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Daniela Fargione

“One thing does not exist: Oblivion”. The Poiesis of Everness and the Wildness of Art in Anita Desai’s “The Artist of Disappearance”

Abstract I: Il primo verso di “Everness” di Jorge Luis Borges che Anita Desai sceglie ad epigrafe de *L’artista della sparizione* sta a indicare che niente può essere dimenticato tranne ciò che non ha forza a sufficienza per diventare memoria. Se l’oblio è il tema principale del libro, il racconto eponimo si concentra sull’urgenza di preservare le opere d’arte di cultura e natura. Il ruolo etico dell’artista come portatore di valori e il lavoro artistico quale strumento di conservazione sono particolarmente evidenti nel cameo destinato a Nek Chand e al suo “Giardino di pietra”, opera mai autorizzata. In questo articolo si esplorano: le eredità naturali e culturali profanate e le loro rappresentazioni letterarie; la distruzione della biodiversità *naturalculturale* nell’India postcoloniale; la decentralizzazione dell’umano e la forza d’azione della materia.

Abstract II: Anita Desai’s *The Artist of Disappearance* opens with the first line of “Everness” by Jorge Luis Borges to suggest that nothing can be forgotten except for what is not strong enough to become memory. If oblivion is the main theme of this collection, the eponymous story illustrates the need to preserve (mainly from forgetfulness) both cultural *and* natural artworks. The ethical role of the artist as transmitter of values, together with artistic travail as a tool of preservation are particularly evident in Desai’s reference to Nek Chand’s unauthorized “Rock Garden”. In this article I explore the literary representation of desecrated natural and cultural heritage, postcolonial India’s destruction of *naturecultural* biodiversity, the decentralization of the human, and the agency of elemental materiality.

In a series of conversations that took place on various occasions in the United States between 1967 and 1985, Jorge Luis Borges offers precious insight about his fascination with death, which in one of his stories he defines as “the oblivion that awaits us all” (Burgin 1998: 125). In an interview with Willis Barnstone, the poet reveals how his late blindness, “which resembles an eternal present” (Borg 2009: 111), compels him to live in memory: “[...] I suppose a poet should live in memory because, after all, what is imagination? Imagination, I should say, is made of memory and of oblivion. It is a kind of blending of the two things” (Burgin 1998: 181). But if the common notion of memory implies an empirical adherence to a past reality or experience, a conformity to veracity, in many of his writings Borges emphasizes the unreliability of the act of remembering, its selective and failing nature that inextricably

ties it to forgetting. And yet, in the first verse of his poem “Everness” (1964), he pens a staggering statement: oblivion does not exist.

One thing does not exist: Oblivion.
 God saves the metal and he saves the dross,
 And his prophetic memory guards from loss
 The moons to come, and those of evenings gone.
Everything is: the shadows in the glass
 Which, in between the day’s two twilights, you
 Have scattered by the thousands, or shall strew
 Henceforward in the mirrors that you pass.
And everything is part of that diverse
Crystalline memory, the universe;
 Whoever through its endless mazes wanders
 Hears door on door click shut behind his stride,
 And only from the sunset’s farther side
 Shall view at last the Archetypes and the Splendors (Borges 1972: 207, my italics).

Still, how can we deny the faltering gait of human memory? With no doubts, we *do* forget, but Borges seems to suggest that we are unable to remember only what is not strong enough to become memory, eventually positing that our incapability to recollect might depend more on a conflict between the various modes of our *ars memoriae* rather than on the dialectic relation of memory and oblivion (Bottiroli 2012). Moreover, the universe itself is conceived as a “crystalline memory”, an immense archive, which eventually defies the possibility of and, ultimately, the need for a total categorization of knowledge and systematized recording: since “Everything is”, nothing can be obliterated.

Similarly, oblivion is the main theme of Anita Desai’s three novellas in *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011), which in fact opens with the first line of “Everness” by Jorge Luis Borges. This is not the first time that the writer devotes an epigraph to memory, as in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), for instance, she uses the line of a letter that Emily Dickinson wrote soon after her mother’s death in 1882: “Memory is a strange bell – jubilee and knell”, emphasizing the disrupting force of remembrance of which she had a “remarkably concrete understanding” (Lundin 2004: 8). This holds true for Anita Desai as well, whose novels are often concerned with something that is vanishing, although in a recent interview she states that her attention to what is passing and disappearing is not theoretical to her, but central to her experience as it is “an Indian obsession” (Menozzi 2015: 30). “Born in India”, she continues, “one is poor in so many ways but I always feel we are, or have been, rich in time. I would say it is the fourth dimension of life, and a dimension to which I am a witness. My role is as of a witness” (*ibid.*). Both epigraphs, then, illustrate the relation between life and the ability to remember, but “memory”, Desai affirms, “contains the writing one does” which, more than an antidote to transience and the custody of what is vanishing, is “a way of seeking order and meaning in what is of its essence chaotic, haphazard, even meaningless” (31).

In the eponymous novella of *The Artist of Disappearance*, chaos is the condition the world has been dragged to by the ruthless attitudes of human beings who chiefly view the planet as an inexhaustible reservoir to be exploited to the substantial detriment of the biotic life, of poor and marginalized people, and of indigenous communities (human and nonhuman). However, Anita Desai does not limit herself to “witness” environmental devastation; rather, “The Artist of Disappearance” is a complex exploration of a process of decolonization of nature through the restoration of heritage and ecological habitats via memory, creativity, and imagination. This reclamation is made more challenging by the fact that the land has already been sacked and ravaged by the violence of history, so that, to say it with DeLoughrey and Handley, “place encodes time” (2011: 4), thus suggesting that the exhuming of a traumatic past embedded in a specific land discloses the transformative entanglement of both human and natural histories. Desai’s attempt at coming to grips with the relationship between landscape and colonization is far from being a mere recovery of the pastoral India, or a nostalgic idealization of a bucolic landscape. In her novella, in fact, she offers new perspectives on environmental change as embedded in material, historical, and discursive practices of commodification.

“The Artist of Disappearance” is set in Mussoorie, a resort in the Himalayan foothills that, due to growing capitalism and commercialization, suffers from a massive devastation of natural diversity. The main character is Ravi, the adopted son of a prosperous but neglecting couple that spends more time abroad than in India. While travelling, the child has to stay behind with servants and tutors, and when he wonders why his parents never take him with them, he realizes that they believe he “belonged at home”¹, a space that he can hardly identify with family bond and love: “they [Ravi’s parents] did not belong to his life because they did not belong to the forest and the hills [...] he knew the family thought him freakishly backward, *a wild creature* of the mountain” (114, my italics). Even when they are present, Ravi is compelled to respect “a set of rigid rules” (108), which require his complete invisibility and silence. The sense of suffocation that he feels at home is opposed to the comfort that he finds in natural spaces, where he can freely roam as a “wild creature”:

Outdoor was the life to which he chose to belong – the life of the crickets springing out of the grass, the birds wheeling hundreds of feet below in the valley or soaring upwards above the mountains, and the animals invisible in the undergrowth, giving themselves away by an occasional rustle or eruption of cries or flurried calls; plants following their own green compulsions and purposes, almost imperceptibly, and the rocks and stones, seemingly inert but mysteriously part of the constant change and movement of the earth [...] collected and arranged according to size and color in an infinite number of patterns and designs, none of which were ever repeated or fixed (101, 103).

Wildness, the chaotic inconstancy of the material world and of its agencies that resist human systematization and control, is a constant in the complex entanglement of beings

¹ Desai, Anita. 2011. *The Artist of Disappearance. Three Novellas*. London: Chatto & Windus, 106. All subsequent quotations or page citations from “The Artist of Disappearance” refer to this edition.

and their environments, and Ravi seems to be particularly interested in the “variations and mutations of the living, their innumerable possibilities” (103) that he can find only at Himalayan altitudes. As Gary Snyder affirms reminding Thoreau’s famous dictum, “Wildness is not just the ‘preservation of the world,’ it is the world” (1990: 168-169).

Desai’s engagement with the more-than-human epitomizes recent international investigations on the long-standing notions of human nature and conservative practices that have repeatedly led to human control and domination of nature and natural resources. Human and zoo-anthropology, ethnography, and animal studies, for example, have contributed to analyze interspecies relationships while exploring the ways of “multinaturalism” and “internaturalism”². “Species interdependence”, affirms anthropologist Anna Tsing, “is a well-known fact – except when it comes to humans” (2012: 144). This supposed exceptionalism has sprung from the assumption that humans are “autonomously self-maintaining – and therefore constant across culture and history” (*ibid.*). This is a conservative idea that has favored preservation rather than innovation, eventually nurturing an ideology of human mastery over other species and of a special kind of domestication that “tends to be imagined as a hard line: You are either in the human fold or you are out in the wild” (Tsing 2012: 145). Animated by Donna Haraway’s ideas of a *dynamic* species companionship³, Anna Tsing’s study of matsutake mushrooms, illustrates the multiple interlacings of the human and non-human while taking into account discipline and cultural specificities, regional and local factors and, especially, various temporalities within fluctuating landscapes. Wandering and contemplation offer Tsing an impression, a *memory* of “a familiar place in the landscape” to return to, a memory that is strong enough to guide her future walks, since one is generally driven to the very geographical spots of previous interspecies encounters. “Familiar places”, concludes Anna Tsing, “engender forms of identification and companionship that contrast to hyper-domestication and private property as we know it” (Tsing 2012: 142).

The main character in Desai’s novella seems to be delighted by surrounding natural places that he acknowledges as his *oikos* as well as his family. Mushrooms, for example, are the companion species that give him the pleasure of the unexpected: “And there was always the unexpected – [...] an eruption from the tobacco-dark leaf mould of a family of mush-

² The notion of “perspectival multinaturalism” has been theorized by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. It postulates that “the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view” (1998: 469). An “ethnographically-based reshuffling of our conceptual schemes” (470) – mainly the demise of dualistic paradigmatic sets collected under the rubrics of “Nature” and “Culture” – is urged to embrace the Amerindian conception of the world which supposes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity, as opposed to the Western notion of “multiculturalist” cosmologies which imply a unity of nature and the plurality of cultures. Similarly, in his essay *Addio alla Natura* (2011) semiologist Gianfranco Marrone concedes that if we can talk of “interculturalism” as a practice that contemplates cultural diversity and hybridization, in the same way we might hypothesize a viable “internaturalism,” that includes “not only our knowledge or common sense, but also social practices” (136). Marrone reaffirms the urge of an intersectionality of different cultures, i.e. of systems and processes that engage “people, but also beasts, plants, spirits, totems, dreams” (132. My translation). Cfr. Fargione 2013; Cravero 2015.

³ “Syntactically and materially worldly embodiment is always a verb, or at least a gerund. Always in formation, embodiment is ongoing, dynamic, situated, and historical” (Haraway 2008: 249).

rooms with their ghostly pallor and caps, hats and bonnets, like refugees that had arrived in the night" (102). Desai's words perfectly echo Donna Haraway's statements that remind us of the value of Anna Tsing's arguments about the Holocene, "the long period when refugia, places of refuge, still existed, even abounded, to sustain reworlding in rich cultural and biological diversity. [...]. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge" and she wishes for a reconstitution of refuges, "to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses" and a communal effort: "We need to make kin [...] sym-poetically" (Haraway 2015: 160-161).

In "The Artist of Disappearance", Ravi treasures enduring wildness and instability, but at the same time he cultivates constants such as energy and creativity that inform both the human and nonhuman worlds of their impermanence and porosity. Energy flows and their disruptions remain inseparable from life, from living organisms and, finally, from *poiesis* – the generative praxis that combines randomness, unpredictability, and design – eventually proving how poetic travail links the wild artistry and creativity of nature to human imagination, in a continuous compositional and transformative process that contemplates inter-/intra-actions of making and unmaking⁴. In this scenario, the complex participation of nonhuman agency generates further challenges because "nature's own processes of regeneration and change often contribute to the burial of postcolonial histories" (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 4), thus foregrounding different temporalities and political and economic interests. Ravi finds this out when he returns to Mussoorie from a study period in Bombay – "years he did not count [...] they did not belong to his life because they did not belong to the forest and the hills" (114) – and while traveling in a bus he notices a "line of huge trucks loaded with rocks, logs, sacks and bundles and men perched on top, their mouths and noses wrapped in scarves against the dust and fumes of exhaust" (116), clearly a hint at the gradual pollution and deforestation of the mountains, a new violence that adds to a past one.

When the family mansion burns down in an accident, Ravi decides to live an increasingly hermitic existence, eventually becoming a recluse. He opts for a life of invisibility in the remains of his family's home now turned into a forest-dwelling that local children say has ghostly powers. However, what might seem just the relic of a glorious past destined to rotting decay, is also the sign of a resistance to oblivion, an enduring permanence against the inexorable passing of time marked by the signs of history. It is Desai herself who explains her predilection for ruins and ruination: "I find ruins wonderfully conducive to thought and impulse. [...] Abandoned, empty, such ruins compel one to create a history for them, tell their stories. They invite imagination to enter and inhabit them" (34). "The Artist of Disappearance" is thus a meditation on the recuperative dimension of art and, especially, on the crucial role of art and writing as transmitters of history. As Filippo Menozzi states referring to Anita Desai's "The Museum of Final Journeys", the opening novella of *The Artist of Disappearance*:

⁴ Considerable scholarship has been published on material ecocriticism, including Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Barrett & Bolt 2013; Iovino & Oppermann 2014.

In a contemporary world defined by the culture of 'commodity and memory' proper to late capitalism, an ethics of the authentic ruin testifies to the possibility of a way out of the impasse between obsolescence and commodification. The ruin indicates a different mode of dealing with the past, which in Desai's story becomes the ethical work of the literary imagination: a literary history able to avoid becoming commodity or forgetfulness (Menozzi 2015b: 11).

This is particularly visible in Ravi's secret and inaccessible work of art, a private garden built in a hidden glade that reflects complex patterns of plants and pigeon-colored stones, broken branches, wild berries and "the family of pallid mushrooms of the day before" – a blending of intuitiveness and symmetry, perception and design, a project of imagination that engages him strenuously but that "no one witnessed" (126).

Ravi's solipsistic existence is interrupted when modernity bursts in through a film crew coming from Delhi with their own "project" (128): to document environmental degradation in the Himalayas. If many directors go to the hills to shoot images of lush hinterland and forests – "Scenary, they all like scenary" (131, 143) – these filmmakers instead are interested in what is spoiling them: "Soil erosion, cattle grazing, deforestation" (129), the agenda of unbridled capitalism. During an inspection, Shalini, a woman from the film crew, stumbles into Ravi's secluded garden, which she describes as an "undiscovered and untrodden [...] wild place," maybe "the lair of a wild animal or perhaps even a secret hermitage. [...]. It seemed totally deserted, as composed and still as a work of art. Or nature. Or both, in uncommon harmony. The place thrummed with meaning. But what was the meaning?" (138-139). The garden is suddenly recognized as a text scripted with both human and nonhuman interminglings, a materiality that Jane Bennett defines as "a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans" (Bennett 2010: 112). The 'vibrant matter' that constitutes Ravi's garden does not simply refer to substances, but it also includes multiple discursive practices and meanings, so that the very concept of interpretation extends beyond the conventional categories of 'text'. As a consequence, the entire structure of the world appears as endowed with a narrative agency that depends on the interactions of different composites; not a uni-verse, but rather a "pluri-verse", as Bennett calls it, "traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*" (Bennett 2010: 122). Intuitively, the documentary director understands that the garden synecdochally "contained the essence [of the Himalayas] [...] as one glittering bee or beetle or single note of birdsong might contain an entire season" (144), and starts musing on the commercial possibilities of its filming. Ravi, could interpret the role of "someone who is different, someone who is not destroying the land but making something of it, something beautiful" (146). Not surprisingly, Ravi has no intention to become a celebrity and perceives the intrusion as a threat: "their gaze alone was a desecration" (152)⁵. Only

⁵ The sacred secrecy of the artistic endeavor is well expressed by Anita Desai in an interview: "I have an intuitive and deep fear that by speaking of something subterranean and sub-conscious, I will destroy it – it is

then, the director concludes that without him, the garden is “dead, a dead loss” (154) and he even suspects that the artist might not even exist.

In the end of the novella, Ravi lets his “bower” revert to wilderness and eventually begins a new project by putting bark, moss, and quartz into a matchbox – “a crib, a cradle” (153), thus a new life container – while fabricating new secret collections of *naturecultural* compounds in a recombinant and procedural eco-aesthetics. His kaleidoscopic assemblage and re-arrangement of this vital matter is also a transmutation of energies and a re-appropriation and custody of a cultural heritage, since his collected fragments belong to a national identity and to its native communities. As philosopher Mark Sagoff posits, by comparing the natural environment to the artistic patrimony of an entire collectivity, the safeguard of nature becomes an obligation towards our cultural tradition and diversity (Sagoff 1988: 124-125). To turn to the forest to recover the suppressed signs of landscape history is all the more ontologically powerful, since capitalism’s despoliation of nature simultaneously becomes an act of violence against the collective memory of an entire country and of its *naturecultural* biodiversity. As Donna Haraway reminds us: “assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too” (2015: 159).

The ethical role of the artist as transmitter of values, together with artistic travail as a source of preservation (mainly from forgetfulness), is offered by a little cameo that Anita Desai devotes to Nek Chand and his illegal and unauthorized sculpture garden.⁶ Now a symbol of successful transmutation, the Garden was made out of stones, debris, and pilfered construction materials left over after more than fifty villages were destroyed to build the city of Chandigarh after the partition of colonial India in 1947. The project’s aim was to create a new modern capital for Punjab, which could reflect the concept of “visual order” pursued by his appointed builder, the French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier, who used a measuring system based on the human body and evoking Leonardo da Vinci’s “Vitruvian man,” clearly a symbol of an anthropocentric vision of the world (cfr. Haraway 2008). Le Corbusier’s plan, moreover, completely effaced the indigenous mixtures of vernacular building styles and architectural folk traditions, a form of oblivion of cultural diversity that sparked Nek Chand’s artistic project. With no formal education in art or sculpture, he started his rock collection in 1958 when he also claimed that “all the stones have a soul,” thus suggesting that a new life form could take place out of a broken past (Wojcik 2016). Space, light, form, and beauty convey both a sense of loss and the strength of imagination to re-create natural indigenous scenes in a forbidden place.

Since Chand was an employee for the Public Works Department, he was aware of the

something so very frail. This feeling I cannot subject to reason. I cannot explain it, but I know the creative act is a secret one. To make it public, to scrutinise it in the cold light of reason is to commit an act of violence, possibly murder” (Kumar 2002: 70).

⁶ When Shalini stumbles on Ravi’s secret garden, she informs her colleague (whose name is, in fact, Chand) about the work of “Some kind of artist perhaps. Now artists were species for whom Chand had a grudging but profound respect” (141). Shalini asks: “[...] you have heard of that man in Chandigarh, a road engineer or something, who collected all the scrap from his road projects and built a kind of sculpture garden of it? Kept it hidden because the land he built it on didn’t belong to him? Then it was found and he became famous? What’s his name, do you know?” (142).



Fig. 1-2. Sculptures in Nek Chand's Rock Garden (Photos by Rod Waddington for Wikimedia Commons)

perils of his endeavor: if caught, not only would he lose his job, but he could also face imprisonment. Chand used tiles, pottery pieces, bicycle frames, broken bathroom sinks, fragments of glass, a whole assemblage that he holistically re-arranged and re-ordered while in solitude and certainly not for personal recognition. His enterprise could rather be seen as a therapy that eventually offered him and his discarded objects a new agency within a process of renewal. His Rock garden later became an open-air shrine, a place devoted to religious diversity and innumerable manifestations of the divine. Of course, his project had to meet different forms of hostility and in 1990 local authorities even sent a bulldozer to destroy part of the garden in the attempt to build a new way for the city (Wojcik 2016). When several attacks of systematic vandalism damaged his sculptures, the reaction was a massive grass-roots response that the authorities could not ignore so easily. A Foundation on his name was eventually established and a new recycling program was inaugurated to clean Chandigarh of its waste, proving the meaningful, transformative, and restorative value of this experience, which could affect a whole community (cfr. <http://nekchand.com/>).

In conclusion, Desai's artists of disappearance, far from being advocates of oblivion, invite us to reconnect with our past to re-create our future, and eventually to nonhuman bodies, forces, forms, and – to evoke Borges again – to the universe (or, possibly, pluri-verse) which is itself energy, vitality, memory, and consciousness. "Everything is".

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Daniela Fargione holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, where she was a Fulbright Scholar. Currently, she teaches Anglo-American Literatures at the University of Turin. Her research interests include: environmental humanities and ecocriticism, the interconnections of American literature and the other Arts, and the theory and practice of literary translation (she translates for the publishing house Einaudi). Among her recent publications: *Ambiente Dickinson. Poesia, scultura, natura* (2013), *Contaminazioni ecologiche. Cibi, nature e culture* (co-ed. with S. Iovino, 2015) and *Il cibo degli umanisti* (co-ed. with M. Bonifazio, 2017) for CoSMo: Comparative Studies in Modernism. daniela.fargione@unito.it