty in finding an adequate method to balance such opposing concepts; referring to Harold Nicolson’s *Some People*, Woolf points out that we still cannot “name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow. His method still remains to be discovered. But Mr Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction, of Lord Curzon’s trousers and Miss Plimsoll’s nose, waves his hand in a possible direction” (Woolf 1958: 155).

<sup>3</sup> Comparing Lytton Strachey’s successful portrayal of Queen Victoria to his less successful *Elizabeth and Essex*, Woolf writes: “In time to come Lytton Strachey’s Queen Victoria will be Queen Victoria, just as Boswell’s Johnson is now Dr Johnson. The other versions will fade and disappear” (Woolf [1942] 1974).

<sup>4</sup> 5th Annual Conference on Biography – “Writing Writers’ Lives”. Hermione Lee in conversation with Gary Giddins. The Graduate Center, CUNY, 18 March 2013.

“He”, *Orlando* begins, “for there could be no doubt of his sex [...] was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor” (Woolf [1928] 1993: 11). But, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, in a startling turn of events, Orlando becomes a woman. At once, Lady of Purity, Lady of Chastity and Lady of Modesty (p. 95) enter the stage and try to hide Orlando’s nakedness, persuading her to join the “tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness” (p. 97). Orlando resists them and stands “upright in complete nakedness before us”, so that “we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (p. 97).

The Augustan setting that forms the background to Orlando’s transformation is not incidental. In fact, the eighteenth century provided Woolf with a series of early models of female self-representation, the fragile beginnings of a female biographical tradition that Woolf herself was trying to promote among her readership and friends. In an article for the *TLS*, Woolf blew the dust off Laetitia Pilkington’s forgotten *Memoirs* (1748); Mrs. Pilkington is “shady, shifty, adventurous”, yet her work is imbued with tradition, so that she still feels that “it is her duty to entertain; it is her instinct to conceal” (Woolf [1938] 2002: 72). Together with writers such as Constantia Phillips, Jeanne de la Motte and Harriette Wilson, Pilkington was part of a group of eighteenth-century women of letters – often described as *female rakes* – who “took the liberty to unshackle themselves from men and to inscribe themselves as the subjects of their own riveting narratives” (Cryle and O’Connell 2003: 10f). In their confessional biographies and memoirs, they represented the ambiguity of their condition. On the one hand, they tended to surpass the categories of gender and genre, to show their, as it were, female masculinity and to present themselves as political and legal subjects, claiming their “rights of citizenship in the public spheres of print culture and the law” (p. 100). On the other hand, while a male rake’s libertinage was a source of public popularity and “enlightened self-possession” (p. 11), a female rake could not use her sexuality to establish herself as an enlightened subject, a “wit” of her time, and was expected to undertake a moral journey of punishment and redemption. Exceeding the limits of gender, female rakes provided the reader with textual self-representations that, while indulging social constructs, denounced their arbitrariness, thus promoting a culture of dissent, moral and ethical experimentalism (Cryle and O’Connell 2003).

As an eighteenth-century woman of letters, Orlando embodies the figure of the female rake: she had an adventurous life; “lovers she had in plenty” (Woolf [1928] 1993: 137), both men and women; she breached the categories of gender, as “she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another” (p. 153). As a re-

sult, “the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally” (p. 153). Orlando also experienced the exclusionary homosocial nature of eighteenth-century society – she was excluded from the conversation of the coffeehouses and settled for serving tea to the members of the Scriblerus Club. Moreover, a passage from Addison’s *Spectator* dealing with female clothing, followed by a reference to Pope’s *Epistle to a Lady: Of the Characters of Women* (1743) and Lord Chesterfield’s whispered comment on women’s lowly nature highlight Orlando’s subordinate position as a passive topic of conversation. After all, “a woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding” (p. 148).

Orlando finds refuge in Nell, Prue, Prue Kitty and Kitty Rose, a group of prostitutes making a “society of their own of which they now elected her as a member” (p. 152). Their society is antithetical to what they call “the society of the other sex” (p. 151); yet, they share an intimate atmosphere that connects their room in Gerrard Street to the coffeehouse. Moreover, the prostitutes’ “comfort with their bodies and their sexuality provides an opportunity for Woolf to imagine a crucial advantage of free discourse” (Fernald 2006: 107). Behind closed doors, they talk about their bodies, female desire and sexuality, but “not a word of it gets into print” (Woolf [1928] 1993: 152). When Nell tells her story, Orlando perceives that “this poor girl’s talk, larded though it was with the commonest expressions of the street corners, tasted like wine after the fine phrases she had been used to” (p. 151). The prostitutes’ talk eventually turns them and Orlando into potential writers and commentators, “social critics whose marginal status grants them freedom to move about the city, observing its customs and structures of power” (Fernald 2006: 108).

In conclusion, the eighteenth century is a landmark Woolf returns to as she evaluates the history of English biography, moving away from the legacy of her father as well as the Victorian tradition, and acknowledging the changes pertaining to twentieth-century biographies, such as H. Nicolson’s *Some People* (1927), L. Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* (1921) and *Eminent Victorians* (1918). In *Orlando*, Woolf dramatises her thoughts on the *new biography*, specifically the need for contemporary biographers to exceed the limits of hierarchy and gender. Drawing from Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, she depicts and parodies the biographer’s path towards the delicate balance between fact and

fiction that, in her opinion, forms the essence of the new biographical subject. Moreover, by depicting Orlando as a female rake, Woolf highlights the importance of the rake's experimentalism in the elaboration of new means and methods of female representation that would allow women to legitimately enter the English biographical tradition.

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*THE GAP OF TIME: THE CREATIVE CYCLE OF A STORY*

*Abstract*

Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Gap of Time*, a re-writing of Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale*, brings to the fore the function of Time as a means to repair the mistakes and losses in an individual's past. Shakespeare's characters and events are re-created in a totally new narrative which comes to its end in a rather sudden way, leaving questions open and, above all, with the assertion that stories can be resumed and re-written anew in an endless process of literary creation. Interestingly, in the end Winterson leaves her role as narrator and speaks to her readers in the first person both to confess her own personal involvement in the story and her identification, since she herself was a foundling, with Perdita, and to offer her comments as literary critic not only on *The Winter's Tale* but on other plays by Shakespeare where the themes of time and forgiveness are particularly relevant. The conclusion is, again, more personal and autobiographical, offering Winterson's meditation on her own reality, the reality of life, and the power of love.

*Keywords:* Winterson; Shakespeare; *The Winter's Tale*; Time.

The process of literary writing, with its power of transformation, can be seen as a fascinating, endless journey both in relation to the intrinsic, material act of writing, and in its metamorphoses through time as a result of the various perspectives and critical approaches of ever new readers in different historical periods. Indeed, the literary text continues its 'performance', renewing itself continuously through both new interpretations suggested by the 'structures of feeling' of individual historical moments, and through re-writings by different authors<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This aspect is discussed, in its different perspectives, by Agostino Lombardo in *Il testo e la sua "performance"* (Lombardo 1986).

A recent example is the novel by Jeanette Winterson, *The Gap of Time* (2015), a contemporary version of Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale* (1613), which, in its turn, is a dramatisation of *Pandosto* (1588), a narrative writing by Robert Greene – a case, therefore, of a text 'travelling' through time (from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to our days) and through literary genres (from narrative, to drama, to narrative again) with its images, characters and ideas.

By choosing *The Gap of Time* as a title, Winterson brings to the fore a major concern recurring in her work: the function of time, the crossing of temporal boundaries, the opportunity offered by the passing of time to repair an initial chaos with the restoration, after separations and scatterings, of renewed harmonies. The opening lines of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* – "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past" – reverberate in Winterson's idea of time as she herself declares in an interview in which she defines *Sexing the Cherry*, one of her first novels (1989), as "a meditation on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*" and explains that "time is one of the things that I'm obsessed with... What it is, how it affects us, how it moves through us, how we move through it. And so I took that poem as a starting point to explore".<sup>2</sup> Time, a keyword and a major issue in *The Gap of Time*, plays a predominant role both in Shakespeare's romance and in *Pandosto*, providing an opportunity for personal growth and repentance, the recovery of a lost harmony, and the opening up to new futures.

*Pandosto*'s subtitle, "The Triumph of Time", announces that Time, in the end, will bring the revelation of truth and the happy ending (though the ending is not completely 'happy' in Greene's story). After a short dedication to the Earl of Cumberland, George Clifford, in which, like in a dramatic prologue, Greene admits his own limits and faults but asks for the reader's patience and tolerance, the text proper starts with a new title, "The History of Dorastus and Fawnia", thus specifying the names of the two young protagonists of the second part of the story (Florizel and Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*).

The narration also opens with a sort of prologue, in which Greene indicates the "infectious sore of jealousy" as the crux from which the story moves: "Pandosto, furiously incensed by causeless jealousy, procured the death of his most loving and loyal wife and his own endless sorrow and misery" (Greene 1987: 155). Then the text proceeds in a plain narration of the events, which correspond closely to the first three acts of Shakespeare's play, the major differences being in the charac-

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Jeanette Winterson, Windrush, 14 September 2002 (Estor 2004).

ters' names, in the reversal of the two kingdoms as Pandosto (Leontes in Shakespeare) is King of Bohemia, and Egistus (Polixenes) king of Sicily, and in the prologue, which Shakespeare entrusts to a dialogue between two gentlemen, describing the happy and loving atmosphere at Leontes's court with the presence of his old friend Polixenes, although the reassuring words soon prove to be wrong as, immediately after, the warm friendship between Polixenes and Leontes's wife Hermione generates an unreasonable, furious feeling of jealousy in the king of Sicily.

The second part of Greene's tale proceeds with the narration of the story of Dorastus and Fawnia; indeed, Greene simply informs his readers that he is now "leaving him [Pandosto] to his dolorous passions" (p. 173) – and soon the story concentrates on Fawnia, grown up into a beautiful and gifted young woman, and her complicated love relationship with Prince Dorastus, son of Egistus, King of Sicily. In *The Winter's Tale* the change of time and place, from Leontes in Sicily to Florizel and Perdita in Bohemia, is explained by the figure of Chorus/Time, a dramatic device which not only marks the shift from tragedy to comedy, but stresses the importance of the function of Time<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Leontes is left behind, off stage, and he is given time for repentance while the comic-pastoral events unfold and lead the story towards the final renewed harmony.

A major difference between the two texts relates to the ending. Pandosto, unaware that Fawnia is his daughter, is openly attracted to her and tries to separate her from Dorastus by imprisoning the young prince. When Dorastus's father, Pandosto's old friend Egistus, arrives and the truth is discovered, Pandosto kills himself for having caused his wife's death and for his shameful, though unconscious, incestuous desire for his daughter. Greene thus chooses to end his narration with an emphasis on the tragic dimension, as the final words openly specify:

Pandosto, calling to mind how first he betrayed his friend Egistus, how his jealousy was the cause of Bellaria's death, that contrary to the law of nature he had lusted after his own daughter, moved with these desperate thoughts he fell in a melancholy fit and, to close up the comedy with a tragical stratagem, he slew himself [...]. (p. 204)

<sup>3</sup> "[...] Leontes leaving, / Th' effects of his fond jealousies so grieving / That he shuts up himself, imagine me, / Gentle spectators, that I now may be / In fair Bohemia, and remember well / I mentioned a son o' th' king's, which Florizel / I now name to you; and with speed so pace / To speak of Perdita, now grown in grace / Equal with wond'ring." (Shakespeare 1990: IV.ii.17-25)

On the contrary, Leontes's incestuous attraction to his daughter is only hinted at, and, in the final scene, Hermione is brought back to life with a powerful *coup de théâtre*, so that the happy ending is complete and the tragedy of the first three acts is partly softened. Indeed, in all his romances, although problems and ambiguities are never fully solved, Shakespeare seems to move from tragedy to an idea of hope and rebirth, perhaps as a result of an emerging confidence in the possibility of a new Renaissance around Princess Elizabeth's court<sup>4</sup>.

Jeanette Winterson's contemporary version of the Shakespearean play seems to suggest, with its very title, *The Gap of Time*, that a story can be readapted, after a gap of four hundred years, and made successful for a totally different kind of audience, in a totally new re-creation, proposing an original creative (though faithful) reading of a story. Indeed, although the events of Shakespeare's play are reproduced quite closely, Winterson creates a totally new narrative by supplying her characters with rich backstories, and transplanting the action from the fantasy kingdoms of Sicily and Bohemia to contemporary London and to an American city in the deep south reminiscent of New Orleans.

*The Gap of Time* opens with a section entitled "The Original", three pages in which Winterson briefly summarises *The Winter's Tale* (openly recalled in the subtitle, "*The Winter's Tale* retold") and concludes:

The end of the play, without explanation or warning or psychological interpretation, throws all the characters forward into a new life. What they will make of it is left to 'the gap of time'. (Winterson 2016: xvi)

A page with the title "The Cover Version" follows; the novel is then divided into three parts, which are separated, in turn, by a couple of pages indicated as "Interval", thus adapting the traditional drama division into acts to the narrative structure.

Winterson reverses the order of the story, beginning with a flash-forward of the deserted newborn Perdita's finding. The opening words of the novel – "I saw the strangest sight tonight" (p. 5) – are spoken/thought by a black piano player, Shep (Shepherd in Shakespeare), who is returning home late at night, promising, with these words, a tale of marvels.

The first, short chapter is all narrated in the first person by Shep and the reader slowly puts together the scraps of a story: there is heavy rain,

<sup>4</sup> Frances A. Yates, among other critics, examines Shakespeare's romances through this historicist perspective (Yates 1975).

though not “Hurricane Katrina” (p. 7) – a reference which sets the story in recent times and places it in the southern United States. Then his son, Clo (Clown in Shakespeare), picks him up in a car but they soon see “a black BMW6 Series” (another reference to contemporary reality) with the doors open and two men beating someone to death.

Father and son stop by a hospital where there is a lit baby hatch, sign that a baby has been left to her fate, and Shep thinks that somehow it is “all connected – the BMW, [...], the dead man, the baby” (p. 8). Here Winterson openly declares that she is using a film technique for her narration as she describes Shep’s moving towards the hatch, his body “in slow motion” (p. 8).

Shep thinks that the little baby is a sort of gift for him – “It’s as though I’ve been given a life for the one I took. That feels like forgiveness to me” (p. 15); indeed, he had suffocated his wife when, close to death, she was in too much pain, and his words “I don’t regret it but I can’t forgive it. I did the right thing but it was wrong” (p. 12) resound as another reference to contemporary life and the current debate on euthanasia. Shep’s feeling that the baby gives him a new life “for the one I took” echoes Shepherd’s words to his son Clown in *The Winter’s Tale* – “thou met’st with things dying, I with things new-born” (III.iii.107-8) – words which underline the change of perspective and of dramatic genre in the play: the tragedy of the first part is over and rebirth is now the main theme. On the contrary, Winterson’s readers are still unaware of the past tragical events which are narrated only in chapter two.

Winterson thus re-creates the old story by placing it in a new time, a new place, and, above all, by giving all possible details to make the readers feel that they are reading a totally new contemporary story. Indeed, if it weren’t for the subtitle and Winterson’s initial comments on *The Winter’s Tale*, it would take quite some time before a reader would realise that it is a re-writing of the Shakespearean romance.

Winterson then resumes the order of the story in chapter 2, and presents Leo Kaiser (Leontes), a successful London manager, head of a financial enterprise he called “Sicilia because he liked that it sounded just a little bit Mafia. He was Italian on his mother’s side” (p. 23) – a reference to the cliché connecting Sicily to Mafia and jealousy.

When he first appears in the story, he is already in the grip of a devastating feeling of jealousy towards his wife, MiMi (Hermione Delannet, a French-American singer, daughter of a Russian diplomat – another reference to Shakespeare’s Hermione, daughter of the emperor of Russia). He believes she is having an affair with his best friend Xeno (short for Polixenes) with whom, as teenagers, Leo had been in a short homosexual relationship.

Soon Leo loses control of his jealousy: he first gets an employee, Cameron (Camillo), to install a hidden webcam in his wife's bedroom, and misinterprets all he sees to fit his darkest fantasies; then he tries to run Xeno over with his car; finally, he rapes his pregnant wife who, after the violence is over, gives birth to a little girl with the help of Pauline, Leo's assistant. Pauline is the only person who has always been able to face Leo's difficult personality, and, even on this occasion, after some time she persuades him to undergo a DNA test (Delphi's oracle in Shakespeare) in order to make sure of his paternity. However, Leo kidnaps Perdita (so called from the title of a song her mother has written for her), and asks his gardener, Tony Gonzales, to take her to New Bohemia in the States, and deliver her to Xeno whom he believes to be the baby's true father.

The last chapter of Part I describes again the opening scene of Tony Gonzales's assassination by the BMW men in New Bohemia, after he has safely left the little girl in the hospital baby hatch, thus making this first part of the story come full circle (Anthony Gonzales, being the "cover" of Antigonus who, in Shakespeare's play, dies "pursued by a bear" after having abandoned little Perdita).

The second part is set in New Bohemia, several years later. It is springtime and Perdita, a lovely young woman, is organising a party for her father's (Shep) 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. The young Zel (short for Florizel), Xeno's son, in love with Perdita, goes to Shep's party where Xeno turns up totally unexpectedly. He happens to mention Tony Gonzales and the baby he was supposed to deliver to him, so the story of how Perdita was found comes to light.

It is important to say that Xeno is a US-based writer of computer games by profession, and, since the beginning of the story, has been working on a video game called "The Gap of Time", in which the final target is to find a baby girl who has been lost, as he explains to Leo at the beginning:

'The story is this: the most important thing in the world is lost [...]'  
 'What is it?'  
 Xeno shrugged. 'You have to find that out [...] I think it's a baby [...]'  
 'So where is the baby?'  
 'Growing up somewhere unknown, hidden. You have to find her [...]' (p. 38)

[...] There are different levels in the game, of course. At level 4 Time becomes a player [Time/Chorus appears in *The Winter's Tale* at the opening of Act 4!]. Time can stand still, move faster, slow down. But you are playing against Time too. That's what it's called – "The Gap of Time" (p. 39).

Later in the story, when Perdita and Zel visit Xeno at his place, he is playing the computer game and explains it to Perdita, also mentioning Leo and specifying that, though at a distance, they have been playing that game against each other for many years – “We keep in touch that way” (p. 207).

In the third part of the novel, Winterson’s narration suddenly becomes hasty and rather cursory, often leaving questions open as to the structure and the plausibility of the chain of many unexpected events. Like Shakespeare, she has concentrated more on Leo’s story so, as she approaches the ending, it is as if she feels constrained to complete her rewriting of Shakespeare’s story without making any further effort to rely on her creative invention; rather, she simply adapts the ending of *The Winter’s Tale* to her own story, making the necessary changes to avoid incongruity.

In the final part, all the characters are brought together in London where the expected agnition and reunion scenes take place. In the ending a party is organised in a theatre and MiMi, having spent the intervening time as a recluse in Paris, suddenly appears on stage, standing still like a statue; before singing, she finally says: “This song is for my daughter. It’s called ‘Perdita’” (p. 284).

The story ends with a very short paragraph:

Leo stood up, went into the aisle. From somewhere in the theatre Xeno came and stood beside him. He put his arm round Leo. Leo was crying now, long tears of rain.

That which is lost is found. (p. 284)

The story comes full circle and, in these last words, the words of Delphi’s oracle in Shakespeare – “[...] and the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found” – reverberate.

This ending leaves the readers somewhat in suspense as to what will ensue, allowing them freedom to imagine/write their own details of the characters’ words and actions; however, with no interruption (there is not even an extra space on the page), Winterson continues:

So we leave them now, in the theatre, with the music. I was sitting at the back, waiting to see what would happen, and now I’m out on the street in the summer night, the rain tracing my face. (p. 284)

So Winterson suddenly comes to the fore, leaving her role as narrator and speaking in the first person. Here, she seems to be stating that there

is no end to creative writing. Her initial comment on the ending of *The Winter's Tale* – “The end of the play, without explanation or warning or psychological interpretation, throws all the characters forward into a new life. What they will make of it is left to ‘the gap of time’” – reverberates in her final words: narration could be resumed by yet another writer who could create a new story starting from where this one ends. Indeed, this is true also for *The Winter's Tale*, as, in the first place, the idea of an endless narration is implicit in the very nature of its being a play whose text is meant to be repeated in its different and diverse stage productions; moreover, Shakespeare concludes his romance with the words:

[...] Good Paulina,  
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand, and answer to his part  
Perform'd in this wide gap of time, since first  
We were dissever'd: hastily lead away. (V.iii.151-55)

Shakespeare, too, is underlining that this story will be re-told over and over again, by different narrators, from different perspectives, and that the process of creative writing/narrating is in continuous progress. In *The Winter's Tale* much remains unexplained, and the spectators are forced to pose questions to which they have to find answers of their own. Similarly, Winterson's novel leaves many empty spaces and ends just as the possibility of reconciliation has opened, so that the reader is left to imagine what may follow and write his/her own ending of the story.

In the final moments of the novel Winterson breaks the fourth wall, as it were, to tell us how much Shakespeare's play means to her – she was a ‘foundling’ herself, so the story of a child lost and found has particular personal resonance:

I wrote this cover version because the play has been a private text for me for more than thirty years. [...]  
It's a play about a foundling. And I am. It's a play about forgiveness and a world of possible futures – and how forgiveness and the future are tied together in both directions. Time is reversible. (pp. 284-85)

There follow four pages of meditation on Shakespeare's late writings (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*) and their concern with forgiveness, their preoccupation with time and the possibility that it might be reversed, and their

insistence, particularly in *The Winter's Tale*, that redemption can flow out of stillness:

Hermione does the thing most difficult to do to right a wrong situation:  
nothing.

Nothing is the key word of the play. Leontes's demented speech on the supposed adultery contains its own answer, but he can't hear it:

Is whispering nothing?  
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?  
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career  
Of laughter with a sigh? – a note infallible  
Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?  
Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?  
Hours minutes, noon midnight? And all eyes  
Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,  
That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?  
Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,  
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,  
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings  
If this be nothing. (I.ii.387-99) (pp. 287-88)

Is this insistence on “Nothing” to be considered as another expression of a “gap”, of a discontinuity not only in literary discourse but in our life? Is this sudden role change, from the narrator to the literary critic, to be seen as a device to shock the reader who, like the author, is sitting in the theatre enjoying the show, waiting for more action, and is suddenly forced to get out of the novel and move into an essay of literary criticism? Is Winterson, by crossing the border between literature and criticism, somehow suggesting that the process of creative writing is the result of a conscious, critical meditation and that every ending has to provoke a further process of critical reflection? Is Winterson engaging her readers in a critical reading so that they are not only emotionally involved but also intellectually challenged? Perhaps there is an easier technical answer and this ending is simply a way to enclose the narration within a critical frame, creating a parallel to the opening pages of summary and critical comments on *The Winter's Tale* and thus giving the novel a more balanced structure. Surely, one would normally expect the initial pages to be printed as a Preface and the last four pages as an Appendix. But no. They are there, as an opening and a conclusion totally separated from the story itself. Moreover, the very last page moves towards yet another different dimension of writing, standing as

a final paragraph with its own title, “Perdita”, becoming more personal and autobiographical (Perdita, like Winterson, was lost and found) with Winterson’s meditation on her own reality and the reality of life made of everyday activities (“We have to go to work, have children, make homes, make dinner, make love [...]”, [p. 289]), ending with a note about the power of love:

Love. The size of it. The scale of it. Unimaginable. Vast. Your love for me. My love for you. Our love for one another. Real. Yes. Though I find my way by flashlight in the dark, I am witness and evidence of what I know: this love.

The atom and jot of my span. (p. 289)

To conclude, going back to the narrative proper, “Winterson’s tale” reconstructs the story of *The Winter’s Tale* organising the literary discourse along new spatial and temporal dimensions, creating a narrative which turns round those universal feelings and values (jealousy, love, friendship, forgiveness, etc.) that were already at the centre of the previous narrations, at the same time giving details as to locations, objects, actions and facts that make it a contemporary story where readers can recognise their own worlds. Another example of how literature is a representation, interpretation, projection of our life, of our feelings, of our ways of being.

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“IN THE GARB OF ANCIENT GREECE”: LATE-VICTORIAN  
WOMEN POETS AND THE GENDERING OF CLASSICISM

*Abstract*

When Augusta Webster (1837-1894) published the dramatic monologue *Medea* (1870) the first college for women in Cambridge – namely Girton – had been open for hardly a year. She could not attend university, but like Amy Levy (1861-1889) she decided to engage herself in the study of Latin and Greek. At the time Classics as a discipline was undergoing a process of redefinition which had started in the 1860s and was to continue in the following decades. Between the 1870s and the 1890s Victorian women who pursued an intellectual career in the classics had to contend with a double prejudice. The first concerned the supposed weakness of the female mind, which would prevent them from attaining ‘serious’ knowledge; moreover, a second specific limitation impinged upon their access to classical education, for it was widely regarded as an exclusively male field. Augusta Webster and Amy Levy approached ancient philosophy and literature – especially Greek – in a controversial period of transition, when Antiquity was becoming a site of contention between a male dominated centre and cultural margins. Their poetical revisionism testifies to late-Victorian women’s “movement *into* the classical tradition” (Olverson 2010: 17) and their creative rewriting of it from a (proto-) feminist perspective.

*Keywords:* Victorian women poets; Hellenism; myth; gender.

*Victorian women, universities and the classics*

The establishment of the first colleges at the end of the 1860s and the early 1870s (Girton and Newnham were founded in 1869 and 1871 respectively) opened up new educational opportunities although such a change proved slow and difficult, since it had to face deeply-engrained assumptions about women’s intellectual faculties. In 1878, when the University of London permitted female students to sit examinations, Augusta Webster wrote a cautiously enthusiastic article for *The Ex-*

*aminer*, where she celebrated the news as “the repeal of the women’s mental disabilities acts, a Magna Charta authorizing them to possess abilities and to train them” (Webster 1879: 95), while warning the readers that socio-cultural transformation had but just begun. Three years later, Amy Levy left Cambridge without sitting her final examinations, apparently because of ill health or depression, along with a growing uneasiness about her identity as Jewish *and* a woman at Newnham<sup>1</sup>.

What their example shows is late-Victorian women’s controversial relationship with culture and above all with Classics as a compelling field of study, not least because of the difficulties it entailed in terms of access and dedication, so that finally learning Greek was celebrated as “the glorious reward of perseverance” (Hurst 2006: 106). Aware of their exclusion from the cultural centre, Webster and Levy at once resisted and exploited their marginality by means of an active engagement with Hellenism, thus exposing its underlying gender politics. Nonetheless, they also knew that the transformation they were promoting might prove painful and perhaps not even desirable. That is what Levy seemed to hint in an article for *The Woman’s World* in 1888: “it is not for me to rejoice over, or to deplore, the complete and rapid change of the female position which has taken place in this country during the last few years” (Levy 1888: 367). There was a price to pay for intellectual ambitions, as the undergirding tensions of women’s poetry testify: the uneasiness of the pioneer suggested by Webster’s ambiguous commitment to ancient languages, and Levy’s ambivalence towards scholarly education, besides a perpetual sense of division between conflicting ideas of womanhood.

The status of the woman of letters at the end of the century is tellingly represented in a 1894 cartoon which appeared in *Punch*, called ‘Donna Quixote’. The spectacled lady in the foreground, a typical bluestocking, is emblematic of a widespread distrust in the female mental faculties, naturally shallow and therefore, as the caption reads, capable of retaining only a heap of “disorderly notions picked out from books”. Despite the parodic intent, what the image throws into relief is how the learned woman at the fin de siècle was still regarded as a threat to cultural hegemony and socio-political order. The new classicist, in particular, an educated female with an unusual erudition, was seen as a disturbing figure, as revealed by another *Punch* cartoon: “Valentine’s Day at Girton” (1876) depicts two young ladies at Girton, quoting from *Antigone* while smoking and reading a love letter from a male colleague. The scene

<sup>1</sup> “She was not yet entirely at peace with the transformation of female subjectivity that she associated with the university experience” (Hunt Beckman 2000: 93).

suggests how the mastery of Greek language was held as a mark of distinction granting access to the cultural *élite*; while also alluding to the unsettling potential of that knowledge in the hands of women such as these two self-reliant Girtonians. The recurrence of “sweet girl graduates” in the popular press testifies to the ambivalent perspective on the female classical pioneers: fascinating, yet constantly commented upon, despised if they failed, and sneered at if they succeeded as well. That was the case, for instance, of Agnata Ramsay, who in 1887 won top first class marks in the Classical Tripos and to whom *Punch* dedicated a cartoon ironically celebrating her exceptional achievement.

Most importantly, underlying these caricatures is a heated debate around gender roles, which at the end of the century is inextricably linked with current scientific theories of evolution and growing concerns about degeneration. Educated women were thought to contribute to an impending regression which was the counterpart of progress, because they contravened to a natural and therefore immutable order. By the 1890s an authoritative body of scientific studies not only supported a biologically grounded disproportion in the size and power of male and female brain, but also validated the equivalence between cultivated women and virility, seeing their intellectual activity as a deviation from their functions that could also entail sterility. In commenting on women at university, Grant Allen confirmed the current belief in the unhealthiness of education and mentioned Amy Levy – who committed suicide in 1889 – among the victims of Newnham College: “a few hundred pallid little Amy Levys sacrificed on the way [...] Newnham has slain its thousands and Girton its tens of thousands” (Grant Allen 1890: 56).

In this context, it is no surprise that Levy left Cambridge before completing her final year; nor is it a coincidence that Webster should have felt the need to justify her commitment to classical studies, reinstating her traditional role of respectable wife and mother. That is what she wrote to John Stuart Blackie, a professor of Greek at the university of Edinburgh, in 1870:

You are very right in considering my excursions into Greek authors *flirtations*, that is just what they are as yet, for I mean to set to work at some schoolboy drudgery in a little while and so put some thing more like a foundation under my *guesswork scholarship*. [...] I taught myself as a girl at home *what little I know* [...] and with no advisor and what might nearly be called no books [...] My being able to make out the meaning of a poet [...] comes from a rather remarkable gift of *good guessing*, and my being able to retain confidence in my interpretation so made comes from my having a *husband* who has learned good Greek in good University earnest [...] I have

been telling him ever since we were married that it is high time for him to take me in hand and give me a sound classical education [...] *Housekeeper's duties* and a little daughter to attend to and all the many social taxes on a married lady's time leave little room for any steady study. (Fiske 2011: 475f, emphasis mine)

What emerges from this passage is Webster's attempt at underrating her intellectual ambitions; her comments can be read in the light of the unsettled status of women's relationship to culture in the nineteenth century: as Dorothy Mermin has pointed out, their commitment to it should be in some way justified and reframed so as to appear "self-less in intent, self-effacing in execution, never interfering with domesticity, and if possible guided by a man" (Mermin 1993: 16). Webster's knowledge of Greek was indeed much more than the mere 'flirtations' with the language she claimed in the letter. In fact, by 1870 she had already published most of her classical work, namely two widely acclaimed translations and her poetical revisions of ancient myth. She was one of the first Victorian self-taught classicists: poet and translator, she actually stole ancient Greek from her brother's books, envying his educational opportunities as "the invalid envies the healthy person" (Webster 1879: 102). In 1866 she translated Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and in 1868 Euripides' *Medea*. Two years later, she created her own version of the tragic heroine, as well as of Homer's Circe, before attempting the tragic genre herself with *In A Day* (1882) and *The Sentence* (1887) set in ancient Greece and imperial Rome respectively. Despite a wide-ranging knowledge of the classics and a full confidence in her methods of translating Greek, when she completed her English translation of *Prometheus Bound*, Webster asked her husband to write a preface so as to assure the readers that he had looked after his wife's work: "my wife wished for some better guarantee of accuracy than a lady's name could give" he concludes (Webster 1866: 5). For all her learning, the translator thought that such a 'guarantee' was necessary before her book came out.

Webster is an illuminating example of women's ambivalence towards Greek studies; at the fin de siècle, the new classicists, such as Jane Ellen Harrison, started to work as scholars, teachers and lecturers, as well as publishing books and articles, yet still aware of their status of minority. First and foremost, they had to dismantle current ideas regarding their field of study, since Latin and Greek were part of the endowments of the gentleman, the required disciplines for those who were destined to leading professions. Above all, Hellenism stood as the epitome of a

masculine cultural heritage, that is a set of socio-political, artistic and philosophical principles which could serve as a model for the present.

However, as some recent studies have underlined (Prins 1999; Hurst 2006; Fiske 2008; Evangelista 2009; Olverson 2010), by the last decades of the century, Antiquity was a gendered discourse, and a site of contention in the intertwined debates around femininity, aestheticism and evolution, a cultural arena where popular and academic culture coalesced. In their ambivalent reception of classical tradition, mainly Greek, between resistance and reverence, women writers and scholars both exploited and contributed to the popularization of Hellenism and reinforced the link between the past and the present from an alternative point of view. Not unlike Walter Pater, they saw the unsettling potential of myth, and turned to a remote time and place where gender assumptions could be safely questioned. The fascination of the ancient world largely stemmed from its very exclusiveness, that is its cultural relevance in late-Victorian Britain: “the point was not utility. It was access to culture and power” (Mermin 1993: 77).

### *Greek heroines, Victorian women*

The relationship between Victorian women writers and Greek Antiquity has been defined heretical (Fiske: 2008) and dark (Olverson: 2010) because, from a female and proto-feminist perspective, it *did* imply a daring going beyond the feminine sphere. The appropriation and revision of a male tradition from a different angle cast a shadow over what was widely seen as a realm of ‘sweetness and light’, of moral and aesthetic perfection while throwing into relief the irrational Dionysian sides of the Greek world. Thus Hellenism conveyed an idea of independence of thought, freedom of choice and liberating rebellion against cultural stagnation.

Webster and Levy offer a fascinating example of this new, revisionist perspective on ancient Greece, giving expression to its silenced and darkest sides while creatively incorporating late-Victorian concerns about gender, society, and science. Furthermore, they reframe the tragic events in new dramatic forms which have been alternatively defined dramatic monologues, duologues, monodramas and closet dramas (Brown 1995; Rigg 2001). In this respect, their rewriting of *Medea* is particularly significant, for she is perhaps *the* most notorious heroine of Greek tragedy.

By 1870, when Webster published *Medea in Athens*, in *Portraits and Other Poems*, the Euripidean heroine had replaced Antigone as the dominant Greek tragic figure in British theatre and since mid-centu-

ry she had come to embody fraught issues within Victorian society in plays as diverse as Ernest Legouvé's *Medea* and Robert Brough's *The Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband* (both performed in 1856). In the course of the 1870s and 1880s, she would inspire popular painters like Frederick Sandys, Valentine Prinseps and Evelyn De Morgan. Both Webster and Levy were well aware of Medea's socio-cultural resonances and fully acquainted with the V century BC version: if Webster, as seen before, had translated it into English in 1868, Levy explicitly refers to the Athenian playwright in the subtitle of her drama, "A Fragment after Euripides", published in 1884. Euripides' heroine unsettled Victorian audiences with her violence, bringing to the fore thorny issues about femininity, while pointing to the disruptive potential of an oppressive patriarchal system which prized acquiescence and passivity. Previous studies (Hall, Macintosh, Taplin 2000; Hall and Macintosh 2005; Fiske 2008; 2011) have pointed to the multiple imbrications between nineteenth-century rewritings of tragic characters and coeval legislation on marriage and divorce. In the history of Victorian Medeas, Webster and Levy's versions can be regarded as the final stage of a process of de-spectacularization of the female criminal, whereby the focus of attention gradually shifted from the sensational curiosity for the depraved woman of whom Medea stood as a prototype, to the representation of a complex subjectivity with deep thoughts and feelings, strong will, and vehement passions. Although "off-staged" (Fiske 2008: 49), namely not meant for the theatre, these late-Victorian speakers paved the way for later theatrical Medeas who would overtly embody the militant New Woman, like Sarah Bernhardt's 1898 interpretation or Gilbert Murray's pro-suffrage version at The Savoy in 1907. It is no coincidence, therefore, that both Webster's and Levy's dramas do not dwell on the slaughter of innocent victims; rather, they lay emphasis on the female subject: a betrayed lover, a forgotten wife, an ostracised stranger and eventually a desperate mother. What Medea's cruel deeds bring to the fore is Jason's guilt as well as the weight of a social system blinded by prejudice, thus they call into question the very foundations of patriarchal hegemony.

*Medea in Athens* is set after a series of crimes committed by the speaker, culminating with the murder of her own children. She has now left Corinth and married king Ægeus. The drama revolves around the protagonist's quest for identity that above all involves Medea's relationship with Jason, still a haunting presence in her mind. The poem is divided into three parts corresponding to three 'dialogues' of the heroine with her former husband: the man's voice is mediated by the woman's, who also interprets his actions from her perspective. The confrontation

with Jason is engendered by the news of his sudden death and takes place in Medea's imagination:

Dead is he? Yes, our stranger guest said dead –  
 Said it by noonday, when it seemed a thing  
 Most natural and so indifferent  
 As if the tale ran that a while ago  
 There died a man I talked with a chance hour  
 When he by chance was near me. (*Medea in Athens*, ll. 1-6)

While she claims that Jason's absence is indifferent to her, she is nonetheless aware that, so far, he has functioned as the pivotal point of her existence: "Can he be dead? It were so strange a world with him not in it (l. 32). Medea's reliance on her former lover – so that even her second marriage was chiefly meant as a revenge against him – is a hint at women's utter dependence on men, a crucial issue for Webster. *Portraits*, in particular, presents the reader with both ancient and modern speakers, thus highlighting the relevance of the past in offering at once a model and a warning for the present. What is at stake is not only female cultural and socio-political roles in society, but also and most importantly the very existence of a *natural* womanhood, an idea which was increasingly theorised as well as attacked from the 1870s on. In this respect, the figure of Medea held a particular significance, for she had been a most controversial heroine since Euripides' time. *Medea in Athens* carves out a portrait of a complex subjectivity, torn between a dark past and an unsettled present, not only a victim, but also a murderer and now a seemingly happy wife with Ægeus. The violent events of Corinth and the restless acquiescence in Athens both hint at the disruptive potential of a betrayed woman who is denied self-expression and autonomy. In her unbending resolution, the Victorian tragic figure echoes her Greek predecessor, whose Nurse says, in Webster's own translation, "I dread her lest she plot some burst / For she's high-stomached, nor will tamely bear / Wrongs put on her" (Webster 1868, ll. 35-37).

In Levy's *Medea* (1884), which looks back to Webster, the violent potential of socio-cultural exclusion and domestic oppression is embodied in the white marbles of Corinth, that signify hostility and exile for the dark-skinned alien from Colchis. This 1884 version, included in the collection *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, underlines Medea's ethnicity, her status of outsider in a foreign city. More crucially, Levy draws attention to the way society constructs and (mis)-interprets the female subject by juxtaposing different voices in the form of closet drama. She revives the function of the Greek chorus in the characters

of two Corinthians, Ægeus and Nikias, observing from a distance and commenting on the events. Unlike Euripides' chorus of women, these men do not sympathise with the heroine. On the contrary, they approve of Jason's behaviour and praise his choice of a fairer bride:

NIKIAS I, in this thing, do hold our Jason wise:

Kreon is mighty; Glauké very fair.

ÆGEUS An 'twere for that – the Colchian's fair enough.

NIKIAS I like not your swart skins and purple hair;

Your black, fierce eyes where the brows meet across.

By all the gods! When yonder Colchian

Fixes me with her strange and sudden gaze,

Each hair upon my body stands erect!

Zeus, 'tis a very tiger, and as mute!

ÆGEUS 'Tis certain that the woman's something strange.

NIKIAS Gods, spare me your strange women, so say I.

Give me gold hair, lithe limbs and gracious smiles,

And spare the strangeness.

ÆGEUS I do marvel much

How she will bear the tidings (Medea, ll. 62-76)

At this point of the drama Medea has not yet learned of Jason's plans, that is his intended marriage with Glauké. The news will precipitate the events, so that at the end of the first Scene, the heroine prophesises "a horror and a horror in this land; / Woe upon woe, red blood and biting flame" (ll. 247-248). The second Scene begins with the news of the slaughter spreading through the city: Medea has killed Glauké and Kreon and has eventually slain her two children. The word "horror" (l. 253 and l. 256) connects the first with the second Scene, in a disturbing hint at the latent violence of oppression and the underlying sexual double standards.

As in Webster's version, what emerges from the account of Medea's revenge is Jason's responsibility: *he* is the real anti-hero. If Webster emphasises Jason's corruption by means of an inversion of the Lamia trope, so that it is him who wreaks ruin to the innocent Colchian, Levy presents a more direct confrontation between husband and wife, stressing Medea's unbending will. Hence an imbalance of moral standards comes to the fore, for the murderer has at least a moral stance, while Jason acts out of sheer calculation: "[he] coldly calculates, / And measures pain and pleasure, loss and gain" (*Medea*, ll. 58-59). Even the loss of their children is paradoxically less painful to the father than to the mother who has slain them. Her actions are less the result of mere

cunning and perversity than the outcome of a long suffering and stifling rage. Levy's Medea is not the monstrous madwoman described by the Corinthians, but "a woman – sick and sore with pain" (l. 135).

Overall, Levy's mythical revisionism aims at exposing how society constructs and construes the Other – be it woman or foreigner or minor poet – and especially how that results in socio-cultural exclusion. At the core of her poetry is the tension between centre and margin, where women are always represented on the threshold, reaching out of their proper sphere. It is no coincidence, then, that her Medea is reproached by Jason for standing "beyond the threshold" (*Medea*, l. 87) and that her first Greek heroine, Xantippe, defies male authority crossing that very same boundary between private and public space.

The dramatic monologue *Xantippe* was written in 1878 and later published in the collection *Xantippe and Other Verse* (1881). It retells the traditional story of Socrates' wife from *her* point of view, interrogating gender binaries precisely in terms of inclusion / exclusion from philosophical debates and historical accounts. Tradition had always presented Xantippe as the prototypical shrew, vexing her husband, the stern philosopher who tolerates her with patience. However, her own version of the facts had never been recorded, as James Thomson ('B.V.'), Levy's favourite poet, lamented in "A Word for Xantippe" (1866): "would that she had left her own statement of the case" (Thomson 1881: 224). In giving voice to the silenced part, Levy conveys a thought-provoking picture of the Greek world, where Socrates and Plato lose their aura of grandeur and sexual double standards emerge. The drama enacts an unsettling "play with reputations" (Hetherington and Valman 2010: 119) which casts doubts on the Socrates-Xantippe relationship, as well as on the Athenian philosophers of the V century BC.

In the first scenes of the poem, Xantippe is sitting at the window and staring at the sea, imagining her future life in terms of gaining experience and knowledge:

I and my *high thoughts*, and my golden dreams,  
 My soul which yearned for *knowledge*, for a tongue  
 That should proclaim the stately mysteries  
 Of this fair world, and of the holy gods. (*Xantippe*, ll. 37- 40, emphasis mine)

In a sunny Mediterranean setting the beautiful maiden anticipates the bliss of "great wisdom" (l. 102) to come. Disillusionment is however in wait, for her father has betrothed her to the most famous philosopher in Athens, Socrates. After some years of married life, it becomes clear that

the elderly sage will never share his knowledge with her, on account of women's supposed weaker mind. Hence Xantippe wastes her time at home, until she finally decides to defy her husband's authority. The rebellion takes place in the garden, where she glimpses Socrates and his friends and happens to overhear their discussion. They are talking about women and she longs to be admitted in the symposium:

Then sudden, *stepping from* my leafy screen,  
 Holding the swelling wine-skin o'er my head,  
 With breast that heaved, and eyes and cheeks aflame,  
 Lit by a fury and a thought, *I spake*:  
 'By all great powers around us! can it be  
 That we poor women are empirical?' (*Xantippe*, ll. 177-182, emphasis mine)

This is a key scene, because Xantippe, significantly on the threshold and behind a "leafy screen", at once transgresses spatial boundaries and breaks the ideal of feminine acquiescence. Even though the rebellion brings about no substantial change in the *oikos*, the heroine's revolt undermines Socrates' authority from within.

Her attempt to grasp men's wisdom parallels late-Victorian women's movement towards the classics: difficult, not always successful, and still reserved to a lucky minority, as Webster and Levy knew all too well. By dramatising ancient heroines, they destabilised current theories around femininity, defined in terms of passivity and lack of rational control, a series of unavoidable limitations which eventually justified the separate spheres ideology. In this perspective, classical figures provided a model for the present and allowed women poets to tackle controversial topics, safely draped "in the garb of ancient Greece" (New 1993: 508).

For all their different strategies, Webster and Levy offer an example of how Antiquity could be appropriated and creatively reused to suggest the instability of conventional gender roles that deny women a voice and leading roles in society and culture. In rewriting ancient myth, they dismantle sexual binaries exposing their inherent fragility as cultural constructs, resisting widespread ideas of a biological unchanging natural femininity.

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TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM  
A CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY PERSPECTIVE:  
*FUTURE LEARN* E-LEARNING COURSE ON *SHAKESPEARE*:  
*PRINT AND PERFORMANCE*

*Abstract*

Chaos and Complexity Theory has interesting applicability to the teaching of literature because it puts an end to cause-and-effect models, linear predictability and atomistic approaches to knowledge, replacing them with organic and holistic visions based on relations within interconnected networks. The most straightforward application of the Chaos and Complexity Theory in education is related to the use of new technologies that enable distance learning through access to digital platforms. Thanks to innovative teaching instruments such as videoconferences, chats, forums, blogs, wiki, repositories for essays sharing and so on, e-learning can help to give adequate space to the metacognitive needs of “digital natives”. *Future Learn* is an on-line platform that offers four free on-line Shakespeare courses to both university teachers and students. All the courses provide a variety of stimuli from video-lessons and documentaries to chats, forums and web-bibliographies and give a final certificate if all steps are completed successfully. One of the four *Future Learn* courses, *Shakespeare: Print and Performance* (4 weeks, 2 hours per week), will be analysed in detail with regard to both its internal organisation and to the learning strategies used to create a stimulating virtual environment where many of the applications of the Chaos and Complexity Theory in education find a practical realisation.

*Keywords:* Chaos and Complexity Theory; e-learning; education; literature teaching.

*Chaos and Complexity Theory in Education*

Chaos Theory and Complexity Theory, collectively known as non-linear dynamics or dynamical systems theory, provide a mathematical framework for thinking about change over time. Chaos

Theory seeks an understanding of simple systems that may change in a sudden, unexpected and irregular way. Complexity Theory focuses on complex non-linear systems involving numerous interacting parts, which often give rise to unexpected order. The framework that encompasses both theories is one of non-linear interaction between variables that give rise to not easily predictable outcomes (Kauffman 1995, Lewin 1993, Waldrop 1992).

Adopting a scientific approach based on the Chaos and Complexity Theory principles, and regarding the characteristics of complex non-linear systems, literature in general, and its genres and sub-genres in particular, can be analysed and introduced as complex systems. Literature can be considered dynamic because its manifestations change over place and time. Moreover, almost all literary texts enjoy a kind of semantic and stylistic complexity that implies unpredictability within a linear pattern. Like all complex systems, literature does not aim at consistency or equilibrium, but rather it is open and susceptible to interpretation. The very essence of literature is in fact in this continuous research of meaning which cannot be found once and forever and in its always being open to various viewpoints and interpretations (Mansoor and Ayoub 2015).

In addition to providing a framework for describing the essence of literature, Chaos and Complexity Theory can offer interesting insights into what concerns the way literature should be taught, especially in the light of the most recent pedagogical research. Although the Chaos and Complexity Theory is on the rise in the spheres of the natural sciences, anthropology and economics, it is still very much a new entry in the world of education. Notwithstanding this, its applicability and potential contribution to education is very interesting. Educational systems, institutions and practices exhibit many features of complex adaptive systems, being dynamical and emergent, sometimes unpredictable, non-linear organizations operating in changing external environments. These systems, institutions and practices shape the environments they are part of and this process occurs through learning, adaptation and development (Osberg and Biesta 2010, Tosey 2006).

But Chaos and Complexity Theory is first and foremost a practical tool for understanding and developing teaching practices because it puts an end to cause-and-effect models, linear predictability and atomistic approaches to knowledge, replacing them with organic and holistic visions based on relations within interconnected networks. Connectedness requires a distributed knowledge system where knowledge is not centrally located. From this point of view the lecture, as the most common teaching modality where provision or 'delivery' of content and

structure for students to engage with is perceived as the central part of teaching, is substituted or at least integrated by bottom-up approaches in which students actively participate and give their contribution to the lesson. Flipped classrooms, discussion sessions, cooperative techniques make students protagonists of learning under the guidance of the teacher and enable them to develop a critical attitude to knowledge. Consequently communication and collaboration become key elements in the application of the Chaos and Complexity Theory to education. Recent pedagogical research emphasises that learning comes through a negotiation of meaning and so it is very important that students have the opportunity of interacting among them and with the teacher, and not simply listen to lessons. This is also very useful for giving and receiving adequate feedback, since the teacher cannot predict what every single student will exactly understand and learners, on their part, continuously need clarifications and explanations for which the last ten minutes of the lesson may not suffice. Moreover, since the brain is a networked organ, the Chaos and Complexity Theory emphasises a connectedness between emotions and academic learning. Creating a relaxed atmosphere where everyone is free to express his opinion, encouraging human relations inside the classroom and stimulating a personal response to literary texts before analysing them, are important starting points to let new ideas and information penetrate deeply into students' minds (Davis and Sumara 2000). For all those reasons, in its application in the educational field the Chaos and Complexity Theory is child of the post-modern age because it emphasises the very strict link between emotions and academic learning, the student's self-organizational ability and the use of collaborative and cooperative strategies in the classroom (Doll 1989, Cillier 1998).

But perhaps the most straightforward application of the Chaos and Complexity Theory in education is related to the use of new technologies that enable distance learning through access to digital platforms. E-learning can give rise to a learning community that tends to avoid individual study and to improve group relations. Thanks to innovative teaching instruments such as videoconferences, chats, forums, blogs, wiki, repositories for essays sharing and so on, e-learning can help to give adequate space to the metacognitive needs of what Prensky defines as "digital natives", who prefer visual communication (images or videos) to the written page, have a reticular learning style and view knowledge as unitary and not sectorial. An emerging group of young people, termed the global "net-generation", is in fact adopting remarkably similar learning approaches, which are characterized as integrated and multi-faceted, constructivist and chaotic. In contrast to the formal

school setting where learning is linear, structured and controlled, for the “net-generation”, learning is often incidental and a sense of “fun” is of paramount importance. Most importantly, for them learning is often linked to the World Wide Web, that opened the way for people to communicate via computers across the globe (Jakubowics 2006).

The World Wide Web had an immense impact on how people communicate, learn and share information so that nowadays many current digital information communications technologies (ICTs), including the internet, have become integral tools in the pedagogical process. The main features of these technologies are: integration of multimedia, flexibility of use, connectivity and interactivity. As it is easy to notice, these features have an enormous educational potential. The integration of multimedia is essential to stimulate different learning styles and to make the lesson a more interesting and diversified experience. Flexibility of use determines the fact that participants to courses are more autonomous in organising the time to be devoted to their study since web platforms are asynchronous and so it is not necessary to be connected when all the others are. This way students develop their self-organisational abilities in a context with no fixed schedules or deadlines. Connectivity assures the possibility through chats and forums to have access to everything the rest of the class have shared and to contact all the other participants at any time.

But perhaps the most important feature to be related to Chaos and Complexity Theory is interactivity as the interaction of individual elements into a wider environment which, in turn, influences the individual units of the network; they co-evolve, shaping each other (Wenger 1998). The concept of ‘interactivity’ is in fact the key to communication in an on-line environment and it takes place among diverse participants because the relation can be student/student, teacher/student, student/outside expert. This favours group learning and co-operation in learning environments that determine deep and achieving approaches to learning. In contrast to surface learning, where there is a great amount of material to be learned and this material will be tested on an examination, deep learning is not associated with time pressure, examination stress, and the use of test items that emphasise low-level cognitive outcomes. On the contrary, students are encouraged to interact with other students, to do task-based learning and the assessment requires them to understand the principles rather than reproduce facts and figures. Interactivity implies continuous feedback that balances the fact that learning is characterized by non-linearity and unpredictability: “although we may be able to predict that certain types of events or ideas may rise, we cannot predict the specific content or outcome” (Bloom 2001: 23).

### *On-line literature courses: Future Learn's Shakespeare: Print and Performance*

A very interesting example of all this can be found in the many on-line courses of literature that populate the World Wide Web. A current Google research with the phrase "online literature learning" produced over 165 million links which have some combination of those three words. In regard to this massive information available on the internet a word of caution is in order because not all of the links are relevant or useful. It is up to the researcher then to establish which links are worthwhile pursuing and propose them to students who, exposed to quality sites, will more easily recognize them in the future (Phelps 2003).

Among the many offers present on the internet, *Future Learn* is a digital platform created by the University of Birmingham, the University of Warwick and King's College London that proposes high quality free on-line literature and creative writing courses to both university teachers and students, who can improve their writing skills and learn more about literary greats such as Austen, Shakespeare, Burns, Wordsworth, Wilde and many others. All the courses provide a variety of stimuli from video-lessons and documentaries to chats, forums and web-bibliographies and give a final certificate if all steps are completed successfully. They are designed to be easily accessible and discoverable also because of the many links to the best of the web. In order to create an engaging and enjoyable experience, articles, broadcasting, games and social media are selected by the course convenors and used to stimulate students.

But the main aim of the courses is to provoke conversation in context which is integral to the learning experience. Learners are encouraged to make connections to provide mutual support, challenge their ideas and share understanding because one of the best ways to learn is through talking with others. Students are also motivated by the breaking of the learning journey into small steps. Each step is bite-sized to make the learning visible, help learners see progress quickly and regularly reflect on what they have learnt. Thus *Future Learn* offers a powerful new way to learn online because every course has been designed according to principles of effective learning through storytelling, discussion, visible learning and using community support to celebrate progress.

**Literature Courses**

Improve your own writing skills and learn more about literary greats with our online literature and writing courses. Explore Austen, Shakespeare, Burns, Wordsworth, Wilde and more.

 <p>LISA UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA <b>An Introduction to Screenwriting</b> This online course explores the key concepts and fundamental principles involved in the process of screenwriting. 2 weeks 3 hrs per week</p>	 <p>LANCASTER UNIVERSITY <b>Corpus Linguistics: Method, Analysis, Interpretation</b> Offers a practical introduction to the methodology of corpus linguistics for researchers in social sciences and humanities. 8 weeks 3 hrs per week</p>	 <p>KING'S COLLEGE LONDON <b>Shakespeare</b> Learn about Shakespeare in print and performance around the world, from early modern times to today. 4 weeks 2 hrs per week</p>	 <p>THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK <b>Literature and Mental Health</b> Find out how poems, plays and novels can help us understand and cope with deep emotional strain in this free online course. 8 weeks 4 hrs per week</p>
 <p>LANCASTER UNIVERSITY <b>William Wordsworth: Poetry, People and Place</b> Explore the influence of the Lake District on Wordsworth with this free online course, filmed at his home, Dove Cottage, Grasmere. 4 weeks 4 hrs per week</p>	 <p>UNIVERSITÀ PER STRANIERI DI ROMA (UNISTRAN) <b>Studying in Italian - Language and Literature</b> Study Language and Literature in Italian and develop the skills you need when you take part in a European student mobility program. 8 weeks 4 hrs per week</p>	 <p>UNIVERSITY OF LISBON <b>Gabriel García Márquez</b> Identifique las contribuciones del autor a la literatura universal mediante el estudio de tres de sus grandes obras. 8 weeks 4 hrs per week</p>	 <p>THE OPEN UNIVERSITY <b>Start Writing Fiction</b> This foundation course helps you to get started with your own fiction writing, focusing on the central skill of creating characters. 8 weeks 3 hrs per week</p>

Fig. 1. List of *Future Learn*'s Literature Courses

Among the many *Future Learn* courses dedicated to Shakespeare, *Shakespeare: Print and Performance*, with Gordon McMullan and Sarah Lewis from King's College London, is one of the most interesting ones because it focuses on how the Bard's plays were printed and performed 400 years ago and on how our conception of Shakespeare has changed over the centuries. As part of the Shakespeare-400 consortium of events, marking 400 years since his death, King's College London has partnered with The Globe theatre and the British Library to explore how Shakespeare's works continue to delight audiences around the world. Academics, curators, publishers, actors, musicians and theatre directors have collaborated in designing this course. Thanks to videos and video-lessons, the course directly takes students onto the stage of the Globe Theatre to find out about performance practices both in the present day capital and in early modern London. Moreover, students have access to some priceless manuscripts and early printed texts in the archives of the British Library. Most importantly, joining *Shakespeare: Print and Performance* students become part of a wide international learning community that draws on everyone's experience of Shakespeare to enrich discussion.

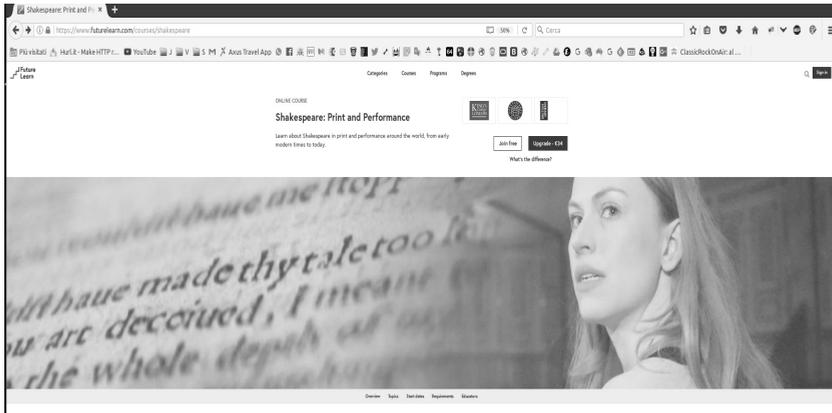


Fig. 2. *Shakespeare: Print and Performance* home page

The course is free and its duration is 4 weeks (2 hours per week). The topics covered are: performing Shakespeare, early modern print, Shakespeare in print today, global/local Shakespeare. By the end of the course, students should be able to reflect on Shakespeare as a global cultural icon, discuss early modern performance practices and the development of the theatre industry, investigate how the print industry developed in early modern England, discuss early modern literary culture and the ‘instability’ of the early modern play-text, evaluate the impact of editorial policy on the way in which is read and performed today, explore Shakespeare in performance today.

The four weeks are divided into small steps, alternating videos of not more than 6-8 minutes to documents and articles. Input is soon turned into practice through discussions on set topics or tasks or exercises which are peer-reviewed. All this turns the course into a very stimulating experience where students learn through small bits thanks to a wide range of stimuli, and are invited to immediately put into practice what they have learned and constantly evolve as a consequence of frequent exchange among a wide international learning community.

Week one, for example, opens with a warm welcome and introduction to the course through a 3,31” video and then students are immediately invited to introduce themselves in the forum and meet the teachers and the rest of the class. This is followed by four sub-sessions of about 30 minutes study each, that students can complete autonomously because they are completely free to decide how much time they can or want to dedicate to the various activities. Each sub-session usually includes short videos, exercises, quiz, discussions and articles to be read.

These sections could be longer or shorter but the entire week usually concludes with a wrap-up moment in which students are invited to reflect on what they have studied during the week. At the end of week four a closing comments section gives the opportunity to write one's opinion about the course and watch a video with closing thoughts from the course leads. Weeks 2-3 and 4 respect more or less the same pattern. At the end of the course the students are invited to give their personal comments on the entire experience.

*Future Learn's Shakespeare: Print and Performance* is one of the best examples of non-linear, interactive learning because both its internal organisation and the learning strategies used to create a stimulating virtual environment where students are fostered to improve their self-organisational skills give practical realisation to many of the Chaos and Complexity Theory applications in the educational field. The nonlinear approach to learning and the variety of stimuli proposed to students are very important to arouse attention. Moreover, creating a learning community based on interactivity is essential to activate what Krashen defines "affective filter" that makes deep learning possible, and to develop the student's capacity of thinking critically, which is the final goal of tertiary education (Krashen 1988). Flexibility of use leaves participants to be autonomous in their study and enhances their self-organisation capacities reducing stress and pressure. Thanks to all this, *Future Learn's Shakespeare: Print and Performance* contributes to spreading profound and significant interest in the Bard's plays and to enhance pleasure and satisfaction in reading and/or watching, as many of the final comments to the course by a large international community amply testify:

The image shows a screenshot of a social media comment thread. At the top, there is a text input field for a comment, with the placeholder text "Add a comment... (plain text only, links will be auto-linked)". Below this, there are several comments from users, each with a profile picture, a name, and a date. The comments are as follows:

- Monica Manzolillo** (0/1200): "Add a comment... (plain text only, links will be auto-linked)"
- [Redacted]** (24 APR): "this course helped me to see details and learn more, this course is excellent, well prepared, it was a pleasure to study, thanks so much to everyone, regards"
- [Redacted]** (17 FEB): "Well, since my first years at middle school I have heard or read about Shakespeare's works. When I was 14 years old I went to the cinema to listen the Zeffirelli's version of Romeo and Juliet. Some years ago, a famous brazilian actor gave a lecture on Shakespeare and the impression I had then was "how great and gloomy is this". The course changed my views introducing accounts of research and instruments on how to understand and to receive the work of the actor. My views were enlarged in a very positive way. Because finally I had the opportunity to listen and learn from British specialists. Thank you very much."
- [Redacted]** (17 OCT): "I wrote - observant, wise and genius, which I think still apply. I cannot find the word cloud now- it is probably too late, but I am sure all the words still apply and many more as well. I have gained a deeper and wider knowledge of Shakespeare whilst progressing through this course. I t has been wonderful."
- [Redacted]** (17 OCT): "I've enjoyed the course and learned quite a bit, particularly when it comes to editing Shakespeare and the variety of approaches that can be taken to putting on one of his plays."
- [Redacted]** (16 OCT): "The words still apply but my understanding has been greatly enhanced thanks to this well constructed, varied and comprehensive course. The bite sized elements were a very good way to introduce different aspects of Shakespeare, his work and outside influences that had a bearing on his output. Because of the course design it was easy to tap in and out at times which suited and for that reason it was never boring. A very entertaining way to learn more about Shakespeare and just challenging enough."
- [Redacted]** (22 DEC): "Nice, Thank you"

At the bottom of the screenshot, there is a pagination bar showing "1 2 3 4 ... 14".

Fig. 3. Final Comments

This course helped me to see details and learn more, this course is excellent, well prepared, it was a pleasure to study, thanks so much to everyone, regards.

I've enjoyed the course and learned quite a bit, particularly when it comes to editing Shakespeare and the variety of approaches that can be taken to putting on one of his plays.

The words still apply but my understanding has been greatly enhanced thanks to this well constructed, varied and comprehensive course. The bite sized elements were a very good way to introduce different aspects of Shakespeare, his work and outside influences that had a bearing on his output. Because of the course design it was easy to tap in and out at times which suited and for that reason it was never boring. A very entertaining way to learn more about Shakespeare and just challenging enough.

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VISUALISING VARIANTS: SHAKESPEARE'S  
TEXTUAL INSTABILITY IN DIGITAL MEDIA

*Abstract*

Within the context of the manifold intersections between textual scholarship and new digital technologies, the outstanding position of Shakespearean texts has gained increasing prominence in the academic debate of the last few years. Illustrating some of the key points at issue in the debate, this paper argues that crucial aspects of Shakespeare's inherently unstable and pre-print textuality (Murphy 2000) can be better revealed by the new tools that have historicised print-based notions of textual stability and authorial uniqueness, showing them as the product of a specific writing technology. The examples mentioned here epitomise the potentialities of digital tools in transcending the space of the book page and in overcoming the constraints of print, thus promising to recover the complexity of Shakespeare's early-modern textuality in a variety of forms.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare; digital media; textuality; editing.

Set against the background of increasingly productive entanglements between textual scholarship and new digital technologies, the outstanding position of Shakespearean texts has gained growing prominence in the academic debate (Carson 2006; Dawson 2007; Best 2009, Paul 2014). The new horizons opened up by electronic technologies in digital humanities acquire particular relevance when applied to the exceptionally complex textual tradition of the most "canonical" of authors. "What happens when the textual mystery of Shakespeare encounters the archival ambitions of modern information culture?" asks Alan Galley (2014: 40); it is an "encounter" which raises crucial issues, whose extensive implications touch on the core of our imaginative engagement with cultural heritage and its transmission, as the scholar points out: "to reproduce or transmit Shakespeare's texts through a new me-

dium is to engage with some of the most textually and ontologically complex material in Western literary tradition” (2014: 160).

It is such complexity that this paper proposes to investigate, addressing the status of Shakespeare’s textuality and its cultural authority in a highly digitalised landscape where hypertexts have radically changed our reading habits, and new digital tools have set the conditions for the flow of content across manifold platforms. Allowing assorted cross-media interactions and convergences of written words, sounds, still and moving images that can be excerpted and endlessly repurposed in unexpected combinations within the media circuit, digital tools profoundly impinge on our reception of Shakespeare’s plays and of their performative potentialities in ways that it would be hard to overestimate.

Within such an increasingly cross-media landscape, it would be perhaps debatable today to claim that Shakespeare survives above all as “a densely textualized object”, as Worthen put it fifteen years ago (2003: 198); it is undisputable, however, that digital technologies allow us to exhibit and explore his textuality in unprecedented ways. To some extent, the Shakespearean material available in digital forms may be said to epitomise the double strategies of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy* that Bolter and Grusin identified in the late 1990s as the dual traits of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999), one of the most fruitful terms introduced in the theoretical debate to illustrate the multiplication of cross-media interactions. On the one hand, providing access to digital facsimiles of the playwright’s folio and quarto editions, such electronic resources as *Literature Online* (LION) or *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) – to mention only a couple of examples within an exceptionally manifold background – offer a seemingly immersive experience of his texts, somehow enhancing their “sacred” status. Despite their unavoidable limitations in terms of accuracy and reliability, that scholars have not failed to notice (Hirsch 2011: 575), electronic facsimiles have had an immense impact on textual studies: effacing the traces of material artifice from the viewer’s perception, they epitomise the logic of *immediacy*, as it was explained by Bolter and Grusin: “it is a medium whose purpose is to disappear [...] seeking to make digital technology ‘transparent’” (1999: 22-23). While obviously lacking the physicality of their print predecessors, digital facsimiles of Shakespeare’s early modern texts produce a sort of “willing suspension of disbelief” in the reader who is engaged with these “digital surrogates” *as if* they were the real pages of the original printed texts. On the other hand, the opposite strategy of *hypermediacy* is epitomised by the growing number of digital editions of single plays and on line resources that allow links to a variety of texts and documents, interactive maps of early modern

London, videos of academic lectures, recorded theatrical versions, rehearsals of performances and film adaptations that may be visualised in overlapping windows on our screen along with the text of a play, within an hyper-mediated, windowed, fragmented, and increasingly interactive textual space.

What deserves further attention, however, is the extent to which digital technologies not only appropriate and reshape Shakespeare in their own language, but above all help us recover specific aspects of Shakespeare's early modern textuality that could hardly be explored in print. More specifically, as this paper will try to show, crucial aspects of Shakespeare's unstable and pre-print textuality can be better revealed by new media that have provided new perspectives to approach print-based notions of textual stability and authorial uniqueness, showing them as the result of a particular writing technology.

As early as 1991, David Bolter's *Writing Space* illustrated how patterns of writing and reading are specific results of technological circumstances. He argued that "each technology gives us a different [writing] space" (Bolter 1991: 11), ranging from the pages of mediaeval manuscripts to the digital screen of our computers, which in turn affects the organisation of the whole text, the reader's overall reception of its content, as well as wider notions of textuality and authorship. The space of the printed book, he pointed out, is inherently associated to notions of stability, fixity and authorial control: "it is the space defined by the perfect printed volumes that exist in thousands of identical copies" (p. 11). Positing that changes in media technology produce far reaching cultural transformations, scholars in the last few decades have extensively illustrated how the printed book has "formed and informed out intellectual history" (Landow 1992: 68), exploring the impact of the invention of printing in almost every field of human activity as well as in cognitive processes (Eisenstein 1980). As Walter Ong notably explained: "Print is curiously intolerant of physical incompleteness. It can convey the impression, unintentionally and subtly, but very really, that the material the text deals with is similarly complete or self-consistent. [...] Print tends to feel a work as 'closed', set off from other works, a unit in itself" (Ong 1982: 133). In this perspective, one of the main outcomes of the digital turn is, doubtless, its contribution to historicising print-based notions of textual uniqueness and stability. As George Landow among others has claimed: the digital turn "historicizes many of our commonplace assumptions, thereby forcing them to descend from the ethereality of abstraction and appears as corollary to a particular technology rooted in specific times and places" (Landow 1992: 31-32).

The wide-ranging repercussions of such processes on our view of Shakespeare's textuality cannot go unnoticed. The intricate relationship between Shakespeare and print would obviously require much wider room for investigation than these pages allow. Regardless of whether and to what extent the playwright was far from indifferent to his popularity in print (Erne 2003), it is a matter of fact that while such poems as *Venus and Adonis* or *The Rape of Lucrece* were published in carefully printed volumes, no collected edition of Shakespeare's plays appeared during his lifetime, and the scripts of single plays were carefully guarded by the company, which had no interest in publishing them until they could be performed. On the other hand, the remarkably different textual variants of the quarto editions have long supported the widely shared scholarly assumption that "Shakespeare contented himself with their availability in the theatre", to mention David Scott Kastan's view, and that "their plasticity may well have seemed to him truer to their nature than the fixity they would achieve on the printed page" (Kastan 2001: 16).

Without a doubt, however, the transmission of Shakespeare's plays is inextricably related to the book form in which we have received them. A careful reflection on the repercussions of such forms of transmission becomes therefore necessary, above all in the light of the digital turn that has opened up wider horizons to appraise the extent to which our view of Shakespearean textuality has been informed by print-inflected notions of textual fixity and authorial uniqueness, assumed for centuries as epistemic paradigms of Western thought (Ong 1982, Landow 1992).

The First Folio (1623) offers perhaps the most remarkable instance in this respect. Its standardised spelling and rigid constraints of spacing and page layout, extensively illustrated by Charlton Hinman's monumental study (1968), provide ample testimony to the processes whereby Shakespeare's plays were heavily affected by the material constraints of the early modern printing process. Many scholars have pointed out the wide-ranging influence of the first Folio from manifold perspectives. If it is unquestionable that it "has promoted and sustained the notion of Shakespeare as a unique, isolated, singular author" (Murphy 2000: 192), Alan Galey has gone so far as to argue that "the Shakespeare Folio is less Shakespeare's book than it is the book's Shakespeare" (Galey 2014: 82). Publishing Shakespeare's plays in a printed volume went indeed far beyond saving them from oblivion: it definitely marked the beginning of a fundamental shift in their literary status from "performance" to "print commodities", and it above all marked the birth of a print-inflected view of Shakespeare's textuality that has long affected our approach to the bard's plays. "Booking" the plays,

as W.B. Worthen has put it, had an important effect on how his theatre “came to be understood” over the course of the centuries (Worthen 2014: n.p.). In a similar perspective, Antony Dawson has drawn attention to what he calls “the curse of the Folio” (Dawson 2005) pointing out the relevance of such a foundational book in our modern, still print-based notion of Shakespeare’s textuality. Unlike Renaissance audiences, who only experienced Shakespeare’s work in performance, the scholar notices, modern audiences “encounter” Shakespeare first of all as a text, and even their experience of the theatrical event is inevitably affected by the awareness of a “literary” text that lies beneath the performance on stage.

Likewise, the dream of a reliable, definitive and standardised printed version of the bard’s corpus has long dominated the history of Shakespearean editing, at least until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is only under the effect of an open and fluid postmodern notion of textuality that significant changes in the editing process have taken place, shedding new light on the intrinsic instability of Shakespearean texts and on the indeterminacy of his authorship from a variety of critical perspectives (Massai 2004; Werstine 2007). Remarkable testimony of the radical renovation that took place in the 1990s is the often quoted opening paragraph of “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text” by Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass:

Shakespearean Studies will never be the same because something long taken for granted has been cast into doubt: the self-identity of the work. We are no longer agreed on the fundamental status of the textual object before us. Is it one or more? The significance of this uncertainty cannot be overestimated. [...] The possibility of multiple texts, then, constitutes a radical change indeed. Not just an enlargement of Shakespeare’s works but a need to reconceptualize the fundamental category of a *work* by Shakespeare. (de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993: 255)

In the same years, in *Unediting the Renaissance*, Leah Marcus went so far as to undermine the very notion of “authoritative” version, stressing the value of uncertainty and indeterminacy in the approach to Shakespeare’s texts:

For an older generation of scholars [...], the idea of textual instability was profoundly disquieting: one of the functions of the standard edition was to calm that unease and convince readers that they were being offered a text that could be counted on. By contrast, students now tend to be awed and charmed by the discovery of textual difference — the realization that early

manuscripts and printed editions of a given author may offer them an array of different texts, rather than a single textual 'authority'. (Marcus 1996: 27)

It is in this perspective that the contribution of digital tools more clearly emerges: they reveal huge potentialities in overcoming the constraints of print, thus "rediscovering" Shakespeare's early-modern textuality, or at least problematising the very notion of "authoritative" version in a variety of forms. To a large extent, this was already exemplified by some early attempts at transcending the space of the book page. In David Small's *Virtual Shakespeare*, for instance, the text of the bard's complete plays is visualised in a three-dimensional and highly plastic environment that shows the traditional division in acts and scenes that appears in print editions, while also radically reimagining the text's visual display on the screen. Escaping the confines of the two-dimensional flat, rectangular sheets of paper, the horizontal and vertical axes are combined with a new dimension: the textual space thus becomes a cube that can be "entered, moved behind and rotated" (Small 1996: 519-20), as Small himself explains, offering the reader the possibility to explore the body of writing at "any scale" he chooses. Selecting different forms of visualisation, the reader is thus allowed to focus on single acts, scenes, and lines in detail.

Along with such visualising potentialities, it is its inherently unstable and fluid nature that marks a crucial aspect of the electronic medium, as many scholars have pointed out. To some extent, as Sonia Massai has pointed out: "it allows editors to present peculiar types of textual instability and variation in early modern printed drama more effectively than the codex form" (Massai 2004: 94). Digital writing embodies a radically different conception of the play, "arguably one truer to its nature in that", David Scott Kastan further explains "the play is fundamentally something less stable and coherent than the printed edition necessarily represents it as being" (Kastan 2001: 133). In a wider perspective, we might argue that the digital medium has much in common with pre-print culture and with the specific kind of textuality of Renaissance drama. In this sense, it is tempting to find similarities between Ong's view of the digital era as an age of "second orality" (Ong 1982), that is radically transforming communication, and what Andrew Murphy among others identifies as the intrinsically 'oral' nature of early modern drama, whose "roots lay in the pre-print and, to some extent, non-literary traditions of medieval drama and art forms", and whose "primarily mode of presentation and reception was the declaimed performance" (Murphy 2000: 195).

An early instance of possible forms of convergence between digital and early modern textuality is provided by the interface designed by Alan Galey for the for the 1996 MLA Electronic New Variorum edition of *The Winter's Tale*. To some extent, it follows the model of the variorum editions begun in the nineteenth century by Horace Howard Furness, where each page traditionally contains three sections: the upper part offering an accurate reprint of specific lines of the original text of the play, the middle part providing a selection of textual emendations made by previous editors, and the lower part including a selection of commentary that generations of scholars have provided for those specific lines of the play. While certainly containing a compendium of the most relevant commentary of *The Winter's Tale* in the past centuries, Galey's Variorum above all epitomises a much more fluid notion of textuality. The original page separated in three sections is here replaced by a flexible display of a number of interface modes that can be changed depending on the readers' different choices, in a logic that bears clear traces of the more active role of readers in the hypertextual environment. By clicking on a specific line of the text, the reader can thus visualise a box containing the notes referring to the lines, but he can also choose other interface modes to read commentary notes, to have access to scholarly annotation or to the further details of the different textual variants adopted by editors (Werstine 2008).

Textual variants are the main concern in a more recent project of the University of Toronto by Alan Galey, *Visualizing Variations*, "a code library of free, open-source, browser-based visualisation prototypes" (web) that mostly explores the forms of animation allowed by the digital tools. Instead of forcing "editors and readers into choosing one variant over another", as the author explains in the introduction of the website, the project offers animated variants as "material reminders of the complex lives of texts", starting from the implicit assumption that "textual transmission is more often a matter of change than fixity" (web). Allowing different variants that appear in the different editions of the play to "flicker" on the screen, Galey especially exemplifies how digital instruments may embody the paradigm of instability that characterises early modern textuality. The very notion of a hierarchy among textual variants is therefore radically questioned, as the author remarks in his introduction to the project. Ambiguity, he openly points out, is not presented "as a problem to solve", but as "a field of interpretive possibilities", thus bringing to light all the potentialities of the text as an inherently unpredictable "network" of potential meanings that become more relevant in the case of Shakespearean texts, where "minor changes can make big difference" (web). A noteworthy example is provided

by the renowned textual crux from *Hamlet* in 1.2., where the prince's first passionate soliloquy expresses his anguished sense of being captive to corrupted flesh and his desire for spiritual release and escape from corporeality:

Oh, that this too, too *solid* [*sullied/sallied*] flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! (*Hamlet*, I, ii.129-32)

Three different readings are suggested by the earliest 1603 and 1604-5 Quarto editions of the play (“sallied” as a variant of “sullied”) and by the 1623 Folio’s version (“solid”), whose different implications are quite relevant: while “solid”, logically corresponding to the verb “melt”, keeps the metaphor at a mere physical level, “sullied” or “sallied” plainly suggest notions of contamination and corruption, therefore assuming Hamlet’s accent on his mother’s moral responsibility at the beginning of the play. This crucial moment of textual ambiguity has been differently represented in textual editions starting from the four-column printed version of Teena Rochford Smith’s *Four-Text Hamlet* in 1883, that Galey explicitly mentions as a fundamental model (2014: 20-32) to a wide range of digital visualisations of the last two decades, including Bernice Kliman’s 1996 *Enfolded Hamlet Project* (Kliman 2006: 165-66; Carson 2006: 174) or Tronch-Pérez’s *Synoptic Hamlet* (2002).

Alan Galey’s choice of exploring the potentialities of digital animation certainly marks an important novelty. It recreates, as Michael Best has put it, a semantic field where “the text dances between variant readings” on the screen (Galey 2009: 34). But it above all acquires particular significance in the light of the new horizons that digital tools have opened up in the transformation of Shakespearean editing, increasingly meant as an “archiving” process, whose implications as both a “textual practice” and an “imaginative site” are extensively illustrated in Galey’s study (Galey 2014: 13-20). It cannot go unnoticed, in this perspective, that meaningful similarities are discernible with what George Landow already envisaged in the early 1990s as a necessary shift from “editing” to “archiving”:

This new conception of a more fluid, dispersed text raises the issue of whether one can have a scholarly edition at all, or must we settle for what McGann terms an archive [...] essentially a collection of textual fragments (or versions) from which we assemble, or have the computer assemble, any

particular version that suits a certain reading strategy or scholarly question. (Landow 1992: 69)

The manifold questions at stake in the ongoing process of evolution Shakespearean editing, and their far reaching repercussions within such an intricate background, go obviously far beyond the object of enquiry of this paper. They are the crucial concern of a lively scholarly debate. Antony Dawson has illustrated the difficult tasks editors have to face today within a cultural context in which notions of uncertainty and indeterminacy have replaced those of stability and coherence (Dawson 2007: 160). Whether and to what extent we can really “unedit” Shakespeare is, on the other hand, still open to question. As John Drakakis has remarked: “If we follow this to its logical conclusion, then the process of ‘unediting’ is not simply the evolution of a practice that respects the multiform overdeterminations of the text, but can only acknowledge, and presumably celebrate, a radical indeterminacy” (Drakakis 2008: 232). Doubtlessly, despite the huge potentialities of the hypertextual space, no single digital edition may reasonably embrace all the textual and dramatic potentialities, all the textual variants enfolded within a play, and even an edition with such features would, at any rate, be “so formless as to be unusable in practice for all but the most sophisticated readers” as Leah Marcus openly admits (Marcus 2008: 142). New pragmatic editorial methodologies are emerging from the ongoing academic debate where the line between “legitimate editorial assistance and unwarranted interference of the editor” is getting “increasingly difficult to draw” (Erne-Kidnie 2004: 5). Of course, electronic animations and imaginative visualising solutions cannot “replace the sophisticated level of annotation through which editors have traditionally explained the complexity of textual variation” (Massai 2004: 96). What is unquestionable, however, is the new awareness that the advent of the digital turn had brought about: the transformation of Shakespeare’s plays into virtual artifacts definitely contributes to undermining print-based assumptions of textual fixity that have long affected our perception of the plays’ textuality.

It is a notion that finds a meaningful metaphorical equivalent in a photographic experiment mentioned by Galey himself. It was carried out by Walter Rogers Furness, the son of Horace Howard Furness, who published his *Composite Photography Applied to the Portraits of Shakespeare* in 1885. Using an ingenious photographic technique, he gathered seven portraits, a photograph of the playwright’s bust on the Stratford Monument and of his death mask. “All I could hope for”, the author noticed in 1885, was “a reflex, very shadowy at best, of the most

characteristic features in the alleged portraits of Shakespeare” (Furness 1885: 4). As Michel Galey has added:

[...] his approach is oddly parallel to his father’s proposed editorial policy for the New Variorum Shakespeare of determining the playtext by accepting the most commonly adopted variants and emendations. Like the contours of Shakespeare’s physiognomy, Shakespeare’s truest text would come forth by the force of quantity and consistency, with variants fading away into indistinctness. (Galey 2014: 133)

Regardless, therefore, of the actual potentialities of digital editing, whose exploration is still open to debate, such experiments as David Small’s *Virtual Shakespeare*, Alan Galey’s graphic interface for the MLA Electronic New Variorum edition of *The Winter’s Tale* or his employ of digital animation in *Visualizing Variants* show how digital tools can contribute to recovering pre-print notions of textual instability. They substantiate the idea that “change” and “permanence” are by no means conflicting notions, and can coexist and overlap in Shakespeare’s textuality. Apart from the specific solutions they propose and the manifold problems that still remain to be tackled in identifying possible models of combining “old and new ways of working” (Carson 2006: 179) in Shakespearean editing, the digital experiments with the bard’s texts above all remind us that they are ontologically complex materials, much more elusive and unstable than any printed-inflected notion of textuality may misleadingly suggest.

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# CULTURE



# PREFACE



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## GLIMPSES OF A METAMORPHIC SCENARIO

The contributions collected in this section of the volume are a choice of the Culture Workshop papers originally delivered at the 28<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Italian Association of English Studies (Pisa, September 14-16, 2017). These papers provide stimulating suggestions on the many ways a ‘world of words’ – a semiosphere permeated with signs, codes and symbols – can help us to figure out connections, dialectical tensions, and interpretative models within a trans-disciplinary and rhizomatic network of perspectives in which the paradigms of conventionality, creativity and, most of all, complexity are often crucially addressed.

The very notion of cultural expression(s) as a non-linear “flow” which is constantly “in process” (Hannerz 1992), growing and adapting, moving across barriers and borders, is at the core of the reflections and analyses informing these articles. A keen awareness of the epistemological constraints ingrained in binary thinking, monolithic codifications and the orthodoxy which underlies a given set of established disciplines and their self-contained areas, is certainly another cornerstone of the arguments offered here. While taking stock of the multiple theoretical entryways supplied by these papers and their efforts at interlocking various conceptual nodes, the reader also gains insight into the “post-disciplinary” afflatus of contemporary Cultural Studies, whose development has been triggered by “a dissatisfaction with other disciplines, not merely their contents but also their very limits as such” (Jameson 1993: 18), let alone the risks deriving from a rigid institutionalisation of knowledge or a crystallised elitist hegemony. Indeed, openness and theoretical versatility, alongside a mental attitude that endorses and enhances critique, have been singled out as prominent features of Cultural Studies, which is in itself “a process, a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reactions” (Johnson 1986-1987: 38).

Differently put, the far-reaching scope, cross-cutting tendencies and “ever-changing field of cultural studies” could be compared to a promising open venture (Wolff 1999: 500, 506), whose earnest explorers take on the task of tracking the epiphenomenal routes that are continuously being shaped (see Grossberg 1993). With the progressive emergence of

a globalised geopolitical scenario, the search for a decentralised “disciplinary reconfiguration” (DeKoven 1996: 127) has become even more compelling. The motley architecture of interrelations and contingencies arching over our Global Ecumene spurs critics and intellectuals to envisage a porous space where a wide range of fields – from literature to ethnography and social anthropology, from media studies to the post-human, from gender issues and diasporic identities to the environment – can further enter into dialogue and profitably overlap.

Against this backdrop, conventionality is of course bound to lie at the negative end of the spectrum as long as one conceives it in terms of a compliant adherence to ossified conventions and exclusionary beliefs, and therefore in stark opposition to the disrupting as well as creative force of confluences, intersections, and exchanges. At the same time, no act of re-positioning and open-ended interrogation can operate in a vacuum, and this is where a collective domain of shared values, icons, representation strategies and even stereotypes proves relevant. Novelty, dissimilarity, and non-hegemonic views are inevitably assessed in comparative and contextualised terms, that is, by marking off their territory *vis-à-vis* predictable conjoinings and canonised rules. That is why the repertoires of received ideas and internalised practices may become instrumental in throwing into sharp relief a whole grey area of asymmetries, disruptions and border zones which are potentially transformative, and sometimes radically so. As it happens, the polarisation setting in between systematic closure and innovativeness, common-sense thinking and divergence, contributes to laying the foundations for the intricate geography of polysemous productivity that is generally defined as ‘complexity’. Figuratively, the flow of cultural (dis-)aggregations is seen as branching out into various directions, both at surface and subterranean levels, via random and organised linkages, and inevitably encountering different kinds of resistance from the regions it crosses, or the strongholds it eventually erodes. In order to map this propagating maze, interpreters need to observe how and to what effect a variable set of components and influences interact with a substratum of enduring, archetypal paradigms so as to create a new balance – be it towards assimilation or eclecticism, revivalism or modernisation – within a clustered system whose norms are never totally transparent.

For their part, Cultural Studies scholars aim to strike a middle course between textual/discursive analysis and political engagement, namely a concern with the complex dynamics of lived experience, social formations and practices, power relations of dominance and subordination, including the conditions of production and consumption as well as the possibilities for situated agency and intervention. Needless to say,

Cultural Studies hardly loses its hold on such focal points as ideology, pedagogy and resistance, the endorsement of a counter-hegemonic and problematising attitude, the material factors in which the generation of meaning is embedded, and a particular receptivity toward issues that have direct bearing on the present.

A large number of those tenets are brilliantly dealt with in the deeply-researched article – originally a plenary lecture – which opens this part of the volume. In “In Between Stories: Gramsci’s ‘Morbid Symptoms’ and Changing Narratives in Cultural Studies”, Roger Bromley takes his lead from one of the most memorable passages in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* to examine the new millennium’s convulsively metamorphic scenario. This globalised, fluid background shows all the symptoms of an epochal time of transition, deep uncertainty and radical change, an interregnum where the old order is disappearing into a ‘post-reality’ and the new one (‘trans-’) is still scarcely visible. This suspended condition of epistemological and socio-political in-betweenness has also thrown down a compelling challenge to the project of Cultural Studies, which, as Bromley cogently argues, has been re-organising itself around parables that subsume the intersectionality of a wider range of areas and phenomena, including emerging technologies, post-humanism theories, transnational diaspora, the Anthropocene and the resurgence of ethno-populism in the West. The need is felt for an up-to-date cartography, a vocabulary capable of re-orientating us towards these massive transformations while simultaneously remaining true to the spirit of Cultural Studies as an unsettling narrative of resistance, a destabilising, hybrid form of counter-discourse which circumvents the pillars of orthodoxy and paves the way for participation and intervention. If critical knowledge calls for a suitable shifting, this must not be done at the expense of analytical criticism’s exegetic power. For Cultural Studies to maintain its intellectual productivity, oppositional force and ethical commitment to shaping the future, no room should be allowed for acquiescence or a mere free-floating in a sea of disconnected signifiers.

The articles following Bromley’s chapter are grouped according to a loosely thematic and argumentative principle which expatiates on the idea of culture and border-blending, language and semantisation, the methodological approaches and reception of Cultural Studies in English and non-English academic contexts. The survey then incorporates discussions of topics related to trauma, history and ethnicity; the globalised metropolis, cyberspace and transnationality; the politics of intermediality; the multimodal rhetoric of advertising campaigns and social networking platforms. These multiple strands draw a miniature constellation of the Culture Workshop sessions into which the 2017

three-day conference had been divided: “Cultural Studies Today: An Assessment”, “The House of Fiction and of Drama”, “Intermedially Speaking”, “Creative Spaces: Global and Transnational Approaches”, “The Green Discourse”, “Detections: Before Genetics, After Truth”, and “Public Engagement and Memory in the Digital Age”.

A reassessment of important theoretical aspects, Nicoletta Vallorani’s “Rewording/Rewarding Culture: (Post)Cultural Studies and the Shame of Being ‘Different’” debates the state of Cultural Studies as intended and practised today within the Italian academe. The theoretical hybridity inherent in Cultural Studies has always encouraged the students of culture to take a two-folded approach across disciplines, in light of which literary and linguistic skills have progressively been re-codified within a globalised program. Seminal relevance on this point is recognised to Richard Hoggart’s and Raymond Williams’s adaptations of literary analysis for the interpretation of culturemes and to Stuart Hall’s theorisation of the centrality of language in cultural representations. The implementation of such cognitive instruments transcends the mere selection of the right utensils from an ideally neutral tool-box. Nor does it entail the mechanical re-enactment of a pre-ordered theoretical scheme. It is rooted in historical transformations and gains momentum from cultural contingency. In this sense, mass migration is seen by Vallorani as a decisive phenomenon within current European affairs and one which necessarily brings Migration Studies to the fore along with the issue of cultural difference. In order to define her flexible approach and her understanding of how literature and culture relate, Vallorani also acknowledges her debt to Franco Moretti’s argument that “[s]cientific work always has limits. But limits change” (Moretti 2000: 54). Another key connection resides in the inextricability of research and teaching, a vital cooperation which is hardly enhanced within the Italian academe. But what is more typically humanistic than Vallorani’s final claim that the academe can and indeed must be emended from the inside? By implicitly rejecting the opposite politics – the strictly technical pedagogy professed by Stanley Fish (1999), among others – she maintains that academic discourse may compete with the kitschification and marketisation of society and the consequent banalisation of our students’ curricula by sticking to high political standards. Unlike Fish, she does not concede that academics are unable to shape the world, or that their messages can get heard beyond academe only when they get out of it. Although it may not be the business of the humanities to save us, as Fish famously maintained, disconfirming the efficacy of humanism does not make teachers and students more reliable citizens or better interpreters of our communal life.

In “The Disaster Selfie: Images of Popular Virtual Trauma”, Anja Meyer offers an analysis of the complex relationship developing between traumatic events in history and their technological mediation in our time. Laying stress on the spectacularisation of personal experiences of victimhood, whether re-lived via photos or through social media, Meyer discusses the *Yolocaust* website project and the so-called ‘disaster selfies’ as part of an awkward aesthetic trend that ends up reconfiguring our relationship with trauma and death. The moral issues raised by the inappropriate pictures taken by visitors at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin have fed a lively public debate on the ethics of visibility online and the permeability of the private and societal spheres at the hands of the digital world. Joining this global forum, and in the wake of Sharpley and Stone (2009), Meyer maintains that contemporary society consumes both real and commodified death through audio-visual representation; at the same time, an ontological paradox keeps spectators at a safe distance from tragedies in which they are only involved at a superficial level. It is thus her contention that both the narcissism of contemporary culture and its necrophiliac aesthetics need re-examining within a critical frame that must go beyond any simple re-description of the epiphenomena of virtualisation, because all this crucially calls into question our vocation to stick to a sense of human communality and concrete history.

Giulia Maria Olivato, the author of “Human Inheritance, the ‘DNA Journey’ and Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*”, illuminates the nexus concerning national history, citizenship and race by reading Evaristo’s 2001 book of fiction through a lens that dismantles binary views and commonplaces on matters of ethnic ‘purity’. Olivato’s analysis of this brilliant novel in verse by a contemporary British writer and critic of Nigerian origin delves into the interactions between identity-construction processes, the national allegory and culture conceived as a “structure of meaning-making that cannot be abstracted from power”: as a site of “intense struggle over how identities are to be shaped, democracy defined, and social justice revived as a serious element of cultural politics” (Giroux 2000: 18). The ‘DNA Journey’ mentioned in the title refers to a 2016 ad campaign launched by Booking Holdings’ *Momondo* – an international travel fare aggregator and metasearch engine based in Copenhagen – in collaboration with American Ancestry.com. That campaign pivoted on an experiment in which about seventy people from around the world were invited to take a genealogical DNA test in order to uncover information on their ancestral relationships. Most results dramatically fell short of the participants’ expectations, since many of their preconceptions and catch-all generalisations about racial purity were disproved by a test that traced an ethnically mixed descent.

This is a momentous point of departure for Olivato to expand on the metaphorical concept of a ‘cultural DNA’ that, rather than obeying ethnocentric or nationalistic mandates, should open up a synergistic horizon where one might finally speak of a dialectically shared inheritance. In this connection, Evaristo’s half-fictional, half-historical work centred on a black British-Roman character – the imaginary daughter of Sudanese immigrants living in London during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus, with whom she allegedly starts a love affair – assumes a particular pertinence. Olivato tracks the ways in which *The Emperor’s Babe* undermines complacent platitudes and poses key questions regarding Western imperialism, the African diaspora and the ancient – one would say ‘classic’ – origins of multiracial realities.

In “Wandering in a Creative Space: The Construction of the Indian City in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*”, Alessia Polatti directs her attention to the globalised metropolis and highlights how the city as a space of encounters, cross-pollination and border-crossing constitutes an inspiring background for Mistry’s 1995 novel. Set in an unidentified Indian municipality, *A Fine Balance* reads like an intense exploration of the dimension of subalternity and of the marginalised experiences of ‘postcolonial *flâneurs*’. Their wanderings in the urban context effectively counterpoint the official accounts of Indian history during the Emergency period. The subterranean awareness laboriously achieved by the wanderer eventually challenges the estranging urban and cultural structures across which he acts and to which he flexibly reacts. It is one of the insights convincingly provided by Polatti’s essay that Mistry largely plays on an insider/outsider dialectic within the new Indian cities’ cosmopolitanism in order to deconstruct dominant viewpoints and make the postcolonial voice more audible.

For his part, Angelo Monaco offers a poignant reminder of how in today’s globalised world, with its numberless ‘in-between zones’ and huge waves of migration, people are often involved in a “struggle for space where identity is endlessly constructed, and deconstructed, across difference and against set inside/outside oppositions [...] belonging is always problematic, a never-ending dialogue of same with other” (Bromley 2000: 5). As suggested by its title, “Globalisation into Cyberspace: Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* and the Indian Transnational Parasite”, Monaco’s article takes the reader on a journey through the virtual realities of computer programming (and the shattering consequences of hacking) by anatomising the grim/funny universe that Hari Kunzru, a British author of Kashmiri descent, envisioned in his 2004 novel. What is being digitally transmitted here is a destructive computer virus capable of wreaking havoc on a global scale. The non-Western origins of

the software cracker – Arjun Mehta, an Indian computer programmer – and the emerging of the United States as the first victimised country provide Kunzru with a sort of clichéd framing-story from which he progressively moves away with a view to discarding preconceived notions and making room for a position of interstitiality and underground agency. Mehta is in fact an ingenuous young man who finds himself stepping into the shoes of the cyber-terrorist without duly pondering the magnitude of the effects. At the same time, he gets caught up in a maze of shifty and voyeuristic relationships that develop inside the very American-dream, Bollywood-movie cocoon he wished to be part of. The article carefully records the moments when Mehta's subaltern and 'parasitic' status joins ranks with a form of resistance and contestation that turns him into the elusive transmitter of scarcely glad tidings for the (ex-?) First World order. In a metaliterary sense, this state of disruption and viral infection acts as an electric shock meant to awaken us to the contradictions and pitfalls of a still largely unequal global village.

A transnational perspective and a destabilising component of critical difference are also the province of Serena Parisi's article. In "Exile as a Creative Choice: Transnationalism and Liminality in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*", she prompts us to observe how the polysemous and idiosyncratic revisiting of a Western literary milestone – William Shakespeare's *Henriad* – might visualise a tangential scenario that remains impermeable to any easy (re)assimilation and univocal interpretation. Behind, or actually by virtue of, its technical unevenness and erratic style, heavy cuts and daring concoctions, Welles's 1965 film based on his own *Five Kings* and inspired by a core of Shakespeare's history plays proceeds to excavate liminal traces and illuminate unexplored corners with regard to scenes, political resonances and characters (Falstaff in the first place). In Parisi's view, the American actor and director's intersemiotic translation should be approached as both a personal creation and a thought-provoking depiction of exilic migrancy and in-betweenness that potentially addresses a multiplicity of diasporic and dissenting subjects. Welles the 'left-wing, alienated intellectual' (at that time living in exile in Europe) is shown to expose the jingoistic rhetoric of power across history, while lending an ear to a gloomy sense of loss and to those who feel somewhat out of line, out of their element, even in their home country.

Annalisa Volpone's "'Stop deaf stop come back to my earin stop': Some Examples of (Tele)communication in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*" pays heed to the politics of intermediality by tracing the presence of technological devices (e.g. radio transmitters, telegraph, telephone) in Joyce's text at the level of plot and language. The linguistic aspect,

which is predictably prominent in the Irish writer's late masterpiece, affects both the morphological and the semantic manipulation of lexis by coalescing, for instance, radio devices and sexual practices with effects of irresistible humour. Joyce's style develops under particular historical circumstances and, far from polarising high and low culture, brings together life experiences and verbal representations from all spheres of linguistic or non-linguistic activities. The author does this in a way that indicates his profound involvement with technology and his instinctive pleasure in metamorphosing human into non-human elements and vice versa, as happens with the character of HCE, who morphs into a radio-transmitter in II.3. The non-human voice which is often heard in *Ulysses* and the dazzling heteronomy gaping inside Joyce's subjects in the majority of his works thus become conspicuously audible/visible in *Finnegans Wake*, whose proteiform dialectics between techno-bodies and techno-languages is aptly brought to the fore by Volpone's essay.

In "Play. Pause. Replay: Performing Shakespeare(s) across Media", Aureliana Natale adds a further layer to the phenomenology of intermediality by opening a window on today's performative turn and the cultural bearing of 'remediation'. Hinging on a mutual contamination between new digital media and traditional ones, which thus appear to shift along a transgeneric, paradoxically 'discontinuous continuum', remediation can exert an extraordinary power of transformation. When applied to literary texts, its moving-with-the-times logic may bring about different kinds of change pertaining to structural elements, fruition and reception. Natale showcases the features and strategies through which innovative visual technologies influence the reader's response and performative modes of cooperation, especially when such great 'classics' as Shakespeare are involved (as, for instance, in the BBC-production broadcast *Shakespeare-Told* and in Ryan North's hypermedial game-books enhancing the *chooseable-path adventure* format).

In his well-informed "From Oscar Wilde to Hanif Kureishi: David Bowie and English Literature", Pierpaolo Martino contends that the consummate theatricality and intimate dialogism of David Bowie's lyrics are at the same time an experiment in oral directness and a self-aware performance in literary distinction. By drawing on distant sources of inspiration and elaborating them via his multimodal histrionic shifts of identities, Bowie repeatedly redefines himself within the spectrum of contemporary popular culture while working in the face of canonical literature from Shakespeare and Wilde to Orwell and Kureishi. Of special interest, in this respect, are Martino's hints at Bowie's and Wilde's conception of the mask as an embodiment of truth, with other cultural similarities between these two major representatives of dandy-

ism being usefully highlighted throughout the paper. What eventually emerges from Martino's contribution is that, as Barthes (1971) put it in his classical terms, dandy culture is interpreted by Wilde and Bowie as a creative, not merely selective, act of resilience to the constraints of a commodified society.

A degree of complexity hidden in the folds of conventionality and everyday discourse is laid bare by Lucia Abbamonte and Flavia Cavaliere in their commentary on the latest advertising campaigns launched by Tesco, the well-known, leading British retailer. In "Adaptively Evolving Ecosystems: Green-Speaking at Tesco", the authors carry out a detailed analysis of the ways through which this company has chosen to enhance its corporate image and prioritise its fresh food business identity, namely by capitalising on the idea of a green and healthy economy. Resorting to the tools of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Positive Discourse Analysis, Abbamonte and Cavaliere investigate aspects relating to the verbal messages accessible from Tesco's website as well as its videos, thus drawing attention to the primary role played by a semantic field that gravitates around catchwords like 'ecosystem' and 'sustainability' and the ethical imperatives of Reducing, Reusing and Recycling. In this paper, questions are also raised about the actual policies of the media-savvy Tesco group and the relevance of its commitment to environmental protection, charity work and social justice.

In "'The Shade of It All': Queering Academia via Twitter", Angela Zottola and Antonio Fruttaldo endorse methodological strategies that draw on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies, Multimodal Prosody and ambient affiliation/identity discourse with the aim of singling out queer academic identities and the linguistic codes used to represent the in-group in the Twitter account *Scholarly Queen*. In pursuing such a goal, they disseminate their contribution with attentive notes on the practices of the participants as social actors ('online *personae*') in the communicative stage and on the theories that stand in the background of communication via Twitter in the academic context. Adding to the dynamism and richness of the field explored by Zottola and Fruttaldo is their engagement with humour and irony as means of empowerment and of a self-defining policy by non-mainstream gender subjects vs heteronormative and binary categories. In a nutshell, this closing chapter of the Culture Session gives a further boost to the idea of reversing stereotypes while fostering new affiliations, and it shows how counter-hegemony can be articulated, or indeed performed, in provoking and protean ways.

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IN BETWEEN STORIES: GRAMSCI'S "MORBID SYMPTOMS"  
AND CHANGING NARRATIVES IN CULTURAL STUDIES

*Abstract*

Starting from Antonio Gramsci's concept of "morbid symptoms", this chapter argues that we are living in a time of transition and of profound radical change which throws out a challenge to disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences to find new ways of thinking in order to respond to what are likely to be significant political, social, and cultural transformations. Cultural Studies has always claimed to be a political project, initially using class as one of its organising principles, and the chapter examines the ways in which the field has developed to take account of the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. A point has been reached, it is claimed, where the field needs also to enter into conversation with other disciplines, especially those in the areas of science and technology, in respect of climate change, artificial intelligence, and post-humanism. At the same time, in the face of one of the largest displacements of people in human history, Cultural Studies has to come to terms with changes in the geopolitics of knowledge, in particular with 'border thinking' and theories derived from the concept of the 'coloniality of power', as well as the rise of Far Right ethno-populism in Europe. If, as it has been recently argued, capitalism in its current form will need to change fundamentally, what role can Cultural Studies play in the analysis of alternative values, a renewed democratic polity, and cultural changes in ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking? What, in other words, does it mean to be living in the 'trans' and the 'post'?

*Keywords:* Cultural Studies; transition; post-humanism; neoliberalism; decoloniality; displacement.

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story [...] is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. (Berry [1978] 2003: 77)

It is generally agreed that we live in a time of transition, possibly the end of a historical arc (Latour 2018: 32), but what we do not know is where this ‘trans’ will take us. At a time of radical change and deep uncertainty (the morbid symptoms of Trump, Brexit, and ISIS), new stories are only half the story. Imagining the future, an alternative future, is also a theoretical and political challenge: “Cultural Studies matters because it is about the future, and some of the work it will take, in the present to shape the future [...] By looking at how the contemporary world has been made to be what it is, it attempts to make visible ways in which it can become something else” (Grossberg 2010: 1). This chapter is designed to look at some features of the contemporary world with a view to making visible ways in which it can change. In Meaghan Morris’s words: “Change itself should be the object of study, rather than an event construed as a text, read as a symptom of a ‘condition’ to be diagnosed by cultural critics” (Morris 1998: 19).

Cultural Studies has always been an eclectic field of study and dealt with the complexities of the social, cultural, and the political, but it now needs to consider whether, in coming to terms with emerging technologies, the relatively new insights of chaos and complexity theory (contingency, path dependency, and system creativity) can be harnessed to its traditional concepts and methodologies. Mapping the field was a familiar, sometimes tedious, activity of Cultural Studies but we may now need a new cartography which can take account of the worlds of artificial intelligence, algorithms, platform capitalism, cyber-hacking, climate change and its denial, as well as ‘post’ claims (post-democracy, post-politics, post-humanism). All of these will have to be seen in the context of a reconfigured global politics characterised by the financialisation of value/s, the wide-scale displacement of people, new paradigms of war, and the so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, the ‘fifth discontinuity’, and the imminence of the ‘sixth mass extinction’.

From the outset, Cultural Studies has always been a political project, a counter-narrative of resistance even, to the monoliths of academic disciplines and orthodoxies, going beyond, and breaking down, prevailing binaries. It retains still its continuing preoccupation with class, race, gender, sexuality and environment, but now these have taken on fresh transdisciplinary perspectives and new configurations under the pressure of changing hierarchies and asymmetries of power as each of these preoccupations has become more exposed, subject to a contemporary rawness at a time of profound transformation. All of these need to be re-orientated, extended beyond the nation which has long been its focal point, to shift the geopolitics of critical knowledge in order to respond to the specificities and particularities of environmental

pressures and decolonial thinking, among other things. The field began with the analysis of sign, symbol, and text in the context of social and political phenomena, and it needs to maintain this analytical stance in connection with contemporary geopolitics – the everyday life of increasing inequality and oppression – in its social, economic, material and technological forms. At the same time, the field has to take account of the “neo-materialism” which has emerged “as a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power” (Braidotti 2012: 21). Combined with this refusal is the rejection of mind/body, nature/culture dualisms, the epistemologies of Eurocentric thinking.

A recent paper, “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene”, speaks of the need for a “deep integration of knowledge from biogeophysical Earth System science with that from the social sciences and humanities on the development and functioning of human societies” (quoted in Angus 2018: 4), and this is a challenge which Cultural Studies needs to respond to in reconfiguring its field. What are the conditions in which interventions (a favourite Cultural Studies term borrowed from Gramsci) can now take place? Is the field of Cultural Studies robust enough to carry out “the ethical imperative of scholarly participation in the transformation of the social world and its constituting and constitutive intellectual structures”, and does it “have the capacity to articulate a ‘history of the present’ to which it can respond in ways that would be at once intellectually and politically productive?” (Frow 2005: 17).

The original project of British Cultural Studies developed as an analysis of the relations of class, culture and power in a territorial/national context. The analysis of conflict used class as its primary theoretical resource. It was also male and, mainly, white. It saw culture as dynamic and cultural studies as always historical, contemporary and political. It examined the historical transformations of culture and society in terms of a struggle over power. Cultural identities were seen as mainly class identities. Race, gender, ethnicity, colonialism and sexuality emerged later to complexify the field. Its paradigms, frameworks, and theories were all Western and, as I have said, its objects of study were nation-specific. For many years, these models and concepts served the purpose of understanding structures of knowledge. However, for some time now, we have reached a stage where these modes of interpreting cultural and social change are no longer adequate. If Cultural Studies had always been a political project, it is in need of re-politicisation in the face of a rapidly changing and globalising world where the idea of a unitary/uni-

versal culture is no longer valid. Race, class, ethnicity, gender, environment could no longer be treated separately in relation to power but only intersectionally. Understanding Hurricane Katrina was a clear example of this need for intersectionality. It was a human disaster on this scale which has made more urgent something which Stuart Hall said about the role of Cultural Studies: “The work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilize everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply inhumane in their capacity to live with difference” (Hall 1996: 343). The discussion below of decoloniality will have more to say of this in respect of racialisation.

Some years ago, Lawrence Grossberg suggested “his spatio-temporal map of the current state of cultural studies: culture as text, culture as communication, culture in the sociocultural space, culture in relation to institutions, and culture in the making of everyday life” (Bachmann-Medick 2016: 6). It is hard to argue with these models as they are fairly comprehensive, but Cultural Studies now also needs to engage with the “new techno-sciences”, other “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988) and the vast cultural terrain of the ‘other-than-human’, in order to become transdisciplinary in response to the new complexity theories, the digital world and the ‘computational turn’. It has to be less Eurocentric and anthropocentric as it seeks to intervene in a rapidly changing public sphere. I will comment on the post-human later but we need to take account of what Rosi Braidotti speaks of as a “posthuman theory [being] a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as the ‘anthropocene’, the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” (Braidotti 2013: 5). My conclusion will deal with another dimension of the ‘human’, the cultural appropriation of the category in Modernity as something exclusively Western.

Emerging from the Humanities, but never really comfortable there, and edging into the social sciences, Cultural Studies has always been concerned with unsettling and destabilising, belonging to a transdisciplinary series of fields. In this sense, it was well prepared for an analysis of the disintegration, fragmentation and synthesising of cultural identities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – “the politics of disconnect” (Giroux 2016) – and for an engagement with complexity studies in the sciences with its ideas of indeterminacy, “contingency, context-dependency, system creativity and multiple, overlapping temporal and spatial frameworks” (Lee 2007: 17), as it had long questioned ideas of objectivity, value-free claims, and essentialisms as well as seeing cultural identities and formations as always under construction. In addition to this, the field

needed to participate in shifting “the geopolitics of critical knowledge” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 2), to go beyond its orientation in Europe and take account of decolonial thinking with its very different historiography and views of struggle and power, as well as also exploring the basis of Far Right ethno-populism with its myth of the “great replacement” (see Bromley 2018). With the global displacement of people now calculated at 65 million, the urgency of a historicised, decolonial epistemology is increasingly apparent. In a time of mobilities, flows, scapes and networks, forms of decolonial thinking can also be applied to the understanding of inequality, injustice, and the reduction of biodiversity on a local, national, and global scale.

New cultural forms are emerging, borders are simultaneously porous and barricaded, indifference and ethical cynicism are as important as questions of difference, and the paradigm of war is magnified as a mechanism of contemporary capitalism. There is, in Henry Giroux’s words, “a serious erosion of the discourses of community, justice, equality, public values, and the common good” (Giroux 2016: 2), all of which have long been concerns of Cultural Studies. The critique of capitalism has also always been a staple horizon of its research and theory as it responded, in the first instance, to industrialisation and urbanisation, and it has had to adapt to the encounter with technology, the rise of information and networking cultures, climate change, and the financialisation of value. Class has re-emerged as a salient category in inequality, as have race and ethnicity in decolonial terms, while gender, sexuality and religion have generated new antagonisms.

How does Cultural Studies, with its emphasis on particularity, context-specificity and its stress on historicisation intervene in this complex, interrelated and antagonistic global situation? We may have to think beyond capitalism to a form of post-capitalism. I say this in the light of research commissioned by the United Nations from the Finnish BIOS Research Unit for the UN Global Sustainable Development Report to be released in 2019. Among many conclusions reached by the Unit, one stands out in terms of a possible post-capitalism: “Economic activity is driven by meaning – maintaining equal possibilities for the good life while lowering emissions dramatically – rather than profit, and the meaning is politically, collectively constructed. It can’t happen without *considerable reframing of economic-political thinking*, however” (Järvensivu quoted in Ahmed 2018: 11. My italics). As, according to billionaire investor, Jeremy Grantham, “we face a form of capitalism that has hardened its focus to short-term profit maximisation with little or no interest in social good” (Ahmed 2018: 8), and as profit maximisation is its ultimate goal, then its long-term future is in serious doubt.

As “social good” is a prime concern of Cultural Studies, it will need to combine with other fields of knowledge to provide an analysis of any “reframing of economic-political thinking” in terms of its likely ethical consequences. This Report also identified four areas – energy, transport, food, and housing – which will require fundamental changes in the organisation of social and cultural life. In these, and other areas, dramatically different cultural practices and formation will need to develop. The scientists write that a switch to a different theoretical lens, different from market-orientated capitalism, requires “a shift from a focus on individual cognition to social or structural dimensions of human behaviour, where we begin to see that individual wants [...] are not merely individual but are produced or conditioned by a set of extra-individual dimensions” (quoted in Wray 2018: 3). The shift referred to would be needed by the neo-classical school of economics (the prevailing capitalist orthodoxy), but would be seen by Cultural Studies practitioners, and others in the Humanities and Social Sciences, as routine procedure.

As I have said, Cultural Studies has always been concerned with the relation between culture and power and, for many years, power was thought in terms of a national ruling class, the establishment, and the owners of the means of production as well as, by using Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Althusser’s idea of state apparatuses, their respective ideologies through which control and consent was exercised. In recent years, new forms of ethno-nationalism and the legitimisation of right-wing ideologies have commanded attention, and, together with the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism and its capture of the global economy, have meant that power has needed to be conceived in very different terms in respect of emerging technologies, financialisation of markets, deepening inequalities between rich and poor, new paradigms of conflict, environmental challenges and the growing incidence of the displacement of peoples. Not only has power needed to be re-thought but also, of course, our ways of describing and analysing culture have had to be reconfigured. Globalisation, as I said, has driven Cultural Studies beyond the nation, and beyond conventional binaries, towards increasing transdisciplinarity. The Humanities are competent to tackle the analysis of cultural expression and the processes of symbolisation and representation in everyday life, but in order to understand current political power, changing cultural identities, and geostrategic struggles – neoliberal and corporate – we need to engage with science and technology from a critical and ethical perspective. Technology, for example, has enabled border crossing in terms of capital, goods, and knowledge, but has also become a means of border control, surveillance, and ‘post-truth’ narratives. There are many similar contradictions which Cultural

Studies needs to examine. Science and technology have the capacity, through gene editing, to eliminate genetic diseases – such as cystic fibrosis – and to produce body modifications through prosthesis, but also to promote ‘moral enhancement’ and designer babies which raise a wide range of ethical questions about the so-called ‘post-human’. Genetic modification has also reduced biodiversity, depleted natural resources, and destroyed farming communities in the name of profit.

If we are living through a period of crisis and transformation, most commentators date this both to 9/11 and to the recession of 2008. The latter, it is argued, revealed a rupture in what has been almost forty years of neoliberalism, with its “matrix of valuation” (Butler 2014) and ushered in governmental practices of austerity, increasing inequalities on a global scale, and the upgrading of surveillance technologies; however, these have also produced ongoing resistances – the Arab Spring, the Occupy movements, Syriza, the Indignados, and hacking – none of which succeeded in the short term but all of which are, arguably, still in transition. This moment can be considered, in conventional Cultural Studies terms, as a conjuncture and it is through the idea of *conjunctural analysis* that I wish to trace the state of the field today and discuss the forms which its practices might take in the future. This account will be necessarily brief, but I shall try to outline what I consider to be the priorities for a cultural analysis of the contemporary world. As Stuart Hall argued, “When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no going back: History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend, ‘violently’, with all ‘the pessimism of the intellect’ at your command, ‘to the discipline of the conjuncture’” (Hall 1987: 17).

Cultural Studies in the United Kingdom began at a time when the postwar settlement of welfarism and social democracy were still unchallenged, relatively speaking, but in a few years had to adapt, not just to challenges, but to the wholesale dismantling of this settlement. The shorthand expression for this process was, in the United Kingdom, “Thatcherism”: deregulation, privatisation and a new technological paradigm based upon the revolution of information and communication technologies (Castells 2017: 206). Our task shifted to ways of understanding the currents in this specific historical moment and, also, to historicise this moment — to trace the cultural transformations and changing power relations which had brought us to this point, the larger trajectories of immaterial and material forces: the relation between the cultural, economic, political and social. *Policing the Crisis* (1979) was the classic analysis of the initial stages of this conjuncture, the political and cultural form of which became the dominant narrative for thirty years, with all society conceived as a market and price the arbiter of

everything. As Brian Elliott argues in *Natural Catastrophe*, “neoliberalism has become consolidated over the last four decades as a set of rigorous procedures and disciplinary practices governing individuals and institutions both from the ‘inside’ of personal consciousness [the new individualism] and from the ‘outside’ in the form of social mores and political common sense” (Elliott 2016: 2). Competition is regarded as the legitimate organising principle for all human activity, with elimination its principal mechanism and instrumentality seemingly its only rationale (I am thinking of all the winner/loser popular TV shows, celebrity culture in general and the currency of ‘loser’ as a term of abuse).

In the 1970s we were still living with “fidelity to May [1968]”, as Alain Badiou has called it. Paradoxically, almost at the same time, another epochal transformation was taking place which, unknown to us, would check and undermine many of the arguments which drove the field, if not its theoretical basis. The oil crisis of 1973, the onset of neoliberalism in Chile and elsewhere heralded the long period of privatisation, deregulation and marketisation which has gone virtually unchallenged until 2008. What I want to tentatively suggest at the end of this chapter is that we may be on the threshold of another epochal transformation and to ask whether Cultural Studies still has any purchase if my assumption is true. Has, in other words, class – albeit in very different form, perhaps that of the ‘multitude’ – returned as a factor in our current moment in so far as inequality (the 99%) has gained renewed prominence in everyday discourse, not just in the UK but on a global scale? Another assumption underpinning early Cultural Studies was that the subject and addressee of our analysis was a *collective*, a class confronted by the power of the State and the logic of capital. Hence, as I have just mentioned, the prominence of concepts such as hegemony and Althusser’s repressive *state* apparatuses and ideological *state* apparatuses linked, if not explicitly stated, with a residual sense of ‘false consciousness’. In other words, with the idea that an otherwise progressive working class, subject to multiple ideological and institutional snares, had its class consciousness thwarted, distorted and displaced by mass media and reactionary popular culture.

Neoliberalism displaced the idea of the collective with that of individualism and entrepreneurialism, which, in turn, led to a response from Cultural Studies that, in some ways, focussed upon the more middle class concerns of identity politics, linked to the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, although always, of course, in the context of patriarchal capitalism, Western colonialism and its corollary migration, and homophobia. In other words, these were all levels of struggle – gender, ‘race’, sexuality – which were missing from our original analysis

and were partly articulated with, as well as providing challenges to, hegemonic consumerism from the 1980s onwards. If our primary identity now was as a consumer, not as a worker (I am thinking of the weakening of the trade unions from the late 1970s onwards and the defeat of the miners in 1984-85), then what were the cultural and political implications of this in terms of prevailing hierarchies of meaning? One response was an over-celebratory cultural populism but, at a deeper level, concepts of negotiation, resistance and contestation – always there, of course, in class formulations – took on new forms and meanings at the level of the *active* consumer and the idea that identity was no longer fixed but always under construction. More recently, the development of digital media has sharpened this concentration on identity, with so many manifestations of sites and resources for self-expression but also, as we have seen in the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, Syriza, Podemos and the growth of petition culture, spaces for a new kind of *collective* mobilisation, and highly contested ones, as we know.

Culture, Raymond Williams said, is “ordinary” and I have often puzzled over precisely what this meant until I came across the formulation by the Latin American scholar Martin-Barbero:

We are not dealing with an increase of information about popular culture in terms of statistics and factual data, but rather with a process that relocates the ‘place’ of the popular by incorporating it into the constitutive memory of the flow of history [...]. This has begun to fragment the once monolithic concept of culture both at the level of the semantic universe and at the pragmatic level. (Martin-Barbero 1993: 62)

This, in essence, was what we were seeking to do, I think, to “relocate” the popular from the margins – both phenomenologically and politically – into the constitutive memory, not just of the “flows of history” but of the social formation as a whole. There was fierce resistance to this at both local and national level in the early 1970s, as we were seen as heretics and subversives trying to introduce an illegitimate object of study into the monolithic legitimacy of the academic hierarchy. Our ambition was not just to fragment the monolith but to reconstitute the fragments of an oppositional class culture, and to argue that culture was a contested and conflictual set of practices and representations. As John Berger says in *A Seventh Man*, a landmark text of its time:

The ‘normal’ is only fully exposed for what it is through action which opposes it, i.e. ‘abnormal’, ‘extremist’ or revolutionary action. When the normal is thus stripped of its normalcy, one’s proper sense of being exceptional

extends beyond oneself to the entire historical moment in which one is living. (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010: 108)

It is in the broad sense of cultural practices as constituting a cultural formation that I wish, to take a step back for a moment, to look briefly at John Berger's *A Seventh Man*, because it embodies in its complex and hybrid methodology much of what Cultural Studies set out to do, starting from a basis in power which it goes on to historicise and contextualise. It is an overtly Marxist text, but it breaks with the classic model of class struggle between workers and employers in a national, statist framework, and begins to trace the first stages of a migratory globalisation process which would undermine totally that particular principle, or model, of conflict. The book looks at the experience of the exploited migrant worker from Southern Europe and the Balkans, working in France, Switzerland and Germany. Whereas the first wave of post-war migrant workers in Northern Europe came primarily from former colonies, of this generation five out of six countries 'sending' workers were once imperial powers.

The book is divided into three parts – Departure, Work, and Return – and combines words with images in characteristic Berger and Jean Mohr fashion, together with objective analysis and subjective, close-up profiles, statistics and stories. The workers are both generic and specific, alienated, humiliated and rootless, existing solely through their labour power in 'exile'. They are workers in terms of their relation to the means of production but, disaggregated by language and origin, they are not of the *working class* in the classic sense at anything but the most vestigial level of consciousness, deskilled and mostly passive, severed from all deep ontological connections — “living [their] migration like an event in a dream dreamt by another” (Berger and Mohr [1975] 2010: 47). Beyond the world of work, there are signs of human agency, of resistance and of dreams, but they are essentially reduced to emblems of displacement and of the absence of political subjectification.

What Berger is charting is a narrative of *rupture* at the level of class, subjectivity and belonging, documenting new patterns of inequality and hierarchy, of exclusion and inclusion, winners and losers; patterns which were to develop exponentially over the next thirty years or so as a result of neoliberalism, conflict and poverty: diasporic in nature and transnational in its implications. The national model of analysis was being superseded. As has been claimed, the more the subject becomes unimagined, the more the possibilities of the future cannot be imagined, or narrated. At that time, those of us working in Cultural Studies thought that our 'subject' *was* imagined, that we knew who 'he' was

(and it was ‘he’), but as shifts in capitalism took place over time, ‘our’ subject became progressively ‘unimagined’ and new models of analysis were needed — ‘he’ became ‘she’, became ‘black’, became ‘gay’ etc.

What Berger does, as Rancière and Deleuze were to do later, is *imagine* a new subject, the figure of transnational displacement which in time merged with a larger model of displacement, what the useful shorthand calls the ‘99%’: those who were *not* ‘always already narrated’, a new story still in the process of construction, a new cultural horizon. The challenge facing any counter-hegemonic moment is to bring into accessible narrativity the primary conditions of its discourses and practices, those elements which can contribute to meaningful agency and empowerment, a new symbolic repertoire, other than the dominant, state-form explanations, representations and silences.

Berger is locating the beginnings, in Europe at least, of a “modern geopolitical imagination”. In the process, a re-mapping is taking place, with the migrant as the symbolic focus of a shifting in the boundaries of imagined national, and perhaps ultimately, global communities; as the forerunner of the massive displacement of people in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, he is clear about how any indigenous sense of insecurity is shored up by ideologies of xenophobia and racism (even more common now in far Right narratives), of scripts of homogeneity which render the migrant inferior, itinerant, temporary and dangerous. The migrant *grounds* and territorialises the resident, restores and renews the binaries of border and boundary. *A Seventh Man* traces the early stages of a new conjuncture which “reconfigures spaces at various levels, provokes cross-boundary flows of people, money, images and ideas, and puts pressure on traditional territorial identities [the initial terrain of Cultural Studies], as distinctions between local and global space become increasingly ambiguous” (Shapiro 1999: 85). As Mignolo and Walsh argue: “Borders are everywhere and they are not only geographic; they are racial and sexual, epistemic and ontological, religious and aesthetic, linguistic and national. Borders are the interior routes of modernity/coloniality and the consequences of international law and global linear thinking” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 112). Border obsession is one of the morbid symptoms mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Berger outlined in embryonic form the gestation of this process, this encounter which cut away the initial Cultural Studies paradigm, and what I am trying to hint at is that, in the present conjuncture, the loss of political subjectification on the part of what Rancière calls the “uncounted”, is no longer simply the migrant experience but is more diffuse and heterogeneous, that of the larger body of people threatened by austerity

who no longer have a political form of identity, are no longer *necessary*, and have lost any identification with a mode of subjectification of the people, as worker or proletarian; that is, of any class belonging or articulation. At the same time, it could be argued that the hegemonic order that configures well-identifiable groups with specific interests, aspirations, values and culture is now beginning to fragment. This may be so, but we still need in-depth analyses of that order, the prevailing discursive formations, and the continuing power of the logic of capital.

It is this reconfiguration, this interruption/disruption of the current ideological order of legitimation and violence, and the appropriation and reworking of the dominant discourse (the governing ways of being, doing and saying), which form the context of what I should like to turn to now.

Today, there are new, and different, fragments that have to be reconstituted, new paths of social change to be located and analysed. To do this, we shall need to develop a new, grounded theory of power which takes account of global social formations and networks – Occupy Wall Street (OWS), the Arab Spring, the World Social Form and the *Indignadas*, among others – which have arisen to challenge prevailing constructions of meaning and value, the symbolic manoeuvres of power brokers, and the conditioning by the predominant communication resources. Are these, perhaps, the harbingers of the recovery of democratic agency, the source of a new model of the collective, and an emergent political subject, once seen as the role of the historic working class? If, as Castells argues, “social movements throughout history are the production of new values and goals around which the institutions of society are transformed to represent these values by creating new norms to organise social life” (Castells 2012: n.p.), then what, if anything, is different about the new social networking movements which have taken shape since the late 1990s?

Whereas, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a relatively empowered working-class in Europe confronted the State with radically unequal means and resources, today the oppositional cultures have a distinct advantage in terms of information and communication power, significantly different alternatives in terms of the means to mobilise relatively autonomously (951 cities in 82 countries on 15 October, 2011 were the site of protests). They are also able to inhabit symbolic and strategic spaces over time, in which they rehearse, model and demonstrate alternative interests and values: modes of belonging *otherwise* and ‘instant communities of transformative practice’. These movements are fuelled by the increasing transparency of inequality, injustice, poverty and financial corruption. Digital and actual, leaderless, participatory, and horizontal organisations, they are experimental/exemplary forms of democratic

practice based on assembly, deliberation and consent, new configurations of value. So, arguably, the network and the co-operative are both processes which confront the existing framework of domination, questioning, and on occasions, weakening its claims to legitimacy, in articulation with the struggles and forms of knowledge of the Global South.

Cultural Studies began in a culture of modernity that was already at the point of exhaustion and beginning to unravel as those of us working in the field started, as I have indicated. So, what seemed a settled object of study – a broad narrative of progress – almost immediately was unsettled and has been ever since by changing processes in the geopolitical, techno-economic and the cognitive, a continuing crisis of the representational currencies we commonly experience, including that of globalisation itself. If this ‘crisis’ is multidimensional, then could the transdisciplinary perspectives of Cultural Studies once again be harnessed for the analysis of the economy, society, culture and politics as a continuum?

In his *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas described two kinds of crisis: of system and of “lifeworld”. The latter – the “symbolically structured space of taken-for-granted meanings in which cultural traditions, social interaction, and personal identity are sustained and reproduced” (Habermas [1973] 1988: 1) – is the realm of beliefs, values and action which has always been the focus of Cultural Studies. Can we also find ways of examining the values, beliefs and practices of specific cultural sets and networks of money, finance and power? The field has always been strong on sub-cultures but has tended to shy away from supra-cultures, those arcane networks of power which reproduce themselves and whose values come to dominate those well beyond its networks, for example in the 1980s by generalising ownership of capital built on access to shares (privatisation) and real estate to reproduce a culture of ‘networked self-interest’.

Arguably, we are on the threshold of a major *disruption* in social integration brought about by the ‘transnational interlocking of institutions’ and a credit-debt meltdown. What started as an economic crisis has become displaced into a political crisis and has the potential to turn into a cultural crisis – by which I mean a turning away from the primary sources of symbols and social meanings, legitimation and authorisation, and a popular disengagement from the prevailing currencies and discourses generated by the exercise of power. If this is, indeed, a crisis at the level of globalisation (but not necessarily global) and its fundamental premises, how will this impact at the level of the cultural in both material and symbolic terms, in transforming core narratives, produce a large-scale turbulence? I have spoken of the ways in which historicisation has always been a key feature of Cultural Studies,

but Earth Scientists have now come to locate the human in relation to deep time as they speak of ecological rupture or catastrophe, of being in transition between two epochs, the Holocene and the Anthropocene. If, as Jeremy Davies argues, “the planet is living through the birth of an epoch, then the world’s green movements face the responsibility of helping shape a turning point within the vast reaches of the geological timescale” (Davies 2016: 209). If Cultural Studies is to respond to this challenge, then it will need to develop new resources of analysis and expand its understanding of the cultural.

We need to think beyond the binary of the human and the other-than-human in terms of flows, complementarity, and interdependence, and of complexity and co-evolution. The Anthropocene debate is a good example of this complexity and transdisciplinarity as a methodology in terms of its use as metaphor as well as its focus of socio-economic analysis and its centrality to recent climate change science (the ‘Great Acceleration’). If the current environmental crisis is best understood as a collection of diverse but mutually-reinforcing political, economic, philosophical, ethical, relational, and spiritual crises, then Cultural Studies can complement responses to environmental problems in the hard sciences, by examining the cultural and social bases for climate change and its accompanying effects by addressing the values which underpin environmental decision-making, and exploring more ethical ways of imagining, narrating, and inhabiting global environments.

As Chakrabarty has argued, “anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty 2009: 201), and, as a consequence, the human/nature relationship changes and we need to think in terms of co-evolution of the natural, human, social and cultural. Humans have now become *geological agents*, have entered time as a geological force but very recently in terms of human history. How can Cultural Studies respond analytically to this rupture in the functioning of the Earth System? Has it any contribution to make to the development of a world-wide accepted strategy leading to the sustainability of ecosystems against human-induced stress? I would suggest by producing analytical frameworks engaging questions of power, freedom and democracy, and the direction of capitalist globalisation, above all, its ecological limits. The task of placing historically the crisis of climate change needs to consider the planetary and the global; deep time and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital. A transdisciplinary approach would be essential to embrace all the dimensions. Environmental Justice Cultural Studies, for instance, draws on environmental history, critical legal studies, social science, ethnic studies, women’s studies and

cultural geography, but we also need to develop cultural criticism of technological and scientific discourses and practices. A conversation across disciplines is increasingly urgent, a conversation in which we re-imagine and remake ourselves to imagine new ways of being and becoming together – new symbolic forms and cultural practices.

One area where this conversation is critical is that of the trans-, or post-, human with its “core idea of human beings in transition” (More and Vita-More 2013: 421). The Transhumanist Declaration (2012) states that “Transhumanism is a cultural movement, a class of philosophies that seeks the continued evolution of human life beyond its current human form as result of science and technology guided by life-promoting principles and values” (More and Vita-More 2013: 54). This has involved neurobiological (moral) enhancement, designer evolution, intelligent machines, and artificial intelligence. The aim is to overcome human limitations through reason, science and technology; for example, ageing, mortality, the alteration of brain chemistry. This raises large ethical questions at a number of levels – are the principles and values really life-promoting? whose life? – and, as it claims to be a ‘cultural movement’, then Cultural Studies has to have a role in this questioning. Are we witnessing a new kind of eugenics (designer babies, Down syndrome elimination by abortion), a profit-driven research culture led by Silicon Valley, and the creation through technology (genetics, nanotechnology, AI, robotics) of massive wealth which will add to global inequities? In other words, we need a methodology and critical vocabulary for examining the *claims* of transhumanism – for example, that disabilities will be overcome, health will be enhanced, suffering will be eliminated, everyone in the world will have sufficient food and water, and climate change will be remedied. Cultural Studies will need to intersect with other critical disciplines as well, with, for example, the anti-eugenic, neurodiversity movement and other emancipatory movements, to interrogate the connection between technologies and the forces of power, ideology and politics.

If “culture is an active process of articulating flows within which relations of power are reproduced, resisted, and transformed” (Castells 2017: 212) and, as Castells claims, cultural change precedes political change, then we need to examine the current resources for cultural change and resistance, forms of creativity, autonomy, and networking harnessed with/to new technologies: a new politics of kindness, care, and belonging, of co-operatives, the commons, slow movements, municipalism, blockchain, and the not-for-profit sector. It is essential to enlarge the horizons of research which have traditionally characterised Cultural Studies by incorporating the environmental and the technolog-

ical in a generalised ecology which Guattari called *ecosophy*, a model of research which also seeks to engage with its subjects as co-equals, for example in developing the culture of urban planning alongside the people who live, or will live, in towns or cities.

What I am advocating is “a socio-historical approach that theorizes the interaction and co-evolutionary development of science, technology, capitalism society, and human individuals as part of reciprocally interacting social processes” (Best and Kellner 2001: 14). In order to situate this more precisely, for the final section of this chapter I want to talk briefly about what Foucault called “the long baking process of history” (Foucault [1971] 1977: 144) which has produced the mindset that has led to European ways of seeing refugees, displaced peoples and racialised others, as it relates to the decolonial thinking which I consider to be an essential feature of a more complex Cultural Studies. This also helps us to think critically about the different forms of ethno-nationalism and identitarianism in the world (see Bromley 2018).

As I have said, one of the roles of Cultural Studies is that of *unsettling*. In thinking about this final section, I started with Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation” (Wynter 2003). To speak of Eurocentrism is something of a cliché now, but in order to understand European attitudes to refugees/migrants at the level of the State and in popular terms, I think it is still necessary to produce an explanatory account by going back and thinking about what Wynter calls the Western bourgeois conception of the human, *Man*, which *over-represents* itself as if it were the human itself. The idea of the Western European as over-representing itself as human is of value because it helps to see why refugees are seen as disposable/expendable *en masse*, regarded as less than human. Once the idea of dehumanisation takes hold it is accompanied by impunity and indifference at the level of the State and in terms of the popular imaginary. How, otherwise, do we make sense of negative responses to the deaths of thousands of refugees at sea, and elsewhere, in recent years, and policies of exclusion which consist of building walls and fences to keep out would-be asylum-seekers? Refugees are the modern version of Fanon’s “wretched of the earth”, as, much of what he had to say about “les damnés” applies to refugees. The attitude of indifference towards the Grenfell Tower victims in London (June 14, 2017), many of whom were poor and/or immigrant, was similar.

Any attempt to unsettle this over-representation necessitates an understanding of what a number of Latin American theorists (Quintano and Mignolo, among others) have called “the coloniality of power”. In

writing about displacement, generally, we need to ask ourselves why, and how, we distance ourselves from refugees, and what set of values enables us to do so. One part of the answer is *racialisation*, one of the primary legacies of colonialism, with the idea of race as “the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years” (Mignolo 2007: 46). Race as a master code, or narrative *mentalité*, has entered so deeply into common sense and daily discourse as part of the construct of the white Euro-American that the ‘epistemological disregard’ of the other informs all other forms of ‘disregard’, of ‘looking away from’. Global inequality is one of the root effects and premises of this racialisation and a reason why degradation, immiseration, and the violent deaths of refugees are met with indifference. They are, in Judith Butler’s words, “the ungrievable”:

Lives regarded as disposable of are so stripped of value that when they are imperilled, injured or lost, they assume a social ontology that is partially constituted by that regard [...] their potential loss is no occasion to mourn. Someone who has never existed has been nullified, so nothing has happened. The ‘grievable’ postulates a future conditional [...] to be grievable is a precondition of being valuable in the present. (Butler 2014: 35)

Systematically representing refugees as figures of lack, without worth or value, lives not worthy of living, derives from ideas with their roots in slavery and gradually extended to cover all other colonised people. These ideas are derived from hegemonic Western forms of knowledge and need to be challenged by establishing equity between ‘different ways of knowing and different kinds of knowledge’. In his *Epistemologies of the South*, Sousa Santos calls the destruction of different ways of knowing in the Global South *epistemicide* and argues that “[f]rom the perspective of the epistemologies of the South, inquiries into ways of knowing cannot be separated from inquiries into ways of intervening in the world with the purpose of attenuating or eliminating the oppression, domination and discrimination caused by global capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy” (Sousa Santos [2014] 2016: 238). This sentence aptly summarises what I consider needs to be one of the key features of Cultural Studies today as it extends its analytical reach beyond Europe and Western models of understanding. This is not to say that this is not already happening but that it needs to be articulated more clearly and primacy given to new, intercultural narratives.

In ‘shifting the geographies of reason’ to take account of the Global South, Cultural Studies needs to come to terms with what Maldonado-Torres has called “epistemic subalterity”: “Man is not merely a mode of

thinking but an epistemic ontology that depends on the liminalization of all colonial peoples by European reason, science and technology” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 11). It is, he says, a “material episteme that shapes the way we live, not simply the way we think”. The BIOS report I cited earlier, points out how uneven the Anthropocene effect is: “the wealthiest one billion produce 60% of CO<sub>2</sub> [greenhouse gases] whereas the poorest three billion produce only 5%” (in Angus 2018: 1). Can we be sure that the new technology revolution, the so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, will not also further liminalise those traditionally ‘othered’ by Western patriarchy in respect of gender, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality? If technology is changing what it means to be human, how will this impact upon culture in the broadest sense? As an imperialising force, Western Europe not only practised slavery and extensive forms of exclusion, but also developed an accompanying ideological narrative related to this, which persists today. Nationalism is one way in Europe in which history is still present in all we think and do, exaggerated even more today by Far-Right populism. As Mbembe says, when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples, “race has been the ever-present shadow in Western thought and practice” (Mbembe 2003: 17).

Until recent years, the term “the wretched of the earth” would comfortably have been applied to those outside the West, but neo-liberalism, austerity, and growing inequality mean that this term also now resonates within the West, with many commentators speaking of ‘the left behind’ – ‘people feeling abandoned’ and lacking a narrative. Today, the jobless, the homeless, the poor, the systemically excluded and criminalised are left by themselves, mostly unaided by the State. As a result, the abandoned in Europe are now made to occupy spaces originally prescribed for the ‘wretched other’. Disposability has come home and, as a consequence, racism and Islamophobia have increased in countries which once prided themselves on welcoming refugees (if not actually always doing this). One problem we face, given the presence of hostile media, is how do we break into, and break up these narratives, if ‘being white’ or, for example, ‘English’, no longer functions as a central psychic compensatory mechanism? I am speaking of countering the growing ethno-nationalism in the West evidenced by the relative electoral success of Far Right populist parties in Austria, Italy, Holland, France, Germany, and Sweden.

Refugees are seen as waste to be excluded, refuse to be discarded, unproductive lives but, at a deeper level, they symbolise a precariousness, a liminality, in the present conjuncture, which serves as an unsettling, unwelcome reminder of how many lives in the privileged West are now also remaindered. Refugees occupy the borderland between abandon-

ment and value now shared by many. Any attempt to unsettle common sense thinking about refugees or migrants confronts ideological forms of nationalism, coloniality, and the state. If, in decolonial thinking, Modernity is identified as the principal bearer of the nexus of power which dominated and controlled racialised others, then transmodernity may be its counter-narrative predicated upon dialogical engagement. Overcoming prejudice towards refugees is an agonistic process, a struggle on several fronts – generational and demographic. One of the major problems to contend with is a taken-for-granted European and white ethnicity. Refugee representations have to somehow interrupt/disrupt this ‘continuity’ and introduce new levels of diversity and antagonism, expose the contingency and emptiness of nationalist signifiers, to go beyond the nation to formulate other, perhaps global, but not necessarily territorial, allegiances.

Potentially, Cultural Studies is more robust now than originally because of identity politics, but it also needs a more holistic methodology drawn from across disciplines. The old classic models and ideologies – the society/nation/state continuum – which shaped the original Cultural Studies *intervention* need to be reformulated in order to examine both the positive and negative outcomes of a possible transformation. No longer is it possible to identify with any certainty the major principle of antagonism/conflict – for example, like class struggle up to the 1970s – as the 99% is a useful slogan but has no analytical precision or purchase, whereas anti-globalisation, linked to other struggles, like OWS, the Arab Spring, and indigenous movements in Latin America, may yet produce a new paradigm/principle of conflict. Cultural Studies has always been about the conflict between the ‘settled’ and the ‘unsettled’ – *unsettling* is its primary dynamic, the taking apart of presumed, or imagined, closures (of village, nation, or identity), and instability its focus.

As yet, the emergent dynamic of conflict at the level of value, of what has been called ‘networked belonging’ against ‘networked self-interest’, is still grossly unequal but, at least, is posing a fundamental challenge to dominant mediations through the building of new forms of communicative power, alternative models of expertise, gradually wresting some of the high visibility from power elites and in the direction of renewed social trust and the disembedding of dominant role models. It is just possible to identify glimpses of different social actors, alternative models of information dissemination, new social conflicts powered – in the first instance, perhaps – by a disenfranchised, disenchanting graduate middle class, sometimes in conjunction with other class fractions with as yet unformed objectives: as this is an ‘experimental’ generation, although it is actually socially diverse and

cross-generational, all designed to bring about *qualitative* change: “the priorities of any advanced society must be equality, progress, solidarity, freedom of culture, sustainability and development, welfare and people’s happiness” (the *Indignados*). All of this is premised upon a ‘lifeworld’ based on much broader precepts than work and consumption – especially ‘care’ and the re-definition of a *public* with access and control over spaces and networks, of autonomy and citizenship in a participatory democracy.

It is always dangerous to speculate on the end of anything, as it can be confused with wishful thinking, but there are certainly signs of deep tension and incoherence within the neoliberal narrative, a disordering and sense of contradiction, what Gramsci referred to as “morbid symptoms” (Gramsci [1948-51] 1971: 276) and which we may term a crisis. What is the nature of the present conjuncture and what are its most urgent questions? Responses/resistances to the dominant narrative are, at present, inchoate and not yet sustainable, but by exploring the concepts of ‘trans’ and ‘post’, I want to attempt an outline of those points where Cultural Studies might be able to intervene: in, for example, changing subjectivities (e.g. transgender), the commons and collectivities, the transhuman, environmental change, decolonial thinking and displacement, articulated with the analysis of prevailing currents/narratives of power in order “to make transparent the lineaments of power, underpinned by information” (Geyer and Bright 1995: 1060). Part of the task is to contest existing explanatory strategies and analytical categories and asymmetries of power: “The world we live in has come into its own as an integrated globe yet it lacks narration and has no history” (Geyer and Bright 1995: 1059). The role of Cultural Studies is to produce new imaginaries, new narratives which critique “the global informational capitalist system” (Castells 2017: 206).

Cultural Studies, as I have been arguing throughout, has always been a marriage between pedagogy and politics that challenges the historical and contemporary narrative which, from the standpoint of power, is set in stone and embedded in common sense, and I have chosen to conclude with this brief case study of decolonial thinking because it seems to me that the ‘decolonial turn’ is, in the words of Maldonado-Torres:

A simultaneous response to the crisis of Europe [and beyond] and the condition of racialized and colonized subjects in modernity. It posits the primacy of *ethics* as an antidote to problems with Western concepts of freedom, autonomy, and equality, as well as the necessity of politics to forge a world where ethical relations [of care, compassion, symbolic and affec-

tive bonds, the social good] become the norm rather than the exception. (Maldonado-Torres 2008:7)

What is Cultural Studies, if it is not an ethical commitment? The challenge now is how to develop a new ethical grammar for our times arising from the sense of “a human collectivity, an us” (Chakrabarty 2009: 222).

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REWORDING/REWARDING CULTURE: (POST)CULTURAL  
STUDIES AND THE SHAME OF BEING 'DIFFERENT'

*Abstract*

In his *Keywords*, Raymond Williams states that “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 1977: 76). This paper engages with the complex ways in which a methodological approach born in the UK as part of the culture of the New Left, and conceived as a hybrid tendency across disciplines rather than a discipline in itself, is reshaped in the Italian academic context. I will see how English Cultural Studies in Italy tends to be perceived as a Janus-faced approach, inheriting Hoggart’s and Williams’s attempt at adapting techniques of literary analysis for the study of a variety of cultural formations and Stuart Hall’s emphasis on language as *the* practice grounding signification and producing cultural representations (Hall and Open University 1997: 4-6). While recognising Eagleton’s position that “Literature [...] inherits the weighty ethical, ideological and even political tasks which were once entrusted to rather more technical and practical discourses” (Eagleton 2000: 40), I will consider how this position should include Hall’s notion that “culture is about shared meanings and meanings can only be shared through our common access to language” (Hall and Open University 1997: 1-2). In a postcolonial and globalised perspective, and with an eye to the current European contingency concerning migration, I will focus on how the Italian approach to Cultural Studies can help us to tackle the ambiguity recently pointed out by Simon Gikandi, who claimed that English literature is simultaneously “one of the most universal phenomena” and “one of the most parochial disciplines” (Gikandi 2001: 650). This requires English Cultural Studies to strongly engage with Postcolonial and Migration Studies, and again raises the question of what we call ‘Cultural Studies’ and how this theory is located in the Italian context.

*Keywords:* Cultural Studies in Italy; (Post)Cultural Turn; Migration Studies; Postcolonial Studies.

### 1. *Looking for It: Motherless Languages at a Loss for New Words*

I grew up thinking of words as spells possessing the magic power to shape the world. My current work moves from the same kind of preliminary assumption, which also represents one of the founding principles of the original critical project going by the definition of ‘Contemporary Cultural Studies’. In the Italian academic world, and not only there, this has always been a contested space. The inbuilt diversification of approaches, the slippery nature of the definition, the commitment tenet and the persisting reference to texts that belong to our contemporary world add to the field’s natural complexity. And within this frame, language proves a key factor in reshaping an effective critical approach to the issue of representation.

My starting point is the assumption that language *means* and, in many respects, *rules*. In his seminal work on representation, Stuart Hall defines language as a “signifying practice” (1997: 1), precisely because “[a]ny representational system [...] can be thought of as working, broadly speaking, according to the principles of representation through language” (1997: 5). By all means, therefore, language is *the* beginning, and literature, embedded as it is in the cosy if nondescript frame of culture, consists in the meaningful use of language. Once accepted that language is a signifying practice belonging to a definite circuit of culture, it is to be inferred that the process of signification can only take place within the borders of a community providing sense to its own representations. In the fifth chapter of his *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Walter D. Mignolo reflects on the complicity between language, literature, culture and nation, reinforcing the need for a relation between linguistic maps and literary geographies (Mignolo 2000: 218). This complicity, by itself a resource for broadening the limits of human knowledge, is in fact neutralised by the current, and unfortunately agreed upon, assessment of the humanities in the academic context at large. While describing the current strictures imposed on fields of knowledge, Mignolo points out that “the restrictive rules operating in cultures of scholarship are based on the belief that literature is fine, but doesn’t constitute serious knowledge” (2000: 222). In short, as humanists, we raise very important issues but we are a basically useless bunch of people. What has been silently applied, in academic research and in Italy in particular, is a sort of ‘imperialism of the mind’ that seems to have recently increased and that sharply opposes science and literature, burning out nuances in academic education and research. It is my conviction that, in the face of this clear-cut dichotomy functionally used to show how unpractical the humanities are, Cultural Studies as a project covers an

in-between space that may prove extraordinarily useful, even when stubbornly marginalised.

In this light, as a researcher educated in the field of Literary Studies and then jumping the line and converging towards the critical analysis of popular cultures, my first problem is understanding how culture and literature relate. Franco Moretti may be of some help in this respect. In his recent essay on World Literature, he introduces a number of very interesting reflections on Literary Studies and change, encouraging both younger and older scholars to overcome the limits of their training: "Scientific work always has limits. But limits change" (Moretti 2000: 54). I firmly believe that culture and literature, in terms of both formation and research, are not only compatible, but also relevant to each other, and they may safely carry some of us across the limits Moretti talks about. The real issue is not *what* kind of texts we must approach – which seem to be largely the same for Literary Studies and Cultural Studies – but *how* we are supposed to approach them, by which sort of critical tools and, most of all, in my view, to which purposes. And, in any case, the close link between culture and literature stands right at the origin of Cultural Studies in the UK. The interwoven action of the two fields of research is posited by Raymond Williams – himself a disciple of F.R. Leavis – via the definitions he provides for both of them in his *Keywords*. As far as culture is concerned, he states that the word "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought" (Williams 1977: 76-77). Regarding 'literature', he admits that "it is a difficult word, in part because its conventional contemporary meaning appears, at first sight, so simple. There is no apparent difficulty in phrases like English literature or contemporary literature, until we find occasion to ask whether all books and writing are literature (and if they are not, which kinds are excluded and by what criteria) or until, to take a significant example, we come across a distinction between literature and drama on the grounds, apparently, that drama is a form primarily written for spoken performance" (Williams 1977: 150-51).

About both words, he acknowledges complexity as a marking feature. In both cases, he examines the semantic development of each word, referring to relevant observations about the development of their meanings through time and in relation to specific national spaces. He becomes more specific (and introduces differences) when he tries to put his finger on the defining features of each word. With reference to literature, he specifies

that the “teaching of English, especially in universities, is understood as the teaching of literature, meaning mainly poems and plays and novels” (Williams 1977: 152-53), thus pointing out the tendency to separate hierarchically “literature” from “literacy” and negatively marking the notion of the literary canon as stable (p. 154). About culture, he reminds us that “Culture in all its early uses was a noun of process” (p. 77).

In short, in the 1970s and while trying to reconnect academic studies to popular cultures, Raymond Williams drew some meaningful borders that are, however, to be conceived as permeable and changeable. In the awareness that “limits change” (Moretti 2000: 54), we should emphasise the need to recover a critical praxis capable of pushing theory beyond the abstract field of humanist research (as traditionally intended) and providing a meaning – alongside an identifiable role – to the choice of being a humanist in a given community. This critical practice finds its core in the ability to develop new tools for new social and cultural conditions, somehow always

working in an area of displacement. There is always something decentred about the medium of culture, about language, textuality and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures. And yet, at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, the trace, of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, all of those questions can never be erased from cultural studies. (Hall *et al.* [1991] 1992: 285)

The issue of resistance as a function of history also allows for the rejection of any form of fixed theory which would crystallise the method of critical analysis and therefore impair the possibility to choose the right tools for the right moment, in full congruence with one’s own positionalities.

## 2. *The (Post)Cultural Turn, or the Advantages of Being on a Border*

The prefix ‘post-’ is sexy mostly because it does not mean, but is given meaning by the coming-after contingency. Hence my resistance to introducing a definition grounded in this nondescript practice. My use of the prefix in brackets comes from an awareness of the need to re-semantise the work of the humanist today, years after the so-called ‘cultural turn’ which took place in the 1970s and has been mentioned by Stuart Hall, among others, as a turning point in Cultural Studies (1997: 5 ff). The (post)cultural turn may effectively designate the at-

tempt at adjusting the notion of culture and the work on popular culture according to hanging spaces (that are now global) and different times (whose pace of change has been accelerating in recent years). More practically, the point is: what is the social, cultural, and empirical role of the humanist in a globalised and ever-changing environment? And to what extent may Cultural Studies help to take into account the fact that, as researchers, we do have positionalities, but “those positionalities are never final, they’re never absolute” (Hall 1992: 279)?

In considering the risks of choosing to be part of an open-ended project, I would spend a few words in favour of inhabiting a critical borderland. As any intersectional space, *limina* exhibit a Janus-faced quality: they imply more distance from the centre (hence from power) and therefore more freedom, but they lack the safety of canonised knowledge. It should be remembered that this is why Cultural Studies must constantly authorise their theoretical tools, to avoid being marked as ‘not scientific’ and therefore not relevant, as well as subaltern.

In a 1976 lecture, while speaking of the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”, Foucault made some statements that may come in handy here. By subjugated knowledges, Foucault explains, “one should understand [...] a whole set of knowledges that has been disqualified as inadequate to its tasks or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity”. He then specified that such knowledges are given as “low-ranking”, “differential” and “incapable of unanimity” (Foucault [1976] 1994: 210). The viability of these definitions with reference to the current consideration given to Cultural Studies in the academic environment, in Italy and in some other national contexts, is surprising. However, they may also prove extremely promising if considered in a different perspective. Cultural Studies is “low-ranking” in that it deliberately chooses to be on the side of popular cultures. It is “differential” in that it values comparison as a relevant tool in any critical approach. And it is “incapable of unanimity” since it seems to be resolutely grounded in intersectional approaches, including a variety of methods and giving space and voice to often silenced fields<sup>1</sup>.

Let’s be clear about it: borders can be beautiful, particularly in the (post)academy. And, joking apart, they can produce very interesting contaminations and forms of hybridisation. In recent times, an increas-

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the round table involving Stuart Hall, Rosi Braidotti, Ien Ang, Alan Grossman, Judith Halberstam, Dick Hebdige and many others, which took place within the frame of the Cultural Studies Now Conference, at UEL, London from 19 to 22 July 2007.

ing number of scholars – mostly locating themselves in the field of Post-colonial Studies and even sociology and anthropology – have come to claim that literature and the humanities in general tend to anticipate and ‘give words’ to changes in society that would otherwise go unnoticed, or would be ‘scientifically’ studied later on. Simon Gikandi (2001), in a seminal essay on globalisation, claims that literature was able to foresee the current breaking down of the Enlightenment vision of Europe as a civilised place. Paul Gilroy, in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2006), quotes Shakespeare and Melville to reflect on some relevant, and sorrowful, current issues in European and US cultures. And in another recent study (Gilroy 2014), he reads the tragedy of migration in the Mediterranean sea by evoking the ancient colonial hierarchies which once developed in the same space. Sandro Mezzadra (2015) mentions Conrad in his analysis of the condition of today’s migrants and tries to show how *Heart of Darkness* poetically anticipated some of our contemporary sociological reflections. Quite meaningfully, Terry Eagleton, in *The Idea of Culture* (2000), reminds us of T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* and points out how the poet defined culture as a word designating the whole way of life of a people, in an obvious connection with anthropology and sociology.

The complexity of these issues is beyond question, but it seems clear to me that the dichotomy culture/literature runs the risk of shaping a *nomos* that implies a double standard of research and sometimes discards as marginal a field that Lidia Curti, in her wonderful essay “What is Real and What is Not: Female Fabulation in Cultural Analysis” (Curti in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992), defines instead as central to our formation as critical intellectuals.

So, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed “to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death”? In Hall’s view, “[t]hose are the things cultural studies can address” (Hall in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992: 284).

### 3. *The Issue of Naming*

I have reached the age at which, no matter how long the rest of my career as a professor might be, one is bound to draw some conclusions. Since I have always found it difficult to comply with the academic obsession with borders – an obsession that has at times been extremely useful in protecting species in danger of extinction – I tend to approach research through the same general beliefs I hold about the use of labels

in any field: they are functional when, and if, they result in some kind of order that works towards a better understanding, but they must be discarded when, and if, they obstruct knowledge by introducing a kind of unwanted rigidity. Obviously enough, research develops, too, and responds to contextual stimuli. The borders between Literary Studies and Cultural Studies – even admitting that they have ever existed – have certainly been redrawn a number of times since the birth of Contemporary Cultural Studies. Many literary scholars, whose faith in the need for literary studies to be 'literary' is adamant, often choose to delve into the process of film adaptations from novels or plays. This is perfectly legitimate and it may be done from a variety of critical perspectives (Cartmell and Whelehan 1999). However, what is in fact a natural development of a critical method, in line with an evolving set of narrative tools and structures, has on the other hand muddied the water in terms of applying labels to this kind of research and their supporters. A number of these scholars, in Italy and abroad, really seem perplexed – if not definitely annoyed – when one observes that their work may be actually going in the direction of Cultural Studies. In some cases, they feel the need to claim that they are *definitely not* doing Cultural Studies, as if it were a dangerous virus.

I wonder why such a label should be felt so dangerous by any committed scholar. The answer partly resides in the critical fluidity of the field, which, as explained above, amounts to both a resource and a limit. Yet, I think it is crucial to consider not only the possible scientific and methodological drawbacks, but also the social and emotional implications of locating oneself in this field, while at the same time being a researcher in English Studies. The institutional, critical, social and emotional aspects are in fact part of the same web. In practice, Cultural Studies presents a kind of complexity that depends on the widespread feeling that the method is 'not scientific enough' and it is also said to easily become the favourite field for researchers who are not able to devote themselves to Literary or Linguistics Studies. In real (academic) life, and if you are young and locating yourself within the project and practice of Cultural Studies, you may happen to be asked some meaningful questions concerning your identity as a researcher, teacher or professor. Such questions generally run like this:

- So this means you don't work on literature, do you?
- Your books include plenty of images, do they?
- Are you *really* working at university?
- Ok, this is not literature. Do you teach any other important subject?

- Was your literary training insufficient to deal with, say, Shakespeare, or Milton?
- Oh, I see: you're left wing (currently an insult)

The joke may be amusing or depressing, but still most of us, including myself, when facing these direct questions, tend to deny they are in the field of Cultural Studies and to declare improvised and previously unpredicted loyalties to other apparently contiguous, though more consolidated, fields (Contemporary Studies, Comparative Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and so on and so forth). I do often react like this because I fear this label may be equated to the choice of an 'amateur researcher' who claims singularity to cover ignorance, running the risk of being excluded from the main lines of research endorsed in my institutional context: culture is regarded as Caliban, a 'delicate monster' that is kept at arm's length, the length of the arm being of course variable.

Generally speaking, it is still true, as Stuart Hall maintained in 1991, that "Cultural studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories". I think we should be aware that the "whole set of formations" that are supposed to be the main object of study are mostly unstable and in progress, and they unavoidably produce many, often conflicting, trajectories, resulting in "a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention" (Hall [1991] 1992: 278). This explains why different national scholarly contexts provide diverging interpretations and articulations of the critical methodology which was introduced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, in Birmingham, as early as 1964. A further variable reinforcing the need for multiplicity in this critical approach resides in the fact that the researchers choosing to be part of the Cultural Studies project normally work on current issues and address their diachronic development as a process that is to be studied in order to properly understand what we are living here and now, in a globalised but still intensely localised environment. Globalisation hosts conflicting attitudes (Mignolo 2000; Gikandi 2001), precisely because it is a *process*, not an *achievement*. And what is happening *now* in this process is that, despite the inexorable drive towards the removal of borders (both geographical and symbolical), problems tend to be approached – even more than before and because of a protective impulse – on an intensely localised basis: more than ever, each culture produces its own vision of the world.

Therefore, my concluding remarks concern how we are to inflect Cultural Studies in the Italian research context. As I said, I entered Cultural Studies from Literary Studies. I have been trained in the English literary tradition and I have gradually developed a specific interest in

contemporary literature. The field has unfolded along lines including several, diversified forms of narrative and drawing on codes that may be different from – or not limited to – written words. As a matter of fact, for example, it is in this sense impossible to critically approach Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* without considering the film adaptations that have partly remoulded and rewritten the original story.

Now, on these grounds, my final point is: is it really useful or relevant to re-label the literary scholar as a Cultural Studies researcher because he/she is choosing a different critical perspective, the more so when this perspective seems to be required by the text itself? Would it not be more interesting to think of this critical development as a natural step forward? We evolve, or wish to do so. And in any case, in my experience, in the field of English Studies in Italy, we all entered Cultural Studies from literature. There is no reason to deny this. And most of us are still teaching literature and using literary texts in our research work. A recent survey currently under way through the online journal *Altre Modernità* has developed a reflection precisely on this issue<sup>2</sup>. Three young researchers conducted interviews with Italian professors and scholars loosely referring to the field of Cultural Studies, with the aim of gaining a better definition of the approach in a specific national context. What has so far emerged from this experience is, basically, the unwillingness of the interviewed scholars to label their work as belonging to the Cultural Studies project, although in practice they develop their research along the lines of this very field.

As for myself, I have no particular interest in labels. At a certain point, I chose to locate myself within the project and practice of Cultural Studies, because this magmatic field allows me to understand contemporary literature and art more effectively; it gives me the freedom to select my tools and it provides meaning to my being a humanist here and now. My choice has its own consequences relating to both my institutional position and pedagogical practice. Following Stuart Hall, I do not think we can divorce theoretical work from pedagogy (Hall in Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992), and I believe we should remember that, as a project, Cultural Studies is always open to what it does not yet know, to what it cannot yet name (Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler [1991] 1992: 279). There is no theoretical closure.

As far as pedagogy at university is concerned, my impression is that, sadly enough, the main point now consists in an increasing drive to

<sup>2</sup> The results of this survey have been published in *Altre Modernità* – Special Issue 09 (Guarracino, Monegato, Scarabelli 2018) and *Altre Modernità* – Issue 19 (Guarracino, Monegato, Scarabelli 2018: 256-317).

‘marketise’ education instead of making it more effective and up-to-date. On the contrary, I humbly believe that the direction to be taken pivots on understanding culture and knowledges, where ‘understanding’ is used both as a gerund and as an adjective.

I think all of us want to change the world through literature, language, and the humanities. Sandro Mezzadra recently stated something rather radical about Italian academic training: he said that our academic system is dramatically inefficient in its task of producing and transmitting knowledge<sup>3</sup>. Academic training and research sometimes lead to a commitment to hierarchy from birth to burial, and in some cases burial may turn premature if you fail to gain a permanent position of some kind. But, at the same time, it is my conviction that the small, unheroic task of rewording (giving new words to) literary and linguistic studies, so as to include culture, may become a highly rewarding endeavour. And, in fact, this is what we humanists are supposed to do.

<sup>3</sup> See Sandro Mezzadra, Plenary Lecture: “Condizione postcoloniale, postcolonialismo, studi postcoloniali. Un bilancio provvisorio”, International Conference *Archivi del futuro. Il postcoloniale, l’Italia e il tempo a venire*, February 18-20, 2015, University of Padua.

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THE DISASTER SELFIE:  
IMAGES OF POPULAR VIRTUAL TRAUMA

*Abstract*

In an increasingly mediated world, tragic events tend to be filtered through mass media. In *Trauma and Media* (2010), Allen Meek underlines the fundamental role played by media in connection with trauma; indeed, the complex relationship setting in between a traumatic event and its technological mediation within a large community has become a focal point in the 9/11 aftermath, and Meek considers this as an example of “virtual trauma”. In the last decade, the idea of trauma has undergone a process of spectacularisation generated by a massive reliance on the media, which have forged a paradigm for the popular representation of personal experiences of victimhood. Reporting on their visits to historical sites (linked to tragic events) through photos and social media has become a common habit among many travellers. Today the so-called ‘disaster selfie’, namely the insertion of the self at a site commemorating a human tragedy, is a popular trend which is bound to reconfigure our relationship with death in the digital world. The aim of this paper is to analyse how popular trauma culture has been evolving, by focusing on the recent – though short-lived – project of *Yolocaust*, a website showing people taking ‘inappropriate’ pictures at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, and a phenomenon which has raised new moral challenges for an ethics of visibility online.

*Keywords:* photography; media; Holocaust; trauma.

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience [...]. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. (Sontag 2004: 16)

In our increasingly mediated culture, tragic events tend to be witnessed and understood through the lens of the media. While TV-news generally conveys a 'softer' version of shocking circumstances and facts, the massive resort to contemporary digital media has actually been hyperexposing audiences to such spectacles. A number of traumatic facts have therefore grown into virtual experiences and the phenomenon of 'dark tourism', namely a tourist's attraction to 'horror sites', has considerably developed, so much so that "wherever there has been a horrific event, there will be people taking pictures of themselves" (Miles 2011). As a consequence, the new trend of experiencing dark tourism on screen has raised several ethical problems and triggered a provocative response from intellectuals and artists, as is the case with Shahak Shapira's controversial *Yolocaust*.

For a long time, most relevant facts have been commonly understood by a globalised audience through TV-news images which have relied on cinematic techniques and given a portrayal of real happenings as brief, uninterrupted narratives. As a matter of fact, the screen provides the spectator with a vantage point where each significant event is conveyed in a condensed and simplified form, temporarily detached from its real counterpart and designed in such a way as to affect the audience's perspective. With the recent advent of digital mobile technologies, in particular the camera phone, the creation of media content has been implemented so as to include amateur photo- and video-production. Today, any ordinary citizen owning a smart phone is a potential witness to natural catastrophes or armed robberies, these being occurrences more and more frequently documented through the digital support of improvised reporters. As Yasmin Ibrahim affirms, "the image testimony shot through the camera phone and mobile technologies democratizes the media event" (Ibrahim 2015: 213), since that image bears the mark of a genuine and truthful documentation, with arguably no deliberate or artificial reconstruction affecting the spectator's perspective. The massive employment of mobile technologies is not only altering the ways news circulates among people, but is actually converting traumatic events into virtual experiences.

The Twin Towers collapse is the most significant example of a catastrophe being globally witnessed via digital technologies – the Internet and mobile phones – as well as by television and radio. The entanglement of trauma with its media propagation across the world has become a prominent feature of the 9/11 watershed, which Allen Meek singles out as a haunting example of "virtual trauma". Differently from

the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>, in relation to which the trauma suffered by its survivors and their communities took decades to be publicly recognised, the 9/11 events proved “immediately traumatic” (Meek 2010: 172). Images and videos of the attacks, mostly amateur and undoctored ones, were watched live worldwide, while the media broadcasting the events soon defined them as “traumatic”, thus strengthening the audience’s perception of being directly involved in the tragedy.

On the other hand, the well-known photograph of “The Falling Man”, picturing a man falling headfirst after jumping from one of the World Trade Centre’s Towers, was immediately criticised as a non-ethical depiction of human death and censored for many years, sparking a huge debate over ethical codes, media and the representation of history. “The visibility of civilian death”, as Meek underlines, “provoked a crisis for narratives of democracy which trauma theory was unable to fully account for” (Meek 2010: 16). Therefore, not only have those who directly went through the events, including their families and friends, become victims of such a calamity, but anyone who is mediatically made aware of what happened could be a potential participant in the traumatic occurrence. In connection with the 9/11 crisis, the notion of a collectively experienced trauma has thus acquired a new meaning due to the central role assumed by the media in redefining the witnessing community. Indeed, “a collective identification with trauma is a feature of a society in which visual media define much of our relation to the past” (Meek 2010: 8).

Over the last decades, the mass appeal of contemporary media has led to an exponential growth in dark tourism. Suffice it to mention the increasing number of visitors to Dallas following the release of Oliver Stone’s movie *JFK* (1991), or of the tourists who have travelled to Krakow, Auschwitz and the settings shown in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* since 1993, the year the film was produced (Hodalska 2017: 411). Reflecting on the effects of contemporary disasters on human perception – from 9/11 to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan – Alice Miles has noticed a general, instinctive need in people to find an intimate link to such grim and seminal events:

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the Holocaust has been consistently analysed within the field of *Trauma Studies*, which has emerged as a distinct trend in literary criticism since the 1990s. Its main purpose is to explore and give voice to human suffering in the attempt to find a deeply ethical and exegetic response to such tragic events as the Shoah. On its part, trauma fiction emphasises the urgency to witness and narrate allegedly unspeakable events and points to the need to rethink such categories as memory, representation, and witnessing. Some of the most eminent *Trauma Studies* scholars are Cathy Caruth, Lawrence Langer, Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman.

When disaster strikes, it seems natural to some people to seek a personal connection. After the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, recollections of holidays in South Asia became common. After 11 September 2001, it was all about ‘having a friend who knew someone who was in the World Trade Center’ – or, as one of my colleagues at the time put it: ‘I nearly went to New York this week. Just think’. (Miles 2011: 1)

One of the reasons hidden behind this general tendency is to be found in the strong influence of the media and their capability of projecting consumers into the context of striking events. Indeed, as noticed by Sharpley and Stone, “contemporary society increasingly consumes, willingly or unwillingly, both real and commodified death and suffering through audio-visual representations, popular culture and the media” (Sharpley and Stone 2009). The incessant exposition to media reports of tragedies, wars, and natural disasters has succeeded in prompting the spectator’s awareness, although at a ‘safe distance’. The propensity to disclose traumatic events via digital technologies runs parallel to the parading of personal experiences concerning victimhood and suffering. To many travellers, reporting on their own visits to historical sites (linked to tragic events) through photos and social media has become a common habit. As Sontag had claimed in the 1970s, “photography develops with one of the most characteristic of modern times activities: tourism”, because taking a picture “gives shape to experience” and, moreover, offers “evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had” (Sontag 1977: 9-10).

However, in our last decade, the focus of such images has shifted: a specific phenomenon of our *selfie* culture consists in a growing tendency to picture oneself with the scene of a tragedy as a backdrop, or on a memorial site, by taking a so-called “disaster selfie” (Ibrahim 2015: 212). The disconcerting practice of taking self-portraits at ‘horror-scene sites’, like Ground Zero, concentration camps or disaster-stricken areas, has become a cultural phenomenon as well as a trend on social networks. The fact that teenagers, or even adults, might nonchalantly strike poses in front of the Auschwitz death camp’s gates, or take duck-faced selfies at Ground Zero, seems to confirm Sontag’s idea that snapping photos is not only a way of certifying an experience, but also of refusing it “by limiting the experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir” (Sontag 1977: 9).

The ‘Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe’, in Berlin (*Holocaust-Mahnmal*, in German), is one of the most famous sites commemorating the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, but it has also turned into one of the most popular sets for selfie-takers visiting the town.

Consisting of 2,711 concrete slabs of different sizes, laid out in rows on a sloping field, it is visited by thousands of people every day. Many of these people have taken playful selfies and weird pictures while jumping, running or biking in between the slabs as though on a racetrack. Some have used the slabs as a support for doing yoga, while others have winked atop them. All these activities have been meticulously recorded through their camera phone with the intent to provide ‘interesting’ media content and thus increase the number of followers and likes on social networks.

In 2017, German-Israeli artist Shahak Shapira launched an online art project, named *Yolocaust*, as a jarringly provocative visual critique of the controversial trend of selfies being snapped at the Eisenman memorial. The name *Yolocaust* comes from a sneering combination of *Holocaust* with the millennial catchphrase *You Only Live Once*, abbreviated to the demotic hashtag #YOLO. Shapira selected twelve striking photos from the social media, depicting some visitors while jumping, posing and climbing on the memorial. Then, he digitally edited the pictures by juxtaposing the original subjects with archival images from Nazi extermination camps and finally displayed them on his website. The result was visually disturbing: a man juggling in between the slabs suddenly appears to be playing inside a mass grave full of dead bodies (Fig. 1), while a girl doing yoga in a sports bra and shorts finds herself head-standing in front of a room crowded with Jewish corpses (Fig. 2), and similarly shocking images would follow.



Fig. 1. <https://static.timesofisrael.com/www/uploads/2017/01/yolocaust.jpg>  
(last accessed April 2, 2019)



Fig. 2. <https://i1.wp.com/metro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/yolocaust.jpg?>  
(last accessed April 2, 2019)

After its online launch in January 2017, the webpage went viral and was visited by 2.5 million people worldwide in less than a week, including the subjects portrayed in the selfie-montages. All of them contacted Shapira to apologise and hastened to request the removal of their pictures from the webpage, as if they had apparently reached a better understanding of it all. On his part, the artist proceeded to replace the images with some personal statements regarding the project and the feedbacks he had received. The project has so far been criticised on grounds of the pressure exerted on the living subjects involved, whose privacy was violated, and because of the controversial use of a form of shaming conceived as a response to offensive behaviours at a Holocaust site (Leshem 2017: 3). Instead, according to Shapira, what really made the project provocative was “the people and the way they present themselves”, rather than the shocking death scenes on which he had superimposed the pictures in question. “If I had used normal selfies, with people standing there doing nothing, I don’t think it would have been provocative”, he said, adding that “the controversy comes from the actions of the people. I’m just changing the scenery” (quoted in Gunter 2017).

Disaster selfies, then, incorporate two temporal frames relating to, respectively, the events preceding them and the moment the self obtrudes and creates a ‘post-event’. Accordingly, the site of memory is but a projection of a past tragic circumstance whose residual aura is exploited in order to highlight the figure taking the selfie. As a matter of fact, the attention is on the self, while the backdrop is arguably only meant to narrate this self and *not* what the tragic site represents (Ibrahim 2015: 213-14). This process is bound to reconfigure our re-

lationship with death, which, within the digital world, is turned into a half-evanescent cipher that is simply needed in the background in order to 'glorify' the living agent.

The allure of the forbidden is another peculiar element characterising disaster selfies, and it might be compared to what Roland Barthes called the "*punctum*" of the picture (Barthes 1981), namely what emotionally affects spectators while observing such images. Moreover, in this case the presence of the photographed subject's mortal body is said to recall death as both a presence and a certainty, since all mortals will succumb to it ("what is there in every photograph is the return of the dead" [Barthes 1981: 9]).

In sum, the contrast between the living body and the deadly aura enveloping the site of a tragedy generates opposite feelings of pleasure and revulsion. Here one might quote Julia Kristeva and her association of the notion of abjection with death, decay and the disruption of semantic palimpsests: "the place of the abject is where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982: 2). Abjection could also metamorphose into pleasure, a perverse desire for the forbidden usually enhanced by voyeuristic impulses. Indeed, the disaster selfie relies on the public gaze, which is invited to observe the "performance of the abject" in order to authenticate his/her private experience. In this way, the selfie can be seen to appropriate the intertextual reference to the tragedy as performance, while the self remains detached from it. The selfie, therefore, becomes a sort of "virtual *flâneur* absorbing the aura of the place to project it in sharp contrast to the mortal loss or carnage in the backdrop" (Ibrahim 2015: 217).

In our media-saturated world, where reality and representation continuously cross each other's boundaries, the disaster selfie has become a strategy through which the masses think they might achieve immortality while reaching the moral limit of self-representation. Baudrillard (1983) claimed that, in our consumerist society, people are caught up in the play of images, spectacles, and simulacra which have less and less relation to an external *reality*, to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political and even the real no longer seem to have any meaning. The case of *Yolocaust* has opened a window on the need to translate the world into a collection of images ready for relentless consumption, irrespective of the moral implications deriving from this attitude. Our mediatically bombarded consciousness appears to be so mesmerised by images and spectacles that the concept of meaning itself risks dissolving (Kellner 2006: 14). The potentially infinite production of selfies at historic sites linked to human tragedies has become an intrinsic part of the 'carnival of mirrors', namely the omnipresent screens of mobile

devices to which people are inescapably attracted. Within the maze of mirrors and images running through these screens, the spectator is hypnotised by a virtual performance and can no longer distinguish between an empirical experience and a hallucinatory one.

If projects like *Yolocaust* confirm, on the one hand, Baudrillard's theory about the nature of a hyperreal depiction of the world, on the other, they bring to the fore the ethical issues related to dark tourism and its performative expression through the media. Shapira, the author of the project, has been smart enough to draw the attention of the audience by taking the latter's very route, that is, social media and the coercive pressure that they are able to exert. Rightfully or not, social media have been used, in this case, with the purpose of making room for reflection on contemporary online narcissistic culture and have also successfully prodded a large part of selfie takers. Therefore, *Yolocaust* represents a symbolic step in the direction of a thought-provoking resort to the media and possibly marks the beginning of a consciousness-raising journey towards a more ethical use of mobile technologies.

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HUMAN INHERITANCE, THE 'DNA JOURNEY' AND  
BERNARDINE EVARISTO'S *THE EMPEROR'S BABE*

*Abstract*

The scientific discovery of DNA has, among other things, allowed people to consciously articulate a critique of the 'racial purity' tenet and of ethnically-based divisions across the world. Being aware of the non-linear and multifaceted histories of our genes leads us not only to redefine our identity and cultural interactions, but also to rethink our ideas relating to citizenship and nationality. This essay adopts an interdisciplinary approach through which scientific, cultural, and literary discourses are called upon to shed new light on the concept of genetic genealogy. In particular, I analyse Bernardine Evaristo's novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) by drawing on Gurnek Bains's category of "cultural DNA" and referring to the 'DNA Journey' ad campaign launched by international travel fare aggregator *Momondo*.

*Keywords:* DNA transmission; 'racial purity' tenet; genealogy; citizenship.

Every human being is linked to his/her ancestors' background and this inheritance leaves an imprint on the individual's identity from both a genetic and a cultural point of view. Indeed, one may claim that every human being inherits, in a certain sense, two kinds of DNA: a biological one, made up of genetically transmitted clusters of chromosomes, and a sort of cultural DNA, shaped by traditions, language, beliefs, imagery, and historical events. According to Gurnek Bains, the concept of "cultural DNA" refers to a set of values and behaviours which can be shown to typically connote a group or a community. In other words, "in spite of the use of the biologically laden term, DNA, the focus is on the deeply grained aspects of a culture that are replicated over generations rather than biological differences" (Bains 2015: xxv). If genetics enables people to virtually take a journey through their family history, literature can provide communities with the possibility to get acquainted with their cultural background by reading through, revisiting or interpreting their traditions, stories, collective and personal hopes and fears.

Over the centuries, however, specific features of both a biological and a cultural DNA have been ideologically subsumed in the attempt to categorise nations, populations and cultures across the world. Traditionally, we have been taught to map the globe according to a rigid framework which establishes an almost absolute correspondence between categories such as race, ethnos, nation, and state. In this perspective, people who share a common descent are supposed to belong to the same ‘race’ and ‘ethnos’, which in turn are said to be strictly connected with the place where those people were born and live, i.e. their ‘nation’. Therefore, it has been deemed possible to identify a place by virtue of the ethnos of its inhabitants, and vice versa.

Yet, the discovery of the processes underlying DNA transmission and the possibility to compare different DNA clusters on a transnational scale have shown that the ethnically-based mapping of the world is not regulated by any single, monolithic principle. Consequently, traditional categories like race, ethnos, nation, and state are now seen as the outcome of complex racial mixtures that have taken shape over the centuries. Conventional schemes are no longer considered as unquestionable paradigms, especially when it comes to analysing modern societies peopled by multicultural or intercultural, diasporic or migrant communities.

The DNA test has recently experienced a resurgence of interest thanks to a 2016 ad campaign entitled ‘DNA Journey’ and launched by Booking Holdings’ *Momondo* – an international travel fare aggregator and metasearch engine founded in 2006 and based in Copenhagen<sup>1</sup> – in collaboration with Ancestry.com, Utah. During this experiment, 67 participants of various nationalities were invited to take a DNA test through a kit provided by the ‘AncestryDNA’ Company, which thus

survey[ed] a person’s entire genome at over 700,000 locations via a simple saliva sample. Analysis of the data provide[d] a prediction of the locations of ancestors from 26 separate worldwide populations including Great Britain and Ireland, Europe, Scandinavia, Asia and South and North Africa<sup>2</sup>.

After uploading their database designed to categorise different types of DNA, researchers began to trace back the ethnical genealogy of the participants and unveil their ‘hidden histories’. Before the experiment

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.momondo.co.uk/letsopenourworld/dna>, last accessed August 1, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.ancestry.com/corporate/international/press-releases/DNA-of-the-nation-revealedand-were-not-as-British-as-we-think>, last accessed August 1, 2017.

took place, the persons interviewed said they were sure of their national identity and felt very proud of their origins. Yet, after the test results made clear what percentage of different ethnicities had a bearing on their genetic makeup, they could not avoid coming face to face with such 'unexpected' roots. At this point, they showed strong emotional responses, wavering between a cathartic cry and a liberating laughter. They laughed because the test had dramatically overturned the racial categories on which they had drawn in order to define themselves. Indeed, a French girl commented on the experiment thus: "[T]his should be compulsory; there would be no such thing like extremism in the world if people knew the heritage like that. Like, who would be stupid enough to think of such thing like pure race?"<sup>3</sup>

The popularity gained by DNA testing has urged people to rethink not only their origins but also racist issues, while an animated debate was ignited within the scientific community and, in particular, among geneticists. Anders Johannes Hansen, a professor from the National History Museum of Denmark, observed that the "DNA from people in the advertisement must be compared to something in order to legitimise the test. This would also have to be something where the DNA was 100 percent from a particular country or region [...] it is impossible to characterise a sequence as 100 percent Danish – or German, or Indian. Whatever you measure the DNA up against, how do you decide what 100 percent Danish, or German or English DNA is? It's impossible – because we're part of a genetically multicultural story"<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, as Mark G. Thomas – Professor of Evolutionary Genetics at University College London (UCL) – pointed out during a lecture in London in 2015, we have far more ancestors than DNA blocks, so that it would be impossible to inherit all their genes. With the passage of time, some chromosomes are bound to go extinct, while others may evolve in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Indeed, some patterns can be explained in light of a multitude of different histories, whereas one single history may produce a whole range of phylogeographic patterns: "The genealogical processes that shape our genetic makeup and trees are very stochastic and they are weakly constrained by population history. That is why [...] the vast majority of population geneticists consider Interpretative Phylogeography analysis as storytelling, not story-testing" (Thomas 2015). Therefore, according to Thomas,

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.ancestry.com/corporate/international/press-releases/DNA-of-the-nation-revealedand-were-not-as-British-as-we-think>, last accessed August 1, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://cphpost.dk/news/experts-claim-viral-momondo-dna-advert-isnt-all-its-cracked-up-to-be.html>, last accessed August 1, 2017.

genetic data can help us to ponder genealogical hypotheses arising from complementary fields, such as history, archaeology, anthropology, and linguistics.

Literature, too, could be mentioned among these fields, in that it both evokes factual events and gives expression to dreams, hopes, and values nourishing a cultural DNA that often overcomes the boundaries of the genetic one and forges relationships among people even beyond their chromosomal identity. This is precisely what British-Nigerian writer Bernardine Evaristo powerfully suggests in her novel in verse *The Emperor's Babe* (2001). This novel is set in London (Londinium) during the period of the Roman Empire, at the time of the building of Hadrian's Wall. The main character, Zuleika, is a Nubian-British Roman girl who marries Felix, a Roman senator, but falls in love with the Libyan-born Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. In this text, historical, linguistic and anthropological references intertwine with feelings, empathy and a variety of points of view, so as to help British people to become acquainted with their own genealogical roots while also leading them to look for a different, hybridised kind of continuity between their past and their present identity. Indeed, as Evaristo revealed in an interview:

I wanted to disrupt the notion that Britain was only populated by white people until recently, so this novel is a direct challenge to Britain's misguided sense of its own history and identity [...]. I have thus far interrogated African history within a European/Western context, and also the past with the present, never one to the exclusion of the other. My preoccupations are in my DNA. (Collins 2008: 1203)

The "African history within a European/Western context" dates back to much earlier ages than those of modern postcolonial migrations. Evaristo's main documentary source is Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984), a seminal and comprehensive work which demonstrates how and why the black presence in Britain should not be confined to the realms of a recent colonial or postcolonial phenomenon. In actual fact, black settlements in Britain are tied to the most ancient roots of the nation:

There were Africans in Britain before English came here. They were soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries. Among the troops defending Hadrian's wall in the third century AD was a 'division of Moors' (Numerous Mauro-

rum Aurelianorum) named after Marcus Aurelius or a later emperor known officially by the same name. (Fryer 1984: 1)

Besides, not all Africans were slaves, as we tend to believe; they were also Roman citizens or officers serving the Roman Empire, probably during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. One of them even became emperor: Septimius Severus, who was born at Leptis Magna (in present-day Libya), spent his last three years surveying Hadrian's Wall and defeated the Caledonians who lived on the other side of the wall (Fryer 1984: 1). Traces of the African presence survived after the Romans left, as testified to by the discovery of the remains of a young African girl in a burial ground dating back to ca. 1000, at North Elmham in Norfolk, about 25 miles north-west of Norwich (Fryer 1984: 3).

Moreover, in the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century records one reads that King James IV of Scotland hosted a group of Africans at his court. A famous black solitary musician was employed by Henry VII and Henry VIII and he was, almost certainly, the black trumpeter portrayed in the painted roll of the 1511 Westminster tournament, which was held to celebrate the birth of a son to Catherine of Aragon. African slaves were brought to England from the 1570s onwards and, throughout the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, they worked as household servants, court entertainers, prostitutes or sexual conveniences for rich Englishmen and Dutchmen. Again in the 1570s, Queen Elizabeth was shown with a group of black musicians, although her attitude towards them was to change dramatically as, at the close of the century, she ordered "those kinde of people" to be deported. Although the queen had initially sent a letter to the Lord Mayor of London arguing that the "blackmoors" were "infidels" and "were taking the food from her subjects' mouth", further evidence points to other kinds of political reasons. As a matter of fact,

[a] week later an open warrant was sent to the lord mayor of London and all vice-admirals, mayors, and other public officers, informing them that a Lubeck merchant called Casper van Senden, who had arranged for the release of 89 English prisoners in Spain and Portugal, was asking in return 'lycense to take up so much blackmoores here in this realm and transport them into Spain and Portugal'. [...] The black people concerned were being used as payment for the return of 89 English prisoners. The government simply confiscated them from their owners – there is no mention of compensation – and handed them over to a German slave-trader. (Fryer 1984: 10)

Nevertheless, she did not manage to banish all Africans, who were to prove a constant presence in British history.

Bernardine Evaristo does not just dwell on a few peculiar aspects of British genealogy; she provides insight into the cultural DNA of the Britons by describing places, sounds, languages, events and, above all, the human environment. Here, the people's stories become precious sources through which we learn about the various phenotypic features of the British DNA as well as about the experiences, hopes, and dreams that constitute the basis for a shared humanity. In this sense, Zuleika epitomises the genetic story that Evaristo wishes to tell us. The character's Nubian origins soon suggest her diasporic identity; subsequently, her marriage with Felix, the Roman senator, ushers in a public and civic dimension in her life; her love affair with Septimius Severus notably gives her access to the 'Heart of the Empire', not only from a political point of view, but also from a human and psychological perspective. Finally, the presence of her Caledonian servants, along with the Pict poets she competes with, invest Evaristo's cultural DNA journey with those 'ethnic genes' that, if not yet a substantial part of British society, would become a salient component of present-day British genetic makeup.

Evaristo significantly foregrounds her character's diasporic roots from the very beginning:

Oh, everyone envied me, Illa Bella Negreeeta!  
 Born in the back of a shop on Gracechurch Street,  
 Who got hitched to a Roman nobleman  
 Whose parents sailed out of Kharthum on a barge. (Evaristo 2002: 15)

Zuleika describes herself by using an expression that is repeated all through the novel: "Illa Bella Negreeeta". This phrase is crucial, firstly because she is employing Latin to declare her African origins and, secondly, because the iconic spelling "Negreeeta" lets us imagine how African people, maybe Zuleika herself, pronounced the Latin word. Thanks to this linguistic device, the reader gets an immediate glimpse of the melting pot characterising Londinium. Zuleika is not just an immigrant. Indeed, even though her parents came from Kharthum, she was born "in the back of a shop on Gracechurch Street" and she got married with a Roman nobleman. The name of the street and, above all, her Roman husband make of her a 'real citizen' of Londinium and, in a wider sense, of the Roman Empire. We can therefore perceive the many different dimensions adding to the creolised 'genetic coiling' envisaged by Evaristo: its ethnical, historical, and cultural levels, along with its social and political aspects.

In a following section of the novel, Zuleika traces her parents' past as a sort of mythical and genealogically entangled story:

Here in the drizzle of this wild west town  
 Dad wandered the streets looking for work,  
 But there was no room at the inn  
 So he set up on the kerb  
 [...]  
 Their own mother, his concubine,  
 Is my mother also my aunt  
 Am I your daughter and niece!  
 Am I my own cousin! (Evaristo 2002: 26)

The sentence "there was no room at the inn" calls to mind the nativity of Jesus in the Gospels and his being born in a barn because there was no place for Mary and Joseph in the inn. These echoes strengthen the mythical quality of the diasporic destiny of Zuleika's parents, suggesting how human history in its entirety might be seen as a long chronicle of diasporas, again an essential part of mankind's cultural DNA. This concept is reinforced by the following words: "Is my mother also my aunt / Am I your daughter and niece! / Am I my own cousin!". Family ties are so interconnected that boundaries blur; by the same token, genetic differences among populations and races across the world have blurred so much over the centuries that they are no longer clearly distinguishable, not even through genetic testing.

Interestingly enough, Zuleika's description is accompanied by a very short, bracketed comment: "(He's told me this story a mille times)" (Evaristo 2002: 28). In other words, her story is part of the traditional narratives that nourish a community's imagery; it is part of the storytelling repertoire that keeps memory and traditions alive. That comment is important because it provides Zuleika's worldview with a further semantic connotation: whether real or partly invented, the narrated events are rooted in her family's cultural background and possibly define her Nubian cultural DNA better than her African genes. Zuleika is deeply aware of this kind of interculturality and is not afraid of facing the fundamental question – "Who am I?":

Identity Crisis: Who is She?

*Am I the original Nubian princess  
 From Mother Africa?  
 Does the Nile run through my blood*

*In this materfutuo urban jungle  
 Called Londinium?  
 Do I feel a sense of lack?  
 Because I am swarthy?  
 Or am I just a groovy chick  
 Living in the lap of Luxury?  
 Am I a slave or a slave-owner?  
 Am I a Londinio or a Nubian?  
 Will my children be Roman or Nubinettes?  
 Were my parents vassals or pharaohs?  
 And who gives a damn? (Evaristo 2002: 31)*

She is palpably toying with the idea of self-definition by taking stock of those categories that are usually employed to pigeonhole individuals, such as nationality, race or social status. She runs through them – Nubian, Londinio, Roman, Nubinettes, vassals, pharaohs – as though striving to find a suitable one, only to conclude her research by mockingly rejecting them all: “And who gives a damn!”. Apparently, no one of such commonly used labels fits her. This leads us to infer how necessary it is to revise a set of paradigms and commonplaces because reality is incomparably more complex and fluid.

As to Felix, Zuleika’s husband, he is the first link in the human chain connecting the diasporic history of the protagonist’s family with the social and political reality of the Roman Empire:

I am a man of multiple interests: a senator,  
 Military man, businessman, I undertake  
 Trading missions for the government,  
 And I’m a landowner,  
 [...]  
 He sailed up the Thames, Felix the Great,  
 On a ship laden with amphorae of spices,  
 Marble and fresh slaves from Palestine.  
 [...]  
 ‘Londinium! You have grown on me,  
 As a child does on parent,  
 After Roma, Neapolis, Alexandria,  
 Antioch, Carthage, Jerusalem –  
 You are the best city in the world!’ he sang out. (Evaristo 2002: 37)

Felix represents the military, trading, and political power of the Roman Empire. In his senator’s role, he can pass bills and, as a trader, has

travelled around all the Roman provinces. Therefore, when he looks at Londinium, he is able to compare this remote part of the Empire to Rome, Neapolis, Alexandria, Antioch, Carthage and Jerusalem, as though the whole array of the Roman dominions were simultaneously present in his mind. In a way, the marriage between Zuleika and Felix seals the merging of the British-Nubian genes with those disseminated through the rest of the Empire. Again, this induces Zuleika to think of her own identity not only from an ethnical point of view, but from a political and social perspective, as intimated by the following excerpt:

Felix's father had been a governor,  
 They had dined with the emperor's children,  
 My father spoke pidgin-Latin,  
 We ate off our laps in the doorway,  
 Spattered with mud. Yet I was Roman too.  
 Civis Romana sum. It was all I had. (Evaristo 2002: 56)

Even if in the poem *Identity Crisis: Who is She?* she did not support any social category, she now sounds adamant: she is a *Civis Romana*. The concept of *civis*, in English 'citizen', refers both to one's birthplace and to the socio-political recognition of a person as a member of the *polis*, meant as the expression of the cultural and political life of a state. This means that Zuleika sees herself as a Roman not just because she was born in Londinium, but because she associates her cultural DNA with that of the Roman Empire.

What is more, the relationship between Zuleika and Rome goes beyond the sheer political sphere, involving her soul and deepest love. This is witnessed by two important circumstances: the first is Zuleika's love for poetry and her determination to become a poet committed to giving voice to her own feelings and life experience, while acting within the Roman Empire's cultural tradition; the second is her love affair with Septimius Severus. In the novel, Emperor Severus personifies the Roman core that engages and merges with Londinium as well as Zuleika's DNA. Evaristo portrays Septimius not only as the Emperor who conquered Caledonia and defeated the Scots, Picts, and Saxons, but also, and mostly, as a man whose dream was to become the head of the Empire and who held Roman poetry and culture in the highest regard:

I sat up. 'Who are you, Severus?'  
 I had discovered the miracle of love-making,  
 [...]  
 Was I that boy who went to the Temple of Apollo

And against music of night waves,  
 Made secret offerings to find out  
 If he would one day be imperator?  
 Whose father said, 'Dream and it will manifest'.  
 But when I replied, 'Daddums, I will be emperor',  
 He scoffed, 'are you mad? A Libyan? My son?'  
 Soon after I read fine words of Virgil,  
 Who is noster maximus poet, of course.  
 ('Of course', I echoed, a tad too quickly.) (Evaristo 2002: 76)

Interestingly, soon after asking Septimius who he is, Zuleika interrupts the flow of their dialogue with a personal aside: "I had discovered the miracle of love-making". In other words, being in love prompts her to engage with the deepest, true identity of the emperor. This intimacy might well be the real turning point in the novel and in our DNA journey, too. Indeed, one is led to assume that what has actually enabled generations to develop – and our genetic makeup to evolve over the centuries and in different places – are the relationships binding people together.

For its part, Septimius's answer does not primarily look back at his genetic roots or family history, but at his dreams as a young boy from Libya. He tells her about his search for identity and about Virgil's words which had inspired him and deeply affected his character: "They can because they think they can". So, Septimius participates in undermining an ossified racial framework and, like Zuleika, envisions a more complex, encompassing cultural DNA that has arguably reached its fullest expression in the vast Roman dominions.

If it digs into British genealogy in order to retrieve and re-imagine hidden stories, Evaristo's novel does not concern the past only. The author is able to make Londinium and modern multicultural London overlap by means of various references that project us into the present day. For instance, in the passage describing Severus inaugurating Hadrian's Wall, one reads:

Severus strode towards the arched  
 Triumphal entrance, his purple Armani toga  
 He smashed a bottle of Dom Falernum  
 Against the wall: this was his inaugural visit. (Evaristo 2002: 103)

The reference to "Dom Falernum", a Caribbean syrup liqueur, is obviously an ironic nod to the modern history of the British Empire and the non-white population growth in London in the wake of the post-colonial diaspora, starting with the so-called Windrush Generation. Cor-

respondingly, the “Armani toga”, the use of a modern name for a street in Londinium (“Gracechurch Street”) and the description of “the slums, swarming with immigrants” evoke a contemporary multicultural, creolised England and its multilayered cultural DNA. As Evaristo stated in an interview: “There are many parallels to be made between Londinium and contemporary Britain/London. [...] *The Emperor's Babe* is a dig at those Brits who still harbour ridiculous notions of ‘racial’ purity and the glory days of Britain as an all-white nation” (McCarthy 2003).

Clearly enough, the resurgence of interest in the DNA and genetic transmission has contributed to reversing a trend and generating a more conscious attitude towards epistemological categories such as ethnicity, nationality and race, which people have often acritically employed when trying to define their own identity. At the same time, the cultural/genetic makeup of populations seems to be much more complex and elusive than what science and genetic testing can say. As such, our biological DNA is not able to encompass the complexity of stories, cultural expressions, and ethnic traits which have forged our personal and national identity over the centuries. As Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* powerfully suggests, literature can in this sense become instrumental in accompanying us throughout the enticing scenarios of a newly conceived DNA journey.

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WANDERING IN A CREATIVE SPACE:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE INDIAN CITY  
IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

*Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to investigate the city as a space of encounters, cross-pollination, and cross-borders, while also trying to figure out the role of outcasts within the contemporary global metropolis. In particular, I analyse the city in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) and see it as a place leading to the strengthening of subalternity. I also suggest that Mistry's characters might be described as postcolonial *flâneurs* and spatial producers in a globalised era, and that their wanderings and subaltern stories could be read alongside the 'official' accounts of Indian history during the Emergency period. In other words, Mistry's novel appears to retrace the city's history through its characters' wanderings and, therefore, offers itself as an interesting example for the spatial-turn approach recently developed in literary studies.

*Keywords:* Rohinton Mistry; *A Fine Balance*; Indian cities; globalisation.

1. *New Spatial Relations and Postcolonial Narratives*

The relationship between literature and a redefined concept of space has recently been dealt with in the wake of the so-called Spatial Turn, which has highlighted the ways global phenomena can influence the connection between migration and place, the perception of transnational movements and the links between globalisation itself and literature. Regarding these points, Pamela Gilbert has argued that "spatial relations would reveal to us a complexity and materiality which was being hidden away by narrative. [...] Space is, then, not a Euclidean given; it is a materiality which we always experience both temporally and through a number of beliefs and practices". Considering these assumptions, "place could be claimed as home, as related to the construction of identity" as well as to "the spatial construction of Otherness under modernity" (Gilbert 2009: 103).

Therefore, the emphasis on the notions of space and place in relation, or in opposition, to the category of time prompts us to rethink the modes through which many literary scholars have approached postcolonial literature and the construction of identities. In this light, it is important to mention Édouard Glissant's theory of the "chaos-world", in which the postcolonial notions of identity and hybridity are critically seen through the shifts brought about by globalisation, but are also connected with a spatial-turn perspective. According to Glissant, one must (re-)start from the very idea of place in order to concretely envision a global world, that is to say an all-encompassing dimension which recalls a rhizomatic body with no centre/periphery distinctions and which should not be confused with a somewhat trivialised view of globalisation (Glissant 1998: 110). In brief, what seems to be crucial is not place *per se*, but the linkages and the different roots existing among places and spaces as created by global shifts. In this context, the concept of location acquires new meanings since it becomes ingrained in a question of production and negotiation, in the idea of a place where people can shape their multiple identities. The new role given to space by literary studies and its dialogue with globalisation also throw light on a postcolonial city – the transnational metropolis – which has in many ways become the global space *par excellence*.

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian-born contemporary Canadian writer, has brightly delved into the urban environment in his novel *A Fine Balance* (1995), trying to contrapuntally read the Indian city through the stories, lives, and deaths of marginalised and alienated characters and emphasising their personal relation to the city-space. First of all, it is important to say that the novel is set during the mid-1970s Emergency, a period marked by a huge political unrest and human rights violations, including detention, torture, and forced sterilisation. Although never named (but just referred to as the 'Prime Minister'), Indira Gandhi remains a sinister presence all along. In this annihilating universe, the urban environment undergoes many changes, but it is especially at the beginning that it develops its potentialities as a creative and inspiring space while also testing the resistance of its inhabitants. The four protagonists of the novel must deal with this double-edged 'face' of the city, torn as they are between the hope to succeed in life and the abuses suffered during this grim phase in Indian history.

Dina Dalal is a Parsi widow who runs a clothing business and, in order to increase her income, decides to hire tailors and have a paying guest. Maneck Kohlah is the Parsi student who rents Dina's room so as to be able to attend university in the city centre, while Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash 'Om' Darji – both belonging to the untouch-

able Chamaar caste from the village by a river – are the tailors who work for Dina. Considering that “above all, *A Fine Balance* is a book about space” (Morey 2004: 110), it is useful to analyse how the lives of the four protagonists happen to intersect across the spatial coordinates underpinning Mistry’s narrative. The stories of these outcasts overlap under the influence of a city which appears to test their ability to survive in the wild urban jungle. It should be noticed that, like most people immersed in the chaotic Indian world, all of them are basically strangers who must learn to coexist and help each other, not only because they share the same living space (namely Dina’s flat) and the same poor condition, but also because they are to gradually build strong relationships as if they were members of a family unit. At the beginning, they all think that the “Emergency” will not “affect ordinary people like us” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 83), but they will soon discover that their lives are bound to drastically change.

## 2. *The Double Nature of Modern Indian Cities*

In order to assess the sturdy interrelationships which eventually bring the four protagonists together, it is fundamental to consider the nature of many contemporary Indian cities. These global metropolises are similar to ‘chaotic cradles’ on which the effects of globalisation have had a huge social impact. Although Jawaharlal Nehru’s plan for a modern India at the end of the 1940s had already included a strong commitment to social justice and the idea of mobility within the rising Indian metropolis (Amrith 2011: 148), the discrepancies between different social groups were then, and still are, quite deep-seated. However, in spite of the impaired conditions of a large portion of the population, India has taken part in a process of globalisation which has deeply changed the landscape of the metropolis as well as the collective consciousness relating to it.

In his recent book *India Becoming: A Journey through a Changing Landscape* (2012), the Indo-American author Akash Kapur describes his perception of India after more than a decade spent in America. He notes that the dusty roads he remembers from his youth have been replaced by modern motorways, with a most significant change regarding the “giddy, exuberant” spirit which animates the land, arguably the new “centre of the world”:

The India of my youth felt cut off, at the edge of modernity. When I boarded that plane in Chennai, trading the heat of coastal South India for the bitter winter of boarding School in Massachusetts, I felt like I was entering the

world. Now, twelve years later, India was at the centre of the world. It was India with its resurgent economy, high saving rates, and young educated workforce, that beckoned with the sense of a brighter future [...]. (Kapur 2012: 5)

The colonial cities of the past seem to have given way to the metropolises of a globalised scenario which is however far from the positive “chaos-world” notion, with millions of Indian people migrating from the countryside and sharing a naive form of optimism that is actually close to frustration. For his part, Amit Chaudhuri also underlines the relevance of these changes by highlighting how Indian cities have been altered by a wave of global transformations which have merely enhanced the glitter, movement, and outlook of the most important Indian metropolises (Chaudhuri 2013: 80).

Therefore, India’s economic and political developments have certainly transformed the face of its cities; however, it is clear that, even today, living in India is not an easy matter. Despite the advent of modernity and consumerism, during the last few decades many problems have led people to migrate to the metropolises in the West with a view to negotiating new identities by resorting to strategies of invisibility, complicity and resistance in diasporic backdrops like London (Bald 1995: 78). Even more crucially, for those who have returned to or stayed in India, the need for a “recognition” in their own country is not to be taken for granted, because they feel that “something [is] amiss” (Chaudhuri 2013: 94) in a landscape that has dramatically changed since their childhood.

Focusing on the beginning of this process of metamorphosis, *A Fine Balance* gives prominence to the confusion and alienation epitomised by Maneck, Ishvar and Om, the three ‘foreigners’ living in Dina’s flat. Since they all come from the countryside, they feel disoriented and lonely in the urban environment, and this condition lasts for many months after their arrival:

They crossed the road, asking again for directions. ‘I’ve been living in this city for two months’, said Maneck, ‘but it’s so huge and confusing. I can recognize only some big streets. The little lanes all look the same’. ‘We have been here six months and still have the same problem. In the beginning we were completely lost. The first time, we couldn’t even get on a train – two or three went by before we learned how to push’. (Mistry [1995] 2004: 6)

The three men’s disorientation is also generated by the atmosphere of poverty and distress which envelops the big city, where it is not uncommon for one to come across

a beggar slumped upon a small wooden platform fitted with castors, which raised him four inches off the ground. His fingers and thumbs were missing, and his legs were amputated almost to the buttocks. ‘O babu, ek paisa day-ray!’ he sang, shaking a tin can between his bandaged palms. [...] ‘That’s one of the worst I’ve seen since coming to the city’, said Ishvar, and the others agreed. Omprakash paused to drop a coin in the tin. (Mistry [1995] 2004: 6)

These inhuman living conditions prompt Maneck to say that he hates the city and cannot wait to return to his dwelling in the mountains, while Ishvar argues: “What is the use of such a big city? Noise and crowds, no place to live, water scarce, garbage everywhere. Terrible” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 7). In this light, they all feel out of place and are nostalgic about the lives and homes recalled in all of their accounts:

‘Our village is far from here’, said Omprakash. ‘Takes a whole day by train – morning till night – to reach it’. ‘And reach it, we will’, said Ishvar. ‘Nothing is as fine as one’s native place’. ‘My home is in the north’, said Maneck. ‘Takes a day and night, plus another day, to get there. From the window of our house you can see snow-covered mountain peaks’. ‘A river runs near our village’, said Ishvar. ‘You can see it shining, and hear it sing. It’s a beautiful place’. (Mistry [1995] 2004: 7)

Eventually, the “combined forces of change and tradition lead not to a step upwards with the successful return to their village, but to a plunge downwards with their final days lived as beggars on the streets of the big city” (Jubas 2005: 58), and this fall gives added strength to the image of the city as an evil step-mother as opposed to the “beautiful” and peaceful village. These first descriptions, along with Mistry’s evocation of an alienating space, cannot be further from the so-called “spatial justice” (Warf and Arias 2009: 31) theorised by Edward Soja in relation to the urban environment. This concept is connected with the rediscovery of Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the “right to the city” (in *Le Droit à la ville*, 1968) and is linked to the idea of “embedding [human rights] in specifically urban spatial contexts and causalities” in order to “reduce spatial inequalities in wealth and well-being and achieve more democratic distribution of power” (Warf and Arias 2009: 32). The right to the city should pave the way for global, civil-society movements aiming to guarantee equal rights for all citizens. The aforementioned recent theories concerning space have already underlined the problem by setting the idea of a postmodern metropolis against the *topos* of the colonial city.

Yet, as matters stand, it cannot be claimed that the passage from a restrictive and coercive colonial system to a modern and open environment has been completed. Indeed, even though on the one hand Ishvar claims that “[t]here is lots of opportunity in the city, you can make your dreams come true”, on the other his nephew Om sounds realistic when he affirms: “I am sick of the city. Nothing but misery ever since we came. I wish I had died in our village. I wish I had also burned to death like the rest of my family” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 103). Not surprisingly, the word ‘misery’ is a recurrent term throughout the novel, where it refers to both the desolation of the living conditions in the city and to Om’s and Ishvar’s hardships. They must actually come to terms with the strict measures taken by the government during the Emergency, such as forced castration, which has cost Ishvar both legs due to an infection, a tragic circumstance which marked the beginning of their life as beggars. After these events, “[e]ach day now was mortifying, with the people who knew them, especially the neighbours, staring at them on their trips to and from the hospital, whispering among themselves, shying away when they saw the handcart coming” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 624).

Om’s and Ishvar’s desperate condition seems to further point to the fact that the “globalization’s rhetoric of opportunity, seen in the manufacturing and export business and the anonymity of the cosmopolitan city, is not so much promising as teasing” (Jubas 2005: 60). In this context, the urban landscape and the tragedies which darkened those decades of Indian history are strictly connected, as testified to by the two characters’ wanderings throughout the city. From this perspective, Om and Ishvar recall those people who – to use an expression by Zygmunt Bauman – are simply “cut-off” from a changing society and cannot afford the costs of globalisation. As a consequence, “urban territory becomes the battlefield of continuous war space” (Bauman 1998: 26), in which different kinds of subaltern people feel marginalised and confined to various ghettos, such as the camps for the homeless or the tent shelters that in the novel host the poor who are recovering from a vasectomy operation. The fact that the fight for self-affirmation is a lost cause for Om and his uncle indirectly confirms Bauman’s considerations about space still keeping a tight grip on poor people. This situation is well portrayed in Mistry’s novel, where the government’s acts of ‘beautification’ of the city do not concern the improvement of the living conditions for the majority of the population, in a duplicitous game that one may grasp by means of the posters sponsoring the Emergency: “The sides of the pedestal were plastered with posters extolling the virtues of the Emergency. The obligatory Prime Ministerial visage

was prominent. Small print explained why fundamental rights had been temporarily suspended” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 220).

This said, in order to better assess the subaltern urban environment described in *A Fine Balance*, I now suggest adopting David Harvey’s definition of “relational space”, according to which it is impossible to extricate *place* from *time*, because political and collective memories are conceptualised by locating spatial contingencies within a temporal framework. Differently put, the social and political events of a given era are said to be only understood in relational terms, i.e. along a chrono-topic trajectory. In Harvey’s view, “this space is lived through emotions and the imagination. The spatio-temporality of a dream, a fantasy, a hidden longing, a lost memory or even a peculiar thrill as we walk down a street can be given representation through works of art” (Harvey 2006). This kind of spatial approach connects the act of walking in a material space – such as city streets and their public or private corners – with an array of “mental” representations associated with people, objects, occurrences, events, and other possibly related images or fantasies. Harvey looks at Lefebvre’s “right to the city” and invites one to ponder on the ways different people may actually exercise that right in a space which is nominally designated as public, thus extending the debate towards politics and the public sphere. In this regard, he also asks an interesting question:

What happens when we construe that right [...] as a right to change and transform the spaces of the city into a different kind of living environment compatible with quite different social relations by attacking both its material forms as well as dominant discourses of representation? (Harvey 2006)

Mistry’s novel implicitly attempts to answer Harvey’s question by envisaging a social and geographical ‘space of equality’ through the protagonists’ infringement of the system and its constraints.

### 3. *Rohinton Mistry’s Characters as Postcolonial Flâneurs*

Ishvar and Om try to fight their adverse fate by creating their own space and appropriating the city in a sort of flaneuristic way. Following the example of their friend Rajaram, who dreams of wandering like an ascetic “with bare feet, my soles and heels cracked” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 558), they walk down the city streets as though striving to claim their right to them. Instead of surrendering to the “universe of frightening chaos” which inhabits those streets, they initially look for “a sign of life” that would help them to make their own fortune: in order to do so,

they resort to walking, “an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers [...] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 131, 176, 158). Interestingly, according to Michel de Certeau, these postcolonial *flâneurs* “make use of spaces that cannot be seen”: in other words, the outcasts’ fate emerges as a “manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments, of trajectories, and alterations of space” (De Certeau 1993: 158). This kind of *flâneur* also needs the support of a number of other outcasts living in a similar condition because, to “master his narrative, the *flâneur* must take into account the ‘tales’ of *fellow-flâneurs* and competitors” (Williams 1997: 821).

The relationship between the young Maneck and the two tailors develops according to this logic, so that, as long as they are together, they acquire new strength throughout their parallel peregrinations. From this perspective, literature can *give shape* to new spaces which interact with reality, with the postcolonial *flâneur* standing out as a symbolic and actual producer of space. The ‘production of space’ is the main conceptual axis allowing us to re-evaluate the postcolonial city as represented, interrogated and reconstructed by its cultural producers, in a condition that “redirects the predominant intellectual gaze from the postcolonial city as it shapes the cultural producer, to the cultural producer as she/he shapes the postcolonial city”, in a reciprocal relationship (Beswick, Parmar, Sil 2015: 789-90). Moreover, this idea recalls Edward Soja’s concept of “Thirdspace”, a “fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency” which claims for “a consciously – and consciously spatial – effort to improve the world in some significant way” (Soja 1996: 11, 28). The effort to improve the world is seen as emerging via a spatial intervention brought about by diverse cultural practices which set out to embody, subvert, and reconfigure the postcolonial city.

The subject who arguably enucleates this peculiar form of space production is the postcolonial *flâneur*, wandering in streets that objectify a Thirdspace. The narrative of the post-colonial and post-diasporic *flâneur* thus inaugurates a “resistant habit of street walking”, mobilising his/her insurgent located-ness on the street as a “creative strategy” (De Certeau 1993: 160). As De Certeau observes, postcolonial *flâneurs* “are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character [...]. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces” (1993: 161).

Thus, the streets of the unknown city in *A Fine Balance* are transformed into a crucial setting for the story of Om and Ishvar, the two unfortunate tailors, in an interweaving of the desolate landscape of the Emergency with the lives of the protagonists. As a result, Mistry seems to emphasise the “migrant’s interstitial position as an enabling space of potential political intervention” (Herbert 2008: 16). Even in the second part of the novel, when, after their castration, Om and Ishvar become homeless people who “occupied park benches, sat on bus-shelter stiles, sipped a glass of tea at a corner stall” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 407) and no longer believe that the scales will ever hang even, their resignation conceals an attempt to react and create a space of their own. Their final wanderings as beggars are not only a reflection of the city’s miserable conditions, but also a reaction to the Emergency’s restrictions. There is no amputation that can deter them from walking; in a certain sense, through their strolling, they manage to appropriate and re-write the city-space and themselves. Moreover, thanks to their peregrinations, the duality between the inner city and the suburbs is also underlined, the latter being a space where outcasts, migrants and diasporic people must live in a sort of eternal separation from the well-to-do.

All these human agglomerations are the product of the global city and of the “claim for the space” (Mistry [1995] 2004: 182) to which *A Fine Balance* has been giving voice. Mistry records an insider/outsider dialectic that is at the same time part of, and apart from, the new Indian cities’ cosmopolitan outlook. Whenever the wanderings and subaltern stories of the novel’s protagonists are read alongside the ‘official’ accounts of Indian history, we realise how the figure of the postcolonial *flâneur* is instrumental in shedding light on the shifts between the dominant and non-dominant points of view.

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GLOBALISATION INTO CYBERSPACE:  
HARI KUNZRU'S *TRANSMISSION* AND  
THE INDIAN TRANSNATIONAL PARASITE

*Abstract*

Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* charts the American migration of Arjun Mehta, an Indian computer programmer with a passion for Bollywood cinema. The chaos of our contemporary world, split between real and virtual, computer geeks and neocolonialism, looms large in Arjun's life. By featuring the *Leela* virus as a controversial metaphor for interconnectedness, the novel seems to evoke P.K. Nayar's conceptual framework of the "transnational parasite" (2014), that is to say, a performative exchange produced at the interstices of cultural negotiations. The novel, in my view, illuminates a cultural paradigm of contestation and agency by having multiple affiliations unsettle the hegemonic practices of a globalised world. This essay tries, then, to shed light on the cyberworld as a productive and transformative semantic space that contaminates the idea of ethnic purity and generates change.

*Keywords:* Hari Kunzru; Indian diaspora; cyberspace; globalisation; transnationality.

1. *Introduction*

It has almost become a cliché to say that we live in a period of interconnected information technology that has turned the world into a global village where the mobility of capital, goods, data and people unfolds across national borders like never before. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, the geographer David Harvey discussed the concept of "time-space compression" and singled out commodity production and accumulation as key-factors within a renewed relation between time and space. Harvey's "condition of postmodernity" is hence characterised by a substantial alteration of spatio-temporal perceptions, because capitalist processes "so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves" (1989: 240). In the same vein, Anthony Giddens defines globalisation as "the intensification of world-

wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (1990: 64). While obliterating the borders of nation-states, globalised modernity has let hope turn into disillusionment for those who have been crossing such borders, and this has consequentially fostered a critical debate about the ‘blind spots’ of globalisation.

With such issues in mind, contemporary literature – above all by migrant writers – might be regarded “as a fiction staged against the awareness of the interconnected, interdependent, but unequal world” (Childs and Green 2013: 3). For their part, Postcolonial Studies have understandably given a skeptical response to the impact of globalisation. As argued by Sankaran Krishna, postcolonialism endeavours to address the inequalities and injustice in our contemporary ‘liquid’ world. Krishna’s contention induces us to reflect on how the interactions between the West and non-West have by no means been egalitarian in cultural and economic terms, with catchwords like ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’ becoming ideological “instruments of oppression in the hands of once-colonized elites and nation-states in the third world” (2009: 4). This is a sore point that Joseph Stiglitz had already highlighted in his *Globalization and Its Discontents*; when implemented too fast, pro-globalisation policies may increase vulnerability and poverty as well as enhance corruption, ethnic conflicts, and rapid change to the detriment of cultural adaptation, while many people “have felt increasingly powerless against forces beyond their control. They have seen their democracies undermined, their cultures eroded” (Stiglitz 2002: 248).

Against the above-sketched backdrop, my essay explores Hari Kunzru’s second novel, *Transmission* (2004), as a case study selected from contemporary Indian literature in English. In the aftermath of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence, Indian literature has percolated through Anglophone writing spaces like, so to speak, a special kind of ‘virus’, witnessing a transnational turn on the brink of the new millennium. Contemporary diasporic Indian writers — Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Hari Kunzru, just to name a few — still draw upon Salman Rushdie’s skepticism of nationalism but, differently from his epic-scale tones, they tend to privilege stories of ‘ordinary’ displaced people. Rushdie’s heirs, or “midnight’s grandchildren” (Rothstein 2000), have not only disseminated Indian literature; in their works, “India itself has put the traditional idea of the nation as imagined community into question” (Ashcroft 2013: 32). In the wake of global mobility and spatio-temporal disarray, Indian writing has interrogated the idea of the nation as it had been embraced in the aftermath of Partition. While pre-Rushdie Indian writing had been informed by a feeling of Indianness all through the

transition from colonialism to independence, writers publishing since the 1990s have begun to give shape to “a new canon” (Varughese 2013: 13), with this significant turn being marked “by a deep distrust of the boundaries of the nation” (Ashcroft 2013: 32). The transnational Indian novel in English exhibits a critique of capitalism and unveils the complexity of a world dominated by mass culture and surveillance systems. Unlike the diasporic migrations oscillating from homeland to new places, transnational fictions “are not negotiating between old and new homes but finding homes wherever they go because of their appropriations of newer cultural identities and artifacts, of constantly reinventing themselves in multiple locations” (Nayar 2014: 19). In line with such premises, Kunzru’s novel can be said to engage with larger global questions, controversially featuring the computer virus as a vector capable of relocating affective, ethnic, and economic affiliations.

A prolific British storyteller of Kashmiri descent, Hari Kunzru has specialised in narratives that “explore the formation of identity and questions of individual agency in regimes of exploitation and control” (Childs and Green 2013: 60). He portrays the complexity of our contemporary global world with a focus on neoliberal capitalism and diasporic identities of South Asian origin. Like his debut novel, *The Impressionist* (2002), *Transmission* spans continents against the backdrop of South Asian dislocations. A tale of worldwide connections and disconnections, global strollers, neoliberal finance and cyberculture clashes, *Transmission* is a multi-plot novel interweaving three stories: Arjun Mehta’s migration from New Delhi to Silicon Valley as a computer programmer, Leela Zahir’s film-making activities as a Bollywood star and, finally, English businessman Guy Swift’s worldwide marketing campaigns. Written in a postmodern style, the novel juxtaposes science fiction with satire and provocatively features the *Leela* virus as the connector of the various stories, even if this virus is to eventually cause the dissolution of money, things, and people. Fascinated by computers and Bollywood cinema, Arjun Mehta, the naïf Indian protagonist, first experiences enthusiasm and then disillusionment with Western culture, until he decides to release a virus into cyberspace in order to paradoxically ‘save’ his American dream.

This essay sheds light on the motif of the cyberworld as a transformative semantic space that sets out to contaminate the idea of ethnic purity and generate change. By using the computer virus as a metaphor for interconnectedness, *Transmission* seems to evoke P.K. Nayar’s conceptual framework of the “transnational parasite” (2014), that is to say, the framework of a performative exchange produced at the interstices of multifaceted negotiations. The novel, in my view, succeeds in il-

luminating a cultural paradigm of contestation and agency by making new affective, ethnic and economic affiliations unsettle the hegemonic practices nurtured by globalisation.

## 2. *The Computer Virus and Parasite through Time and Space*

By interweaving Bollywood cinema and computer viruses, Kunzru's narrative becomes embedded in a logic that accelerates spatiality and temporality as if in accordance with Harvey's "time-space compression". The novel shuttles to and fro, from the Indian metropolises of the booming 1990s, like New Delhi and Bombay, to Silicon Valley, in North America, bustling with traffic hums and technology; it then passes through Scottish lochs, Dubai's luxurious hotels, and the border between Mexico and the United States.

In other words, *Transmission* depends upon multiple 'viral regenerations' that tend to reverse cultural differences along temporal and spatial boundaries, creating a sense of suspension in a dimension where everything seems to exist in a state of transition. A feeling of temporal disruption spreads through the novel. Upon entering the office where a job interview will take him to the United States, Arjun observes that "a row of clocks, relic of the optimistic 1960s, displayed the time in the key world cities" (Kunzru 2004: 6)<sup>1</sup>. The clocks, however, are not synchronised ("New Delhi seemed to be only two hours ahead of New York, and one behind Tokyo" [p. 6]), thus introducing a component of temporal disarray. Arjun feels disoriented and, imagining "the globe contracting like a deflating beach ball" (p. 6), experiences a first sign of the spatio-temporal compression that is to dominate the storyline. The foregrounding of diachronic fragmentation is epitomised by the tellingly named Guy Swift, a London-based businessman who exploits the Internet in order to raise money; his marketing agency, called *Tomorrow\**, is a future-oriented business company which strives to encompass the world/temporal distances by using *GS:TM* (*Guy Swift: The Mission*), a strategy that the omniscient narrator describes as follows: "[t]he future is happening today, and in today's fast-moving future the worst place to do business is the past" (p. 20). *GS:TM* is inspired by an "emotional magma that wells from the core of planet brand" (p. 21) and that Guy, the chief-executive officer of the agency, has defined *TBM*, i.e. Total Brand Mutability.

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent quotations from *Transmission* will be followed by page numbers cited in parentheses.

Acronyms abound in the text together with other typographic alterations (italics, hashtags, capital letters), while a sort of panoptic perspective impends over the narrative, despite the rapidity and fragmentation which connote the cyberspace. If CEST, KST and PST (Central European Summer Time, Korean Summer Time, Pacific Summer Time) stand for the several time zones which the viral infection is to link together, physical spaces are turned into virtual ghosts of the original landscapes. The Scottish Highlands, for instance, become the setting of a Bollywood film where Leela is seen to dance to Hindu music, and one learns that the Gothic Castle nearby is a fake one (an emblem of modern capitalism, the castle was actually built in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a glamorous mannerist style). If the setting of Leela's movie is "a ghost of Scotland" (p. 176), the Dubai hotel where Guy Swift is temporarily staying, "sprawling along an artificial beach whose white sand [...] had been imported by the Caribbean" (p. 178), similarly metaphorises an abstract world as well as a mimicry of globalisation.

As anticipated, the viral dissemination joins together the sub-plots of the novel. For his part, Arjun Mehta is to find himself ambiguously stuck in the circuits of a global reality. An ingenuous Indian computer programmer, he daydreams about America and Bollywood and, once in the United States, he is initially mesmerised by that longed-for world, until hope is sadly supplanted by disillusionment. He gets a job at Virugenix, a company based in Washington State and specialised in antivirus software. Here, he first falls victim to Chris, an ex-hippy, bisexual colleague who almost rapes him, and later on he is fired by the company because of a financial crisis. Feeling bereft of his dignity but unwilling to return to India, Arjun decides to make the most of his two passions – Bollywood and computers – in order to reassert a sense of agency. Though the virus he releases is basically aimed at regaining access to Virugenix, the actual consequences of his act of sabotage turn epidemic and sow the seeds of pain and destruction. Like a parasite, the virus that Arjun names after his favourite Bollywood star, *Leela*, "disrupts the flow of the First World, interrupts it and reorients it" (Nayar 2014: 24), dangerously transcending the borders of time and space.

It is worth remembering here that Nayar conceives the "transnational parasite" as connected with "a process of mutually transformative exchange" (Nayar 2014: 25) rather than with the presence of allegedly isolated colonial subjects in the West. The parasite can be compared to a performative agent that "locates itself as *noise*, asserts its postcolonial agency through a rectangulation of affiliations" (p. 27; my emphasis). According to French philosopher Michel Serres, on whom Nayar draws, parasites fall into a variety of categories including the biological, social,

and the ‘noise’; in this last sense, they catalyse mutations, because “le bruit suscite un système nouveau, un ordre plus complexe que la simple chaîne” (Serres 1997: 36).

In my view, *Transmission* can be read in line with Nayar’s theoretical framework and as a powerful example of how a multifaceted paradox may animate a (mock-)tragic tale of destruction. The novel is divided into two parts, “Signal” and “Noise”. While the first part, which covers two thirds of the book’s length, deals with the episodes that trigger the release of the virus, the second describes the consequences of Arjun’s hacking. Even language undergoes a mutation, since the concise and computing-like vocabulary of the first section is subsequently replaced by a more nuanced and descriptive style. Whereas at the beginning signals gather and converge, in the second section a peculiar kind of noise is released which, to quote Serres, may act on a system of relations and go so far as to encroach on its host: “[l]e bruit introduit le hasard et une altération de l’ordre, qui est donc aussi une altération du sens. D’un autre côté, il y a la sélection, c’est-à-dire le fait que le sens soit le sens d’une circulation irréversible” (1997: 334). Although he has planned it, Arjun is not able to control the disastrous consequences of the viral infection, which are to develop into variants that have the power to change reality. This insidious process is alluded to by the very word that the author has chosen for the novel’s title:

Perfect information is sometimes defined as a signal transmitted from a sender to a receiver without loss. In the real world, however, there is always noise. [...] Certainty backslides into probability. Information transmission, it emerges, is about doing the best you can. (p. 271)

Noise intrudes and percolates through various affiliations. As a consequence, affective and ethnic ties are forced to move across borders, while metaphors, jargon and acronyms bring about a linguistic comingling that undermines linearity and causality.

Yet, despite his geeky obsession with technology, Arjun remains a ‘romantic hero’ in search of love and true contacts, feeling “the need for another person as a hard ache inside, an alien presence which had formed in his chest like a tumor” (p. 110). As he understands in the end, life is governed by other laws than mathematical principles and their predictability. All things considered, then, if emotional experience has been heightened in the novel through a virally-transmitted affiliation, the computer programmer and transnational parasite himself ultimately sees the virtual world of information technology as too arid and unfeeling.

### 3. *Cyberspace Ethics: The Virus's Affective and Ethnic Affiliations*

The fact remains that the virus seals an emotional bond between the protagonist and the external world. While still living in New Delhi, Arjun “did not really understand emotions as well as he might” (p. 16), avoiding communication with his parents. As the narrator observes, “his desires expressed themselves as images of a world which appreciated the importance of the principles of predication and control. Reality was NOIDA. The gap too great” (p. 14)<sup>2</sup>. Once he moves to the United States, he melodramatically embroiders on his sexual dates with Chris, an American colleague at Virugenix, and finally pleads with her: “You’re my last hope. It’s you and me against the world now” (p. 103). Shocked by this remark and staring at him, the girl ironically asks: “What movie was that from?” (p. 103). Although she does not know about Arjun’s Bollywood passion, Chris does read the man’s statement as a script from a virtual reality.

On the other hand, the viral version of Leela Zahir proceeds to transform the Bollywood star into a flirtatious creature who “corrupted data at the New Cross and Littlebrook substations, seducing the control software, whispering you are overloaded, trip the circuit-breakers, shut down the lines” (p. 199). Passages like this remind us of a *femme fatale* who, by resorting to an allusive smile, causes pain and loss among her lovers: the virus gives shape to a winking and smiling “Leela Zahir, dancing in jerky quicktime in a pop-up window” (p. 3). By choosing a Bollywood actress and making Arjun worship her as a Hindu goddess, Kunzru appears to allegorically conflate Eastern and Western approaches to emotions and sexuality. While Leela Zahir is a celebrity in the East, she is almost unknown in the Western world, and this condition contributes to turning her into a mere object of sexual desire, as Arjun’s American colleagues confirm while watching the viral dance on their computers: “She’s hot. To me a lot of Indian chicks are hot” (p. 146).

A second set of affiliations regards ethnical roots and hospitality (it is no mystery that ethnicity issues may get entangled with cyber-terror or sexual traffic). In line with the tradition of *Bharat Mata*, India is initially personified as a prosperous woman, as a country with a thriving economy where farmland has been replaced by blocks of flats, shopping malls and stadia. And Leela stands in metonymic terms with such

<sup>2</sup> Arjun’s technological know-how as well as his worldview are grounded in NOIDA, short for the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority; the acronym also refers to the ‘Integrated Industrial Township’ in the state of Uttar Pradesh and a symbol of Indian economic ascendance.

a motherland. The Bollywood star embodies her homeland's divine qualities; as the narrator points out, she is "India's girl-next-door, and at the same time her newest goddess" (p. 48). What the virus does is corrupting the girl's beauty and purity, so that Arjun's cyber-creature ends up spoiling Leela's career as an actress and generating a plethora of new Leelas, with "her organs rearranged, mutated, hidden under a novel layer of encryption" (pp. 113-14). The virus can be said to enact a trans-medial mutation producing *noise*, a parasitical interaction that modifies its source (Leela/India) and its various hosts around the globe, blocking the neoliberal-logic flow that we are used to associating with the West: "she could camouflage herself within the programs she infected, inserting herself in between legitimate instructions, covering herself over by resetting all references to the changes she had made" (p. 114).

According to Nayar, the transnational parasite leans on a form of postcolonial agency "where the nostalgia and yearning is replaced by poise and aggression" (2014: 29). In a similar way, *Transmission* appropriates and subverts the colonial rhetoric hidden behind neoliberal principles. While Leela ultimately escapes from the fake Scottish setting and her dreadful mother Fazia – who had convinced her to become an actress – Guy Swift is also a victim of Arjun's cyber-attack. Grippled by recession, Guy's company is facing financial problems and, during a meeting with PEBA, the Pan European Border Authority in charge of frontier-crossing policies, the laptop where an important presentation is stored fails to start because of the *Leela* virus. Guy is then mistaken for an illegal Albanian migrant and deported to Albania; he eventually manages to go back to England, where he settles down on a moorland in the North Pennines, a world apart from his previous life governed by the motto "PLAY, CHANGE, INSPIRE" (p. 125). By using capital letters, Kunzru seems to crystallise the mantra of neoliberal finance, against which the virus works as a disruptive strategy pushing to the fore the precariousness of our contemporary world, erasing ethnic borders and unleashing violence and destruction across national boundaries. The most powerful image of such a transnational crossing is represented by the spreading of the *Leela* virus from London to Tokyo, from the United States to the Philippines: *Leela01*, *Leela06* (*RingtoneLeela*), or the calamitous "Variant Eight Leela, the so-called transpositional worm" (p. 283), who "danced her way around the world, and disaster, like an overweight suburbanite in front of a workout video, followed every step" (p. 4).

Constantly dwelling on borderline situations, the novel also deals with the question of illegal immigration/emigration. Arjun is aware that, after his dismissal, his visa is soon to expire and he will be re-

turned to India. Likewise, Guy's project with the EU immigration-policy authorities conveys the idea of borders being blurred across a continent in chaos. While the European Union tries to weed out 'unwanted people', American immigration policies go after the 'enemies within' by protecting national borders. If Guy Swift falls victim to EU controls, Arjun manages to reach the US-Mexican border, a 2000-mile line "monitored by armed patrols equipped with thermal-imaging cameras and remote-movement sensors, portable X-rays devices, GPS optics, satellite maps" (p. 266). Followed by two Korean boys who have identified him as the target of the FBI's manhunt, he eventually disappears to become a legend. A "twisted genius" (p. 284), according to the press, this transnational parasite has shown how an alienating experience can be turned into a strategy aimed at deconstructing and reformulating the discursive palimpsest of our globalising reality. As Nayar argues, "[o]n the one hand, the parasite is indispensable; on the other, its presence restructures the society" (2014: 29). While it is true that the virus has wreaked havoc, it cannot be denied that the same viral infection has drawn attention to the sense of ontological vulnerability and social fragility blending into the lures of neoliberal globalisation. On the so-called Greyday, the virus has reached its climax and given vent to a deep sense of loss and uncertainty:

Greyday was an informational disaster, a holocaust of bits. A number of major networks went down simultaneously, dealing with such things as mobile telephony, airline reservations, transatlantic email traffic and automated tellermachines. [...] Home computers? Individuals? Do you know anyone whom Leela did not touch in some way? Leela's noise passed effortlessly out of the networks into the world of things. Objects got lost: a van carrying armaments from a depot in Belgrade; a newly authenticated Rembrandt. Money in all sorts of physical forms dropped out of sight, but also money in its essence, which is to say that on Greyday a certain amount of money simply *ceased to exist*. (p. 272. Emphasis in the original)

As this passage illustrates, the virus hurls the world into chaos. And yet, the novel's ending seems to acquire a utopian timbre. Guy Swift finds shelter in a solitary pastoral dwelling and Arjun Mehta and Leela Zahir disappear into the void, but, despite the omnipresent panoptical eye presiding over people, time and spaces, this act of vanishing may suggest their potential survival from technological tyranny. The parasite thus veers toward an ethic direction, a "mode of articulating a solidarity of suffering and oppression" (p. 36) that aligns the Third World with the First World.

Arjun possibly epitomises a ‘postnational ethic’ that, in Leela Gandhi’s words, is formulated “through an emphasis on mutual transformation of coloniser and colonised, and its blueprint for a utopian inter-civilisational alliance against institutionalised suffering is, indeed, salutary” (1998: 140). By blurring the affective, ethnic, and economic boundaries between East and West, postcolonialism can challenge privileged perspectives and envisage a utopian approach inspired by an ethics of hybridity rooted in the wounds afflicting the Third and First World alike. As Ashcroft has recently pointed out, the road to utopia is marked by a transformative and visionary power, and the most distinctive feature of postcolonial “utopian thinking is the importance of memory in the formation of utopian concepts of a liberated future” (2016: 2). If “the transnational parasite lives in a world of extensive suffering”, it can be turned into an agent whose memory lays the foundation for a solidarity “built on a common history of suffering” (Nayar 2014: 31-32).

*Transmission*, in conclusion, suggests that endings can be new beginnings. If the *Leela* virus has generated infinite and dangerous variants, the story envisioned through the text’s omniscient perspective opens up to an imaginary and more promising future. “There are sightings of Arjun Mehta and Leela Zahir around the world”, the narrator concludes, “sometimes alone, sometimes in company” (p. 297). People spot Leela “begging in the streets of Jakarta” and Arjun at an “anti-globalisation demo in Paris” (p. 297). In an attempt to find “one pattern that makes sense” (p. 297), the novel’s epilogue inches towards a path that joins Arjun and Leela as lovers struggling against the constraints of globalisation. The unknown utopian space into which the two heroes escape can be interpreted as a potentially positive scenario subverting the rules that had stifled their previous lives. While the virus has admittedly caused loss, the novel simultaneously appeals to a redeemingly active layer that my reading has intended to show.

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EXILE AS A CREATIVE CHOICE: TRANSNATIONALISM AND  
LIMINALITY IN ORSON WELLES'S *CHIMES AT MIDNIGHT*

*Abstract*

This paper analyses Orson Welles's 1965 *Chimes at Midnight* from the point of view of the relationship between the stylistic unevenness of the film and Welles's experience as a 'transnational' director. Welles reworks Shakespeare's *Henriad* into a new, highly personal product. While source texts are heavily cut, scenes are rearranged so as to occasionally include lines from other sections of the plays; some of the characters are eliminated, while brief excerpts from Holinshed's *Chronicles* are added. Further stylistic idiosyncrasies stem from technical flaws: defective recording, poor synchronisation, and contrasting editing arrangements, for instance, leave their mark on a series of discrepancies between sound and image. My paper considers both the filmmaking strategies and the technical shortcomings of *Chimes at Midnight* as an opportunity to investigate Welles's condition of 'in-betweenness'. In other words, his transnationalism might be read as a possibility for his work to address multiple audiences and their different issues. Thus, the "incredible unevenness" of the film (Jorgens 1977: 114), which has often been labelled as a blatant flaw, becomes a way to explore Welles's personal and historical sense of loss. His reinvention of the Shakespearean source can speak not only for the filmmaker's own feeling of intellectual and political alienation, but also for the historical situation in which the film was produced and received.

*Keywords:* Orson Welles; Shakespeare; transnationalism; experimental visual strategies.

1. *Intellectual and Political Isolation*

Drawing mainly on *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, and partly on *Richard II*, *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Chimes at Midnight* can be described as a "kaleidoscopic revisualization" (Seltzer 1969: 103) of Shakespeare's *Henriad*. As a Spanish-Swiss co-production, the film was shot in Spain between 1964 and 1965, while the country

was still under Francisco Franco's military dictatorship. At that time, Welles lived in a (more or less) voluntary exile in Europe, trying to get away from the suspicions about his commitment which circulated in the late-1940s in Hollywood, where "the proscription of intellectual filmmaking [...] went hand in hand with punitive anti-Communism" (Guneratne 2008: 197). After he had outspokenly supported progressive ideas and had been engaged in political activities during the Roosevelt presidencies, Welles was no longer particularly welcome in his home country. As the 'Red Scare' began to rise, the director's name was included in *Red Channels* (1950), the anti-Communist publication that contributed to the banning of left-wing actors, writers, musicians and journalists suspected of backing 'Communist subversion'. Meanwhile, the FBI had been investigating him since 1941 for his potential connections with Communist activities in Hollywood (although the Bureau would find no evidence). Isolated from the 'national' industry of Hollywood as well as from active political involvement, Welles's sense of intellectual and political alienation probably increased as he ended up shooting a film in Franco's Spain. Although it was originally conceived as a theatrical adaptation (*The Five Kings*, which premiered in Boston as early as 1939), *Chimes at Midnight* is imbued with connections to both Welles's cultural and physical exile and the political scenarios of the mid-1960s. By considering the historical context of the film's production and reception, we shall see how Welles's transnationalism and liminality, his standing neither "here" nor "there", allowed him to speak to a "double audience", the one left behind in his home country and the one he found in Spain and Europe (Naficy 2001, quoted in Guneratne 2008: 200).

Welles's film opens on a winter landscape, where two black figures are struggling through snow, until they get to a wooden house, reach for the fireplace and reminisce about "the days that we have seen":

*Shallow*: Jesus, the days that we have seen! Do you remember since we lay all night in the Windmill in Saint George's Field?

*Falstaff*: No more of that, Master Shallow.

*Shallow*: Ha, 'twas a merry night! Is Jane Nightwork alive?

*Falstaff*: She lives, Master Shallow.

*Shallow*: Doth she hold her own well?

*Falstaff*: Old, old, Master Shallow.

*Shallow*: Nay, she must be old, she cannot choose but be old; certain she's old, and had Robin Nightwork by old Nightwork before I came to Clement's Inn. Jesus, the days that we have seen! Ha, Sir John, said I well?

*Falstaff*: We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Robert Shallow.

*Shallow*: That we have, that we have, that we have; in faith, Sir John, we have. Jesus, the days that we have seen!<sup>1</sup>

This dialogue from *2 Henry IV* (III.ii.187-211) is relocated within an open-ended frame, with which the film opens as a sort of nostalgic flashback centred on Falstaff. This opening sequence already shows Welles's extensive textual revision of the Shakespearean source. The director radically alters the structural order of the Henriad, erasing borders between the five different plays he is borrowing from. He recombines them together into a new, personal "compound" that takes emphasis away from Hal and focuses on Falstaff's story instead (Anderegg 1999: 127).

According to Welles, it is precisely "by focusing on Falstaff" that the "Shakespearean material leads him into dark colours" (Crowl 1980: 373). Along with the lines from *2 Henry IV*, the film's opening sequence borrows the bleaker tone of the play. A sense of loss and instability pervades Welles's re-shaping of the Shakespearean material, as suggested by Falstaff's conclusive reply: "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Robert Shallow". On the one hand, this implies that Falstaff and Shallow have been spending nights awake, presumably enjoying life as much as they could. On the other hand, while apparently celebrating life, the line also laments the inevitable passing of time – as the insistent use of the past tense and the iteration of the adjective "old" suggest (Barnaby 2004: 26). The phrase "chimes at midnight" acquires "further resonance by the repeated intoning of bells throughout the film" and "is associated for the audience with sadness and mortality more than with youthful carousal" (Anderegg 1999: 125). The mournful tone of the line is stressed by the succeeding sequence, where vigorous knights going to war are rapidly replaced by weary, gloomy soldiers (probably coming back from war), with hanged corpses in the background. Thus, the film opening foreshadows the sense of loss and nostalgia stylistically and thematically prevailing in *Chimes*, which, as we shall see, also resonates with the historical context in which the film was shot.

## 2. *The Voice of History*

Adapting the Henriad was a meaningful choice in itself. While tracing the origins of the modern, centralised nation-state, Shakespeare's plays mainly dealt with the recurrent patterns of violence that followed Henry

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, all literal quotes from the film are taken directly from it.

IV's (illegitimate) conquest of the crown. The Shakespearean material might have echoed the recent history of Spain, as it was marked by a military *coup* and the following civil war, culminating in the establishment of Franco's dictatorship.

As noted by Guneratne, Welles's work appears stylistically close to the soon-to-be oppositional Spanish cinema, which aimed at destabilising official discourse. To begin with, the voice-over narration from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which introduces the flashback following the opening sequence, may have reminded the 1965 Spanish audience of recent historical events:

King Richard II was murdered, some say at the command of the Duke Henry Bolingbroke, in Pomfret castle on February 14, 1400. Before this the Duke Henry had been crowned King, though the true heir to the realm was Edmund Mortimer, who was held prisoner by the Welsh rebels. The new king was not hasty to purchase his deliverance, and to prove this Mortimer's cousins, the Percys, came to the King unto Windsor. There came Northumberland, his son Henry Percy called Hotspur, and Worcester, whose purpose was ever to procure malice and set things in a broil.

Official history in the film is reduced to a voice (namely, Ralph Richardson's), this voice being unidentifiable, external and extraneous to the events shown. Historical records intermingle with fictitious ones, but are still kept out of the screen, or offstage – which could already suggest a hidden, *obscene* quality ingrained in the historical events themselves. Similarly cut off from the 'real', material world, the protagonists of official history appear to plot and muse on usurpation or rebellion from the distance of secluded palaces. Enclosed – almost imprisoned – in his own cold stone court (the Church of Sant Vicenç in Cardona), Gielgud's Henry IV accentuates his incorporeal voice at the expense of his body, his physical presence distorted and made distant by the camera's low-angle perspective. Although he is hardly ever left alone, he seems to talk only to himself: his reproaches cannot control his son, nor can his promises pacify the rebels. Similarly, his rich, extremely rhetorical soliloquies are uncovered as strategies to hide conflicts and his own anxieties about power (Anderegg 1999: 133). They expose the burdens of (illegitimate) kingship to such a point that, "[h]ad he been more alert, Franco might well have noted the parallels between his situation and that of Gielgud's Henry IV, the latter as overburdened by what is within his head as that which sits atop it" (Guneratne 2008: 199). And had the Spanish audience been more alert as well, they might have recognised, in both Rich-

ardson's and Gielgud's detached words, a mystifying rhetoric very similar to the one associated with their own dictator since 1939. Franco's speeches – not basically different from those of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century national leaders and/or dictators – are not that far from Henry IV's grandiose and self-shielding soliloquies. Coming either from the distance of a radio broadcast or the heights of a balcony, with his voice amplified, made thundering by sound machines in order to reach the whole nation, such speeches were equally disconnected from material reality, alien to 'real', dialogic communication.

As a matter of fact, Henry IV is constantly fabricating the legitimation of his sovereignty: the violence on which his power is founded is strategically projected outside, 'translating' unwelcome people into a threat for the order and safety of the realm. From his very first appearance in the film, we hear the king attack the true heir to the throne, whose deliverance from the Welsh rebels he "was not hasty to purchase":

[...] Shall our coffers, then,  
Be emptied to redeem a traitor home?  
[...] No, on the barren mountains let him starve!  
For I shall never hold that man my friend  
Whose tongue shall ask me for one penny cost  
To ransom home revolted Mortimer. (*1 Henry IV*, I.iii.85-92)

The same strategy is of course recognisable in the speeches of many politicians from various historical periods. For the Spanish audience of the mid-1960s, one of the most recent striking experiences of the kind was Franco's victory speech at the end of the civil war, broadcasted on May 20, 1939. Here, the defenders of the democratically elected Second Republic, which the Nationalist forces led by Franco had overthrown in 1936, are deceitfully turned into barbarous tyrants:

In Madrid, the martyr city now freed from the tyranny of the Barbarians, you have witnessed [...] Spain a captive, subjected to a barbarous foreign yoke and sullied with Marxist crime. The martyrdom of Madrid is the gravest charge that can be brought against the Red leaders who, after being beaten in all the battles and hopelessly defeated, sacrificed the capital in vain by shielding themselves behind the non-combatant population, and delivered her over to the perverse methods of Russian Communism. (Franco 1939: 10)

### 3. *The 'Reality' of the Image*

On the other hand, 'unofficial' history – what is conventionally left outside historical records – is persistently present in Welles's film, up to the point of taking over and overturning its official counterpart. This carnivalesque parody is associated with an erratic and flashing visual style conveyed through a freewheeling camera, uneven editing and a badly synchronised soundtrack which is often hard to follow or understand. Besides these technical flaws, Welles seemed so little concerned about coherence in the soundtrack that he even dubbed a few actors (Anderegg 1999: 125ff). The fleeting images and their discrepancy with respect to the pieces of dialogue also divert our attention from words (the main medium of official history) in favour of the visual component, so that

[h]istory and (verbal) rhetoric are constantly displaced, replaced by Welles's nervous, erratic, de-centred, unstable visual and aural style, a flow of images and sounds that thoroughly dismantle Shakespeare's text, peeling away layers of strategically placed and carefully joined verbal and thematic checks against confusion. In this context, the inadequacies of the sound track become at least as much a matter of Welles's intentions and methods as a matter of technical flaws. (Anderegg 1999: 130)

Such is the visual style informing the sequences centred on Falstaff and his 'band of outsiders' – thieves and prostitutes belonging to settings outside the court, like taverns. But, most of all, it is the long battle sequence placed at the film's core that succeeds in subtracting history from the rhetoric of words and in rewriting it through images. Welles casts the battle of Shrewsbury as chaotic and meaningless, stripped of all language, so as to underline the devastatingly physical effects of war. This reminds one of an act of primordial, destructive violence, in which it is impossible to distinguish between loyalists and rebels, men and mud. The scene is filled with indistinguishable figures, and the editing is so rapid and fragmented that viewers are bound to feel a sense of claustrophobia, as though they were trapped in a nightmare. It is an experience from which virtually no one will be able to recover, "a major aesthetic disruption from which neither the tone of the film nor the perceptive mood of the spectator returns to its former equilibrium" (Davies 1988: 135).

While *Chimes* was being shot, the Francoist regime officially interdicted representations of the civil war. Yet, the Spanish audience might have been affected by the battle sequence in relation to the ferocious conflict their country had recently gone through. The rest of 1965-66

Europe as well – freshly devastated by two World Wars and in the first decade of the Cold War – could not have remained indifferent at such a view. As a matter of fact, Welles's use of "very short cuts" and his shooting "with a very big crane very low to the ground, moving as fast as it could be moved against the action" (Welles quoted in Cobos and Rubio 1966: 161) drag the spectator into a muddy and bloody confusion of bodies that reminds of World War I trenches. "What I was planning to do – and did", the director explained, "was to intercut the shots in which the action was contrary, so that every cut seemed to be a blow, a counter blow, a blow received, a blow returned" (Welles quoted in Cobos and Rubio 1966: 161). Welles's war sequence is therefore in stark contrast with the colourful and 'elegant' depiction of it in Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), where spotless cavaliers gallantly ride horses towards their adversaries. In *Chimes*, war is a black-and-white, blurry, and unruly act of violence. Like Falstaff's own 'catechism' on honour, Welles's re-interpretation unmasks the 'heroic' motivations and values said to be behind it as empty and grotesquely inhuman ideology. If Olivier's 'cheerful' representation of the battle of Agincourt is partly designed as a propagandistic encouragement of England's military effort against Nazi-fascism, Welles's Shrewsbury battle is built on the post-war ruins from which Spain (with the rest of Europe) had recently been striving to rise – which were nevertheless still visible at the horizon.

The whirl of events – such as the battle, the following punishments and the yet inexorable power-related brawls – conveys a sense of repetition that could find striking parallels in the historical context in which the film was shot. As soon as the battle scene begins, the image of soldiers rushing to war which informed the opening sequence is replayed, inevitably bringing to mind the very gruesome ending of that sequence, and suggesting that this may be the battle's own outcome. As a matter of fact, the battle scene ends by showing again those weary soldiers coming back from war and the hanged rebels in the background already present in the film's frame. The connection with the opening sequence may also suggest that rebellion, war and punishment cyclically repeat themselves in history. In light of this, Henry IV's apparently irrefutable statement at the end of the battle ("Rebellion in this land shall lose his sway, /Meeting the check of such another day", *1 Henry IV*, V.v.41-42), later echoed by the narrator ("But in the year of our Lord 1408, the last of his enemies had been vanquished"), may sound as an ironic anticipation of the very opposite – in the movie as in the mid-1960s Cold War scenario.

#### 4. *Displacing Verbal Rhetoric through Visual Elements*

The weary aftermath of the battle is going to culminate in Hal's coronation and, tragically, in Falstaff's banishment and death. Up to this moment, Hal has been divided between his two 'fathers', king Henry IV and Falstaff, liminal to both of their worlds. As he assumes the crown, he is finally absorbed into the realm of his father the king: the realm of 'official' history and its verbal rhetoric. His first act as Henry V is the rejection of Falstaff, which he has been (verbally) rehearsing throughout the film. It is actually "a rhetorical act, the new king of England's maiden speech, the son's entrance into the symbolic world of his father" (Anderegg 1999: 136). Similarly, Hal's declaration of war against France is only bombastically announced:

Now lords, for France; [...]  
 We doubt not of a fair and lucky war,  
 [...] Then forth, dear countrymen: [...]  
 [...] the signs of war advance:  
 No king of England, if not king of France. (*Henry V*, V.ii, *passim*)

No actual motivation is provided but, again, empty rhetoric. Henry V complies with his father's manipulative use of war, as Henry IV (after usurping the crown from Richard II) had tried to cover the illegitimacy of his sovereignty by fighting against and annihilating internal dissidence. Likewise, Hal's war is merely a political scheme: as his father had hinted, war against an external enemy would divert his subjects' attention from their own king's conduct and consolidate his power (2 *Henry IV*, IV.v). This time, it was the North American audience Welles had left behind that might have felt close to issues such as a crusade against a common external enemy. At the time *Chimes* was released in the United States (March 1967), the country's involvement in Vietnam, which had begun during World War II in support of the French colonial army, had turned into one of the wars of the Western Bloc against 'Communism'. The reasons President Johnson had adduced for committing his country to (an undeclared) war, if not omitted like Hal's, were at least as arbitrary, and glossed over the American interest in preserving its control over South-East Asia:

If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then [...] [i]n each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened, and an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States itself. (Johnson 1965)

By 1967, a period of great social upheaval was about to start in the U.S.A. The rise of the hippie counterculture spread pacifist ideals in the country, and more and more anti-war protests were organised. A movie like *Chimes at Midnight*, where rhetoric was distrusted through the immediate physicality of the image, could easily be associated with that growing counterculture and the attempts to denounce the actual horrors of war against the dominant military propaganda. Aware, by then, of the human price they were paying for a crusade against Communism, part of the American audience might have felt a connection with those on ‘the other side of history’ who, like Falstaff, died *because of* words.

Falstaff’s sudden death in the film is straightforwardly attributed to the young king’s rejection (“The king has killed his heart”, says here a random character). After Hostess Quickly’s brief account of his death, the closing scene contrasts the bare image of Falstaff’s solitary coffin in a desolate landscape with the voice-over narration from Holinshed’s *Chronicles*:

Determined to put on the shape of a new man, this Henry was a captain of such prudence and such policy that he never enterprised anything before it forecast the main chances that it might happen. So humane withal, he left no offence unpunished, no friendship unrewarded. For conclusion, a majesty was he that both lived and died a pattern in princehood, a lodestar in honour, famous to the world always.

The final sequence highlights the ironic gap between word and image emerging in the film, since Holinshed’s panegyric of Henry V is mockingly disproved by the appearance of Falstaff’s bleak funeral procession. The rhetorical strategies by which official history legitimates power are ultimately uncovered and dismantled, as history is shown in its crude material reality. By undermining verbal rhetoric, the immediate and disturbing physicality of the image urges the viewer to question official historical records and to read them as liable instruments of ideological propaganda instead.

## 5. Conclusion

Welles might be defined as one of those filmmakers who, after undergoing the “crises and tensions of exilic migrancy”, have transformed their “liminality and interstitiality” into “passionate sources of creativity and dynamism” (Naficy 2001: 13). The director’s strategies seem to attest his “in-betweenness”, placing him in stark opposition with the conventional filmmaking of both his home and host countries (Naficy

2001, quoted in Guneratne 2008: 200). Therefore, the visual style of *Chimes at Midnight* issues an incessant challenge to its viewers. The film “approaches something resembling pure cinema, images and sounds, that have an emotional and intellectual resonance apart from rational discourse” (Anderegg 1999: 137), with a consequently direct, sensory impact on the audience. Both deliberate idiosyncrasies and (more or less) intentional technical flaws prevent the spectator from reaching a logical and coherent understanding of the unfolding events. The incoherent medley of aesthetic elements on screen, especially sound and image, induces one to focus on the likewise disjointed aspects of history or contemporary reality. Shakespeare’s texts are re-interpreted through an uneven and fragmented filmic material, where the sensuous force of the image lays bare and disassembles verbal strategies. Accordingly, the “incredible unevenness” of the film potentially allows the audience to destabilise the rhetoric of power, especially in relation to the different social and political contexts they live in. In sum, such a challenging aesthetic could lead Welles’s audience(s) to question univocal, pre-established interpretations of both past and present conditions.

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“STOP DEEF STOP COME BACK TO MY EARIN STOP”:  
SOME EXAMPLES OF (TELE)COMMUNICATION IN  
JAMES JOYCE’S *FINNEGANS WAKE*

*Abstract*

This article discusses James Joyce’s peculiar use of contemporary technological devices for telecommunication in his last and most compelling novel *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Joyce employs telecommunication within the plot (provided that such a term still means something in the *Wake*) through his characters – in particular HCE, the Chapelized pub-owner, and his twin sons (Shem and Shaun) – and at a linguistic level, by mimicking the codes and communication modalities of radio transmitters, telegraphs, telephones, and other technological tools. In the *Wake* technology becomes consubstantial with characters and language, so that HCE does not only morph into a radio transmitter in II.3, but he also changes the semantic value of his utterances in accordance with the jargon of radio communication. Therefore, HCE undergoes a fascinating process of bio-mutation which changes his very meaning and function in the text. In its highly experimental structure, the *Wake* proves to be a magnificent example of the impact that the technological development of the first half of the twentieth century exerted on Modernism and its writing.

*Keywords:* *Finnegans Wake*; telecommunication; orality; posthumanism.

1. *The Wake as Telegram*

The quotation I chose for the title of this article is taken from I.1 of *Finnegans Wake* (henceforth *FW*) and refers to the ‘Prankquean Fable’ section (*FW* 21.5-23.16)<sup>1</sup>, when Jarl van Hoothor (the Earl of Howth, a proto-HCE figure) sends a message from his castle as a telegram

<sup>1</sup> All editions of *FW*, including the 1975 one employed here, have the same pagination and line spacing.

addressed to the Prankquean (a proto-ALP figure), who has just kidnapped his son and heir Tristopher (a proto-Shem) as a consequence of his refusal to let her in, apparently because he was at dinner<sup>2</sup>.

Jarl reiterates the message thrice, each time with a minor variation that continuously redefines the nature of his relationship with the Prankquean together with the triadic evolution of her political as well as sexual challenge. In all of the messages, particular attention is drawn to hearing. Joyce toys with the morphology of the word and associates it with ‘ear’, ‘earring’, and ‘heir’. ‘Ear’ is a direct reference to HCE (whose acronym can also be read as ‘Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker’) and to his hearing impairment, which recurs in all HCE-types, including Jarl van Hoother. ‘Earring’ is evocative of the hoop earring that pirates usually wear. This is consistent with the Prankquean, whom Joyce presents as a pirate. She is associated with the historical figure of Grace O’Malley, the pirate queen and champion of Irish independence – in *FW* she becomes “her grace o’malice” (*FW* 21.20-21) –, who visited the castle of Howth and threatened the Earl with her riddles. Finally, ‘heir’ refers to Jarl’s child and his kidnapping; he is the one who has been appointed as the future earl. This passage depicts the genesis of the family, from Adam and Eve as the Ur-couple throughout all its historical evolutions, which include the union of HCE and ALP. It is also one of the first instances regarding the rivalry and courtship between the sexes, here embodied by Jarl van Hoother and the Prankquean.

The very first instance of a male/female communication is presented as a *tele*-communication in the form of a telegram, which is however orally uttered (“Jarl van Hoother warlessed after her with soft dovesgall”, *FW* 21.22-25). Such a blurring between orality and writing, to which Joyce links the telegram, suggests how in his view human communication is an unstable and unreliable process. As a matter of fact, there is no difference between Jarl’s mediated message and the Prankquean’s riddles, since they are both failed attempts to deliver a message whose very meaning can never be disclosed. Furthermore, Jarl as a HCE-type has a hearing impairment that is also mentioned in his message through the word ‘deef’, evoking ‘theft’ and alluding to the kidnapping of his child. Most importantly, if read as ‘deaf’, the word is a reminder of Jarl’s medical condition. Such a supposed deafness con-

<sup>2</sup> As Adaline Glasheen (1977: 214f) explains, the Prankquean’s story was inspired by the legend of pirate Grace O’Malley’s visit to the castle of the Earl of Howth: Grace asks a riddle he never answers, and eventually kidnaps his heir, thus starting a war. For further studies on the Prankquean Fable and its narratological implications in *FW*, see Begnal 1964; Sailer 1989. For the role of Jarl van Hoother and the Prankquean as an Ur-figure for HCE and ALP, see McLuhan 1997; Lernout 2007; Epstein 2009.

tributes to jeopardising his chances to eventually engage in an effective conversation with the Prankquean, who can only retort by means of apparently unsolvable riddles. Notably, the three messages Jarl sends/ utters are perfectly counterbalanced by the Prankquean's three riddles (see Epstein 2009: 35ff).

The insistence on the telegram form for Jarl's message deserves further attention. The Prankquean fable is in fact introduced by a transitional section which comes right after the Jute/Mutt dialogue and starts as a telegram, anticipating the kind of communication the reader is about to experience: "(Stoop) if you are abcedminded, to this claybook, what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed!" (*FW* 18.17-18). Here Joyce conflates the inception of language, the creation of the alphabet and of writing with all the possible supports and tools in the history of communication, from clay, animal skin, and papyrus to the perfect complexity of the book, and once again such a catalogue is given in the form of a long telegram. On closer examination, one could even argue that the peculiar language of *FW* may be compared to a 'telegraphese' structure in its most sophisticated form. Indeed, the use of compound words and puns is consistent with the clipped way of writing and the attempt to pack as much information as possible within a small number of words, this being a typical feature of the telegraphese.

Jacques Derrida (1984) has extensively discussed Joyce's philosophical and linguistic engagement with the new forms of communication of his time and beyond. According to the French philosopher, Joyce's style is an anticipation of the writing of the future (it actually takes place in the future), in a context where the book as an artefact gives way to the dematerialised environment of digital messaging. In his godlike (re)creation of word systems, Joyce virtually puts all the languages of the world back together (even those that still have to be invented), as though aiming to recreate the 'encompassing idiom' humans allegedly spoke before the Tower of Babel's times. The polysemy each word is endowed with seems to be inspired by a peculiar principle of economy which is consistent with the philosophy that lies at the basis of the telegraphese: that is to say, conveying the widest possible meaning in the shortest expressive form. However, the more we try to keep those languages together *by* reading and *through* reading, the more the supposedly monolithic structure of that original idiom falls apart and ends up reproducing an uncontrollable Babelic fragmentation.

Along with telegraphy, Joyce was also interested in such forms of communication as radio, telephone, television and cinema, especially in connection with the ways these new media affected human perception in relation to bodily presence/absence, in both spatial and temporal terms

(see Fordham 2014: 39f)<sup>3</sup>. Fordham reminds us of a very effective pun Joyce employed for television, which might be extended to all the new forms of communication one was able to experience in the twentieth century (and even beyond): this coinage is “spectacular” (*FW* III.17), a term which combines the amazing show of the ‘moving pictures’ with the idea of the uncanny presences involved in it, or resulting from it. Such presences seem to be almost ghosts, or even post-human beings belonging to a transitional dimension which fluctuates between life and death, like Dracula, whose name is also echoed by Joyce’s pun.

In the next paragraph I will provide some examples of how Joyce engaged with the radio: in his ‘Wakean transformation’ of this technology, we will see how strongly and endemically bodies can be affected, to the point that they seem to undergo a process of genetic modification which has very much in common with posthumanism issues.

## 2. *Techno-Bodies/Techno-Languages*<sup>4</sup>

II.3 of *FW* presents HCE in his crowded pub in Chapelizod, when midnight is approaching and the tale of the Norwegian captain about how he tried to purchase a suit of clothes from a Dublin tailor is given as a “pub tale, a bit of drinkers’ gossip and even as a radio broadcast complete with weather reports” (Hayman 2007: 255). After long discussions and meetings, the suit is eventually ready for the captain, who ends up marrying the tailor’s daughter and setting up a new family. The passage is also a mythologised representation of the first meeting of HCE and ALP – he being the Norwegian captain, she the tailor’s daughter – and for this reason it is strictly connected with the Prankquean fable, which is variously echoed here.

The customers are so drunk that they cannot orientate themselves with respect to the radio play and do not understand at what point of the story they are (this remark is imbued with metatextual overtones). What they are actually listening to is the dialogue between the captain and the supply agent for his ship, including the question about the place where

<sup>3</sup> In *FW* II.3, Joyce’s well-known engagement with television emerges in the section that is usually referred to as “How Buckley Shot the Russian General”. In Donald Theall’s view, this was “one of the first fiction scenes in literary history involving people watching TV in a bar-room” (Theall 1997: 66). However, commenting on Theall’s statement, Fordham has argued that “although it may have been the first fictional representation, the presence of a TV in a bar didn’t require a miraculous leap of imagination on Joyce’s part”, as “[h]is vision was coinciding with actual consumer patterns of the period” (Fordham 2014: 40-41).

<sup>4</sup> A shorter version of this section appeared in Volpone 2015.

he can order a suit. The agent suggests “Kersse the tailor successor to Ashe and Whitehead, Clothes Shop” (*FW* 311.24). It is precisely in this narrative context that HCE undergoes a kind of techno-chemical mutation whereby his body, especially his brain and ear, turns into a radio transmitter. The reader is immediately projected into the “balk of the deaf” (*FW* 309.3), the allusion to HCE’s poor hearing being mingled with a reference to the kind of narrative presented here. In David Hayman’s words, one is faced with a “postmortal book” (Hayman 2007: 258) in which HCE is about to be brought to trial for an unknown, probably sexual, infraction, which will be followed by the end of his existential cycle (further on in the chapter, he is described as a king who will soon be dethroned). The moment arrives when impaired hearing and imperfect bodies undergo a major physical and technological transformation: as his customers are listening to the radio drama, in ‘real time’ HCE turns into a prosthetic expansion of the radio itself, which starts broadcasting information about his private life and spreading ‘the news’ all over the world.

Remarkably, at this point of the narrative, in which the feared ‘next generation’ is almost overcoming the previous one, HCE perfectly embodies both the role of Everyman and of ‘Noman’, as the acrostic at the beginning of the chapter reveals: “It may not or maybe a no concern of the Guinnesses but” (*FW* 309.1). ‘Noman’ obviously echoes ‘Nobody’, i.e. Ulysses’ self-definition when meeting the Cyclops. However, in light of HCE’s endemic transmutation, it could also refer to a change in his ‘human status’: HCE is no longer a man, because he has transcended his own biological condition and has become a cyborg. I am referring here to Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline’s first definition of ‘cyborg’, i.e. “a human artificially enhanced beyond his/her original biological status” (Clynes and Kline 1960: 26-27; 74-76). Accordingly, HCE is eventually given a chance to correct his hearing impairment (his ‘weak ear’) and be more responsive to external stimuli. After all, the narrator suggests that the opening segment of the chapter is in fact devoted to HCE’s “otological life” (*FW* 310.22). This pun combines HCE’s change in his own ontological condition with the machinic transformation of his ear, as hinted by the Greek prefix ‘oto’, meaning ‘ear’. As if he were reborn or had been recreated, HCE is now half human and half machine. Such a regeneration is further suggested by the term ‘Guinnesses’, which juxtaposes ‘Genesis’, the first Book of the Bible, with the ‘Guinness’ beer: HCE the pub owner, and a heavy beer drinker himself, is caught in the moment of his physical, intellectual and moral fall, ready to be born again and become ‘other’.

As Everyman/Noman, HCE is about to leave his “hyper-chemical economantarchy” (*FW* 167.6) and make way for the new generation, represented by his children. Whereas HCE’s power is the result of an ‘enhanced chemical reaction’ (‘hyper-chemical’), his own subjectivity loses substance and strength, becoming a distant ‘echo’ (*eco*) of someone who is dissolving into a ‘noman’. In I.4, HCE’s acronym even turns into the chemical formula “H2CE3” (*FW* 95.10), which somehow points to the character’s distinct chemical components before they are separated and reassembled into a different structure (see Theall 1997 and 2004). The passage that describes HCE’s electro-chemical transformation signals the presence of a mutual influence and affection between language and the subject. What alters HCE’s body does alter the language designed to make the phenomenon intelligible:

as mysterbolder, forced in their waste, and as for Ibdullin what of Himana, that their toltvtubular high fidelity daildialler, [...] equipped with supershielded umbrella antennas for distance getting and connected by the magnetic links of a Bellini-Tosti coupling system with a vitaltone speaker, capable of capturing skybuddies, harbour craft emittences, key clickings, vaticum cleaners, due to woman formed mobile or man made static and bawling the howle hamshack and wobble down in an eliminium sounds pound so as to serve him up a melegoturny marygoraumd, eelectrically filtered for allirish earths and ohmes. This harmonic condenser enginium (the Mole) they caused to be worked from a magazine battery [...] with a howdrocephalous enlargement, a gain control of circumcentric megacycles ranging from the antidulibnium onto the serostaatarean. They finally caused, or most leastways brung it about somehows (that) the pip of the lin (to) pinnatrate inthro an auricular forfickle. (*FW* 309.13-310.21)

While preparing the materials for this section, Joyce compiled clusters of technical terms which would constitute the major body of his notebooks (see Hayman 2007). Some of them are extremely helpful to decode the nature of HCE’s metamorphosis and its impact on the space-temporal context in which it occurs: suffice it to mention expressions such as “tube”, “high fidelity”, “supershield antenna”, “coupling system”, “vitaltone speaker”, “in the ohms”, “vacuum cleaner”, “magazine battery”, and “harmonic condenser”. According to Hayman, “Joyce was able to turn technical terms rapidly into puns based on homonyms while integrating the radio into its pub context” (Hayman 2007: 259). As a matter of fact, the account of HCE’s proteiform nature is consistent with the proteiform compound language employed by Joyce, so that the minute description of the character’s metamorphosed body turns

into an allegorical and almost comic narrative: the ironic *storiella* of his supposed guilt and last grotesque attempt to re-establish his power is loaded with sexual overtones. Hence, the “supershielded umbrella antennas” that represent a major part of HCE’s transformation are also a reference to a possible (or longed for) sexual intercourse, with the antennas alluding to HCE’s penis and the umbrella to the condom, which in Joyce’s times happened to be called in that way. This reading also chimes in with the “Bellini-Tosti coupling system” mentioned in the subsequent line. If Bellini and Tosti were of course the Italian pioneers of radiotelegraphy, this particular “coupling system” is not merely associated with the radio, but with HCE’s increasing sexual drive, too.

Furthermore, the “due to woman formed mobile or man made static” passage echoes the convention of calling each half of a pair of mating connectors, or fasteners, ‘male’ and ‘female’ (in Joyce’s case, “man” and “woman”); the ‘female’ connector is generally a receptacle that receives and holds the ‘male’ one, in a direct analogy with genitalia and sexual intercourse. ‘Mate’ is also the verb employed to describe this connection. As HCE’s transformation progresses, one notices that both his ear and his head (along with his brain) are involved; as a consequence, he exhibits a “howdrocephalous enlargement”. HCE grows to gigantic proportions and becomes “howdrocephalus”, with the pun referring to the gradual expansion of his skull (‘cephalus’) and penis (‘phallus’). Indeed, this is the last chance for him to affirm his intellectual and sexually powerful position over his posterity. Paradoxically, his supposed higher intellectual and sexual ‘ability’ proves to be a case of hydrocephalia, a developmental disability that causes mental retardation.

The last sexual reference is associated with the moment HCE is plugged into the radio through his ear: “the pip of the lin (to) pinnatrate inthro an auricular forfickle”. HCE’s attempt to take advantage of the potentialities of his technological transformation in relation to power and sex is however bound to fail. Indeed, his condition mirrors a very peculiar form of transhumanism which, on the one hand, brings about an enhancement of biological functions (namely, improved hearing) and, on the other, catalyses a considerable regression of his intellectual faculties, thus epitomising his inexorable human decline<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps the kind of bio-mutation experienced by HCE is that of a “reformatted

<sup>5</sup> According to Nayar, transhumanism relies on the “perfectibility of the human” (Nayar 2014: 6), in the awareness that the body may impinge on the ontological potentialities of the mind.

body”, a body that is “capable of morphing into, or connecting with, some other body/ies” (Nayar 2014).

HCE will be surpassed by his children, Shem and Shaun, who, however, will not succeed in wiping him off, because they are *him* and he is *them*. This is due to the genetic link between parents and their offspring as well as to the fact that HCE possesses the posthuman capacity to morph into other bodies<sup>6</sup>. From the very beginning of *FW*, HCE has been presented as the Ur-Father or the Ur-Man, a sort of Adamic figure from whom humanity descends (indeed, another reading of his acronymic designation is ‘Haveth Children Everywhere’). To some extent, all the male characters in *FW* are types HCE morphs into. His chemical components separate and reassemble in accordance with the narrative context and the available technological supplies, giving life to different kinds of (post)humans.

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere I suggested that Shem and Shaun may stand for the two halves of the male body – the upper and lower half, with HCE objectifying the male body itself – as well as the two hemispheres of the brain. See Volpone 2018.

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PLAY. PAUSE. REPLAY:  
PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE(S) ACROSS MEDIA

*Abstract*

This paper offers a bird’s-eye view of various forms of literary remediation, including gamebooks, seen as intersections between narrative or discursive systems which are brought into being through a performative structure that both revitalises and exceeds the boundaries of the book’s materiality. Indeed, the process of digital remediation and, in particular, gamebooks can open up new, extraordinary possibilities regarding the ways stories are experienced. Here, the theatrical/narrative event appears to take place in a totally transformed and fluid dimension. “But how can we recognise or deal with the new?” (Waugh 1984: 7): the question that Patricia Waugh posed in her study of the theory and practice of metafiction has not lost its relevance today, prompting us to wonder whether a core of paradigmatic plots might actually be deconstructed, remodelled and still be called ‘classic’. Focusing on a number of Shakespeare’s retellings across media, my paper aims to stimulate a general reflection on some aspects of the contemporary ‘literature-scape’ and its performative turn.

*Keywords:* Shakespearean adaptations; new media; performative turn.

1. *Shakespeare the Globetrotter*

With the colossal success they have enjoyed over the centuries, Shakespeare’s plays, as well as the adjective ‘Shakespearean’, have become seamlessly integrated into the collective cultural consciousness. Having shed its Britishness, the adjective now not only refers to the most renowned icon of European cultural heritage, but also to a broader field. Shakespearean audiences are constantly growing and in 2016 the phenomenon springboarded, spurred as it was by the plethora of celebrations commemorating the 400-year anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. As Michael Taylor puts it: “The twentieth century has consoli-

dated and expanded the already bustling Shakespeare export market [...]. Production of Shakespeare's plays in languages other than English are now legion" (2001: 37).

It is common knowledge that after the critical re-appropriation of the Shakespearean corpus by the former colonies, a significant number of interesting Shakespearean productions have been staged from a postcolonial perspective too, transforming the Bard from colonial icon to hybrid multicultural product. Thanks to these experiments, Shakespearean characters have been acquiring symbolic connotations related to intercultural mixing, as Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin point out in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (1998). An enthralling example of this kind of intercultural encounter was the 2012 *Globe to Globe Festival*, consisting of 37 performances presented in 37 different languages, very diverse in nature and rhythm but quite close to Shakespeare in many other respects. All staged at the Globe Theatre in London, such experiments were instrumental in showing how Shakespeare has become a sort of shared terrain across the globe, far beyond the English-speaking context. Since then, during the spring/summer season, Shakespearean companies have come to the Bankside from all over the world to perform Shakespearean classics in languages other than English.

These productions have gone so far as to propose a challenging interaction between non-English-language drama and the London stage, while also triggering movement in the opposite direction. Notably, after the *Globe to Globe Festival* it was the turn of *Global Hamlet* – a two-year long worldwide tour – to leave London and embark upon a journey round the world. The show aimed to investigate the dynamics relating to the interaction of one of the most famous among Shakespeare's plays with differently localised and heterogeneous audiences.

The large-scale circulation of Shakespearean icons can also be seen as a natural consequence of the huge number of film adaptations that have been released since the 20<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, the Globe Theatre had also presented the *Globe On Screen* project in order to bring productions from stage to cinema. Following a long tradition of cinematographic adaptations of the Bard's plots, Shakespearean tragedies, comedies, and historical dramas have been substantially altered and manipulated, appearing in cartoon form or as musicals, sci-fi, and documentary films. In his book about Shakespeare and film, Maurice Hindle writes:

Shakespeare has always had an audience. Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, that audience, whether elite or popular, experienced Shakespeare exclusively in a theatrical space, and was relatively small. The invention of moving pictures changed all that. Not so noticeably in the silent

era or in the 1930s, it has to be admitted, since it is only with the success of Laurence Olivier's wartime production of *Henry V* (1944) that one can talk of a film adaptation having for the first time found favour with a mass moviegoing audience. (Hindle 2007: xiv)

Ambition, curiosity, seductiveness, and individualism are at the core of Shakespeare's evergreens, so that a large number of his characters manage to embody the perfect type of the anti-hero found in today's worldwide narratives. With unfailing ability, contemporary adaptations appear to address the elemental affects behind behavioural patterns or the sense of national belonging: as Indian director and producer Vishal Bhardwaj has shown in his cinematographic trilogy *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014), Shakespearean characters and plots can also stand as metaphors capable of bringing worldwide non-Western issues and conflicts to a Western audience. All this further confirms how Shakespeare's ability to explore human passions and faults emerges as a crucial reason for his historical and trans-geographical success.

## 2. *Shakespeare the Media-Trotter*

Dealing now with other aspects of experimental Shakespearean retellings, it must be underlined how the phenomenon of technological 'remediation' of the Bard's plays has currently reached unprecedented proportions. One might wonder whether this evolving and metamorphic scenario is a sign of intellectual wealth or, on the contrary, if we are running the risk of an irretrievable loss of authenticity. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that Shakespeare himself always played with the concepts of authenticity, recognisability, and imagination in a kind of tacit pact or agreement with his public. As Duncan Salkeld makes abundantly clear:

As the several inductions and epilogues to his plays indicate, Shakespeare well understood that drama creates an imaginative contract between the players and the audience. For the audience, such a bond involves a suspension of scepticism and willingness to allow the dramatist to call the things that are not as though they were. We began by noting that Shakespeare repeatedly made that contract the subject of his drama. (Salkeld 2010: 18)

*ShakespeaRe-Told*, for example, was a 2005 BBC-production broadcast in which four of Shakespeare's most famous plays – *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – were adapted for TV by different writers and direc-

tors. Choosing well-known interpreters such as Rufus Sewell, James McAvoy, and Imelda Staunton, the series succeeded in giving new features to the Bard's presence on the small screen. Each episode in *Shakespeare Re-Told* was relocated in the present day, creating new realities, hierarchies, and categories through which to look at the plays. Engaging with the contemporary cultural practice of repeatedly 'recycling the classics', this BBC series challenged the recognisability of Shakespeare by making provocative casting choices. Among such choices were the three Scottish witches being represented as refuse collectors, or the Minola sisters' differences being marked via an association with a peculiar lifestyle (climbing the political ladder vs a career as a supermodel).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, besides literature, theatre and cinema, other media have strongly contributed to re-elaborating what Maurizio Calbi (2013) calls the "Thing Shakespeare". In his Derridean analysis of Shakespeare's spectral presence on the World Wide Web, Calbi observes how a Shakespearean media-scape is largely growing thanks to the creation of an array of cybernetic stages, such as the vlog phenomenon that serialised a sequence of plays on YouTube, or *Global Shakespeares*, a work-in-progress and huge, multi-centric database where videos are continuously uploaded to be shared among scholars and/or fans. Indeed, as also stated by Anna Maria Cimitile and Katherine Rowe in their introduction to *Shakespeare in the Media: Old and New*, an *Anglistica AION* special issue, this worldwide 'traffic' across multiple platforms and in a global context is bringing new life-blood to the "Thing Shakespeare". As they note, the last decades have seen "a turn accelerated by the advent of accessible video archives, the proliferation of new screen formats, and the convergence of screen, print, and performance media" (Cimitile and Rowe 2011: 1).

In the wake of the almost infinite story relating to the revisions of Shakespeare throughout the course of history, from the earliest 17<sup>th</sup>-century rewritings to 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary remediations, now, at the beginning of the third millennium, a new kind of contract has been drawn up, with an authorising process capable of directly involving individual readers. A remarkable case in point is Canadian Ryan North's *To Be or Not to Be: A Chooseable-Path Adventure*, an interactive retelling of *Hamlet* which came out in 2013 and was followed three years later by *Romeo and/or Juliet: A Chooseable-Path Adventure*. In this latest series of proliferating 'Shakespeares', the addressee is half-jokingly projected into a role quite similar to that of a co-author. Working their way through predisposed narrative crossroads, readers are asked to decide which direction the plot should take and are thus prompted to trace a personal trajectory within the plays. Such gamebooks have been paving

new ways for popular creativity, so that even iconic roles have become exchangeable by virtue of performative modes.

Within Ryan North's inventive rewritings, Shakespeare's plays grow into a locus for a dynamic exploration of cultural memory and its transmission, with both the author (North himself) and the reader engaging with and re-appropriating paradigmatic texts. Although the crossroads were of course designed by North, the possible paths to follow actually number 3,001,181,439,094,525 (as emphatically clarified in the gamebook's Introduction). As a matter of fact, it is possible to choose whether to act one's way through the story as Ophelia, Hamlet, or even the Ghost; moreover, each of them is provided with a sort of survival kit consisting of *bonuses* or *maluses*. Ophelia, for instance, is understandably doomed to lose more and more strength when coming into contact with water.

The gamebook opens with some *caveat*, such as the importance of *not* reading it as though it were an ordinary book because, should addressees approach it in the wrong way, the volume would start insulting them and use a colourful range of expressions, from the complaisant "There is something wrong" to the caustic "Are you stupid?". The reader is also asked to build different identities and constantly establish a dialogue with the author, or rather the authors (Shakespeare as well as North). It is no wonder that these elements should similarly inform other kinds of literature-inspired gamebooks, such as Emma Campbell Webster's *Lost in Austen: Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure*, where the reader, at the beginning of the adventure, is given instructions about her "mission" – finding a husband – and about how to succeed in meeting "a man just like Darcy".

Throughout these adaptations and appropriations, readers are induced to 'play with the classics' while keeping the original in mind, irrespective of their sticking to or diverging from the germinal text. Importantly, their revisiting hypotexts in the attempt to give shape to the 'new' does not undermine the canonical status of Shakespeare or Jane Austen, who continue to reveal themselves as inexhaustible sources of inspiration and development. What these popular, intriguing forms of experimentation show is, once again, the possibility for a virtually never-ending rebirth of the classics by means of a continuous and/or controversial process of metamorphosis.

As Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt point out, even distant and irreverent forms of vulgarisation are part of the complex Shakespeare phenomenon and implicitly add to the greatness of the original. In their view, this is corroborating evidence of how one should no longer believe that representations are confined to conveying "universal truths

divorced from the time and the culture that created them” (Boose and Burt 1997: 1). Above all, as they rightly observe, we must be wary about separating the original from all its adaptations. Far more can allegedly be gained from deconstructing dichotomies and considering the source simply as part of a meta-historical *continuum* embracing all successive versions, including the indecorous, extravagant, or preposterous ones, as happens with gamebooks and the *ShakespeaRe-Told* series.

In conclusion, in Calbi’s words, “[t]here are ShakespeareS, ‘more than one / no more one’ (Derrida, *Spectres XX*) and these ShakespeareS take place in a variety of forms [...]. In all these twenty-first-century adaptations, ‘Shakespeare’ is simultaneously material and evanescent. Like the ghost in *Hamlet* that Jacques Derrida continuously evokes in his work on spectrality, ‘Shakespeare’ is ‘here’ and then is suddenly ‘gone’” (2013: 2-6). By transforming the plays in a multiplicity of ways, this practice of reshaping the original to form the ‘new’ has turned the Bard and his work into an enduring source of interest and inspiration across the centuries. Indeed, as testified to by *ShakespeaRe-Told* or Ryan North’s gamebooks, the “Thing Shakespeare” that has been an indelible presence among audiences and readers for over four hundred years still looks forward to a productive future.

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FROM OSCAR WILDE TO HANIF KUREISHI:  
DAVID BOWIE AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

*Abstract*

Approaching David Bowie in literary terms means conceiving his work as a sort of dialogue among dialogues where music interrogates other art forms and in which images, sounds, and words constantly redefine themselves. Bowie's songs and, in particular, his lyrics are characterised by a powerful theatrical dimension; they are associated with many different masks which the author *constructed* during his career in order to problematise the very notion of a natural, stable, and *authentic* identity that was dominant in popular music in the 1960s. As Bakhtin would have put it, these songs are underpinned by different voices, all resonating within the author's words. Indeed, Bowie's work is nourished by a deep dialogical relationship with writers such as Shakespeare, Wilde, Orwell, MacInnes, and Kureishi. What seems particularly relevant is Bowie's ability to create, through his concept albums, an art form which both draws on literature at various levels and somehow becomes itself *literature*, recovering the power and directness of early oral poems within extremely rich and complex narrative structures.

*Keywords:* Bowie; literature; Wilde; Kureishi.

In an article published after David Bowie's death, in January 2016, novelist Jake Arnott investigated the relationship between this singer and literature and referred to him in terms of a “furious reader” who, just three years before his passing, had issued a “wonderfully eclectic” reading list (100 titles) on his official website, embracing very different forms and genres of writing, “from *The Beano* to *Transcendental Magic* by Eliphas Lévi” (Arnott 2016). George Orwell, one of Bowie's favourite writers, is of course included, both as a novelist and an essayist, as are Burgess and Bulwer-Lytton, along with others he was to read in the following years, namely Braine, Waterhouse, and Spark. The list also incorporates Bowie's contemporaries such as Ackroyd, Amis, Chatwin, McEwan, and Angela Carter. Among the authors belonging to Arnott's

generation – people who were just teenagers when Bowie first came on the scene – one can mention Sarah Waters and Rupert Thompson, the latter standing as a kind of ‘Thin White Duke’ of British fiction, building a long-term career by constantly changing his writing style.

Bowie’s love for literature encourages us to *read* him in literary terms and approach his work as a sort of dialogue among dialogues where music interrogates other art forms, and in which images, sounds and words constantly redefine themselves. Bowie’s songs and, in particular, his lyrics are characterised by a powerful theatrical dimension (Critchley 2016); they are associated with many different masks which the author *constructed* during his career in order to problematise the very notion of a natural, stable and *authentic* identity that was dominant in 1960s popular music (Auslander 2006). As Bakhtin (1981) would have put it, these songs are also underpinned by numerous voices, all resonating within the author’s words. Indeed, Bowie’s work is nourished by a profound dialogical relationship with writers such as Shakespeare, Wilde, Orwell, MacInnes, and Kureishi.

The Bard proves particularly relevant if one intends to investigate Bowie’s inner dialogism, i.e. the complexity of a man who thought of himself in theatrical terms; some critics have even established a link between Bowie’s mid-1970s mask, namely ‘The Thin White Duke’, and Shakespeare’s Prospero, the Duke of Milan as well as director and main character in *The Tempest*. In a thought-provoking essay included in a Garzanti edition of the play, Lombardo (1984) aptly focuses on Prospero’s multiplicity: Prospero is at once a man (who must choose between life and death), the father of Miranda, the Duke of Milan, a coloniser but also a scientist and a magician. If, on the one hand, we must acknowledge that Prospero is the *product* of well-defined historical circumstances and a specific set of conventions four centuries older than our own, on the other hand this very idea of plurality perfectly captures Bowie’s deeper essence and his extraordinary capacity for self-fashioning. At a different level, Bowie’s role in his album *Station to Station* (1975) – a work powerfully nourished by his interest in occultism – reminds us of a magician presiding over a fascinating sonic theatre, in which he creates a synthesis of all his musical influences and indirectly pays homage to the most *musical* of Shakespeare’s plays.

Besides, as highlighted by Greenblatt, Shakespeare the working dramatist would not systematically lay claim to the transcendent and visionary truths on which many among his most fervent admirers dwelt; apparently, his characters more modestly say, again in Prospero’s words, that their project was “to please” (*The Tempest*, Epilogue, l. 13). The starting point, and perhaps the end point as well, in any encounter

with Shakespeare arguably consists in “enjoying” him, in savouring his imaginative richness and appreciating his infinite delight in language (Greenblatt 2000). This kind of perspective should also inform our analysis of Bowie, who was in his own way a man of the theatre; we should take delight and pleasure in his music and his *theatrical* approach to pop itself.

From a different angle, and in connection with his idea of identity as performance, Bowie could also be compared to a sort of twentieth-century Oscar Wilde, since both of them acknowledged the *truth* and relevance of masks in art and, most importantly, in everyday life. A powerful link between Wilde and Bowie was suggested by Todd Haynes in his 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*. This film features two kinds of Wildean performance respectively associated with the figure of Wilde himself (as played by a very young actor) and a number of other male characters belonging to the 1970s world of British pop. Because of their interest in artifice, gender bending and self-construction, these glam-culture affiliates emerge here as “of the Wilde sort” (with a nod to E.M. Forster’s allusion in *Maurice* [1971]) (Coppa 2004). *Glamsters*, such as Marc Bolan, Bryan Ferry, Suzi Quatro and Gary Glitter, were able to construct a hybrid gender identity, both onstage and offstage, by resorting to specific iconic signs, i.e. make-up, glittering dresses, and platform shoes, which sharply contrasted with the machismo of the late 1960s. In the film, an infant Wilde lands on Earth via a glittering spaceship that moves like a shooting star, since, to Haynes, Wilde’s genius was so otherworldly that it was bound to be extraterrestrial. Moreover, in the Victorian-school scene, when each boy tells what he wants to be when he grows up, the young Wilde eventually stands up and declares: “I want to be a pop idol”. Then the film jumps a hundred years ahead to investigate the mysterious disappearance of glam-rock star Brian Slade, a fictional equivalent of Bowie in the early 1970s. According to Waldrep, Bowie

represents contemporary culture as a heterogeneous expression of a performative self and acts as the ultimate type of Wilde in his ability to take Wilde’s permutations and transformations of self and fashion a career that is based completely on displaying and practicing this performative paradigm. (Waldrep 2004: 105)

Bowie played many different roles and *personae* throughout his career, from glam fictional hero Ziggy Stardust to 1980’s DJ, and ultimately accessed proper role-playing thanks to his work in the world of cinema (as in *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence* [1983], directed by Os-

hima; in *Absolute Beginners* [1986], directed by Temple; or in Schnabel's *Basquiat* [1996], in which he impersonated Andy Warhol). Watts, commenting on the polyphonic album *Hunky Dory*, argues that Bowie has "an acute ear for parody" which "doubtless stems from an innate sense of theatre". In this perspective, "he says he's more an actor and entertainer than a musician; then he may, in fact, only be an actor and nothing else" (Watts 1995: 394).

Bowie has always managed to make clear to his audience that he is performing a role, and that music, as life, has an ingrained theatrical quality. Interestingly, his major influence in the mid-1960s was not represented by a band or a singer, but by the mime Lindsay Kemp, who offered him a connection with the 1970s queer culture and introduced him to the use of masks. Bowie's commitment to performance and the theatre was finally instrumental in bringing about his revolutionary identity as a pop/rock artist; in other words, his emphasis on artificiality testified to his desire to distance himself from the cock-rocker paradigm of the hippie culture in the late 1970s. Glam rock was all about irony, masks, and blurring identities. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde famously wrote that "man is least himself when he speaks in his own person; give him a mask and he will tell you the truth" (Wilde [1890] 2003a: 1142). Bowie's truths were literally delivered through a multiplicity of masks, which he used to wear on and off stage.

A further link with Wilde may be detected in Bowie's conviction that music, as an artistic form in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, cannot be thought of outside the framework of capitalism. In this sense, it could be argued that Bowie's changes – from late-1970s art rock to 1980s mainstream pop – have as much to do with market policies. If, according to Chambers, Bowie's songs were "miniature films" (Chambers 1985: 132), his music videos were a suitable rendering of their cinematic quality; at the same time, they represented Bowie's most consistent effort at marketing himself and especially at creating an image or character that was meant to complement his music by conveying both a critique of it and a fuller autobiographical statement of what he was trying to do in his work. Interestingly, in the video for the song *Look Back in Anger*, Bowie explicitly pays tribute to Wilde by impersonating an artist living alone in a great studio and caressing a portrait of himself as an angel. As he rubs his hand across the surface, paint appears on his face, which in turn begins to look grotesque – even diseased. As a comment on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bowie seems to play the roles of both Basil and Dorian – or, indeed, to reinterpret the novel's theme of duplicity in such a way as to palpably interfuse the artist with his subject.

To Bowie, literature was not only a source of leisure and pleasure but also, and most importantly, a lens through which he could penetrate his own time and respond to it. After performing the Wildean paradigm in the glam era and wearing his masks inspired by science-fiction – that is, Major Tom (the protagonist of his 1969 single *Space Oddity*) and Ziggy Stardust (a rock'n'roll Messiah coming from Mars) – Bowie gave shape to a dystopian work through his album *Diamond Dogs* (1974), which was informed by the disturbing vision conceived by George Orwell in his iconic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

Orwell's cult novel holds a very specific place and meaning in Bowie's work and biography. Doggett reports how, having been deeply impressed by a train journey across the Russian continent in 1973 – in which “the grim bureaucracy and acute poverty of the fabled Communist paradise stoked his prevailing sense of panic and claustrophobia in the run-up of his final tour as Ziggy Stardust” (Doggett 2012: 196) – Bowie wished to release a rock musical on the basis of Orwell's fictional recreation of a Stalinesque society. Orwell's widow, however, refused to grant him usage rights, so that Bowie ended up moulding his Orwell-inspired rock show within a work that, if similarly apocalyptic, would veer away from the format of the musical to turn into a complex hyper-textual space consisting in the *Diamond Dogs* album, along with the show aimed at promoting the album itself.

Published in May 1974, *Diamond Dogs* was “Bowie's attempt to stick to the pop-rock songbook while emphasizing his literary credentials” (Sandford 1996: 124). In actual fact, the work which finally appeared had moved beyond the boundaries of Orwell's novel. With their echoes of Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and Burroughs's *The Wild Boys* (1971), Bowie defined the songs on the album as part of a “glitter apocalypse” and described its conceptual scenario as “the breakdown of a city, featuring a disaffected youth that no longer had home-unit situations, but lived as gangs on roofs and really had the city to themselves” (Pegg 2011: 331).

In the album, Bowie replaced “Orwell's Oceania with his own future urban nightmare environment, Hunger City, a sort of post-nuclear, technologically primitive hell” (Buckley 2005: 183). Moreover, the fragmented lyrics and the portrait of urban America's sordid meltdown “were clearly indebted to Burroughs” (Pegg 2011: 331), with many of the album's literary inventions being the outcome of Bowie's recourse to Burroughs's cut-up techniques. In a certain sense, if the general subject had been inspired by Orwell, Bowie tried to translate the novel's feelings of alienation and fragmentation into verbal narratives which

eventually exceeded Orwell's *naturalistic* style and embraced Burroughs's experimentalism.

Other writers who, besides Orwell and Burroughs, seem to be more strictly connected with Bowie are Colin MacInnes and Hanif Kureishi, who, in two different decades (respectively the 1950s and the 1980s), set out to investigate the complex dialogism which has been linking music, youth culture and – especially in Kureishi's case – multiculturalism.

In 1985, Bowie contributed to the soundtrack for Julian Temple's filmic adaptation of MacInnes's 1959 *Absolute Beginners*, composing two original tracks, i.e. *That's Motivation* and a song named after the novel, which stands as one of his best works from the 1980s as well as a tribute to his teenage years spent with his half-brother Terry in Soho. Interestingly, the unnamed protagonist of this novel is an *insider-outsider*, like MacInnes and, somehow, Bowie himself. In the very first pages of the book, the protagonist shows his craft as a photographer by presenting a series of moving pictures relating to a specific scene: 1950s London, crowded with beautiful girls, musicians, gays, black immigrants, prostitutes, and corrupted producers who literally mould and sell the latest musical talent available on the market. This was basically the London Bowie grew in.

The novel investigates the revolution fuelled by the turmoil of a teenager world which was strictly connected with the post-war economic boom. The "absolute beginners" operating in a context emerging first in America and then in the UK were indeed boys and girls who used music, fashion and the latest trends in catering and motorcycles to build their own identity and foreground their affiliation to a specific subculture. Besides being associated with ethnic diversity, Soho also symbolised the stage where the boys and girls belonging to the teenager subculture performed their exciting scripts. It was here that one might find the jazz clubs so loved by the protagonist and his girlfriend Suzette. Like Mr Cool, his black friend, the protagonist is a jazz addict:

The great thing about the jazz world, and all the *kids* that enter into it, is that no one, not a soul cares what your class is, or what your *race* is, or what your income, or if you're boy, or girl, or bent or versatile, or what you are [...]. The result of all this is that, in the jazz world, you meet all kinds of *cats* on absolutely equal terms, who can clue you up in all kinds of directions – in social directions, in culture directions, in sexual directions, and in *racial* directions... in fact, almost anywhere, really, you want to go to learn. (MacInnes [1959] 2005: 61)

In *Absolute Beginners*, jazz stands for freedom, for a language capable of blurring differences and providing teenagers with a chance to establish an intercultural dialogue. Interestingly, in the early 1960s Bowie was a jazz fan who even started playing saxophone.

In the second part of the text, Mr Cool speaks of the Teddy Boys' attacks on black people, which would lead to an event powerfully represented in MacInnes's novel, i.e. the Notting Hill race riots of September 1958.

Towards the end of the story, the protagonist's attitude to listening seems to overcome his obsession with images, so that his passion for jazz turns him into a responsive and responsible improviser who promptly acts and interacts with performers coming from different backgrounds, in particular with black people. *London* [is] *calling* and the main character can be seen to answer through a direct engagement in the scene: the outsider now becomes an insider getting access to a basement where the friends of a black boy to whom he has given a lift (thus saving him from an attack) are speaking about the crisis. The protagonist expresses his views on what is going on in London and comments on a racist article published in a newspaper which his friend Big Jill had shown him; he declares not to be in love with England and London anymore and decides to leave, possibly moving to Brazil or Norway. Nevertheless, the last image in the novel is that of a mature young man who is ready to accept his responsibility and role. Thanks to his love for youth cultures, for music and intercultural dialogue, he posits himself as the new *guardian* of the city. In the last textual sequence we see him at the airport – a postmodern gate to the city – while he welcomes a group of young black men coming from Africa.

In 1992, Bowie composed the soundtrack for Roger Michell's BBC version of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). As is well known, this novel tells the story of a mixed-heritage young Londoner, Karim Amir, who finds in pop a precious resource to cross all barriers (sexual, racial, social) and give sense and vitality to his life. The novel features two main sections, "In the Suburbs" and "In the City", and documents the passage of the protagonist from one to the other in a way that somehow recalls Bowie's own *translation* from Brixton to Soho in the early 1960s:

In bed before I went to sleep I fantasized about London and what I'd do there when the city belonged to me. There was a sound that London had [...]; there was the keyboard on the Doors' *Light My Fire*, there were shops selling all the records you could desire; there were parties where girls and boys you didn't know took you upstairs and fucked you, there were all the drugs you could use. (Kureishi 1990: 121)

The novel is rich in references which document the evolution of rock and pop music from the early 1970s to the very dawn of the Thatcher era. At the same time, it records the passages from glam rock to other parallel phenomena, such as progressive music and punk. Charlie Hero, Karim's best friend and adolescence lover, seems to be modelled after Bowie, who, ten years before, had attended Bromley School, like Kureishi. In Chapter 5, Karim describes Charlie in these terms:

He stood out from the rest of the mob with his silver hair and stacked shoes. [...] It was Bowie's influence, I knew. Bowie, then called David Jones, had attended our school several years before, and there, in a group photograph in the dining hall, was his face. Boys were often to be found on their knees before this icon, praying to be made into pop stars and for a release from a lifetime as a motor-mechanic or a clerk in an insurance firm, or a junior architect. (Kureishi 1990: 68)

A few years later, it is Charlie's turn to get a shock from a new band performing punk music in a pub:

It was more aggressive than anything I'd heard since early Who. This was no peace and love; here were no drum solos or effeminate synthesizers. Not a squeak of anything 'progressive' or 'experimental' came from these pallid, vicious little council estate kids with hedgehog hair, howling about anarchy and hatred. (Kureishi 1990: 130)

The relevance of music in the novel invests not only the thematic level, but also the stylistic one. Indeed, *The Buddha of Suburbia's* highly episodic structure recalls the concept album as a collection of songs (Kaleta 1997), with Karim's many adventures objectifying a polyphonic collection of little narrations or songs which resound in the reader's ears even when the experience of reading is over. Similarly, we might consider Bowie's albums as *sonic novels*, as literary experiments written in sound-waves. Bowie's soundtrack for Michell's film incorporates this very episodic dimension; the title-track stands as a long narrative ballad in which he rewrites his adolescence spent in London's suburbia, with the way being paved for some of the most memorable verses in his career, such as "Elvis is English and climbs the hills"; all this conveys the idea of a dream come true.

*Strangers When we Meet* is another memorable song from the soundtrack, featuring intriguing lyrics which seem to blend a sense of loneliness and personal regret and be addressed to Angela, Bowie's ex-wife (who, in that period, had published a *memoir* containing an attack

on her ex-husband). Interestingly, in 1999 Kureishi was to publish a short story named after this song, in which he appears to elaborate on some of the song's images and themes.

In a recent article, Kureishi himself focused on Bowie's relevance in contemporary popular culture, stressing again how "he constructed himself and his many aliases from a wide range of sources" (Kureishi 2017). He also referred to his blatant precursor, Wilde, in whose *Picture of Dorian Gray* one reads: "Man is a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature" (Wilde [1891] 2003b: 107). Bowie can best be described through the paradigms of multiplicity and plurality; his philosophy was based on the vital coexistence and simultaneity of opposite, irreconcilable stances. In this sense, as Kureishi observes, his finest work appeared as both experimental and popular. As Critchley (2016) puts it, Bowie was a ventriloquist, a man of many voices and languages.

In conclusion, what seems to be particularly fascinating today is Bowie's ability to create, through his many masks and concept albums, an art form which was not only nourished by literature at a variety of levels, but somehow became itself *literature*, recovering the power and directness of early oral poems within extremely rich and complex narrative structures (van Leeuwen 1999). A process of expansion of the literary in performative and theatrical terms has laid the groundwork for a multimodal work in which our dystopian present is both performed and deconstructed while pointing to music, literature, and artistic creativity as the proper means to recover a sense of the human in a dramatically dehumanised age.

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ADAPTIVELY EVOLVING ECOSYSTEMS:  
GREEN-SPEAKING AT TESCO

*Abstract*

Nowadays, many companies rely on green economy-oriented campaigns to promote their corporate image and attract the ever-increasing number of consumers who are sensitive to environmental issues. Accordingly, ‘ecosystem’ and ‘sustainability’ have become catchwords for such companies, Tesco being a relevant case in point. Tesco – a UK fresh food business and a media-savvy company currently relying on a team of over 470,000 people in 16 markets worldwide – advertises its aims to reduce the environmental impacts in its operations and supply chain. The aim of this study is to identify and scrutinise aspects of the verbal texts and videos accessible from Tesco’s website advertising such issues. These kinds of multimodal texts require an integrated approach that utilises both the tools of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress 2010; van Leeuwen 2013) and the additional lens of Positive Discourse Analysis, with its emphasis on discourses about positive happenings and initiatives leading to change and offering inspirational models (Martin 2004; Rogers 2017). Furthermore, the use of particular “lines of appeal” (Fowles 1996; Dyer 1988) in Tesco’s corporate communication will be investigated, as well as the modalities of the visual composition of the images (Stinson [2002] 2012; Ascher and Pincus 2013; Bateman 2014; Chandler 2016). The results and implications of such analyses will be critically discussed.

*Keywords:* corporate communication; green campaigns; sustainability; Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis; Positive Discourse Analysis; lines of appeal.

## 1. *Introduction*

Increasingly, ecosystems, which are intrinsically non-linear adaptive systems, partly determined by environmental conditions and partly by self-organisation, have become a locus for the intersection of different and often contrasting interests in our contemporary semiosphere. In particular, a major issue is the divergence between genuine worries about the environment and climate change on the one hand, and productivity standards and the need to generate profit on the other. From a lingua-cultural perspective, it can be seen how companies have been progressively relying on green economy-oriented campaigns to socially promote their corporate image and attract the rising number of consumers who are sensitive to environmental issues. ‘Ecosystem’ and ‘sustainability’ have thus become catchwords for the companies that follow this recent tendency, Tesco being a relevant case in point.

The first Tesco store was opened in Edgware, North London, in 1929. The company’s history began with a stall in the East End of London in 1919, where Jack Cohen started selling surplus groceries. From 1930 to 1950, the business expanded, the first supermarkets were opened, and, in 1961, Tesco Leicester entered the Guinness Book of Records as the largest store in Europe. By the 1970s, Tesco was building a national network of stores to cover the whole of the UK. In 2000, the business also expanded online and, nowadays, Tesco has become UK’s biggest retailer in terms of sales and also the nation’s biggest private employer, with more than 330,000 staff working in 3,146 stores<sup>1</sup>. Tesco is the world’s third largest supermarket group and can rely, today, on a team of over 470,000 people in 16 countries worldwide (UK, USA, China, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, India, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Poland, Slovakia, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Turkey). Nevertheless, it still manages to prioritise its fresh food business identity.

A media-savvy company, Tesco repeatedly advertises its aims to reduce its impact on the ecosystem, an objective it apparently achieved with its first zero-carbon store in Bang Phra, Thailand in 2011 (The Nation 2011; Tesco PLC 2011). The company has declared that its success depends on the health of the natural environment, and that they are constantly addressing environmental impacts in their operations and supply chain, identifying five key environments. Firstly, *climate*, whose ongoing changes represent a significant challenge. Then, they focus on *forests*, *marine environments*, *farmland*, and *freshwater* as various domains to be safeguarded, by developing the overarching policies of the

<sup>1</sup> Abridged and distilled from Winterman 2013 and Tesco PLC [n.d.].

three Rs: *Reducing, Reusing, and Recycling*. Tesco's most advertised issues can be graphically represented (in brief) as follows:



Fig. 1. Tesco's Key Notions

Tesco is active in promoting human rights, labour and social engagement at both the local and global level through numerous initiatives. The following are some of its partnerships, with a graphic representation of its intended social engagement below:

- United Nations Global Compact
- The Consumer Goods Forum
- Retailers' Environmental Action Programme
- Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil
- Partnership for Cleaner Textiles
- Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals
- Waste & Resources Action Programme
- The British Red Cross
- Diabetes UK

- The British Heart Foundation
- Cancer Research UK
- Newlife
- Farm Africa
- The Trussell Trust
- FareShare
- Children's Food Trust
- Mary's Meals



Fig. 2. Tesco's Shared Values (at <https://www.tescopl.com/little-helps-plan/>)

Both Tesco's business developments and advertised goals, as well as their everyday events and occasional mishaps, are closely watched by economic journalists, observers and some critics.

## 2. Aims

The aim of this study has been to identify and scrutinise aspects of Tesco's videos advertising issues where 'sustainability' and 'responsible', positive attitudes to fundamental issues like waste, products and sourcing are publicised, with a focus on Tesco's communicative strategies at both a lexical and multimodal level.

In particular, attention has been given to what advertisers define as "lines of appeal", i.e. a set of themes having proven appeal for the audience (Fowles 1996; Dyer 1988), such as:

- ✓ ideal families
- ✓ glamorous/elite lifestyles
- ✓ success stories, romantic love stories
- ✓ beautiful natural and, nowadays, 'green' settings (as identifiable in Tesco's contemporary corporate communication)
- ✓ beautiful women and handsome men
- ✓ sex appeal, arrogance, and humour
- ✓ cyber-scenarios (a more recent theme)

A wide range of resources is displayed in Tesco's corporate communication to shape an *appealing* image of the company, finalised at engaging environment-friendly consumers who are potentially sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged social groups as well. The competent use of such resources will be highlighted, with reference to the intended goals of gaining social esteem and consensus.

### 3. *Integrated Methodology*

Multimodal texts, synesthetically exploiting many different codes, require a *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (MDA) approach (Kress 2010; van Leeuwen 2013), with attention given to the modalities of the visual composition of the images (Stinson [2002] 2012; Ascher and Pincus 2013; Bateman 2014; Chandler 2016). In more detail,

a set of interpretive tools and notions is now available to analyse the visual and other non-verbal features as well as lexico-grammar choices [...] and their interaction, i.e. notions such as Information Value [...] Salience and Framing (mirroring the Theme-Rheme dynamics in verbal language). Through these, semantics and the meaning-making process of both verbal texts and images can be successfully interconnected. (Abbamonte 2018)

In particular, the following resources can be useful to decoding and analysing the language of advertising and corporate communication:

- ❖ Composition/framing – to frame an image, *close-up*, *medium* or *long-distance shots* are the more frequent options. The latter better establish the actors' relationship to the scene/landscape. *Canting* (where the image is tilted left or right on the axis) and two-point shots (a shot of two people together) are also utilised.
- ❖ Perspectives:
  - High angle (or bird's eye) shots – when the camera is higher and positioned above the subject. These per-

spectives function as maps of the shooting environment.

- Low angle shots – the subject is shot from below, so that it appears more powerful/threatening.
- Eye-level shots – these are the more ‘realistic’ choices, where the camera is placed as if a human being were really observing the scenery.
- ❖ Salience – the dominant image that draws our attention.
- ❖ Gaze vectors – the lines that draw us towards a particular image.
- ❖ Gaze demand – the eyes of the image demand our attention.
- ❖ Gaze offer – the person in the frame could be looking beyond the frame.
- ❖ Colour and lighting – e.g. red = passion; blue = peace and tranquillity; black = death or fear; monochromatic = black and white; saturation = the bleaching out of colour as a result of the open aperture of the camera lens, causing too much light to flood in; *chiaroscuro* = dramatic use of light and dark shadows.
- ❖ Symbolism and icons, intertextual allusions – references to other texts and well-known symbols/images<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, notions from the emerging approach/perspective of *Positive Discourse Analysis* need to be taken into account, given the issues at stake. While the de-constructivist (multimodal) CDA with its foci on ideologically-driven discrimination, gender, ethnicity, and class-related social variables has not offered (productive) accounts of alternative forms of social organisation, J.R. Martin (2004), through his Positive Discourse Analysis approach, has provided a complementary methodological resource. PDA highlights how “language and semiosis can function to make the world a better place [...]. This face is oriented not so much to deconstruction as *to constructive social action*”. In brief, PDA is potentially instructive since it can act as a window on the construction of values and the circulation of power through “a *discourse* which we can use both to *monitor* and *design change* – and thus materialise CDA irrealis in the interests of its *visions of better worlds*” (Martin 2004: 179 *et passim*; our emphasis).

Additional insights from this new discourse studies (DS) perspective are provided by T.A.M. Bartlett in *Hybrid Voices and Collaborative Change: Contextualising Positive Discourse Analysis* (2012), who con-

<sup>2</sup> Distilled and abridged, utilising the specific terminology verbatim, from Stinson [2002] 2012.

sidered the potential of linguistic and discourse analysis for facilitating positive interventions in social issues. In the same vein, Rebecca Rogers, in her 2017 volume *Reclaiming Powerful Literacies: New Horizons for Critical Discourse Analysis*, gives an account of the emergence of PDA. This emerging trend in DS functions as a reconstructive form of discourse analysis, focusing on topics related to hope, transformation and liberation. PDA does not emphasise academic methods *per se*, but, broadly, liberates creative energy for a healthy reevaluation of social mores – it mainly consists in a shift in emphasis and/or *a change in topic selection*. Discourses about positive happenings and initiatives are foregrounded in order *to offer inspirational models*, thus newly embodying the proactive, transformative, socially engaged attitude shared by many discourse analysts.

### 3.1. Corpus

Our corpus consists of both verbal texts accessible from Tesco's multilayered and multifaceted website, in the sections where the company's commitment is illustrated, and Tesco's sustainability videos, also easily accessible on YouTube. Indeed, the relationship between YouTube and the advertising world is growing stronger: "YouTube pitches itself to advertisers as the medium of the future [...and predictably], in five years, the majority of advertiser-supported videos will take place on a mobile device" (Lieberman 2015).

Here follows the list of the main issues, organised according to the themes of the videos:

#### RESPONSIBLE SOURCING

- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/responsible-sourcing/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/responsible-sourcing/reducing-our-impact-on-the-environment/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/healthier-living/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/reports-policies-and-disclosure/animal-welfare-policy/>

#### SUPPORTING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- <https://www.tesco.com/carrier-bags/>
- <https://www.tesco.com/food-collection/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/supporting-local-communities/supporting-the-british-red-cross/>

#### TACKLING FOOD WASTE

- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/our-approach/our-strategy/>

- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/food-waste/tackling-food-waste-in-our-operations/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/food-waste/working-with-suppliers-to-tackle-food-waste/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/tesco-and-society/food-waste/tackling-food-waste-at-home/>
- <https://www.tescopl.com/news/blogs/topics/food-waste-reduction-by-bring-our-suppliers-together-at-tesco/>

#### 4. Data and Results

As far as the verbal level is concerned, there follows a close reading of three brief excerpts from Tesco’s corporate communication, with the insertion of a selection of its typical images:

<i>Recommitting to the UN Global Compact</i>	<i>Core Purpose and Values</i>	<i>Our Values Help Us to Understand How to Put this into Practice</i>
<p>A key part of that is about doing our part to look after our global resources, <i>promote human rights</i>, and address <i>significant</i> societal challenges.</p>  <p>Of course, Tesco cannot solve these challenges alone, but by building partnerships across business, government and through our supply chain we can have a <i>significant and positive impact</i>.</p>	<p>SERVING SHOPPERS, A LITTLE BETTER EVERY DAY</p> <p>Our business was built with <i>a simple mission</i> – to be the <i>champion for customers</i>, helping them <i>to enjoy a better quality of life and an easier way of living</i>. This hasn’t changed. Customers want <i>great products at great value</i> which they can <i>buy easily</i> and it’s our job to deliver this in the <i>right way</i> for them.</p>	<p>No one tries harder for customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>Understand</i> customers</li> <li>✓ Be first to meet their <i>needs</i></li> <li>✓ Act <i>responsibly</i> for our communities</li> </ul> <p><i>Understanding people</i> – customers, colleagues, communities – and what matters to them, and then trying <i>to make those things better</i>, is at the heart of Tesco. It’s about listening to people and talking to them using all the tools at our disposal – from Clubcard data to social media – and <i>then</i></p>

<i>Recommitting to the UN Global Compact</i>	<i>Core Purpose and Values</i>	<i>Our Values Help Us to Understand How to Put this into Practice</i>
 <p>As the chair of Champions 12.3 – an international coalition of businesses and organisations committed to reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 of <i>halving global food waste by 2030</i> –</p>  <p>I'm seeing first-hand the power of bringing people together around a common goal, and openly reporting that progress.</p>	 <p>That's why "Serving customers <i>a little better every day</i>" is our core purpose. As a business, serving customers is <i>at the heart</i> of everything we do – from colleagues in our stores to those of us <i>in supporting roles</i>.</p>	<p><i>acting by changing and innovating to meet their needs.</i></p> 
<p><a href="https://www.tescopl.com/media/391787/corporate-responsibility-update_nov-2016-final.pdf">https://www.tescopl.com/media/391787/corporate-responsibility-update_nov-2016-final.pdf</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.tescopl.com/about-us/core-purpose-and-values/">https://www.tescopl.com/about-us/core-purpose-and-values/</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.tescopl.com/about-us/core-purpose-and-values/">https://www.tescopl.com/about-us/core-purpose-and-values/</a></p>

Table 1. Excerpts from Tesco's Texts for Corporate Communication

As we can see from the italicised words, Tesco's communication foregrounds values that are positively appraised in terms of social esteem, such as pursuing the mission to understand and meet any customer's needs, while at the same time safeguarding the environment and promoting human rights. The linguistic register utilised favours direct speech, transitive verbs, and popular, clear words and phrases, thus

suggesting the transitivity of Tesco’s social action and emphasising its credibility. In many images the technique of gaze demand (to demand our attention) and of two-point shots (to signify interaction) are utilised, as well as lively colours and bright lighting.

As regards the videos, our analysis has outlined a number of shared notions and characteristics, which are schematised in Tables 2 and 3.

<i>Lines of Appeal</i> (Improvement, Community Values, Healthier Life)	<i>Slogans</i>	<i>Advertising Sustainable G/localised Activities</i> (Social Esteem)	<i>Technique</i> (Voice Over, Hyperbolic Language)
<p>It’s <i>the value we live by</i> to ensure we serve our customers, colleagues and their communities a little better every day.</p>  <p>We are taking steps to help our customers to make <i>healthier choices</i>.</p>  <p>We build strong relationships with suppliers to guarantee great quality <i>sustainable products</i> at a great price.</p>	<p>Every Little Help Makes A Big Difference.</p>  <p>You Choose, We Help. No Time for Waste.</p>	<p>Bigger global initiatives ... We <i>donate</i> surplus food to local food banks ... <i>Reduce waste</i> globally ... We <i>send surplus food</i> to those in need ...</p>  <p>We improve <i>safety</i> in clothing factories... We supported 200 suppliers with training... We shared the £12m raised from carrier bag sales to 1,000 local projects...</p>	<p>Bigger Great quality Vibrant Improve</p> <p>Empathic <i>music</i>, catchy, easy rhythm.</p>

Table 2. Salient features from Tesco’s videos

<i>Scenery and Setting</i>	<i>Framing/ Composition</i>	<i>Iconicity</i> (Freshness/Nature/ Social Inclusiveness)
<p>Foregrounded vegetables:</p> 	<p>Mostly eye-level shots to convey <i>closeness</i>:</p> 	<p>Bright green/orange/red colours</p> 
<p>Green pastures:</p>  <p>Growing as a business, growing as a family:</p> 	<p>Two-point shots to convey <i>interaction</i>.</p> 	<p>Flowered meadows</p> 
<p>(Smiling) people at work:</p> 	<p>From eye-level shots to a bird's eye view to convey the ideas of <i>joint efforts</i> and a <i>busy community</i>.</p>	<p>Kids in open sunny gardens</p> <p>Homeless/poor people and different races all together</p> 
<p>Close-up shots of individual customers and colleagues:</p> 		<p><i>Red and blue logo (Union Jack)</i></p> 

Table 3. Salient features from Tesco's videos

To obviate the difficulty of reporting the results of the analyses of mainly visual and audio-oral materials (which obviously cannot be fully displayed here), some images from the films have been reproduced in the tables.

By relying on and foregrounding the contemporary (stereotypical), all-pervasive perception of the need for a ‘sustainable’ ecosystem, increasingly promoted in our semiosphere both at verbal and audio-visual levels, Tesco’s films evoke and shape images of the ideal world where ‘the values we live by’ are shared and pursued. In contrast, the need to generate profit is only represented as a need to make profit for charitable initiatives, thus gaining social esteem and avoiding social sanctions.

### 5. *Discussion and Concluding Remarks*

Tesco’s corporate communication revolves around the declared mission of the company “to be the champion for customers, helping them to enjoy a better quality of life and an easier way of living [...]. Serving Britain’s shoppers a little better every day”, and the statement that “the Tesco Values influence the way we work”. As we can notice from the data section, use of the resources for alignment is constant, ranging from the frequent use of holistic pronouns (*we*), direct forms of address, and simple language to the preference for transitive verbs. Indeed, success in aligning/persuading the audience/customers depends on the ability to *get people onside* and present one’s own (declared) goals as shared values, or the other way round, i.e. presenting socially shared values as one’s own values and goals. Through its communication, Tesco has shown its ability to adapt to the contemporary trend towards green-speaking by focusing on both environmental and social issues and by foregrounding the rhetoric of solidarity through its sustainability/solidarity campaigning, while backgrounding the need to generate profit.

The fluid YouTube medium, fully exploiting the grammar of visuality, allows Tesco’s sustainability campaigns to achieve an all-pervasive effect and make its goals ‘visible’. From a PDA perspective, Tesco’s advertising displays *positive production* and *distribution models to imitate*, so as to promote a better world.

Nonetheless, Tesco has given its detractors grounds for some legitimate criticism in a variety of fields ranging from supply chain emissions to renewable energy, preserving habitats, and questionable use of charitable donations. For instance, according to government data, Tesco was accused of deducting millions of pounds in administration

costs from the charitable donations raised via the plastic bag tax.<sup>3</sup> To give one more example, the British National Farmers' Union stated that Tesco's fresh produce is often labelled with "fictional farm" brands for produce which is sourced from abroad, such as "Rosedene Farms" and "Boswell Farms" (BBC 2016). What are these British-sounding brands trying to communicate? Obviously, these lexical choices meet customers' positive affinity with local farmers by shaping a seductive line of appeal based on the freshness of local food. Yet, this can be misleading for customers, as one tweet concisely suggests: "Shocking! Shoppers deserve to know where their food comes from" (BBC 2016).

Although such criticism resonates across the fluid (new) media space, the complex mechanism of corporate communication quickly evolves and adapts to the need for more engaging advertising. For example, in 2018, Tesco launched 'Jack's', a new brand and store named after its founder, Jack Cohen, as part of their way towards "Celebrating 100 Years of Great Value" (Tesco PLC 2018). The advertised goal is that 8 out of 10 food and drink products will be grown, reared or made in Britain. This new marketing campaign relies on tradition and the potential for successful, historicised businessmen to be inspiring role-models. Thus, a new dimension and a new persona are added to Tesco's multifaceted corporate communication.

<sup>3</sup> A 5p charge for plastic bags was introduced in England in October 2015. This has led to an 83% reduction in their use, with the number of plastic bags found littering beaches dropping by nearly half. The government required shops to donate the proceeds of the 5p plastic bag tax to good causes. Unlike other supermarkets, Tesco deducted more than 10% of the total to cover the cost of administering donations. See Carrington and Webber 2017.

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‘THE SHADE OF IT ALL’:  
QUEERING ACADEMIA VIA TWITTER\*

*Abstract*

The following investigation examines the linguistic choices and communicative practices used in and by the Twitter account *Scholarly Queen* to perform and display queer academic identities. As platforms such as Twitter are increasingly being used to give a voice to specific communities of practice (Swales 1990, 2004; Wenger 1998), the language informing these Social Networking Systems becomes a means through which gender identities are performed (Papacharissi 2013). In a society which is basically structured on heteronormative and binary categories, creative text-internal and text-external resources take on a seminal role in constructing minority gender identities by allowing users to engage with creative practices as a way through which unrepresented identities and discourses come to be defined. The analysis can be positioned in the theoretical framework of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik and Zia 2014; KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik 2017, 2018), while Multimodal Prosody (Balirano 2017a, 2017b) and ambient affiliation/identity (Zappavigna 2012, 2013) operate as the methodological tools. The former will be applied to analyse the numerous images discursively brought into play to perform this queer academic identity, while the latter will be employed to retrace the language connoting the representation of the ‘in-group’ in *Scholarly Queen*.

*Keywords:* academic discourse; Social Media Critical Discourse Studies; queer identity representation; Multimodal Prosody.

\* The authors have jointly discussed and conceived this paper. Nevertheless, individual contributions in writing this research article are identified as follows: Antonio Fruttaldo is responsible for Section 2, Section 4.1, and Conclusion; Angela Zottola is responsible for Introduction, Section 3, and Section 4.2

## 1. Introduction

Social media platforms are increasingly becoming prevalent communicative means through which identity is performed and displayed (Zappavigna 2013, 2015). The Internet “has allowed for the construction of a wide variety of non-mainstream identities [...] and opened up spaces for new dynamic of social and political power for non-elite text producers resisting the discourses of established institutions” (KhosraviNik and Zia 2014: 757). Facebook pages and Twitter accounts are thus used in order to give a voice to specific communities of practice (Swales 1990, 2004; Wenger 1998).

In these contexts, language plays a seminal role in the construction of gender identities, since “the performative nature of language can be understood as the way in which it allows us to be ‘certain kinds of people’ and engage in ‘certain kinds of activities’ through an ongoing series of cultural performances” (Jones 2015: 68). In a society where heteronormative categories prove to be the default way of structuring our everyday reality, creativity turns into a mode through which unrepresented identities and discourses come to be defined. Therefore, creative text-internal and text-external resources are crucial in constructing specific gender identities.

Grown out of the tradition established by social media accounts such as *Shit Academics Say* (Hall 2015)<sup>1</sup>, our case study examines the Twitter account *Scholarly Queen* (from now on, referred to as SQ). The linguistic choices emerging from the profile description<sup>2</sup> are indicative of the general trends with which the account deals, creatively giving a voice to queer identity in Academia and, more to the point, humorously representing queen identity as juxtaposed with daily-life academic experiences. The case study presented here is investigated according to the framework provided by Social Media Discourse Analysis (Herring 2004; Androutsopoulos 2008; KhosraviNik 2017, 2018). In particular, the notion of engagement systems on social media platforms (Zappavigna 2012, 2013, 2015) will be used to retrace

<sup>1</sup> The Twitter account of *Shit Academics Say* can be found online at <https://twitter.com/AcademicsSay> (last accessed March 5, 2018). Its Facebook page is available online at <https://www.facebook.com/academicssay/> (last accessed March 5, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Scholarly Queen* was only available on Twitter and its account could be reached at <https://twitter.com/ScholarlyWERK>. Unfortunately, after a year of inactivity, the account was closed and, therefore, its description is mainly based on the data that were downloaded by using NVivo 11 (QSR International 2015; see Section 3 for a better understanding of the methodology used in the data collection). The description found on its page presented *Scholarly Queen* as giving a voice to “[h]umanities PhD with a focus on WTF did I get myself into with a subspecialty in HEEEEY GIRL HEEEEY”.

the representation of the in-group language employed by SQ in performing an academic gendered identity. This will allow us to see how "users of language perform their identity within uses of language" (Martin *et al.* 2013: 468). More specifically, this contribution will highlight, in the particular case of SQ, the way Twitter users perform relational identities as they enact discourse fellowships (Zappavigna 2013). Additionally, due to the crucial role played by the numerous images which are discursively used to perform this queer academic identity, a recently developed theory of multimodal analysis will be applied to investigate the multimodal prosody (Balirano 2017a, 2017b) detectable in *Scholarly Queen*.

## 2. Diversity Issues in Academia

The concept of and the issues linked to diversity have been extensively tackled in linguistic and cultural studies (see Balirano and Nisco 2015). However, as far as management literature is concerned, they have only been addressed in the last thirty years (Bizjak 2018). In the specific case of higher education organisations, this relatively new body of literature underlines how diversity issues linked to gender inequality and sexual orientation discrimination seem to resemble an "unbeatable seven-headed dragon that has a multitude of faces in academic life [...] regardless of the variation in the history of higher education in different countries and regardless, too, of their varying equality policies" (van den Brink and Benschop 2012: 71).

In her work on the reasons lying behind discriminatory policies, Anderson (2016) investigates why discrimination still persists and even flourishes in organisational contexts, in spite of diversity being recognised as a source of growth. One of her explanations looks back at the classic work by G.S. Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957), which highlights how "people simply prefer to associate with certain types of individuals [...]; there is simply a 'taste' that people have for people who are like themselves" (Anderson 2016: 163). In other words, "[d]iscrimination is the result of this taste for similarity" (Anderson 2016: 163), which consequently hinders diversity and marginalises those who do not conform to this 'taste'.

While Diversity Management has frequently focused on issues linked to gender wage differences between women and men, little has been done and is still *not* done with regard to the study of minorities such

as LGBTI+ individuals<sup>3</sup>. More importantly, little has been done in the specific case of Academia, concerning which there is “a smaller amount of literature focused particularly on [...] the everyday slights, harassment, intimidation, fears, exclusion, and discrimination experienced by LGBT faculty” (Bilimora and Stewart 2009: 86). Renn thus highlights one of the major contradictions in Academia: “[a]lthough higher education is the location of much development of queer theory, it is not an especially queer system of organizations or a system of especially queer organizations” (Renn 2010: 138). According to Yoshino (2006), one of the coping mechanisms adopted by LGBTI+ individuals in Academia draws on a process of ‘covering’; the author argues that some scholars may feel the pressure to ‘cover’ their sexual orientation or gender identity in order to fit in within the mainstream, binary heterosexual matrix. However, this implicit demand relating to ‘covering’ one’s own identity obviously “constrains the full personhood of minority group members’ self-expression, and for that reason is experienced as deeply painful over time” (Bilimoria and Stewart 2009: 91).

In such a context, Social Networking Systems (SNSs; see Papacharissi 2013) offer these non-mainstream identities the opportunity to find their own place and self-expression, so as to see themselves represented. The empowerment of media prosumers (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016) afforded by SNSs has allowed users to establish online ambient and identity affiliation systems (Zappavigna 2012, 2013, 2015); through these systems, groups of people can reunite under the discursive icons of their collocative values associated with the specific ‘signs’ and ‘places’ (e.g. hashtags, Facebook groups and pages, Twitter accounts, etc.) which point toward their in-group community representation. Thanks to their anonymity, these constructed identities – and the set of values fostering their discursive online moulding – can give shape to forms of counter-discourse and fight against the hegemonic male heteronormativity of Academia, where heterosexuality tends to be routinely endorsed.

<sup>3</sup> The acronym LGBTI+ is used here with reference to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersexual communities. The plus at the end of the acronym is meant to encompass other groups committed to non-conforming sexual orientation and gender identity issues, such as the Asexual, Non-Binary, Pansexual, Genderqueer, Questioning, Queer communities. No form of disrespect or erasure is intended here by not specifically mentioning other types of initialisms or terms from different languages and cultures. The authors have adopted the acronym LGBTI+ because they feel it represents the most inclusive, concise and comprehensive way to envisage this ever-growing community.

### 3. *Methodology*

Bearing in mind the circumstances outlined in the previous section, the following investigation examines the social platform Twitter (see Kwak *et al.* 2010: 591), in the awareness that "social media have facilitated the construction and representation of a variety of non-mainstream identities" (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016: 211), such as the queer academic identities dealt with in this analysis. As it happens, given their ephemeral nature and the anonymity they might provide, SNSs such as Twitter or Facebook are likely to become a safe space where identity is performed and displayed. Facebook groups/pages and Twitter accounts thus turn into a space where people can reunite under the flagship of similar identities, that is, what Zappavigna (2012, 2013) defines as ambient and identity affiliation systems.

The case study discussed in this work is based on the analysis of a specific Twitter account, *Scholarly Queen* (SQ), and aims at highlighting the semiotic strategies used by this online 'persona' in order to bring ambient and identity affiliations into being. The focus of the analysis will be on the representation of the in-group language employed by SQ in performing an academic gendered identity inside a space considered safe.

The corpus under investigation was collected during a timespan that stretches from June 1, 2016 to January 12, 2017, including a total of 165 tweets and replies. Out of the total number of tweets, 155 contained multimedia contents, while only ten did not. The corpus collection was enabled by the use of the NVivo 11 software (QSR International 2015), which allowed the automatic collection of the data (both textual and multimodal) and the analysis of the corpus offline.

As highlighted in the corpus description, the combination of different semiotic systems employed on Twitter has required the use of a mixed methodology which could take into consideration both the textual and multimodal aspects of SQ tweets. The analysis presented in the following sections can be positioned in the more general theoretical framework of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik and Zia 2014; KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik 2017, 2018), while Multimodal Prosody (Balirano 2017a, 2017b) and ambient affiliation/identity (Zappavigna 2012, 2013) operate as our methodological tools.

Introduced by KhosraviNik and other scholars, Social Media Critical Discourse Studies differs from traditional CDA in the sense that while the latter tends to describe subjects as undergoers of a one-directional hegemonic power pressure, the former is based on the Foucauldian idea that power always entails opposition and counter-discourses of resistance. Therefore, the general goal here is not so much to unveil hegemonic heteronormative power relations, but to show how heter-

normative power itself calls for social struggle, potential reversals, and transformations.

Social Media Critical Discourse Studies sees SNSs as an instrument through which silenced voices may find a way to challenge hegemonic power. As Cottle (2011: 651) points out, “[s]ocial media can help to bring into being new practices of social inclusivity, group recognition and pluralized participation as well as different forms of political conversation and engagement”. In this sense, SNSs may be seen as *loci* where people can ‘gather’ around specific identity performances and freely express themselves, while functioning as online ambient and identity affiliation systems, in which groups get together under the discursive representations of their collocative values associated with the specific ‘signs’ of their in-group community codes (Zappavigna 2013). The notions of ambient affiliation and ambient identity on which we have drawn were elaborated by Zappavigna (2012, 2013) on the basis of Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory (2005). Zappavigna’s work focuses on social bonds and the way they are configured in order to commune with a mass online audience. Moreover, she directs her attention to the particular discursive patterns of collocative values that characterise specific microblogging *personae*.

SNSs’ consistent reliance on images has required further investigation regarding the extent to which visual material is involved in the discourses which underpin SQ. The theory of Multimodal Prosody, introduced by Balirano (2017a, 2017b), was adopted in this case. According to Balirano (2017a), just as language engenders a priming mechanism (Hoey 2005), so do images. In this sense, the continuous exposure to a given identity performance associated with specific visual representations induces the audience to establish a link between a discourse, a type of identity-moulding and an image. In other words,

*Multimodal Prosody* refers to the observed effect by which individuals, who are exposed to complex multimodal co-deployments, subsequently notice more of the positive or negative features of the world than they would otherwise, according to the way the priming semiotic resources co/occur with certain other resources, in certain kinds of context. (Balirano 2017a: 160)

The following sections will address the results emerging from the application of the previously discussed theoretical and methodological frameworks to the collected data.

#### 4. Analysis and Results

In the following sections, the main results of the discursive patterns emerging from our analysis will be highlighted. As will be shown, when applying Zappavigna’s framework (2012, 2013), two main linguistic strategies informing the textual elements of SQ tweets prove prominent. As for the multimodal prosody connoting SQ, data show how a twofold strategy of exposure to specific multimodal discursive constructions allows SQ to foster ambient and identity affiliations.

##### 4.1 Textual Elements

As previously argued, in the linguistic analysis of SQ, two main groups of tweets can be distinguished: (a) monologic tweets and (b) dialogic tweets.

Monologic tweets can be defined as those that describe typical situations in Academia and their queer (multimodally conveyed) response. More specifically, in these tweets, attitude, judgement, and polarity, which are the three aspects analysed by Zappavigna (2013), are epitomised via the image, while the written comment works as a context setting. Here, images are used with a view to evaluating the academic situation described in the tweets (e.g. department meetings, students evaluations, etc.). Generally speaking, monologic tweets evaluate a multifold series of academic situations which involve relations of power that are re-semiotised along a queering trajectory (see Figure 4.1.1):



Fig. 4.1.1. An example of monologic tweets.

Dialogic tweets can be defined as those where a fictitious dialogue is created between a powerful normative voice and a queer, multimodally challenging one. The latter may also include a cultural reference to the LGBTI+ community (see Figure 4.1.2). In the case of dialogic tweets, attitude, judgement, and polarity are expressed both in the text and the image. In the text, a negative evaluation of the hegemonic voice is formulated through the insertion of specific cues that point to the presence of a figure traditionally occupying a position of power, while the image, which functions as a response to the written text that precedes it, works as a counter-discourse challenging the hegemonic voice.



Fig. 4.1.2. An example of dialogic tweets.

#### 4.2 Multimodal Prosodies

In order to convey meaning, the textual components highlighted in the previous sub-section work together with a number of visual representations. As previously mentioned (see Section 3), Multimodal Prosody looks at the way discourses are organised and replicated through an array of multimodal components. Two co-occurring multimodal prosodies have emerged from the data investigation process: one addressing

the LGBTI+ and queen community, and the other relying on humour. In other words, the meanings associated with and conveyed by the tweets and replies retrieved from SQ mainly reproduce images or GIFs culturally related to drag identities or to shows and iconic characters of the LGBTI+ community, while always introducing a pun or joke, or depicting a hilarious situation.

In detail, the first pattern is made explicit through the continuous exposure to images related to the drag queen ballroom scene and, more generally, the LGBTI+ community. As can be seen in Figure 4.1.1, a typical academic situation is presented, and the response is used as a form of counter-power enactment. Therefore, SQ users are primed to associate queer academic identity with queen identity. In other words, just like gay men perform a drag *persona* on stage, people working in Academia are seen as performing a *persona* that differs from their everyday selves. However, owing to the pressure towards normalising individuals and adjusting their identity in the academic world, the queen appearance eventually objectifies a transposition of the inner desires of queer academics imaginatively reacting to situations as their inner selves would do.

The second strategy is intertwined with the first one and relies on the use of humour as a source of empowerment. Engaging everyday struggles through irony is a defensive mechanism which engenders diversity and gives power to the discriminated subject, who might thus mock and challenge orthodoxy. Once again, this pattern is shown in Figure 4.1.1, where the response to the situation presented is infused with sneering overtones.

In this space, voices usually considered as non-conforming are finally seen as part of a group, rather than outcasts. Therefore, Twitter resembles a safe haven for non-conforming identities, a means through which communication is simplified, emboldened, and encouraged. SQ gives voice to an inner representation of the self that does not identify with the heteronormative, binary system endorsed by society, carving out a (parallel) space in which that expression is made possible.

## 5. Conclusion

Bucholtz and Hall (2010) argue that identities and, more precisely, gender identities gain social meaning when put in relation with other social actors. SQ is a practical example of how this is achieved in the context of SNSs. Indeed, queer academic identities are given a chance to express themselves in a space (i.e. SNSs) that is specifically built on relations among social actors. In this way, invisible actors in the academic environment find a way to see themselves represented, creat-

ing an affiliation and identity system that allows counter-discourses to develop. As previously argued, there is still a lack of representation of LGBTI+ faculty members in Academia, and there is still a lack of research on the experiences of these individuals in everyday life situations within the higher-education sphere. This void is somehow counterbalanced by SNSs, with the online context working as a sort of offline empowerment system. In this sense, SQ functions as both an online ambience and an identity affiliation platform, a counter-power mechanism through which forms of heterosexism, heterocentrism, homophobia and, more broadly, hostility within and outside social work programmes in Academia are challenged and fought.

The analysis of communing affiliations carried out in this paper has aimed at shedding light on how social relations are strengthened on SNSs through the use of specific linguistic and multimodal cues. The investigation of SQ has allowed us to explore how values (as ideation-attitude couplings, according to Zappavigna and Martin 2018) are performed and how users commune around them ambiently. This study provides further insights on how “persons and personalities as active participators in the creation and maintenance of cultural values” (Firth 1957: 186) can draw on values that are being forged in a discourse underpinned by online interactions.

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