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Antonella Riem, Stefano Mercanti, Mattia Mantellato, Caterina Colomba, Annalisa Bonomo & Fernanda Verçosa

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Dennis Haskell

Poems

Nature and the Human
The snow that warms and thins
and shivers down mountains
then gurgles its way into trusting cities
translating streets into streams,
strolling into drowning;

the dragon fire that sails on the wind
and licks up fences, cars, community,
cackles at churches, cremates ordinary lives;

the epilepsy of air that churns
and jives, argues with itself, gnashes
its windy teeth over timber, tiles, arches,
tossing home parts up like a frenzied juggler;

the earth that tears apart like unwanted rags,
heaves hard, deep stones skyward
then makes them flow like rocky blood

draw our astonishment and sympathies,
prove nature is not always nurture
and snubs human nature after all:

but they all happen to others, not to us
– to us drama and excitement
on the nightly news. What
makes us think that the climate is ours?
Is this how living works? That
catastrophe will never conscript our names
but someone else's, while we build a planet
where the news waits to knock,
edgily, on everyone's door?

Kuala Lumpur, 2024
for Shan Mugalingham

Ziggurats, jagged glass stacks,
twin rockets or minarets,
palm leaf folded onto palm leaf,
KL's modern towers make
their magic beanstalk climb
into a ruffian sky.
They're building New York,
but the stately skyscrapers
must wear foxy cloud toupees.

Far below them
in makeshift alleys and meandering streets
poverty is stretched through time:
another Malaysia works
and lives, tourist-free,
where once white walls
wear black fungus curtains,
tassels dripping down,
squat on the rain-drenched ground.

Dignity and Indignity
1994, in a still impoverished China
I stood on a large, blank concrete square
where hundreds of would-be passengers crouched,
the only *laowai* white face there
– all would-be traveller refugees
when China's Communism meant power
for every petty official to gloat and seize:
the ticket seller decided when she would bother
to swap your money for a seat on a train
or when she would *mei you* you away;

so my Mandarin-speaking son and Chinese friend
set off for tickets to Hangzhou, however constrained,
while English-speaking I was left with bags to defend
in that brittle, early morning light

when up he came, inky-outlined, as relentlessly
as Hamlet's father's ghost. Broad-chested,

almost as wide as he was tall,
a strange cloak draped across his forceful breast
and with the long, white flowing stream
of beard he looked like he had stolen
from an ancient Chinese scroll, with
an implied calligraphy of bold birthright.
The people parted for him like the sea.

His eyes never left me as he stepped forward;
in his right hand he held a staff as thick
as a tree trunk, not to lean on but just to hold:
I thought him a Chinese Moses, but quickly
shifted my Western bias, and thought of Confucius
although he looked more warrior than thinker.
I stared back, my eyes as fixed as his.
I didn't need to look to sense
that the whole square watched
as he came up and up towards me, shoulders squared:

I decided to play the dumb, determined foreigner
with not a word of Chinese. When he stood,
eyes close to mine, he held out a cupped left hand
as large as insistence, as firm as a fist;
I didn't know what he wanted, or so I bluffed
but he knew me for the fraud I was. He was not
begging but demanding; I was staring and not giving.
From his elbow he rocked his hand like a gymnast
and I still stood, blind-ignorant, until
he banged that staff on the concrete, hard
and banged again, and again. I felt the concrete shake
but I didn't give way. He looked at me
with neither pity nor disappointment but contempt

when he finally backed away, eyes on me,
staff in hand, as if I was watching centuries disappear,
as if the loss was not his but mine,
and perhaps it had to be.

25 Abril, 2024
The kerchunk-squash, kerchunk-squash
of tyres on cobbled streets

is silenced; tourist ubers are diverted
while people march, flags and home-made placards
and casual clothes, up and down Lisbon's
argument of hills, their only weapons
red carnations. Fifty years since
a woman dropped red carnations
into gun barrels
and the soldiers let her. While elsewhere
in Europe right-wing zealots
and immigrant-hating
strong-arm politicians
flaunt their trade: *25 de Abril sempre,*
fascismo nunca mais,
La Revolución de los Claveles –
the old who remember the dictatorship of guns
and the young who have never known it,
the Portuguese march with democratic fervour.

Dennis Haskell is an Australian poet, critic, Emeritus Professor of English and Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. He is the author of ten poetry collections, most recently *Who Would Know?* (2024), as well as fourteen volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. A former co-editor of *Westerly*, he has received the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry, the A. A. Phillips Prize and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from UWA. In 2015, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for his services to literature, education and intercultural understanding.
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Cristiana Tonon

The Search for New Stories to Live By: Econarrative and Ethical Leadership

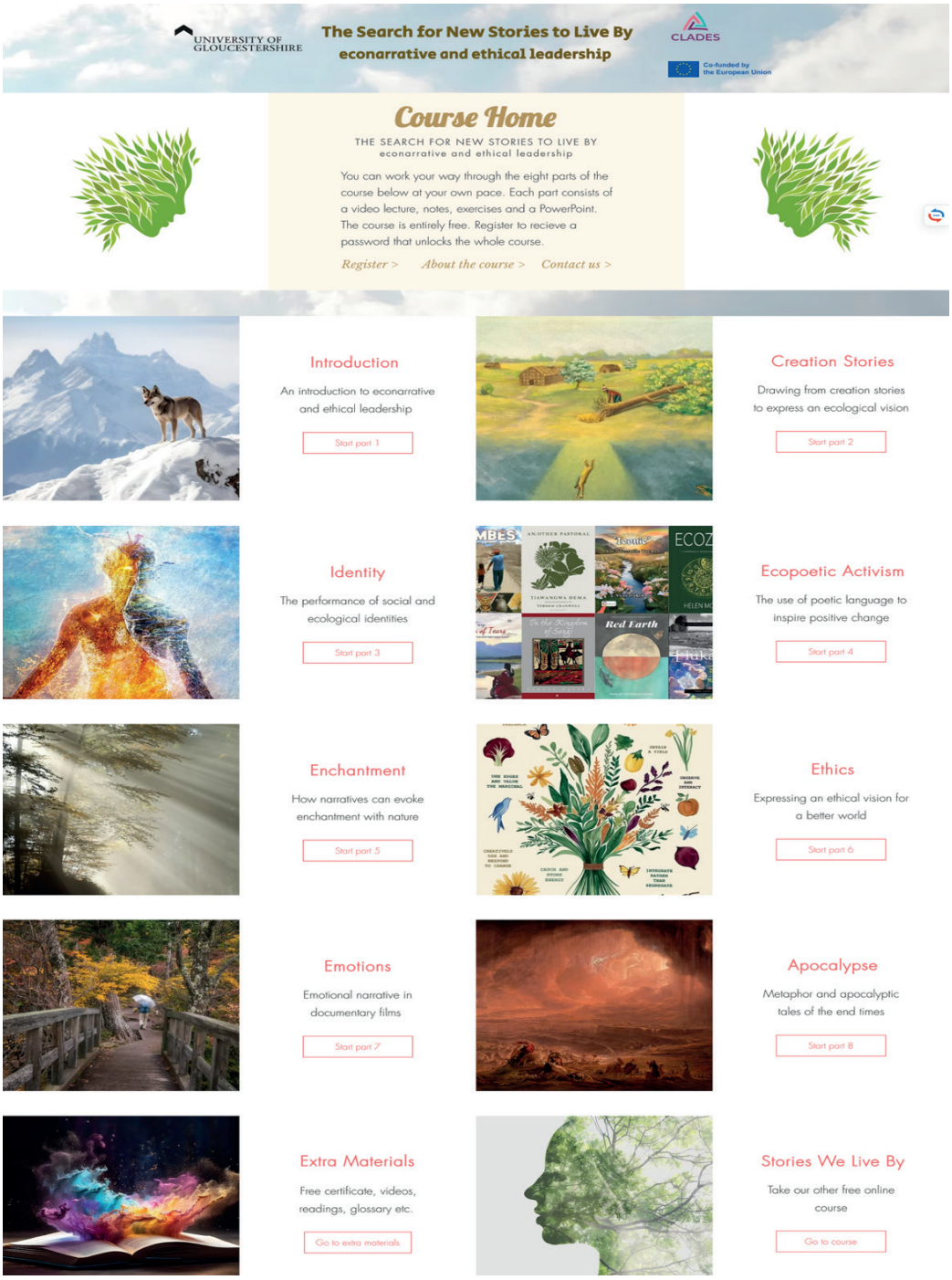

Figure 1. The course homepage at https://www.storiescourse.org/new (consulted on 22/07/2026).

What if the future of our societies depends on the stories we choose to live by? This question lies at the heart of the free online self-study course *The Search for New Stories to Live By. Econarrative and Ethical Leadership*, planned, created and coordinated by Arran Stibbe, Professor of Narrative Ecology at the University of Gloucestershire (UK), and based on his book *Econarrative: Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New Narratives to Live By* (2024). To develop the course, Stibbe worked with a team of colleagues from the University of Gloucestershire (UK) and other international institutions as part of the CLADES (Critical Language Awareness, Democratic Engagement and Sustainability) project, funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme[1]. The course has also been adopted by the United Nations as part of its SDG:Learn programme[2] and follows on from the first free online course *The Stories We Live By*[3], based on Stibbe's book *Ecolinguistics. Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By* (2021).

In the first course *The Stories We Live By*, Stibbe explains that we live in societies based on stories, but some of the stories underlying contemporary highly industrialised and consumerist cultures perpetuate destructive beliefs for the earth and its communities, such as the belief in unlimited economic growth within a world of planetary boundaries, excessive consumerism that drives the exploitation of entire ecosystems, and human exceptionalism, which feeds a false illusion of ethical superiority and separation of humans from the rest of nature when in fact we are part of nature. These beliefs are constructed and conveyed through the language we speak, read, see, and hear as we live in and by our linguistic constructions of reality. Yet we rarely notice them, unless we promote critical awareness of how linguistic and multimodal meanings influence our perceptions of reality and are intertwined with ideologies, cultures, and power. If the first course is especially relevant to investigate the hegemonic stories we live by in consumerist and extractivist societies, in the second course *The Search for New Stories to Live By. Econarrative and ethical leadership,* Stibbe demonstrates that change and the construction of ecocivilisations founded on equity and socio-environmental and epistemic justice can only occur by finding and telling new stories to live by, that is, stories that imagine a fundamentally different society and practical steps to realising it. On this premise, the course analyses the language of a wide range of econarratives, namely narratives that involve "not only humans but also other species and the physical environment in interaction with each other" (Stibbe 2024: 6) to inspire meaningful change, guide us towards ethical leadership, and challenge our hypocognition, that is, the lack of "a cognitive or linguistic representation of a concept" (Wu & Dunning 2018: 25) that leads to a lack of realities we can conceive of. The course offers a constellation of non-anthropocentric, counter-hegemonic, decolonised, and culturally diverse econarratives, ranging from children's tales to documentaries, films, political speeches, books, poems, advertisements, economic texts, stories of Indigenous communities, Japanese poetry, and the speeches of leaders who embrace an ethical leadership grounded on ecological visions. This breadth makes the course relevant not only to those with literary or linguistic interests, but

[1] Project 2024-1-NL01-KA220-HED-000249129.

[2] See UN SDG:Learn (n.d.).

[3] See Stibbe (n.d). *The Stories We Live By*.

to anyone curious about how our world is fundamentally a *storied* world at all levels, where stories are found not just in literary works, but in the economic systems that structure a society, the objects we create and use, or the relationships between people and other beings. Stories shape and underlie every aspect of our reality for we are storytelling animals[4].

Three of the most significant, innovative, and empowering aspects developed in the course are the concepts of leadership, its ethical orientation, and the active search for and analysis of new stories to live by that can inspire people to build a society based on ecological values. In Stibbe's course, leadership becomes empowering and inspiring for it is not limited to individuals with broad social, political, or cultural influence. Instead, ethical leadership is woven into everyday life, where each of us can exercise it, whether through the personal choices we make, the examples we set in our families, or the roles we have in our communities. Moreover, the ethical orientation of the course demonstrates how language and stories model the ethical compass of a society, and tapping into this values-shaping force is key to building societies grounded in an ecological vision of reality that recognises ecosystems as the very foundation of life. The course stresses the importance of language in shaping the ecosophy of an individual or groups of people, that is, "a values system, grounded in evidence, which takes into consideration not only humans but other species and the physical environment" (Stibbe 2024: 19). The course is therefore suitable for anyone concerned about the future of societies in an era marked by interconnected socio-ecological crises and for people who are interested in understanding, learning, and/or teaching how change can happen through the stories we tell, including company employees, NGO workers, students and teachers. At the end of the course, it is also possible to request a free certificate of completion.

The platform of the course is very user-friendly and intuitive to navigate. The course unfolds through eight parts, each offering videos in English with subtitles in three other languages (Chinese, French, Spanish), exercises, multimodal presentations, readings, and further materials. Together, the eight parts show how stories and language can enact and influence our perceptions of the more-than-human world and how they can be drawn upon to bring about positive changes in society. The eight parts of the course seem to tell a story of their own, which begins with creation stories, that is, those narratives that give meaning, purpose, and sense to the origin of the world, and ends with the futures that await us. In between lie the many facets of our ecoreality, each influenced and constructed by the stories we tell through words, images, sounds, for communication is a multimodal, embodied experience, extending beyond logocentrism as "a property of animate Earth itself" (Abram 2010: 171). In addition to being structured like a story, the course integrates key elements of storytelling, such as narrative flow, aesthetic appeal, and emotional engagement. The combination of images, sounds, and clear and accessible language makes each video and learning material captivating, weaving together scientifically rigorous content with visual and emotional involvement. In this way, the course transforms factual knowledge into an engaging learning experience. The eight parts of the story-course are:

[4] See Gottschall (2012).

1. Introduction to Econarrative and Ethical Leadership
2. Creation stories
3. Identity
4. Ecopoetic Activism
5. Enchantment
6. Ethics
7. Emotions
8. Apocalypse

The course begins by introducing the concepts of econarratives and ethical leadership (Part 1) and follows with Part 2 devoted to Creation Stories, that is, stories used by different cultures to explain the origins of the world, humanity, and the universe. Part 2 reminds us that the stories we tell today often originated in a distant past. Just as there are anthropocentric creation stories, there are others in which the entire earthly community comes together to jointly create a world that is the shared home of all species, of every river, sea, ocean, tree, insect, plant. The course then turns to show how the identities we instantiate for ourselves and other beings in the world (Part 3) are deeply linguistic, discursive, storied, and, above all, profoundly consequential for the planet.

In Part 4, the language of poetry, long revered and now often overlooked in hegemonic technocratic societies, returns to wrap the planet in enchantment[5] and magic, demonstrating the pivotal role of language in shaping our perceptions of the lifescape[6] by enlivening or deanimating it. In Part 4, ecopoetry becomes a form of resistance against the language of technocratic rationality and quantification of nature, which reduces the natural world to a set of resources for extractivist models of economy. The course shows that the language of technoscientific and mechanistic rationality is but one of the many human symbolic constructions of reality used to make sense of it and communicate it. Additionally, it is the language of specific cultural worldviews and reality-constructions, which may not be fully inclusive and intelligible to everyone, and may fail to make people aware of the natural world as a life-sustaining system. Part 4, together with other sections of the course, demonstrates the distinctions between linguistic forms that are more "abstract" and rationalised, and others that are more sensorial and embodied, and how these impact on our perceptions of the environment. Part 5 contributes to re-enchanting the natural world by showcasing how econarratives and language can inspire a sense of wonder towards the planet as "those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts" (Carson 1965: 56).

As already mentioned, stories and language also hold a values-shaping force. Part 6 of the course is specifically devoted to how econarratives shape ethics and values, which are essential to foster a leadership capable of guiding individuals and communities towards a hopeful future. The "Emotions" section (Part 7) illustrates how econarratives can shape *how*

[5] For an examination on the connection between language, enchantment, and the more-than-human world, see Russo (2026).

[6] See Bortoluzzi & Zurru (2024).

and *what* our bodies feel by constructing causes and consequences of ecological issues, (re) distributing agency, and imagining the futures we can actively build. Since evoking emotions can work as a call to action, the course demonstrates the power of narratives in eliciting a wide range of ecological emotions, such as ecoanxiety, ecohope, ecoguilt, ecoanger, ecoenchantment, ecowonder, moving us from the 'catastrosphere' towards the sphere of hopeful and active engagement underpinned by new inspiring stories and emotions to live by.

Finally, Part 8 of the course, named "Apocalypse", reminds us of how challenging it is to communicate the planet's future as that future also depends on what we are able to imagine, and imagination itself is shaped by the stories a society tells. The future, in the end, is an open conceptual and narrative dimension onto which we project data, hopes, fears, plans, and predictions based on the information and feelings we hold. Part 8 therefore asks what kind of future we are able to imagine and tell, drawing on apocalyptic imagery that ranges from religious to secular ways of expressing the trajectories of our societies. It also reveals how we use language to communicate those trajectories, especially through metaphors and narratives. The course further demonstrates that we often rely on stories that follow a precise structure, namely the five stages of narrative identified by Todorov: equilibrium, degeneration, recognition, improvement, and restoration. By employing specific linguistic features, future narratives can overcome the paralysing fear sparked by "doom and gloom" stories and instead inspire action towards a new flourishing ecocivilisation.

The eight parts of the course share a common thread: they all offer sustainable ways of conceptualising, communicating, and inhabiting the earth on which the biodiversity of life emerges. They do so with rigorous critical grounding in scientific research across language science, ecology, sociology, economics, cultural studies, and other disciplines. But scientific facts are still stories and need stories to carry them forward, for if one wonders how "a new system comes to replace an entrenched one" (Kimmerer 2024: 97), the course offers its answer: through the search for new and inspiring stories to live by.

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Anna Enrichetta Soccio

The Prince Consort's Raphael Collection: The Cultural Politics of the Victorian Monarchy

Abstract I: Nel 1839, l'anno prima di sposare la regina Vittoria, il principe Alberto di Sassonia-Coburgo-Gota si recò in Italia per completare la sua formazione. Qui, come molti stranieri nel loro Grand Tour, rimase folgorato dall'arte e dall'architettura italiane al punto di conservarne le suggestioni e riprodurle in terra britannica. Questo contributo ripercorre gli interessi del Principe Consorte, dalla personale interpretazione del genio italiano al suo sostegno convinto nei confronti della scienza e della tecnologia, che egli vide coniugate nell'arte della fotografia tanto da dare vita alla cosiddetta *Raphael Collection*, che comprende più di cinquemila stampe e fotografie di opere di Raffaello o a lui attribuite o dei suoi epigoni, una collezione che costituisce un patrimonio culturale inestimabile in termini di risultati artistici, storici e pedagogici, il cui valore deve essere ancora tutto raccontato.

Abstract II: In 1839, the year before his marriage to Queen Victoria, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha travelled to Italy to complete his education. Like many foreign visitors undertaking the Grand Tour, he was deeply impressed by Italian art and architecture, whose influence he retained and later translated into the British context. This article traces the Prince Consort's interests, from his personal interpretation of Italian artistic genius to his firm support for science and technology, which he saw brought together in the art of photography. These interests culminated in the creation of the so-called Raphael Collection, comprising more than five thousand prints and photographs of works by Raphael, attributed to him, or produced by his followers. The collection represents an invaluable cultural heritage in artistic, historical and pedagogical terms, whose significance has yet to be fully explored.

Keywords: Prince Albert, Raphael Collection, Italy, Art, Photography.

Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in February 1840 when she was 20 years old and had been on the throne for less than three years. Despite the fact that she was so young and had only been reigning over the country for a short period, Victoria had already demonstrated that she was a strong sovereign and thanks to Lord Melbourne's and her uncle Leopold I of Belgium's political experience, she led the monarchy into a new phase. The Queen's political authority was supported by an iconography that redefined its

terms. Such an iconography was not separated from Victoria's cultural authority that entailed inevitable modernisation based on the notions of scientific and technological progress and on the general improvement of English society. The choice of Prince Albert, a first cousin and the younger son of the ruler of one of the many German principalities, as consort to the most coveted sovereign among the European courts, indicated a radical change in the image and lifestyle of the royal family, characterised by a sense of respectability, morality and cultural guidance of the country.

Albert was a few months younger than Victoria and in 1840 he had finished his private education, which mainly consisted of studying Latin and history and he had also completed his university studies in Bonn, where he had taken courses in law, politics, philosophy, botany and history of art (Wilson 2019: 60-61). He was introduced to the history of art by Johann Wilhelm Eduard d'Alton[1], who played an important role in the preparation of the journey to Italy that the Prince was about to undertake as the final part of his education. Albert's Grand Tour was, as Andrew N. Wilson wrote, "part of the preparation for Albert's English life" (2019: 62), a real test for his future life as Queen Victoria's consort. The Prince, accompanied by Baron Stockmar[2], arrived in Munich in December 1838 and then travelled to Verona, Pisa and finally Florence, where he stayed from January to March 1839. The Prince stayed in Florence with the Marquises Gerini[3] and became acquainted with European nobility. However, he maintained the strict lifestyle he was used to: he woke up at six, had a light breakfast, then had Italian lessons, piano or organ practice, composition and singing lessons, he went for walks around the city and visited museums or artists' workshops. In *The Early Years of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort*, which Victoria commissioned immediately after the death of her husband and that she herself helped write[4], the Queen recalls that Albert was a great admirer of Florentine architecture: "He was a great admirer of the buildings in Florence, and among these there was none he admired more than Palazzo Pitti, which he especially mentions for the beauty of the external architecture and the magnificence of the apartments" (Grey 1867: 164). Nonetheless, a letter preserved in the Royal Archives contains the young Prince's unusual reaction to the masterpieces that he admired at the Uffizi and Pitti Palace:

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[1] After living in Italy for many years, d'Alton (1772-1840) was a professor of history of art in Bonn, although he was best known as a naturalist and archaeologist. One of his students, in addition to Prince Albert, was young Marx.

[2] Christian Friedrich Freiherr, baron von Stockmar (1787-1863), secret advisor, one of the dominant figures during Victoria's reign, who devised many of the political strategies in Europe, cf. Sotnick (2008).

[3] Andrew N. Wilson made a mistake with the name of the noble family that hosted Prince Albert in 1839 and that later hosted Queen Victoria herself on several occasions from 1888. Wilson speaks of "Casa Cerini" (2019: 71) because he probably followed the example of Charles Grey who, in the memoirs commissioned by Queen Victoria in 1867, wrote "Casa Cerini" when he included a letter from Albert: "We are now established in the Casa Cerini, which is very well situated. We have very airy and pretty rooms, still furnished in the style of Louis XIV" (Grey 1867: 163). Weintraub also speaks of "Marquis Cerini" (1997: 67). This, however, is the Gerini family, whose origins go back to the 14th century and which was active in the political and economic life of Renaissance Florence. From the mid-18th century, the Gerini were also patrons of art and promoters of artistic initiatives, as well as being art collectors. See Ingendaay (2013).

[4] The subtitle "*Compiled under the Direction of Her Majesty THE QUEEN*" not only indicates the Queen's desire to commemorate her late husband but also anticipates her future aspirations as an author-narrator.

> I can't attain to the state of ecstatic enthusiasm in which so-called connaisseurs envelop themselves as in a mantle in order to hide their real failure to understand the nature of art. I have been clever enough not to let anyone notice my coolness, or even to confess it, otherwise I should be regarded as a frozen Vandal from the ice-bound regions of the North (Royal Archives: RA/VIC/ADDA6/13).

There is disappointment in these words, which are to be interpreted partly as a criticism of those who were described as "connaisseurs" – that is, the pseudo-experts whom Albert, who was a serious scholar of the old masters, never missed a chance to berate – and partly as a search for artistic grandeur that would be able to stimulate not only his senses but also his intellect. In fact, this was his reaction when he saw St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, in late March 1839:

> I have long yearned to look upon something great and uplifting: here I found it, but it oppressed me to depths. Here I found the standard by which men's achievements must be measured. I felt as though I were looking at the Alps from the summit of the Faulhorn, to which they seemed so near that one could stretch out to touch them, and then again, so immense that one could imagine them one with the heavens. So it is here. Everything is in such perfect harmony (Royal Archives: RA/VIC/ADDA6/18).

The majesty of St. Peter's evoked feelings in the Prince that were similar to those he had when he looked at the sublime scenes of the Alps described by the Romantic artists. It was almost a Wordsworthian "spot of time", an epiphany that revealed the connection of man, in terms of his intellect and spirit, to the external world of unfathomable vastness, like the one described by the poet in Book VI of *The Prelude*, after climbing Mont Blanc:

> Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld,
> Or heard, was fitted to our unripe state
> Of *intellect and heart*. With such a book
> Before our eyes, we could not choose but read
> Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain
> And universal reason of mankind,
> The truths of young and old (Wordsworth 1995: 237, ll. 541-547, my italics).

Intellect and heart: a combination that Albert must have had in mind while admiring Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican Rooms, when he first became passionately enthusiastic about this Renaissance painter. Queen Victoria then shared Albert's enthusiasm, to such an extent that on special occasions like birthdays and wedding anniversaries they gave each other artworks, often inspired by Raphael. One example is the small watercolour painting on ivory by Robert Thorburn that the Queen gave her husband in 1847 for his 28th birthday. In the painting, Victoria is represented in a Raphaelesque pose, with little Helena in her arms in the role of the Child Jesus and Prince Alfred at her side in the role of John the Baptist (Figure 1). Victoria expressed her delight with the painting in her diary:

> Thorburn has brought back my miniature, finished & it is beautiful. My likeness seems very good, & he has made additions below and above. In the background are trees, & a deep blue sea, not unlike Osborne. I have got a fine piece of dark blue drapery round me, with a basket of flowers near me. The whole is splendidly coloured, & the drapery most carefully studied [...][5].

The English Royalty's enthusiasm for Raphael's paintings soon gave way to a far more modern enthusiasm for photography, the new technology they even used for taking photographs themselves, and of which they became advocates and patrons. In fact, in the summer of 1842 the daguerreotypist William Constable took photographic portraits of Albert in Brighton (Figure 2), the first photographs of a member of a royal family in the history of photography. A darkroom was soon set up in Windsor Castle and all the couple's children were taught how to take and develop photographs. As patrons of the *Photographic Society of London*, in January 1853[6], Victoria and Albert were present at the first photographic exhibition in the world, which featured the work of 76 photographers from all of Europe[7]. From the early days of photography, British royalty commissioned and collected photographs of themselves, their family, friends and landscapes, since they perceived the documentary and political value of this new means of communication. These photographs were collected in 110 albums, for a total of over 100,000 items that the Royal Collection Trust now preserves.

Prince Albert was an enthusiastic advocate of all forms of science and technology: he was credited with the complex organisation of the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, held in London in 1851, which showed England to the world in its role as a leader on the international stage. Albert also purchased the site of the Great Exhibition and later turned it into an area of museums and colleges that focused on science and technology (the so-called "Albertopolis"). In addition, as Chancellor of Cambridge University, he reformed the university curriculum, introducing the study of the sciences[8]. He was instrumental in providing social housing for the working classes, and he supported many scientific and professional societies. As a pioneer of the private and public use of photography, Albert perceived the power and potential of a technology that made it possible for the royal couple to create an image of themselves as the ideal model of a democratic and imperialistic society. Victoria and Albert presented themselves as an ordinary bourgeois couple who embodied the "bourgeois" values of family and sobriety, considered essential for contributing to the greatness of the country. At the beginning, many photographs were for the family's private use, but very soon they became a political instrument

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[5] *Queen Victoria's Journals*, 17th November 1847, http://www.queenvictoriajournals.org (consulted on 21/05/2026).

[6] *The Exhibition of Recent Specimens of Photography* was organised in 1852 by the Society of Arts. It was the first photographic exhibition in the world and led to the foundation of the Photographic Society. Due to its success, the exhibition remained open till the end of January 1853.

[7] One of these photographers was Roger Fenton (1819-1869), the Society's first secretary and one of the court's official photographers. Albert soon afterwards sent him on a mission to Crimea, so he became the first war photographer.

[8] The subjects on the curriculum included natural sciences, arts, law, medicine and mathematics.

for upholding the monarchy and consolidating public consensus. One example was the *cartes de visite* of members of the royal family, which many ordinary citizens started to collect[9]. This contributed to creating a new relationship with their subjects, through which the royal family played a decisive role in the spread of the photographic press and the development of the visual culture (cf. Plunkett 2003).

The photographs for private use include 44 albums in the category called "Portraits of Royal Children" that cover events concerning the couple's nine children and grandchildren between 1848 and 1899. Some photographs of Prince Arthur (1850-1942) in particular stand out. They were taken by Leonida Caldesi[10] in 1857, with the Prince in poses that clearly remind one of the putti in Raphael's Sistine Madonna (Figure 3). The photographs of the young Prince appear to have been inspired by another photograph, taken by Oscar Gustave Rejlander, which Albert had only purchased a few months beforehand, of two children imitating the putti in Sistine Chapel. The title of the photograph in Latin, "Non Angeli, sed Angli", is a clear pun on the words *angeli*/*angli* and it alludes to a comment attributed to Pope Gregory the Great: when the Pope asked who some children in a slave market in Rome were, he was told they were "angels", and he said: "Angelicum habent faciem et tales angelorum in caelis decet esse consortes"[11] (Figure 4).

The domestic context of these photographs was Osborne House, the royal residence built between 1845 and 1851 on the Isle of Wight. Osborne House was designed by Albert himself according to Italian Renaissance models and was built by Thomas Cubitt, who built most of Victorian London's buildings. The residence echoed the architectural and stylistic elements of the majestic Italian villas that faced the sea, like the ones Albert had admired in the Naples area.

As an advocate of photography, Albert perceived the great social value of the "mechanical reproducibility" of works of art. As Walter Benjamin claimed, "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility [...] But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic reproduction, the total function of art is reversed" (1992: 218): not a ceremonial function but a political one; not for the elite but for the masses. Through photography, Albert was able to carry out one of his most ambitious projects, which was to make otherwise inaccessible masterpieces of art available to the masses. The aim was to educate the masses in artistic aesthetics and also direct their response in political terms. This was a social mission that intellectuals like John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold defined more systematically later but that in the meantime became one of the main areas of Albert's work, and he deliberately placed the royal family in the forefront of the history of nineteenth-century cultural progress.

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[9] In 1860, Queen Victoria gave J. E. Mayall (1813-1901) permission to print a series of portraits of herself and the Prince Consort that served as *cartes de visite*.

[10] Leonida Caldesi (1822-1891), an Italian photographer, co-founder of the Caldesi and Montecchi studio in London, author of numerous photographs of the royal family, including some famous ones taken in the Osborne House residence. In May 1858, the photographs were officially part of the *London Photographic Society's* fifth yearly exhibition.

[11] The episode is narrated by the Venerable Bede in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (731), II, 1, pp. 96-97, https://archive.org/details/bedehistoriaecc00bedegoog/page/n4/mode/2up (consulted on 21/03/2026).

The Raphael Collection, consisting of over 5,000 prints and photographs of works of art by Raphael and by artists of his school, was created on these grounds and was destined to become an essential visual asset for the study of this Renaissance artist. The collection, which started in 1853 and was completed in 1876, after the death of the Prince Consort, was an important instrument for the study of the history of art. The choice of Raphael was almost obligatory since the Royal Library already owned numerous drawings by the Italian artist. These drawings were also reproduced and the photographs became part of both the Windsor collection and other European collections. The vast amount of material available, between photographs of works of art that were already owned and those of paintings and frescos in Italy and Europe, was organised in a single sequence according to the cataloguing criteria established by Adam Bartsch in his ground-breaking study *Le Peintre Graveur* (1803-1821). Albert and the curators identified 25 categories, including "Portraits of and by Raphael", "Old Testament Subjects", "New Testament Subjects", "Christ and Other Religious Subjects", "Holy Families & Madonna and Child", "Life and Legend of the Virgin Mary", "Saints", "Mythology and Putti", "Allegory", "History and Battles", "Genre", "Vatican Frescoes", "Other Frescoes", "Tapestries", "Architecture", "Sculpture", "Studies". All the photographs were placed on large sheets of paper in a total of 49 portfolios and stored in a special cabinet in the Print Room in Windsor Castle. For each category, the material was divided according to whether the works of art were signed by Raphael or attributed to him and whether the photographs reproduced prints, paintings or frescoes. All the items were catalogued chronologically, so Raphael's works can be traced from the first draft to their completion, followed by more recent works of art inspired by Raphael's art.

The first catalogue in the collection was published in 1876 by Carl Ruland[12], the royal librarian, who also explained how it began and how it developed. There is an example, "Three Cardinal Virtues: Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance [from *The Jurisprudence Wall*]", in "Portfolio 27" of the subcategory "Vatican Frescoes" (Figure 5). It is the photograph of a lunette painted on a window of the Room of the Segnatura in the Vatican, made with a "carbon printing" process that the English chemist Joseph Swan had just finished perfecting at the beginning of the 1860s. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, "Photography gives an account of the state of the world when we are absent" (2006: 94, my translation): in this case, the absence of the viewer from the location of the work of art is clearly compensated by an image reproduced technically. The photograph is for educational and cultural purposes and, at the same time, contributes to the preservation of the work of art and establishes the latter within a process of democratic participation.

If one considers the thousands of photographs that reproduce the details of Raphael's frescoes, his paintings, studies and cartoons, and the works of artists of his school and of those who, in the following generations, recreated his style and subjects, one can appreciate the enormity of the work. This was the project of a modern monarchy that was engaging with

[12] Carl Ruland (1834-1907) was in the service of Prince Albert from January 1860 and succeeded Ernest Becker (1826-1888). After the Prince's death, Ruland returned to Germany, where he became the director of the Ducal Museum and of the State Museum in Weimar but he continued to be in charge of the Raphael Collection until 1876.

a country which, within a few decades, had become increasingly and irreversibly technological. Prince Albert was behind this change, since he was convinced that the monarchy had to promote the wellbeing of the workers according to a widespread practical idea. He also intended to promote the cultural growth of all social classes by giving them the chance to have a broader education and to be able to appreciate works of art. The early death of the Prince in 1861, when he was only 42 years old, represented a great loss for the project, but it did not stop the enthusiasm for it and its momentum. Proof of this was the work in the following years involving collecting and cataloguing and, more recently, the vast digitalisation project carried out by the Royal Archives. Thanks to this latest development, it is now possible to go online and consult not only Victoria and Albert's letters, memorandums, private and public writings, but also the English Royal art collections, including the Raphael Collection.



Figure 1. Robert Thorburn, *Queen Victoria with Prince Alfred and Princess Helena*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

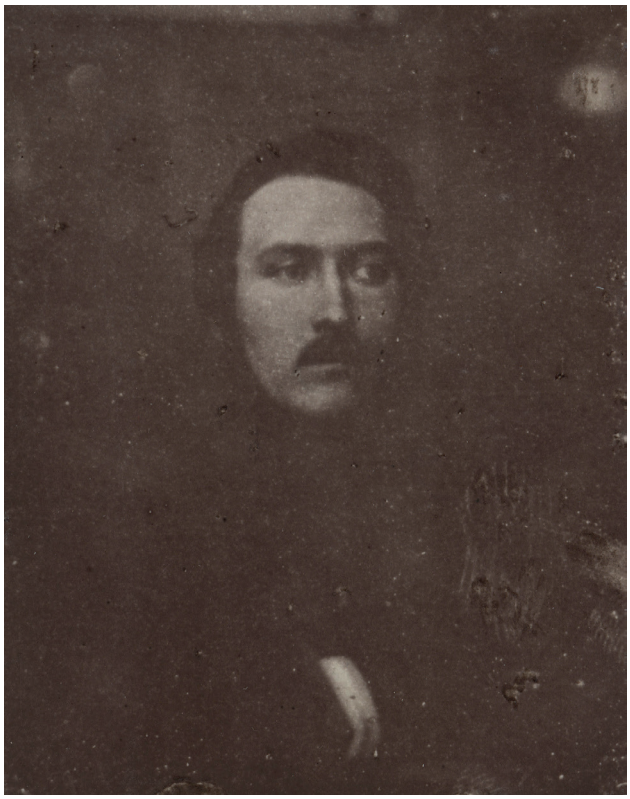

Figure 2. William Constable, *Prince Albert*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 3. Leonida Caldesi, *Prince Arthur, later Duke of Connaught*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 4. Oscar Gustave Rejlander, *Non Angeli, sed Angli*, © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.



Figure 5. After Raphael, *Three Cardinal Virtues: Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance* [from "The Jurisprudence Wall"], © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

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"A third of mine own life": A Note on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Four Ages of Man

Abstract I: Un verso della *Tempesta* di Shakespeare si è rivelato notevolmente problematico sia per coloro che hanno lavorato all'edizione del testo sia per la critica in generale. Il quarto atto si apre con le parole che Prospero rivolge a Ferdinando: "If I have too austerely punished you, / Your compensation makes amends, for I / Have given you here a third of mine own life – / Or that for which I live – who once again / I tender to thy hand" (4.1.1-5). Sebbene questi versi siano stati oggetto di dibattito accademico dal XVIII secolo a oggi, il significato preciso dell'affermazione di Prospero rimane sostanzialmente oscuro. Attraverso l'analisi di alcuni analoghi contemporanei, in particolare una poesia contenuta in *A Margarite of America* di Thomas Lodge, queste pagine intendono fornire nuovi elementi per la comprensione di questi versi: la chiave del loro significato si rivela infatti nel riferimento implicito al comune *topos* delle quattro età dell'uomo.

Abstract II: A line in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has proved significantly problematic for editors and critics alike. The fourth act opens with Prospero telling Ferdinand, "If I have too austerely punished you, / Your compensation makes amends, for I / Have given you here a third of mine own life – / Or that for which I live – who once again / I tender to thy hand" (4.1.1-5). Although these lines have been the subject of scholarly debate from the eighteenth century to the present day, the precise meaning of Prospero's statement remains elusive. Through an analysis of contemporary analogues, most notably a poem in Thomas Lodge's *A Margarite of America*, this paper sheds new light on these lines, arguing that the key to their meaning lies in their implicit reference to the common trope of the four ages of man.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Four ages of man, Editing, Shakespeare Criticism.

Notwithstanding its apparently uncomplicated plot and its elegantly symmetrical structure, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a highly compelling example of a play presenting a vibrant, almost overwhelming world of concrete objects and interconnected events. On this barren island every detail matters. Scraps of conversation, casual remarks, gestures, and references to food, items of clothing, or even fuel provide a semantic accumulation of words that allows

for an exploration of themes as weighty as freedom, slavery, love, and mercy. These details are, for the most part, clearly detectable; the text of this play, in fact, offers comparatively few problems of substance. Set from a transcript prepared by Ralph Crane – a professional scrivener who maintained a close relationship with the King's Men – the 1623 Folio text of *The Tempest* is generally considered to be relatively free from real cruces, that is, corrupt or ambiguous passages[1].

The precise meaning of certain phrases in the play, however, has sometimes been considered obscure and has engendered considerable discussion among scholars. One passage in particular has proved significantly problematic for editors and critics alike. It is found at the opening of Act 4, where Prospero tells Ferdinand: "If I have too austerely punished you, / Your compensation makes amends, for I / Have given you here a third of mine own life – / Or that for which I live – who once again / I tender to thy hand" (4.1.1-5; Loughnane 2024). Given that it would be typical for a parent to speak about their child as "half" of their life, this line has puzzled editors for centuries. The precise implication of Prospero's assertion remains a subject of critical debate. Lewis Theobald (1733, vol. 1: 50) appears not to have been able to make sense of it and emended "third" to "thread"; most subsequent editors, from Edward Capell (1767-1768, vol. 1, part 2: 56) to Rory Loughnane, have retained "third" (the Folio reading), explaining it in a variety of ways: as a reference to his personal life, his lost dukedom, or his deceased wife (cf. Furness 1964: 187-189; Loughnane 2024: sc. 8). Alternatively, Stephen Orgel (1987: 170) has suggested that the term "a third" is not a literal fraction but simply denotes a portion of paramount significance – a usage supported by Prospero's subsequent declaration that "every third thought shall be my grave" (5.1.311). Can any of these hypotheses be corroborated by concrete evidence?

One may well understand why philologists and critics seem perplexed by this passage. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, human existence is famously compared to a play divided into seven distinct acts. Life's journey begins with the helpless infant, transitions into the whining schoolboy and shifts into the dramatic lover. As individuals mature, they take on the roles of the hot-headed soldier and the wise, prosperous justice. Finally, life winds down into the lean and slippered pantaloon before ending in "second childishness" – the sad state of oblivion, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.138-165). This division is well attested in classical and medieval traditions, rooted in Greek philosophy and medicine. Solon originally outlined the human life cycle in ten septenary blocks, and Hippocrates formally divided life into seven specific stages measured by these seven-year periods. Later, St. Augustine described the history of the world as divided into seven ages, corresponding to the seven days of creation. A widely used Renaissance school text, Pier Angelo Manzolli's *Zodiacus Vitae*, published under the name Palingenius and translated by Barnabe Googe as *The Zodiake of Life*, explicitly enumerates these stages of human life alongside astrological influences (cf. Manzolli 1565; Burrow 1988; Archambault 1966; Brissenden 1994; McPherson 1994).

Should we regard "third" as a typographical error, then? One may want to recall what

[1] Cf. Lindley (2013: 102-104, 237-268) on Crane, Wilson (1926: 194-215), Ioppolo (2008: 131-135), and Werstine (2013: 168-172). On Crane's non-dramatic manuscripts, see Bowles (2020: 287-312).

the prominent bibliographer and philologist R. B. McKerrow – author of the *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare* – asserted during his memorable Sandars Lectures of 1928:

> emendation is a risky business and […] in most cases it is best to let well, or even moderately well, alone. We are all of course far less given to reckless emendation of early texts than critics were a century ago, but I cannot help feeling that we still at times expect from writers of the Shakespearian period a standard of correctness in grammar, of clarity of thought and precision in statement that we certainly do not always find in the writers of our own day. There is, I think, no evidence whatever to justify us in any such expectation, and we must always before assuming that a text is erroneous do our utmost to interpret it as it stands (2000: 13)[2].

McKerrow's remark suggests that one should sift every scrap of evidence to try to understand the possible meaning of the text as it stands. When good sense and *divinatio* alike fail, however, one should try to find more analogues or witnesses for a chosen variant, turning to the evidence of contemporary texts.

In fact, the key to the meaning of this passage in *The Tempest* may lie in its implicit references to the common trope of the *four* ages of man – a tradition just as ubiquitous as the seven divisions from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages[3]. This division is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, specifically in the lengthy philosophical discourse of Pythagoras in Book XV (ll. 199-227), as well as in Isidore of Seville's *De natura rerum* (chap. 11) and his *Etymologiae* (Book XI, chap. 2, where *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *juventus*, and *senectus* are linked to specific humours, seasons, and elements) – works that deeply influenced medieval medicine and pedagogy. Similarly, the four stages of life are portrayed in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593; repr. 1602, 1603, and 1611), which provides emblematic descriptions of youth, adolescence, maturity, and old age, explicitly tied to humoral theory and moral qualities (cf. Miller 2015; Sears 1986: chaps. 1, 5).

While the traditions mentioned above do not appear to formulate the four ages in entirely identical ways, it is worth noting that the four ages of man are also mentioned in a text Shakespeare might well have known. In *A Margarite of America*, Thomas Lodge – the author whose *Rosalynde* inspired the plot of *As You Like It*, which itself contains the famous monologue on the cyclical nature of life and time – describes a chamber with a bed decorated with images of the four ages of man, each associated with a different humour and season. Here, the prose gives way to several lines of poetry – admittedly not of the loftier kind – that conclude with a rather predictable moralising lesson:

> O wretched man with many torments mangled,
> Since neither childe, nor youth, nor staid, nor aged,
> The stormes of wretched life may be asswaged.

[2] Interestingly, these topics were also central to McKerrow's *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare* (1939).

[3] The vitality of this *topos* is still evident in modern literature; cf., e.g., Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), a satirical reworking that structures cultural history as a progression through stages analogous to youthful beginnings, vigorous adulthood, mature refinement and senescent decline; cf. also Macpherson (1962).

> And with the Egyptian midst thy delicates
> Present the shape of death in euery member,
> To make thee know the name of all estates:
> And midst thy pompe thy nying graue remember,
> Which if thou dost, thy pride shall be repressed
> Since none before he dies is perfect blessed (Lodge 1596: sig. B3r-v)[4].

These contemporary analogues, one may object, still do not explain Prospero's lines ("I / Have given you here a third of mine own life – / Or that for which I live – who once again / I tender to thy hand"). Why a third and not a fourth?

Once the link with the partition into four ages is established, the solution is rather simple. As the first act indicates, Miranda must be about fourteen or fifteen years old (cf. 1.2.40), and Prospero is not yet an old man, but *senectus*, with its "grave" thoughts (5.1.311), is about to come. His maturity – the third stage within a four-age model and, in fact, a *third* of the life he has lived *so far* (having lived through youth, adolescence, and maturity) – has been entirely dedicated to Miranda. Her lifespan has heretofore encompassed a third of his existence: she represents, appropriately, a third of Prospero's life.

The example provided by Lodge's *A Margarite of America* certainly contributes to validating the original reading in F, "third", by evidencing its use in a contemporary volume by an author who was known to Shakespeare. At the same time, it allows editors to avoid resorting to conjecture – a procedure that, as they know all too well, can sometimes be dangerous, if not disastrous. The case discussed so far, in fact, offers a good occasion for one final note on editorial methodology: going to great lengths to find contemporary evidence to justify a single, apparently minute variant does not equate to a waste of time. It helps us to change perspective. Of course, as W. H. Auden famously wrote, "the words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (1945: 49), but – *pace* post-structuralism and the "death of the author" – we do not necessarily want to project our own time and beliefs onto such words[5]. On two separate occasions, C. S. Lewis described what he believed was the right attitude towards understanding a literary work:

> The poet is not a man who asks me to look at him; he is a man who says 'look at that' and points; the more I follow the pointing of his finger the less I can possibly see of him […] To see things as the poet sees them, I must share his consciousness and not attend to it; I must look where he looks and not turn round to face him; I must make of him not a spectacle but a pair of spectacles (Lewis & Tillyard 1965: 11-12).

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[4] On this work, see Beecher & Janzen (2005), Vitkus (2011: 99-112). The four ages of the world may also have been in Shakespeare's mind at the time. Intriguingly, *The Tempest* and the first three of Thomas Heywood's "blockbuster" *Ages* plays (*Golden Age, Silver Age, Brazen Age* and the two-part *Iron Age*) were composed and staged around the same time as *The Tempest*, and the last *Ages* plays were jointly produced by the Queen Anne's Men and the King's Men; cf. Munro (2020: 128-129) and Arrell (2022: 127-142).

[5] On the "death of the author", see Barthes (1977: 142-148), Foucault (1977: 113-138), Bennett (2005). See also McKerrow's *caveat*, discussed above, regarding what we expect from "the writers of our own day" (2000: 13).

> You must, so far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an eighteenth-century Londoner while reading Johnson. Only thus will you be able to judge the work 'in the same spirit that its author writ' and to avoid chimerical criticism (1967: 64).

The case of this short passage from *The Tempest* is exemplary in this respect. As seen above, it is by exploring some of its contemporary analogues and their ideologies that one can examine the textual evidence and decide that no emendation is needed. The task of the textual editor requires that we sometimes look with different eyes at the text we are working on. By doing so, we will also get a glimpse of a vaster horizon. Editing requires, first of all, looking as far as possible at all the interconnected details in a text – taking into account its complexity and doing what we can to consider the full extent of the meanings engendered by such intricacy. This method is, no doubt, an effective way not only to edit but also to appreciate, and help others appreciate, a literary work.

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Love in Translation: Persian Poetry and the Romantic Revolt against Reason

Abstract I: Il saggio esplora l'intersezione tra la poesia persiana classica, il misticismo sufi e il Romanticismo inglese, esaminando i processi di traduzione e mediazione che resero tali tradizioni accessibili alla cultura britannica. Attraverso l'analisi dell'orientalismo di Sir William Jones e Isaac D'Israeli, il saggio prende *Layla e Majnun* di Nezami come caso di studio per indagare i tropi dell'amore assoluto, della follia e dell'annullamento dell'io ("*fanā'*"). Distinguendo metodologicamente tra ricezione documentata e affinità concettuali, l'analisi delle poetiche di Shelley e Keats mostra come il principio del *fanā'* sia messo in relazione con l'estetica occidentale secolare. Il lavoro offre così un paradigma interpretativo per riesaminare le formulazioni romantiche dell'identità poetica, della trascendenza del sé e della "*negative capability*".

Abstract II: This paper explores the intersection between classical Persian poetry, Sufi mysticism, and English Romanticism, examining the processes of translation and mediation that made these traditions accessible to British culture. Through an analysis of the Orientalist scholarship of Sir William Jones and Isaac D'Israeli, the study adopts Nezami's *Layla and Majnun* as a case study to investigate the tropes of absolute love, madness, and ego-annihilation ("*fanā'*"). By making a methodological distinction between documented reception and conceptual affinities, the analysis of Shelley's and Keats's poetics shows how the principle of *fanā'* can be read in relation to secular Western aesthetics. The paper thus offers an interpretive paradigm for re-examining Romantic formulations of poetic identity, self-transcendence, and "negative capability".

Keywords: British Romanticism, Sufism, Persian poetry, self-annihilation, negative capability.

> It is to the East that we must look
> for supreme ideals of Romanticism
> (Schlegel 1968: 81).

The Romantic fascination with the Orient has long been examined through a range of critical perspectives, among which Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains one of the most

influential touchstones in postcolonial studies. Said's framework brought crucial attention to the asymmetries of power embedded in Western representations of Eastern cultures and to their entanglement with imperial discourse. Over the past four decades, however, a substantial body of scholarship – represented, *inter alia*, by critics such as Lisa Lowe (1991), Nigel Leask (1992), Mohammed Sharafuddin (1994), Kate Teltscher (1995), Robert Irwin (2006), Daniel Martin Varisco (2005), Urs App (2010), Srinivas Aravamudan (2012), and Humberto Garcia (2012) – has significantly reassessed the historical and theoretical premises of the Saidian model. In particular, these scholars have questioned whether an exclusive focus on colonial domination and subordination can fully account for the historical heterogeneity of Orientalist scholarship, pointing instead to instances of genuine intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual reciprocity. Building upon these critical reassessments, the present study examines the specific mechanisms of transmission, reception, and structural affinity that linked classical Persian verse to English Romanticism. Moving beyond exotic ornamentation or opportunistic literary borrowing, I argue that Persian poetry and the mystical worldview of Sufism provided British writers with essential symbols, formal devices, and conceptual frameworks. Far from serving as mere local colour, these elements offered Romantic poetics a transformative paradigm through which to articulate poetry as a vehicle of spiritual discovery and a means of approaching a quasi-mystical experience of poetic creation.

Persia occupied a distinctive and often ambivalent position within the British Orientalist imagination. Unlike territories subject to direct colonial administration or regions viewed primarily through the lens of immediate military hostility, Persia was not incorporated into the British Empire as a direct colonial possession. Instead, as scholars of Romantic Orientalism and British imperial history have noted (e.g. Sharafuddin 1994; Aravamudan 2012; Garcia 2012), it occupied an intermediate space: deeply entangled in imperial and geopolitical interests – most notably through the diplomatic manoeuvres of what was called the "Great Game", the Anglo-Russian rivalry over British India. Nevertheless, Persia retained its nominal political sovereignty and cultural prestige[1].

This geopolitical position generated a complex duality in British attitudes. On the ground, British diplomats, military officers, and travellers – such as Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833) and Sir Gore Ouseley (1770-1844) – frequently evaluated contemporary Qajar society through a pragmatic, administrative lens. Influenced by Europe's rapid industrialisation and perceived monopoly on empirical science, these observers often diagnosed Qajar Persia through secularised metrics of modern progress, attributing what they perceived to be its shortcomings to autocratic governance rather than inherent cultural or racial deficiency. Concurrently, however, British literary culture approached Persia through the prism of its ancient civilisation, recognising it as the heir to a philosophical and poetic tradition fully comparable to the classical heritages of Greece and Rome. This combination of imperial entanglement and continued political autonomy complicates any straightforward identification of Orientalist discourse with direct colonial domination (Ingram 1992; Amanat 2002). While British representations remained shaped by Western perspectives and asymmetrical

[1] For comprehensive analyses of British diplomatic, geopolitical, and military engagements with Qajar Persia within the context of the Great Game and the defence of British India, see Ingram (1992) and Amanat (2002).

power relations, Persia's unique civilisational status allowed its poetic tradition to offer Romantic writers a framework for genuine aesthetic and spiritual engagement.

Indeed, this recognition of Persia's elevated civilisation fostered an intense wave of "Persophilia" across European intellectual culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Dabashi 2015: 12-45). Within this atmosphere, Western thinkers held ancient Persian history and classical literature in the highest esteem – an admiration spanning from Montesquieu's satirical deployment of the Persian frame in his *Lettres persanes* (1721), George Lyttelton's *Letters from a Persian in England, to His Friend at Ispahan* (1735), and Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747), to Hegel's monumental declaration in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (2011) that "With this empire we enter for the first time into world history proper" (2011: 304; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001).

It is precisely within this complex field of tension that one can identify some of the most fruitful cultural exchanges between Britain and Persia, particularly in the realm of poetry. Romantic writers discovered in Persian literature forms of imagination, spirituality, and aesthetic expression that resonated deeply with their own concerns. The possibility of such reciprocal encounters found its most influential theoretical expression in Goethe's famous declaration in the *West-östlicher Divan*: "Whoever knows himself and others will recognise this too: Orient and Occident are no longer to be separated" (1981: 121).

1. Romanticism and Sufism

Among the many aspects of Persian culture that attracted European intellectuals during the Romantic period, poetry – deeply infused with Sufi mysticism – occupied a privileged position. Its combination of mystical speculation, lyrical intensity, and philosophical reflection resonated deeply with an age increasingly dissatisfied with Enlightenment rationalism and seeking alternative modes of artistic and spiritual experience. Persian poets such as Hafez, Saʿdi, and Rumi gradually entered the European literary imagination, becoming not merely representatives of an exotic East but authoritative voices in a broader dialogue on poetry, spirituality, and the human condition. For the Romantics, Persia was therefore not merely another region of the "Orient", nor merely a repository of new literary models, but the wellspring of a poetic and philosophical tradition capable of revitalising European literature itself. However, to understand the nature of this Romantic reception, the historical and conceptual relationship between Persian poetry and Sufism requires some clarification[2].

Following the Arab-Islamic conquest of Sasanian Persia (c. 651 AD), Sufism emerged within Islam as an ascetic and mystical movement reacting against the materialism of the early Umayyad caliphate (661-750). Framing the mystic ("*sālik*") as the true possessor of spiritual knowledge, it developed into an inward path centred on the direct, unmediated experience of the Divine. In Persian literary culture, Sufi metaphysics became closely interwoven with classical poetic forms such as the "*ghazal*" (lyric ode) and the "*masnavi*" (rhymed couplet narrative). Through these forms, master poets including Attar, Nezami, Rumi, Jami,

[2] For comprehensive historical and conceptual studies on the development of Sufism within the Islamic tradition and its fundamental role in shaping classical Persian poetic culture, see Schimmel (1975), de Bruijn (1997), and Lewisohn (1999).

and Hafez articulated core mystical doctrines: most notably *fanāʾ* (the annihilation of the earthly ego), "*baqāʾ*" (spiritual subsistence within the Divine), and "*ʿishq*" (transformative, ecstatic love). Within this allegorical system, earthly desire, longing, human romance, and intoxication functioned not merely as earthly experiences but as profound metaphors for spiritual transfiguration and union with the Divine Beloved.

Its appeal to English writers was deeply rooted in striking philosophical and aesthetic affinities. While arising within vastly different historical and religious contexts, both English Romanticism and Persian Sufi poetics emerged as challenges to the dominant intellectual orthodoxies of their respective ages. Just as Sufi thinkers questioned rigid scholasticism in pursuit of an immediate, inward experience of the divine, the Romantics reacted against Neoclassical formal order and Enlightenment rationalism. Crucially, both traditions elevated imagination, intuition, and ecstatic feeling over discursive reason. In both worldviews, verse ceased to be a mere formal exercise, becoming instead the privileged vehicle of visionary experience and spiritual discovery – a medium capable of capturing moments in which individual consciousness transcends ordinary perception to intuit the underlying unity of existence.

2. The Role of Translation

Throughout the history of civilisation, translation has served as one of the principal means of cultural exchange, enabling the circulation of texts, ideas, and aesthetic traditions across linguistic and geographical boundaries. Its mediating role became particularly significant in Britain during the Romantic period, when rapid political, intellectual, and global transformations fostered an unprecedented openness to non-European cultures.

Within this context, the translation of classical Persian poetry played a decisive role in broadening the European intellectual horizon. Far from being a mere linguistic exercise, it introduced new aesthetic models, ethical perspectives, and imaginative forms that reshaped literary sensibility and expanded the imaginative boundaries of European poetry.

This renewed interest in Persia owed much to the work of British Orientalist scholars[3] such as George Sale, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and, above all, Sir William Jones. Their linguistic and philological studies made Persian texts increasingly accessible to English readers and facilitated the circulation of knowledge concerning Persian language[4], history, literature, and culture.

Widely regarded as the founder of Persian studies in the West, Jones (1746-1794) occupies a pivotal place in this intellectual movement. His *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), although described as being of more use to poets than to merchants or imperial administrators, introduced readers not only to the structure of the language but also to the richness of

[3] For comprehensive studies on the emergence of Orientalism as a scholarly and cultural phenomenon, see Arberry (1943), Schwab (1984), Ahmad (1992), Haddad (2002), Irwin (2006), and App (2010).

[4] Retaining its Indo-European structure while adopting the Arabic alphabet and vocabulary, Early New Persian developed into a major transregional *lingua franca* across the early modern Persianate world, serving as a language of administration, diplomacy, and high literary culture across the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal spheres. For the linguistic development of New Persian and its Arabic elements, see Paul (2000) and Perry (2002); for the role of Persian as a transregional lingua franca, see Green (2019).

Persian poetry through numerous translated excerpts and literary quotations. Furthermore, Jones's comparative linguistic work helped situate Persian, alongside Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, within a broader Indo-European framework[5]. This philological reclassification contributed to a growing European recognition of Persian as historically related to classical languages central to European heritage, encouraging new forms of comparative linguistic and literary inquiry and complicating the perception of Persian as an entirely external or unintelligible "Oriental" tongue.

More broadly, Jones was instrumental in directing English attention towards Persian, Arabic, and Indian literary traditions. His influence extended well beyond scholarship: Robert Southey and Thomas Moore drew extensively upon his translations and essays (Majeed 1992: 47-86; 87-122), echoes of his work have been identified across the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Alfred Tennyson (Yohannan 1942), and Lord Byron was thoroughly familiar with several of his writings (Meester 1915; Sharafuddin 1994; Javadi 2005)[6]. Equally important, Jones encouraged the translation of many Oriental works that he himself had been unable to publish, thereby stimulating a sustained interest in Eastern literatures throughout the nineteenth century.

Against this background, Persian poetic forms became increasingly accessible to British readers, largely through translation. Jones's "A Persian Song of Hafiz", published in his *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), offered an influential European demonstration of the *ghazal* – a classical lyric form composed of autonomous couplets, characterised by thematic fluidity and a deliberate ambiguity in which sensual and Sufi mystical meanings coexist. Rather than adhering to Aristotelian narrative linearity, the *ghazal*'s associative, non-sequential architecture offered British readers a poetic model strikingly different from conventional Neoclassical structures[7]. This non-linear design contributed significantly to the growing Romantic interest in Persian verse, offering an imaginative alternative capable – in Thomas Percy's words – of rekindling "our cold European imaginations" (1764: xxxii-xxxiii).

Jones's broader ambition, however, was not simply to introduce British readers to the spiritual dimension of Persian poetry[8], but to demonstrate literary and historical interconnectedness. In his *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* (1772), he repeatedly drew parallels between Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Indian poetry and the principal traditions of European literature, especially Italian poetry. Jones argued that the

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[5] On Jones's identification of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic, and Old Persian as belonging to a common linguistic family, see his "Third Anniversary Discourse" (1788); for its historical significance in the emergence of Indo-European philology and comparative linguistics, see Trautmann (1997).

[6] A six-volume collective edition of Jones's works was published in 1799, followed by two supplementary volumes in 1801 and an official biography by Lord Teignmouth in 1804. His complete writings were later reissued in a thirteen-volume edition in 1807: see Cannon (1979; 1990).

[7] Jones's translation choice of rendering Hafez's metaphor of structured verses as "orient pearls at random strung" (1772: 63) deliberately emphasised spontaneity and "artless ease". This interpretive choice helped align classical Persian lyricism with emerging pre-Romantic and Romantic aesthetic values. For Arberry's classic critique of Jones's translation strategies, see Arberry (1946).

[8] In his influential essay "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus" (2013), Jones examined Sufi symbolism with remarkable philological insight and genuine intellectual empathy.

imagery and poetic conventions of Petrarch's sonnets displayed remarkable affinities with Persian lyric poetry, even suggesting that certain poetic forms may have reached Europe through Arabic cultural mediation. As he asserted, this offered "a proof that the Eastern imagery is not so different from the European as we are apt to imagine" (Jones 1772: 182).

The comparative study of folklore, epic poetry, and mythology that developed in the wake of Jones's works significantly reinforced his integrative vision. Nineteenth-century comparative scholarship – spearheaded by figures such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, Jacob Grimm, and Friedrich Max Müller – increasingly identified striking correspondences among the myths, narrative structures, poetic motifs, and symbolic patterns of diverse civilisations, suggesting that the poetic imagination ultimately transcended national, religious, and linguistic boundaries (Schwab 1984; Marchand 2009)[9].

Such discoveries encouraged the emergence of a genuinely comparative vision of literature that ultimately culminated in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of "*Weltliteratur*". Far from an abstract theoretical construct, Goethe's formulation of world literature emerged directly from his intense engagement with classical Persian poetry – specifically catalysed by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's 1812–1813 landmark translation of Hafez's *Divān*[10]. This intellectual and creative encounter inspired Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), an extraordinary poetic project in which he famously declared that East and West could no longer be separated, embodying *Weltliteratur* as a dynamic space of reciprocal aesthetic dialogue and mutual renewal.

Rather than a mere canon of global masterpieces, *Weltliteratur* was conceived as a dynamic space of cross-cultural resonance. As Jones had anticipated, this idea was grounded in the conviction that literary traditions do not develop in isolation but through continuous dialogue, exchange, and mutual enrichment. Cross-cultural engagement, therefore, was not a form of appropriation, but a process of dialogue through which literatures could renew themselves while preserving their distinct identities – an ambitious attempt to imagine a genuinely reciprocal literary dialogue between East and West, one grounded in mutual recognition and appreciation.

This shift represented more than a simple enlargement of the literary canon. It challenged the idea of Europe as a self-contained cultural system by suggesting that defining features of European literature had emerged through long processes of intercultural transmission. Rather than tracing European literature exclusively to a Greco-Roman genealogy, nineteenth-century comparative scholarship increasingly emphasised the interconnectedness of civilisations and the circulation of literary forms across cultures.

Within this broader perspective, Persia gradually ceased to be perceived merely as

[9] On the nineteenth-century emergence of comparative mythology, philology, and folklore studies, as well as their role in constructing cross-cultural frameworks of human imagination, see Müller (1856), Schwab (1984: 11-32), and Marchand (2009).

[10] Goethe conceptualised this engagement with Hafez as an intellectual "*hijra*" – a deliberate spiritual migration away from the political turmoil and rigid Neoclassical constraints of contemporary Europe towards the poetic sanctuaries of the East. On the decisive impact of Hammer-Purgstall's translation on Goethe's poetics and the genesis of the *West-östlicher Divan*, see Mommsen (2014); for the intrinsic relationship between Goethe's Oriental studies and his formulation of *Weltliteratur*, see Birus (2000) and Albrecht (2005).

a distant or exotic geographical entity. Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the growing availability of Persian texts, translations, and linguistic scholarship contributed to a significant shift in European intellectual culture[11]. Rather than being approached solely through antiquarian, theological, or decorative frameworks, Persian literature increasingly entered comparative literary, philosophical, and aesthetic debates, allowing Persia to be understood as a more substantial historical interlocutor within European thought (Javadi 2005; Dabashi 2015).

3. Layla and Majnun

The introduction of Persian literature into the British Romantic consciousness, as we have seen, was primarily initiated by the pioneering translations and essays of Jones. His landmark translation of Hafez's poetry captivated the English reading public, inspiring a generation of writers to look eastward. While this initial wave of Orientalist scholarship laid the textual foundation across late-eighteenth-century literary culture, it was among the second-generation Romantic poets that Persian forms underwent their most profound aesthetic and philosophical internalisation.

From a methodological perspective, however, the nature of this engagement varies significantly among individual poets. In the cases of Lord Byron and Shelley, engagement with Persian and Orientalist literature is extensively documented through their journals, letters, reading lists, and book orders (Sharafuddin 1994; Javadi 2005)[12]. Byron's familiarity with Persian literature is attested by his readings of Ferdowsi, Sa'di, and Hafez, alongside works by Jones, Stephen Weston, and George Sale. This scholarly foundation complemented his Grand Tour (1809-1811) and directly shaped his "Turkish Tales", such as *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813). Shelley's documented reception is similarly robust: introduced to Jones at Eton, he requested Jones's collected *Works* in 1812, read Isaac D'Israeli's *Mejnoun and Leila* alongside Mary Shelley, and studied Oriental materials throughout his adult life. This documented reception provides a firmer basis for examining possible connections between Persian mystical motifs and poems such as *The Indian Serenade* and *Alastor*. By contrast, in John Keats's case, there is no comparable evidence of direct reading of Persian or Arabic texts, even though his active participation in Leigh Hunt's literary circle and immersion in London's vibrant Romantic print culture ensured his exposure to the era's widespread "Persian poetry fad". Any critical parallel between Keatsian poetics and Sufi concepts must therefore be understood primarily in terms of broader conceptual and structural affinities rather than documented textual influence.

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[11] This shift marked a departure from earlier eighteenth-century and Neoclassical attitudes, which often reduced Persian culture either to static historical models or to ornamental exotica. With the philological and literary advances of the late Enlightenment and Romanticism, Persian texts were no longer kept at a defensive distance as mere Islamic oddities, but were increasingly recognised for their distinct philosophical and aesthetic integrity. On the evolution of Western perceptions of Persian literature from antiquarian curiosity to active cultural engagement, see Javadi (2005: 45-82) and Dabashi (2015: 12-38).

[12] For detailed documentation of Byron's Oriental reading lists – including his Cambridge studies of Weston (1805) and Sale (1734) – see Sharafuddin (1994: 215-220). On Shelley's book orders, his study of Jones's essay "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus", and his reading of D'Israeli (1797) with Mary Shelley, see White (1940: I, 205-212) and Oueijan (2023: 45-58).

Moving far beyond the exoticised local colour of their predecessors, these younger Romantics repurposed the structural mechanics, mystical metaphysics, and psychological archetypes of Persian verse to dismantle Neoclassical rationalism, confront the anxieties of modern Western subjectivity, and ultimately convert the lover's quest for the Divine Beloved into a modern Western odyssey towards Beauty, Imagination, and Art.

As a primary case study, I focus on *Layla and Majnun* by the Persian poet Nezami Ganjavi (1141-1209), widely considered one of the masterpieces of classical Persian literature. The legend itself originated in seventh-century Arabia as a cycle of Bedouin oral anecdotes before being codified in the tenth century by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani in his *Kitab al-Aghani*. In the late twelfth century, Nezami radically transformed these fragmented narrative materials into a unified Persian epic romance, infusing the tragic story of human passion with a profound Sufi allegorical and mystical dimension[13].

The story reached British readers through Isaac D'Israeli's *Mejnoun and Leila* (1797), in which Nezami was celebrated as "one of the sublimest of the Persian poets" (1797: 98). Rather than a literal translation of Nezami's text, D'Israeli's version represents a complex act of cultural mediation and creative adaptation. Drawing partly on Denis-Dominique Cardonne's 1778 French translation and on an illuminated Persian manuscript of Nezami preserved in the library of his friend Francis Douce, D'Israeli also incorporated fragments from other Persian poets, including Jami and Sa'di, alongside classical motifs such as the rose and the nightingale ("*gul u bulbul*") (Ogden 1969; Javadi 2005)[14]. Describing the story as "as popular in the East as the loves of Abelard and Heloïsa, or those of Petrarch and Laura are in the West" (D'Israeli 1797: xxiii) – and explicitly subtitling his work *The Arabian Petrarch and Laura* – D'Israeli provided British Romantics with a crucial textual bridge to Persian mystical romance.

The narrative recounts the tragic love between Kais and Layla, whose union is thwarted by their respective families. Rejected by Layla's parents, Kais gradually descends into madness, earning the epithet *Majnun* – a passive participle denoting one "possessed by *jinn*" and, by extension, driven mad by love (Saccone 2018: 755-756)[15]. Cast out of social order, he wanders through the desert, befriended only by wild animals while composing verses for his absent beloved.

Majnun's desert exile draws directly upon an older Arabic poetic tradition in which desolate landscapes, wandering, ruin-contemplation, and solitary mourning form a foundational imaginative vocabulary. These motifs, central to the pre-Islamic odes later compiled as the *Mo'allaqāt*, were subsequently transformed within Persian mystical romance into an architectural foundation of spiritual self-loss and solitude. Jones's landmark English

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[13] On the historical evolution of the Majnun narrative from early Arabic Bedouin poetry to Nezami's Persian allegorical epic, see Calasso (1983) and Davis (2021).

[14] For detailed textual reconstructions of Isaac D'Israeli's sources – including his reliance on Cardonne (1778), Francis Douce's Persian manuscript, and various excerpts from Jones's translations – see Ogden (1969: 35-48) and Javadi (2005: 85-91).

[15] As Carlo Saccone clarifies, Majnun is doubled in his condition: he is simultaneously possessed by the "spirit" (*jinn*) of absolute love and perceived as afflicted by literal insanity in the eyes of his tribe (2018: 755-756).

translation of the *Mo'allaqāt* (1782) made this rugged, emotionally charged poetic landscape directly accessible to British readers, offering Romantic writers a vivid aesthetic of melancholic isolation[16]. Layla is subsequently forced to marry another man and eventually dies consumed by grief. Upon learning of her death, Majnun succumbs to sorrow beside her tomb, uniting the lovers only beyond earthly existence.

Yet the narrative functions as far more than a tragic romance. In Nezami's hands, human love is elevated into a rigorous spiritual discipline, wherein separation serves as the indispensable condition for transcendent realisation. As framed by late-eighteenth-century mediators such as D'Israeli, the legend offered Romantic readers a powerful model of idealised devotion purified through renunciation – one in which the lover's earthly suffering and physical self-loss become the very means of achieving a higher, spiritualised state of unity. True love is thus measured not by physical possession, but by the lover's willingness to surrender the self – a conception deriving directly from Sufi mysticism. Human love functions as the visible manifestation of a deeper longing for the Divine; separation from the earthly beloved mirrors the soul's exile from God, while the beloved's beauty becomes the earthly reflection of divine Beauty itself. Consequently, the poem operates continuously on two interconnected levels: the earthly human narrative and the transcendent mystical allegory.

Jones clearly recognised this allegorical dimension when he observed that the poem was "avowedly allegorical and mysterious", suggesting that Layla ultimately represents "the omnipresent Spirit of God" (2013: 222). Love here expresses not only the agony of separation from the beloved, but also from the Divine. The lover is filled with an intense longing for reunion with God.

The fusion of love and madness marks the narrative's decisive turning point. Majnun's state of being "distracted with passion" serves as the ultimate proof of the authenticity of his devotion. Thwarted in his romantic suit, he becomes entirely possessed by the interior image of his beloved; at that precise moment, earthly desire ("*ʿishq-i majāzī*") is transfigured into a spiritual vocation ("*ʿishq-i ḥaqīqī*"). Detached from social convention, Majnun consecrates his entire being to the contemplation of the idealised Beloved and to the composition of verse. In Nezami's formulation, Majnun's affliction is not a mere clinical insanity, but an ecstatic alienation from worldly illusion:

> Let me quit a world in which I have ceased to be useful: trust me, I am fitted for a hermitage! I care not for the honour of my friends, and am placable to the insult of an enemy. What is a man, alike incapable of friendship or of enmity? – O, thou desert! thou unshadowy waste! to me pleasant is the abode of thy unrelenting rocks (D'Israeli 1797: 115).

Although Majnun is already a poet before his exile, it is this state of passionate madness that elevates his verse, transforming personal suffering into visionary utterance. Poetic

[16] For Jones's seminal translation of the pre-Islamic odes and his preliminary discourse on Arabian poetry, see Jones (1782). On the reception of the *Mo'allaqāt* in British Romanticism, see Sharafuddin (1994: 42-68) and Attar (2014: 15-38).

creation and madness thus emerge in Nezami's romance as complementary expressions of a single, ecstatic condition: as Majnun proclaims in his wilderness solitude: "I quit the FAME that crowns my polished song, and in a desert, strangling glory's voice, I feel the madness and approve the choice. Yet, scorn me not, nor yield a proud relief, There is a majesty in lonely grief" (D'Israeli 1797: 184).

This intrinsic link between madness, poetic inspiration, and social exile reveals a striking structural alignment with English Romantic poetics. Rather than asserting a direct historical inheritance across all Romantic writers, this parallel illuminates a shared conceptual topology: both Nezami's Sufi-infused allegory and Romantic theories of the imagination perceive poetic genius and mental alienation as dual manifestations of an inner estrangement from a utilitarian world. Only when Majnun is cast out of the social order does he fully realise his dual identity as poet and mystic – establishing the archetype of the solitary, alienated visionary that would find such a powerful resonance in the poetic landscapes of Shelley, Byron, and Keats.

4. The Nightingale and the Rose: Symbol, Reception, and Aesthetic Affinity

Majnun's transformation into the archetypal lover-poet finds its most iconic symbolic expression in the celebrated Persian image of the nightingale ("*bulbul*") and the rose ("*gul*"). Within the Sufi mystical tradition, as elucidated in foundational texts such as Farid al-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (1177), the rose represents the inaccessible beauty, perfection, and splendour of the Divine Beloved, while the nightingale embodies the soul of the lover-mystic consumed by an insatiable longing for union (1984; Bertel's 1965: 42-58)[17]. At the same time, because the nightingale pours forth its continuous lament in praise of the rose, it serves within classical Persian poetics as the primary emblem of the poet. As Isaac D'Israeli observed in his commentary on Nezami, "Kais is indeed a nightingale, and Leila his Rose" (1797: 40).

According to this allegorical tradition, the nightingale presses its breast against a thorn to remain awake throughout the night, singing until it bleeds and faints. The image fuses love, bodily suffering, and poetic creation into a single, indivisible trope. D'Israeli captured this idea when he described the poet as a nightingale whose song grows sweeter in proportion to its agony:

> The more mellifluous his pathetic song, the more his bosom leant on the piercing thorns: ah! he sings but to bleed, he leans but to faint; the nightingale dies on the Rose in aromatic pain […] Believe me, my friends, the poet, the tender poet, is like the rich perfume, which, the more it is crushed, the more deliciously yields its odours (1797: 40).

Historically, this trope proved remarkably durable in its transmission to European literature. First introduced directly into English verse through Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's translations of Ottoman love poetry during her embassy to Constantinople (1716-1718; published 1763), the motif of the rose and the nightingale circulated widely across

[17] For comprehensive critical analyses of the mystical allegory of the *bulbul* and *gul* in classical Persian literature, see Attar (1984; 2003) and Bertel's (1965: 42-58; 2021).

eighteenth-century Orientalist writing before becoming one of the defining figurative devices of British Romanticism (Javadi 2005: 112-125; Oueijan 1996; 1999)[18]. The documented reception of this emblem appears prominently in works explicitly set within Eastern milieus, such as Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817)[19] and Lord Byron's Oriental tales, most notably *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813).

The success of the symbol was hardly accidental. Beyond its documented adoption as a decorative or localising motif, the *bulbul/gul* trope resonated with Romantic aesthetics owing to a profound structural and symbolic affinity. The Persian nightingale coalesced into a core image in the ideals of Romantic poetics: the identification of poetry with intense emotional effusion, the view of artistic creation as inseparable from suffering, and the belief that transcendent beauty requires a form of self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*). In this broader comparative sense, the nightingale functioned not merely as an imported Oriental motif, but as a symbolic mirror for the Romantic re-definition of the poetic vocation itself – a resonance vividly discernible in Samuel T. Coleridge's "The Nightingale" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale".

Like the nightingale, the lover undergoes a form of symbolic death. The culmination of *Layla and Majnun* is therefore not physical demise but self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*), wherein the individual ego must be relinquished before the soul can attain union with the Beloved. Love thus operates as a spiritual discipline through which the self is gradually emptied of its worldly attachments until it is transformed into participation in the divine. Majnun's death beside Layla's tomb does not signify despair but spiritual completion: it fulfils a process of renunciation that had begun long before his earthly life came to an end. Physical death merely seals an inner transfiguration already accomplished through love.

From this perspective, suffering acquires a positive value. The lover's path is marked by separation, longing, and pain, yet these trials become the necessary stages of spiritual ascent. What appears as loss is revealed as ultimate transcendence, for the negation of earthly desire opens the way to a more perfect form of devotion. The extinction of the individual self makes possible union with the Eternal Beloved, who, in Sufi thought, is not a distant deity but a living presence accessible through contemplation, love, and absolute self-surrender.

This philosophical paradigm offers a compelling comparative framework for reading Shelley's poetics. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley famously defines Love as "a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (1840: 17). This conception of radical self-transcendence invites a direct parallel with the Sufi doctrine of *fanāʾ*, insofar as both models demand a movement beyond the isolated, egocentric self towards participation in a higher, universal reality. In both systems, self-renunciation is not viewed as a tragic defeat, but as the essential prerequisite for imaginative and spiritual fulfilment.

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[18] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu included her translation of a Turkish *ghazal* employing the nightingale and rose motif in her *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1994: 76-77). On the historical transmission of this translation and its impact on eighteenth-century English poetry, see Javadi (2005: 112-125).

[19] Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817), a frame narrative centred on a Mughal princess travelling from Delhi to Kashmir, offers a significant example of the wider Romantic fascination with Persian and Oriental themes. Byron explicitly encouraged Moore's project in a letter dated 28 August 1813, famously urging him to "stick to the East" (1974: III, 101).

On a broader comparative level, Nezami's treatment of love as a transformative discipline also invites parallels with medieval European traditions of spiritualised love, most notably Dante Alighieri's representation of Beatrice. In both *Layla and Majnun* and the *Commedia*, human affection exceeds physical possession to become a transformative movement of spiritual ascent, wherein the earthly beloved acts as a crucial mediator between earthly beauty and divine reality. Dante's celebrated line, "Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate" (1966-1967: *Paradiso* XXXI, 85), offers a remarkably concise formulation of this shared dynamic, in which the lover's surrender of earthly desire converts suffering into revelation and leads the soul from worldly bondage towards mystical transcendence.

This shared topology of self-surrender offers a revealing perspective for examining Shelley's engagement with Oriental motifs. In "The Indian Serenade", Shelley transforms what appears to be a conventional love lyric into an intense poetic exploration of self-dissolution that closely mirrors the *gul u bulbul* trope. Access to this Persian imagery was facilitated for Shelley through the foundational translations and scholarly commentaries of Jones and Sir William Ouseley[20]. In the poem's second stanza, the speaker explicitly evokes this classical emblem:

> The nightingale's complaint,
> It dies upon her heart –
> As I must on thine (Shelley 1914: 575, ll. 13-15).

Rather than employing the dying nightingale as a mere ornamental hyperbole, Shelley aligns the speaker with the classical Persian poet-lover, whose unyielding devotion to the Beloved demands absolute self-surrender rather than physical possession. This allegorical foundation dictates the lyric's dramatic climax: echoing the structural dynamics of the classical Persian *ghazal* – where sensory intoxication culminates in the annihilation of the ego – the speaker undergoes a state of total physical collapse, exclaiming: "Oh lift me from the grass! / I die! I faint! I fail!" (Shelley 1914: 575, ll. 17-19). Sensual longing and spiritual *fanāʾ* here converge, rendering physical dissolution the ultimate expression of imaginative and devotional union.

This unconditional yielding mimics spiritual ecstasy, wherein the ego is stripped of self-will to be consumed by sacred passion. While *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* (1816) may be read, in comparative terms, through a broader dialectic between *fanāʾ* (self-annihilation) and *baqāʾ* (spiritual persistence), "The Indian Serenade" distils this imagery into a concise, highly musical drama of emotional abandonment. By imploring to be pressed close to the beloved's heart "where it will break at last" (Shelley 1914: 575, l. 23), the speaker frames erotic longing as a sacrificial rite, aligning emotional dissolution with the surrender of the ego.

In *Alastor*, Shelley's narrative invites a compelling comparison with the symbolic archi-

[20] On Shelley's familiarity with Sir William Ouseley's *Persian Miscellanies* (1795) and the *Oriental Collections* (1797-1800), as well as his adaptation of the Persian "*radif*" and *ghazal* structures, see Javadi (2005: 128-135) and Oueijan (2023: 52-61).

tecture of *Layla and Majnun*, offering a striking parallel for a secularised quest for ideal Beauty. Central to this structural affinity is the representation of the desert landscape, which functions not merely as a setting but as a psychological and spiritual arena for self-annihilation. Just as D'Israeli depicts Mejnoun climbing rugged rocks and treading briny sands until his withered frame inhabits a solitary wilderness (1797: 105-110), Shelley's Poet abandons home to wander through the desolate, "stony jaws" of Arabia, Persia, and Carmania. The Poet's retreat into the wilderness mirrors Majnun's exile, transforming physical solitude into an instrument of spiritual purification wherein the individual ego is systematically extinguished. In both texts, the desolate terrain serves as an ascetic condition, purging the protagonist of earthly attachments and establishing a contemplative isolation from human society.

Furthermore, the Poet's visionary encounter with the "veiled maid" may be read alongside late-eighteenth-century descriptions of Sufi ecstatic practice. In D'Israeli's text, Mejnoun assumes the guise of a wandering dervish, playing the reed-flute ("*ney*") until, overwhelmed by pain and sacred ecstasy, he collapses in a death-like trance (1797: 115-120). Shelley presents a remarkably similar dramatic sequence during the Poet's dream vision (1914: 18-19, ll. 149-191): as the veiled maiden's voice echoes the mournful strains of a musical instrument, the Poet, swept by ecstatic longing, reaches out to merge into her "dissolving arms" (1914: 19, l. 187), falling into a trance that functions as the poetic equivalent of emotional exhaustion and physical self-loss.

Finally, Shelley's conclusion presents a striking thematic and textual convergence with D'Israeli's description of Mejnoun's death. D'Israeli portrays Mejnoun's demise as a quiet, solemn fading – staggering across the desert until his final breath vanishes into the vast silence (1797: 162-165). Shelley evokes an analogous atmosphere in the Poet's final moments, depicting him stepping with fragile feet into a secluded wilderness to surrender his breath without violent struggle (1914: 28-29, ll. 645-671). In both narratives, death emerges as the inevitable culmination of an internal consumption: an erasure of the bodily self, necessitated by the impossibility of sustaining absolute, transcendent union within the material world (Oueijan 2023: 65-78)[21].

5. Art as Religion

The Romantic engagement with *Layla and Majnun* and Persian poetry did not end with its mystical interpretation. While eighteenth-century readers primarily recognised the Sufi narrative of the soul's longing for the Divine, second-generation Romantics reinterpreted the figure of the lover-poet within an increasingly secularised aesthetic framework. In this transformation, the Sufi concept of *fanāʾ* – the annihilation of the ego in the Divine – was transposed from a strictly theological domain into the realm of poetic creation, where artistic experience itself assumed the sacred function of spiritual transcendence.

This conceptual shift was anchored in the eighteenth-century emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline. When Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term "*aesthetica*" in his *Meditationes philosophicae* (1735: §116) and later codified it in his

[21] For comparative analyses exploring the structural and thematic parallels between Shelley's *Alastor* and classical Persian allegorical romances, see Oueijan (2023: 119-122) and Javadi (2005: 135-142).

Aesthetica (1750-1758), his objective was to grant sensible knowledge an independent epistemological dignity alongside rational logic. Defining aesthetics as the science of sensitive cognition ("*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*") and beauty as the perfection of sensible knowledge, Baumgarten achieved a revolutionary breakthrough: sensibility (*"aisthesis"*) ceased to be viewed as a confused step towards rational truth, becoming recognised instead as a legitimate bearer of irreducible insight (1750: §1; Guyer 2014)[22].

Though Baumgarten did not claim that art granted access to the Absolute, his foundational move opened an intellectual space that Immanuel Kant reconfigured in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) by attributing to aesthetic judgment a mediating function between nature and freedom, sensible reality and moral law. The post-Kantian Idealists brought this trajectory to its speculative climax. In his *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling posited the work of art not merely as an object of taste, but as the primary organ of philosophy – the infinite manifestation in finite form through which the underlying identity of spirit and nature is revealed (1800: 287-307; Beiser 2002)[23].

In this intellectual climate, the Romantic poet inherited a role formerly reserved for the mystic. As M. H. Abrams famously argued, Romanticism performed a systematic "secularisation of inherited theological ideas", transforming divine illumination into imaginative epiphany (1971: 12-16). Jacques Barzun similarly observed:

> Art, then, was the gateway to the realm of spirit for all those over whom the old religions had lost their hold. Most Romantic artists needed nothing higher. Art was sufficient and supreme. For a Goethe or a Berlioz, nature and art equally embodied the divine […] The genius […] was nature's mouthpiece, and the products of his art were an enlargement of nature, both alike deserving adoration (1974: 30).

Within this secularised framework, classic Sufi tropes underwent a profound functional reinterpretation. A striking example is the ancient Persian allegory of the moth and the candle ("*parvānah u sham'*"), immortalised in classical texts such as Farid al-Din Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr* and the *ghazals* of Hafez and Rumi to illustrate the soul's joyful self-immolation in the flame of Divine Glory (Schimmel 1975; Lewisohn 1999)[24]. In Shelley's "To –" ("One word is too often profaned"), this traditional mystical emblem is reconfigured into a secularised aspiration towards ideal love and poetic beauty:

> The desire of the moth for the star,
> Of the night for the morrow,
> The devotion to something afar
> From the sphere of our sorrow (1914: 639, ll. 13-16).

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[22] On Baumgarten's pioneering formulation of aesthetics and its emancipation from Cartesian logic, see Guyer (2014: 318-340).

[23] On the post-Kantian transformation of aesthetic judgment into a supreme philosophical instrument for intuiting the Absolute, see Schelling (1800), and Beiser (2002).

[24] For the historical origins and mystical metaphysics of the moth-and-candle allegory in Persian Sufi poetry, see Attar (1984: 206-210), Schimmel (1975: 70, 142-145), and Lewisohn (1999: II, 115-130).

By substituting the terrestrial candle – which consumes the lover in an immediate flash of fire – with a distant star, Shelley evokes the *parvāneh* archetype, decoupling *fanā'* from literal physical death. The moth's desire becomes a continuous, non-possessive contemplation of an unearthly, transcendent Ideal. Rather than a mere tragic dissolution, this longing transforms into a manifesto of imaginative resistance, wherein the heroic soul refuses to yield to cold, calculating reason, choosing instead to refine and hollow out the ego through the voluntary renunciation of physical possession.

This secularisation of *fanā'* finds its ultimate ontological and epistemological culmination in Keats. Long before T. S. Eliot described artistic creation as "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (1920: 53), Keats had formulated a strikingly similar conception in his theory of "*negative capability*". In his letter to Richard Woodhouse (27 October 1818), Keats delineated the true "poetical Character" – in opposition to the Wordsworthian "egotistical sublime" – asserting that "it has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character... it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto" (1958: I, 387). This "chameleon poet" relinquishes a sovereign, bounded subjectivity to continually inhabit other forms, whether an Iago, an Imogen, or a sparrow pecking in the gravel. The artist must relinquish a fixed sense of self, suspend self-consciousness, and become fully receptive to the reality contemplated.

This radical empathy may be compared with the opening allegory of Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi* (1925-1940): the song of the reed flute (*ney*). Rumi's *ney* is a hollow vessel, severed from its native reedbed and emptied of its physical substance. It possesses no voice of its own; it is the breath of the flute-player – the Divine Beloved – passing through its empty chambers that produces the music of nostalgic separation. Keats's chameleon poet may be compared to this hollow reed. To articulate the *gusto* of existence, the artist must undergo an aesthetic "*kenosis*", purging the self of the egotistical sublime so that the sensations of the world can resonate through him like breath.

Keats made this self-emptying epistemologically explicit through his theory of negative capability, defined in December 1817 as the capacity of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1958: I, 193). This refusal to force a rational closure onto the absolute directly mirrors the classical Sufi critique of the logical mind ("*'aql*"), which thinkers like Hafez deemed structurally incapable of penetrating the enigma of existence. By cultivating what Keats called "diligent indolence" in a letter to J. H. Reynolds of 19 February 1818 (1958: I, 231), or what William Wordsworth termed "wise passiveness" (1992: 103), the poetic mind ceases to be an aggressive seeker and becomes a thoroughfare for all thoughts. This state of intellectual receptivity represents the secular equivalent of the Sufi station of "*faqr*" (spiritual poverty): by relinquishing intellectual ownership and rational categorisation, the poet's mind becomes an open, hollowed-out space capable of receiving the unmediated revelation of universal Beauty and Truth.

This aesthetic *fanā'* reaches its poetic zenith in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". The nightingale (*bulbul*) – the classic Sufi symbol of the soul's melancholic longing for the unattainable rose (*gul*) – lures the poet to escape the physical world through the "viewless wings of Poesy" (1977: 347, l. 33). Seeking a complete sensory fusion with the bird's song, the poet reaches the brink of symbolic death ("To cease upon the midnight with no pain")

(Keats 1977: 347, l. 56). Yet, because this union is achieved through the ephemeral power of the human imagination rather than divine grace, the flight abruptly terminates, leaving the poet in a state of productive melancholia: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?" (Keats 1977: 348, ll. 79-80).

6. Conclusion

The encounter between classical Persian poetry and English Romanticism represents one of the most intellectually fertile cross-cultural dialogues in modern literary history. As this study has demonstrated, this engagement operated across two distinct yet complementary dimensions: documented historical reception and comparative structural affinity. Through the philological and translation labours of Jones, Isaac D'Israeli, and their contemporaries, Persian poetic forms such as the *ghazal* and allegorical narratives such as Nezami's *Layla and Majnun* entered the British literary imagination, offering concrete models of non-linear composition, emotional fluidity, and symbolic richness.

The comparisons developed in this essay suggest that the Romantic encounter with Persian verse involved far more than the adoption of exotic ornamentation or decorative local colour. Through translation, documented reception, and broader conceptual affinities, ideas associated with Sufi self-annihilation (*fanā'*) offered a productive framework for rethinking poetic identity, transcendence, and the relationship between the self and the imagination. Via the philosophical bridge of late eighteenth-century aesthetics, the mystical journey towards union with the Divine was transfigured into an aesthetic quest for beauty, art, and imaginative insight – preserving the architectural structure of mystical transcendence while establishing the self-emptying artist as its ultimate vessel.

In this light, the encounter between Persian poetry and English Romanticism stands as a compelling example of the cross-cultural literary exchange later conceptualised in Goethe's vision of *Weltliteratur* (1827). Rather than representing a passive inheritance or an act of unilateral appropriation, this dialogue demonstrates a dynamic process wherein inherited poetic forms and mystical concepts were reinterpreted, transformed, and integrated into a new language of poetic modernity.

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Gaza's Tempest: From Prosperian Anglosphere to Calibanesque *Sumud*

Abstract I: Questo saggio, partendo dall'interpretazione della *Tempesta* di Shakespeare come un testo proto-coloniale che anticipa le dinamiche dell'imperialismo europeo attraverso il rapporto tra Prospero e Calibano, arriva a considerare la questione coloniale della Palestina. Su questa base, viene introdotto il concetto di "anglosfera prosperiana" per descrivere la continuità storica e ideologica del potere imperiale anglosassone, dai primi anni del '900 fino all'attuale genocidio a Gaza (Hübner 2026). Andando oltre il dominio imperiale, il tentativo è quello di teorizzare un'"anglosfera calibanesca" come spazio contro-egemonico in cui soggetti subalterni anglofoni si appropriano della lingua del padrone per resistere e ridefinire i rapporti di potere. Con particolare riferimento alla Palestina, viene sviluppato il concetto di *sumud* calibanesco, che combina la metafora shakespeariana con la nozione araba di perseveranza, per rappresentare pratiche culturali, artistiche e digitali di resistenza sotto occupazione coloniale.

Abstract II: This essay, starting from an interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a proto-colonial text that anticipates the dynamics of European imperialism through the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, goes on to consider the colonial question of Palestine. On this basis, it introduces the concept of a "Prosperian Anglosphere" to describe the historical and ideological continuity of Anglo-Saxon imperial power, from the early 1900s to the current genocide in Gaza (Hübner 2026). Moving beyond imperial domination, the aim is to theorise a "Calibanesque Anglosphere" as a counter-hegemonic space in which Anglophone subaltern subjects appropriate the master's language in order to resist and redefine power relations. With particular reference to Palestine, the concept of Calibanesque *sumud* is developed, combining the Shakespearean metaphor with the Arabic notion of steadfastness to represent cultural, artistic, and digital practices of resistance under colonial occupation.

Keywords: *The Tempest*, colonialism, Anglosphere, Palestine, *sumud*, Zionism.

1. Colonial Tempest?

The interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has ranged from viewing it as concerned only with the humanistic issues of the Old World of the Mediterranean/Great Britain – aristocratic political turmoil, Renaissance humanism and magic, reconciliation and forgiveness

– to interpreting it as fundamentally about the New World of the Atlantic and, consequently, a play resonating with early colonial encounters[1].

In the mid-twentieth century, Frank Kermode argues that "there is nothing in the play fundamental to its structure of ideas which could not have existed had America remained undiscovered" (1954: xxv). A couple of decades later, Northrop Frye likewise maintains that the play "has nothing to do with the New World", apart from Ariel's reference to the "still-vexed Bermoothes" (1970: 22-23). Also, for Tristan Marshall, the play includes passing mentions of the New World, such as the jester Trinculo's reference to Caliban as a potential "dead Indian" to put on display as a curiosity: "Yet aside from being topical echoes there is no sense that this makes the play specifically set in or indeed about the Americas" (1998: 376). In 1979, however, a first shift can be observed when, while maintaining that the play shows no interest at all in the central concerns of colonial pioneers such as Richard Hakluyt and Walter Raleigh, Philip Edwards adds that "*The Tempest* is in a great many respects a New World play, but it is not a colonial play" (1979: 109). Some years later, many doubts seem to have faded: notwithstanding its ambiguous Neoplatonic allegory, the play unintentionally "provides insight into an early stage in the formation of colonialist ideology" (Cohen 1985: xx). A compromise was later proposed in these terms: "If the play is 'colonialist', it must be seen as 'prophetic' rather than descriptive" (Skura 1989: 58). Indeed, Leslie Fiedler had earlier famously called Caliban "the first drunken Indian in Western literature" and, as a result, in Shakespeare's play "the whole history of imperialist America has been prophetically revealed to us in brief parable" (1973: 238).

As a matter of fact, British colonisation of America officially started in 1607, when the Virginia Company set up the first permanent English settlement: Jamestown. Thus, when Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* some years later, around 1610-1611, colonisation had not yet developed enough for its full complexities and ethical implications to be revealed. Therefore, the parallels between *The Tempest* and colonial discourse cannot be drawn in clear-cut, univocal terms. Ultimately, "*La Tempesta* ha a che fare col colonialismo, ma non era *già* colonialismo" (Coronato 2025: 14).

Nevertheless, it may be argued that, whether interpreted as descriptive or prophetic, *The Tempest* fundamentally encompasses all the essential elements of the European colonial enterprise. It stages the entire process of colonisation, albeit in microcosm: European arrival → dispossession → enslavement → acculturation/deculturation → othering and dehumanisation → legitimising master narrative → native resistance. The following are some quotes from Act I, Scene 2 of the play (Shakespeare 2026) for each of the aforementioned steps:

– European arrival:
  "*Miranda:* How came we ashore?
  Prospero: By Providence divine […]"

– Dispossession of the native:

[1] This reflects what Cantor (2006) calls the Atlantic view of Shakespeare, as opposed to the Mediterranean or Renaissance view of his theatre.

"*Caliban:* This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me.
[…]
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king. And here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island"

– Enslavement:
"*Prospero:* Thou most lying slave,
[…]
Hag-seed, hence!
Fetch us in fuel, and be quick thou 'rt best,
To answer other business"

– Acculturation/deculturation:
"*Miranda:* Abhorrèd slave,
[…]
I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known"

– Othering and dehumanisation:
"*Prospero:* Thou poisonous slave, got by the Devil
himself
Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!"

– Legitimising master narrative:
"*Prospero:* I have used
thee,
Filth as thou art, with humane care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honor of my child"

– Native resistance:
"*Caliban:* You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!"

The only difference from the historical colonial process is Prospero's promised departure from the dispossessed island: "And thence retire me to my Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave" (Act V, Scene 1). Almost four centuries later, in Aimé Césaire's

A Tempest (1969: Act III) Prospero does not leave the island: "Sans moi cette île est muette. / Ici donc, mon devoir. / Je resterai".

Indeed, quoting Césaire's adaptation of Shakespeare allows us to bridge early modern Europe and present-day Palestine. The Caribbean playwright's attempt to "strike back" at the European cultural canon paves the way for the central concepts of our analysis: Prosperian Anglosphere and Calibanesque *sumud.*

2. Prosperian Anglosphere

After five centuries of colonialism and a century of decolonisation, the enduring legacy of colonialism can still be painfully observed in present-day Palestine. A significant portion of historical responsibility lies with Britain. The phrase *"Prosperian Anglosphere"* foregrounds the centrality of the lexeme "*Anglo"*, which primarily denotes a geopolitical and linguistic formation. At the same time, the term inevitably carries cultural and ideological weight that has played a significant role in shaping the Question of Palestine (Cazzato 2025). This role, despite its importance, has frequently been overlooked, minimised, or effectively erased from broader discourse. Even postcolonial studies have neglected Palestine, to the point that it is considered a "strange omission" (Williams & Ball 2014: 128) within an academic field inspired, paradoxically, by a Palestinian scholar, Edward Said. This may help explain why the substantial and far-reaching British (Prosperian) historical responsibility for the Question of Palestine has remained largely unrecognised (Cazzato 2024). It can be traced back to what has often been described as the "original sin" of the infamous Balfour Declaration in 1917, when the British Foreign Secretary pledged support for "a national home" for European Jews in Palestine – then commonly framed through the false Zionist myth of "a land without a people for a people without a land".

The Anglosphere may be defined as that sphere of influence in which imperial power has English as its language, a sphere that has exercised its absolute dominance without interruption from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Let us briefly examine its emergence. Although the concept of the Anglosphere is at least a century old, the term itself entered mainstream Anglo-American debate towards the end of the Cold War, when the earlier late nineteenth-century notion of Anglo-Saxonism experienced a revival. This renewed form no longer rested on claims of racial superiority, but rather on assertions of cultural superiority. It is important to note that both moments of debate – the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century – coincided with periods of American ascent and British decline. It is equally important, and indeed revealing, to consider the terms in which the concept first emerged.

John Randolph Dos Passos (the novelist's father), one of the early twentieth-century theorists of Anglo-Saxonism, proposed the Anglo-American path as a means to achieve peace, using a messianic rhetoric similar to that of present-day Zionism. The question was: "Are we the chosen race of Israel? Are we the peoples of the earth, elected to lead the van of civilisation and peace?" (Dos Passos 1903: 62). It follows that Anglo-Saxons were, like the Israelites 3,000 years ago, God's chosen people – and that the Promised Land was thus the entire planet.

Such proclamations had already begun to multiply by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1895, the Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain asserted that it was

the duty of the British to establish and maintain permanent bonds of friendship with their kin across the Atlantic, since they had many things in common: origin, history, language, literature, a "love of liberty and law", and – above all – "common principles to assert" and "common interests to maintain" (1897: 77). A decade earlier, Chamberlain had already suggested that the alliance of the "Anglo-Saxon race" was "infallibly destined to be the predominating force in the future history and civilisation of the world" (1897: 6).

Famously, for his part, in *The White Man's Burden* (1899), Rudyard Kipling declared that Americans, too, should take up the task of bringing civilisation to their "new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child" (1903: 79). Once they had reached "manhood" (81), they would then be judged by their peers – namely, the British.

The future of the Anglospheric alliance was fully envisioned by Winston Churchill (1946), who called this geopolitical entity "the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples". In his well-known 1946 address, delivered in the U. S. shortly after the conclusion of the Second World War, Churchill stated: "If all British moral and material forces and convictions are joined with your own in fraternal association, the high-roads of the future will be clear, not only for us but for all, not only for our time, but for a century to come". Historical events soon confirmed his prediction and, above all, the Anglosphere subsequently emerged as a space of the "special relationship", initially centred on London and later, after the decline of the British Empire, on Washington, leaving behind a community of peoples furiously committed to delivering liberty, democracy, the rule of common law, and, of course, the English language. Nowhere was this commitment more evident than in Palestine, where the Anglospheric "fraternal association" enabled Zionist forces to pursue their colonial project both at that time – somewhat anachronistically, given the broader phase of decolonisation – and in the years that followed.

3. Calibanesque Anglosphere

That said, the concern here is with a broader conception of the Anglosphere, one that moves beyond Atlanticist or British imperial nostalgia and encompasses all subaltern English-speaking peoples seeking to "strike back" in that same language. In Shakespearean terms, it is a space of power relations in which a few Prosperos impose their language on the many "savage and deformed" Calibans (as the dramatis personae of *The Tempest* have it), whose only profit is to "know how to curse" their masters in that very tongue. It constitutes a Calibanesque sort of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) – anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-racist – spanning dozens of postcolonial countries, from Canada to Australia, including the region commonly referred to as the "Middle East".

In the Prosperian Anglosphere, the Zionist lobby has worked since the nineteenth century to gain power across the Atlantic. In the Calibanesque Anglosphere, Palestinians have resisted Anglo-Zionist power by postcolonially articulating their response in the very language of that power. They have "written back" (Rushdie 1982), employing English in their artistic production both to resist oppression and to appeal to a global audience.

At this stage, the concept of Calibanesque *sumud* should be clear, too. The Arabic word *sumud* literally means "steadfastness" and originally referred to the institutional-political sphere. Over the decades, however, it has evolved from a political and institutional concept

into a quotidian mode of life, embodying the everyday way of life of Palestinians resisting Zionist colonialism, both individually and collectively. *Sumud* is enacted by men, women, and children alike, each striving in their own way to endure and resist the pressures of life under colonial occupation. The Palestinian writer from Ramallah, Raja Shehadeh, defines it as follows: "*Sumud* is watching your home turn into a prison […] Living like this, you must constantly resist the twin temptations of either acquiescing in the jailer's plan in numb despair, or becoming crazed by consuming hatred for your jailer and yourself, the prisoner" (1982: viii). But between submission and violence, Shehadeh claims, there is a third option: *sumud* as nonviolent resistance. Interestingly, since the start of the millennium, with the Second Intifada, *sumud* has expanded more and more to encompass cultural and artistic forms of resistance worldwide – through literature, cinema, music, graffiti, memes, and more – both in Palestine and across the diaspora.

One of the most challenging aspects of the Question of Palestine concerns the use of the term "colonialism" with reference to the State of Israel, both within the Anglosphere and, more generally, across the Western world. The characterisation of Israel as a colonial entity remains the elephant in the room – difficult to name and, consequently, seldom articulated or acknowledged. This considerable outcome has been achieved through an enormous amount of effective "enunciation" (Mignolo 2000) – what is often referred to as *hasbara* (variously understood as strategic communication or propaganda). Indeed, what has been at work is a double process of erasure: on the one hand, Israel has been obscured as a colonial entity; on the other, the Palestinians have been erased as a people.

During the British Mandate (1922-1948), Palestine undeniably existed. It disappeared from maps in 1948, when the State of Israel was born out of the Nakba (the Arabic word corresponding to the Hebrew term "Shoah"). That is to say, about 700,000 Palestinians (two-thirds of the population at that time) were driven from their homes through terror and mass killings. However, contrary to historical evidence, in 1969, Prime Minister Golda Meir notoriously stated that "there was no such thing as Palestinians […] It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist" (Giles 1969).

4. *Sumud*

One may say that all Palestinian art has existed – and continues to exist – to contradict the absurd non-existence axiom through what can be called Calibanesque *sumud*, articulated in multiple artistic forms and modes, above all through both resident and diasporic digital activism aimed at generating networked counterpublics (Ponzanesi & Habed 2018).

One instance has been the use of the Zionist advertising campaign "Visit Palestine" in the 1930s, demonstrating that Palestine existed, as the slogan itself suggests. Following the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s, Franz Krausz' poster (1936) – depicting the iconic landmark of Jerusalem's Old City, with the Dome of the Rock in the foreground – was subsequently reprinted and went viral across the Occupied Territories sixty years after its initial publication (see Figure 1; Cazzato 2025).



Figure 1. Franz Krausz, *Visit Palestine* (1936), Wikimedia Commons.

This recovery from the dusty archive of Zionist propaganda has served to debunk at least three enduring myths: Palestine as "a land without a people" (the picture shows the vast city of Jerusalem); Palestine as a barren desert awaiting transformation into a garden (the lush tree in the foreground suggests that the landscape surrounding Jerusalem was far

from an empty wilderness); Palestine as non-existent (on the contrary, it clearly did exist and was explicitly referred to as such in a Zionist poster). Subsequently, a form of grassroots visual "guerrilla" emerged – both locally and transnationally – targeting Zionist posters, particularly that of Krausz[2]. Among the various reinterpretations, one may consider Wiz's intervention, which operates as a twofold appropriation: its target is not only the original Zionist image but also Banksy's mural on the West Bank barrier, commonly known as "Beach Boys"[3] (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Banksy, *Beach Boys* (2005), Wikimedia Commons.

Wiz's poster, called *Visit Palestine – Banksy Tribute*[4] (see Figure 3), can be understood as a dual parodic operation, insofar as it simultaneously parodies both Banksy and Krausz, in a sort of postmodern and postcolonial manoeuvre: postmodern insofar as it draws on the characteristic parodic impulse of postmodern art (Hutcheon 1988); and postcolonial insofar as it enacts a "writing back" strategy (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989). If Banksy's *trompe-l'œil* mural disrupts the wall by offering a fictional glimpse of liberation through a Caribbean paradise, Wiz replaces the Beach Boys motif with the recognisable landmark of Krausz' poster, thereby re-signifying the image: rather than an imagined exotic escape, the "paradise" evoked becomes the return to historical Palestine.

[2] https://www.palestineposterproject.org (consulted on 15/06/2026).

[3] https://electronicintifada.net/content/well-known-uk-graffiti-artist-banksy-hacks-wall/5733 (consulted on 15/06/2026).

[4] https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/visit-palestine-banksy-tribute (consulted on 15/06/2026).

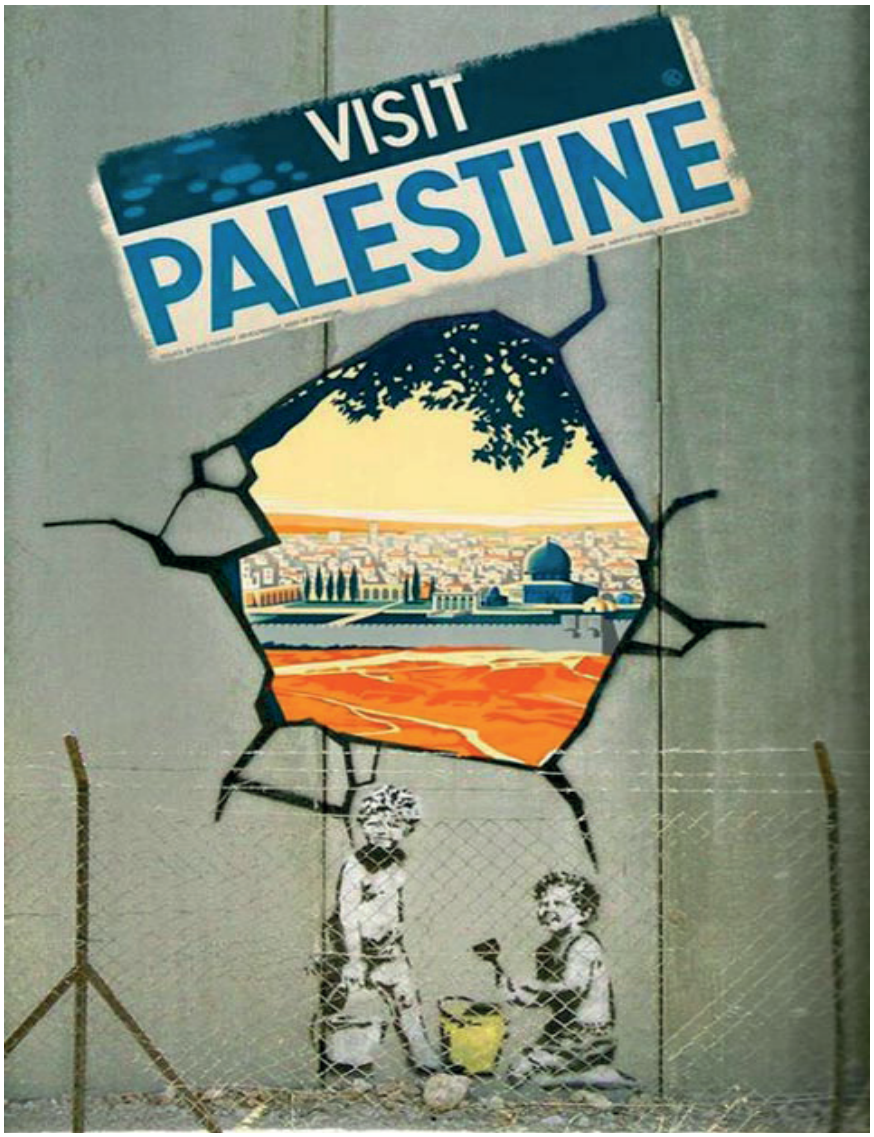

Figure 3. Wiz, *Visit Palestine – Banksy Tribute* (2013).

Another form of Calibanesque *sumud* is embodied through music, as DAM (a Palestinian-Israeli hip-hop group) do, by drawing on the global music language – a Prosperian genre that nevertheless constitutes a historical expression of marginalised cultural voices in the West – and transforming musical production into a site of political struggle (Cazzato & Taronna 2023). Their work asserts Palestinian cultural identity in the face of its systematic denial and challenges processes of erasure, exclusion, and ongoing dispossession under Israeli occupation. In doing so, their music emerging from Western contexts operates not only as a local artistic expression but also as a performative practice of *sumud*, articulating resilience and collective memory within a transnational cultural framework.

Furthermore, Calibanesque *sumud* may be performed through spoken word, as in the work of Rafeef Ziadah, a London-based Palestinian-Canadian poet, who draws on the Ar-

abic oral poetic tradition while powerfully delivering English-language performances of her poems, which have been viewed millions of times on YouTube (see Cazzato 2018)[5]. Or it may be performed through creative writing, as exemplified by the work of Refaat Alareer, poet, editor, and educator from Gaza, who edited, among others, a book, unsurprisingly titled *Gaza Writes Back* (2014). He created a platform for young Palestinian writers to tell their own stories in English, asserting narrative agency through the transformation of personal and collective memory into acts of resilience. Let us recall his heartbreaking and widely celebrated poem "If I Must Die", which, originally written in English, mobilised a global audience in the aftermath of his death on 6 December 2023, allegedly resulting from a surgically targeted strike.

Calibanesque *sumud* is also Bisan Owda's MoJo (*mobile journalism*) from Gaza. She is a Palestinian reporter and filmmaker whose widely circulating videos (shared by major global media and awarded major journalism prizes) often begin with "Hi, this is Bisan from Gaza, and I'm still alive". She transforms everyday survival into a powerful expression of resistance, blending immediate reporting, embodied testimony, and moving storytelling. Unlike conventional war correspondents, she is not "embedded"; if anywhere, she is embedded only in a shared condition of vulnerability.

Palestinian-American gaming influencer Hamzah Saadah, who has nearly eight million followers across social media and is known online under the pseudonym "Absorber", fully embodies the digital activism of the Palestinian youth diaspora (Saadah 2026)[6]. By leveraging global – arguably Prosperian – social media platforms, he engages directly with Israeli audiences. By minimising role-play, rhetorical aggression, and visual mediation, he produces what audiences perceive as a "non-performance", thereby forcing the interlocutor – and the audience watching the video – to confront the ideological violence within Israeli civil and military society as it unfolds, without journalistic filters. Rather than directly contesting dominant narratives, Saadah creates conditions in which his interlocutors, often young members of Israeli civil and military society, become participants in what could be described as a form of flagrant discursive self-exposure of the Zionist genocidal ideology.

Another distinctive instance is Shehadeh, who deploys English as a strategic linguistic medium to articulate the hardships of life under occupation and to foster a potentially sympathetic network of human solidarity. "Our struggle for survival", he states, "is totally consuming. It was to break out of this silence that I began writing about my life and the lives of the samidin [steadfast people]" (Shehadeh 1982: viii). Thus, by blending memory and language through a medium that enhances the likelihood of being heard and understood, Shehadeh offers his own path of Calibanesque *sumud*: a kind of personal therapeutic engagement with the reality of occupation that manifests itself in the act of writing in the language of an "other" self. Because, as he affirms, "we cannot unpick our life or the history of our nation" (Shehadeh 2017: 227) – despite what the bleak present may suggest – a chan-

[5] Her best-known poem is *We Teach Life, Sir*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKucPh9xHtM (consulted on 15/06/2026).

[6] Here is an interview at the Sundance Film Festival: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cwch6W495GE (consulted on 15/06/2026).

nel of communication with the "official enemy" must remain open as an alternative to the seemingly endless cycle of violence and revenge. Therefore, through the Prosperian common language, Palestinians and Israelis may potentially cultivate mutual understanding, thereby enabling the growth of trust and respect among sensible humans, even though such an endeavour remains profoundly complex across a deeply violent line of contact.

Ultimately, through Calibanesque *sumud*, these artists appropriate and assimilate the Prosperian language while simultaneously challenging it in an act of anthropophagy, or cultural cannibalisation. Such an act entails the "Absorção do inimigo sacro" (the absorption of the sacred enemy; de Andrade 1991: 43), whereby the culture of the coloniser – the father's taboo in Freudian terms – is metaphorically swallowed, digested, transfigured into a totem, and ultimately subjected to radical contestation and refusal. In conclusion, this act of cannibalisation – or, if we like, of *Calibanification* – can be understood as a process that metaphorically consumes the culture of the coloniser only to re-elaborate and reproduce it in a transmuted form.

It is an act that not only subverts the dominant Prosperian discourse, shaped and sustained by Zionist *hasbara*, but also contributes to the formation of counterpublics, opening up alternative spaces of meaning and cultural resistance. At the same time, it seeks to foster empathy and ethical engagement, as well as to instil a form of cognitive hope – both within the consciousness of the oppressor and among those who bear witness to the spectacle of the prolonged, inhuman, and relentless process of dispossession and ethnic cleansing in Palestine.

Since Shakespeare's time, history has recorded numerous *ante litteram* and *post litteram* genocides. In the early seventeenth century, as Walter Cohen (1985) reminds us, indigenous peoples were often represented as hardly dissimilar "from beasts, hauing no Art, nor science, nor trade" (Robert Gray); resistance to religious conversion was framed as hostility, such that natives were to be "dealt with as enemies of the Commonwealth of their country" (Robert Johnson) and their Indian priests were to be killed as "murtherers of soules and sacrificers of gods images to the Divill" (Thomas Gates in Cohen 1985: 400). In the early twenty-first century, little has apparently changed, as Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant called people in Gaza "human animals" while announcing a complete siege on the Gaza Strip[7]. The only difference is that the present genocide is unprecedentedly and shamefully unfolding in real time before a global audience.

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Multimodal Dialogic Teacher Education: Learning to Mediate Children's Picturebooks for Active Citizenship and Intercultural Encounters

Abstract I: L'articolo intende essere un contributo teorico che ricontestualizza la formazione dialogica delle/degli insegnanti trasformandola da pratica prevalentemente logocentrica a pratica *embodied* e di interazione multimodale che media significati co-costruiti attraverso la combinazione di diverse modalità. Traendo spunto dal contesto teorico del progetto Erasmus+ *Intercultural Citizenship Education through Teacher Education for the Mediation of Picturebooks* (ICETEMP), l'articolo sostiene che la formazione dialogica delle/degli insegnanti per la mediazione di libri illustrati per bambini/e nelle letture ad alta voce debba riconoscere l'importanza fondamentale delle risorse multimodali nell'interazione tra insegnante, bambini/e e libri illustrati. Le pratiche di dialogo interiore, dialogo tra pari e dialogo di interazione in classe dimostrano come il significato sia co-costruito attraverso una ricca orchestrazione di diverse risorse multimodali.

Abstract II: The article is a theoretical contribution that recontextualises dialogic teacher education from a primarily logocentric practice to an embodied and multimodal one, mediating co-constructed meaning through an orchestration of modes. Drawing on the wider theoretical context of the Erasmus+ project *Intercultural Citizenship Education through Teacher Education for the Mediation of Picturebooks* (ICETEMP), the article posits that dialogic education in teacher education for mediating children's picturebooks in read-aloud performances needs to recognise the crucial relevance of multimodal resources in the interaction between teacher, children and picturebooks. Practices of inner dialogue, peer dialogue and interactive dialogue demonstrate how meaning is co-constructed through a rich orchestration of different multimodal resources.

Keywords: ICETEMP, picturebook mediation, dialogic education, teacher education, English FL/AL.

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1. Introduction

Dialogic education approaches can have a profound influence on intercultural and citizenship education because they are based on the mediation and co-construction of knowledge. The extensive mainstream dialogic education (DE) literature is largely grounded in L1 learning contexts and focuses mainly on verbal, oral and written discussion and argumentation (see, among others, Mercer, Wegerif & Major 2020; Cui & Teo 2021), with some exceptions (e.g., Heggernes 2019; Maine 2015). The present paper is based on the reflections generated during the initial stages of the project *Intercultural Citizenship Education through Teacher Education for the Mediation of Picturebooks* (ICETEMP; Erasmus+ KA220-HED2024-011). The project centres on student teacher education for English as a foreign or additional language (FL/AL) and focuses on intercultural and citizenship education through the mediation of picturebooks during read-aloud events for young learners (Masoni 2019; Bland 2022; Bertoldi 2025a). The innovative aspect of the project is the conceptualisation of dialogic education with reference to picturebook read-aloud performances within a synthesised framework that can facilitate intercultural communication among teachers of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The introduction of a dialogic dimension in teacher education for the mediation of picturebooks places strong emphasis on multi-sensory and multimodal communication through both enacted picturebook read-aloud performances and classroom interaction. The embodied quality of communicative interaction in the classroom and during read-aloud performances consists of ensembles of modes, including oral language, gesture, facial expression, proxemics, gaze, and voice quality (Bertoldi 2025a: 162). In addition, picturebooks are themselves inherently multimodal, through the interplay of images, written language, oral language when read aloud, graphic design, and haptic features (Painter, Martin & Unsworth 2013; Bertoldi 2025a, 2025b). These ensembles of modes contribute to shaping meaning-making in the interaction between teacher and learners (Kress 2010). In a similar vein, classroom dialogue also needs to be viewed in its naturally multimodal and embodied context rather than being treated as primarily logocentric argumentation. On the basis of these considerations, this article aims to discuss what DE practices and principles can be considered more relevant for mediating picturebooks during read-aloud performances in relation to the educational context in English as an FL/AL.

The article is a theoretical paper based on reflections and discussions in the early stages of the ICETEMP project. Dialogic education can potentially involve four main interrelated planes of interaction which are deeply interconnected and mutually influence one another:

1. Dialogic education for student teachers and children in picturebook mediation: how student teachers apply dialogic education during picturebook mediation in their teaching placement;
2. Dialogic education for student teachers interacting with educators in preparation of picturebook mediation for children: dialogic interaction during teacher education;
3. Dialogic mediation for student teachers among peers during COIL (telecollaboration): how student teachers adopt dialogic interaction during their online meetings and work with other student teachers;
4. Dialogic education for teacher educators planning modules and discussing issues among peers: how teacher educators apply dialogic education while working among peers planning education modules.

This article focuses on planes 2 and 3 at a theoretical and reflective level, while work on experimental data gathered during the project is not within its scope and will be explored in a future contribution. Planes 2 and 3 inevitably impact on planes 1 and 4 directly or indirectly, but a reflection on these levels remains beyond the scope of the present paper. In all four planes, language teacher educators and student teachers can fall back on the common background knowledge and practice offered by Communicative Language Teaching (Richards & Rodgers 2014) in which language use is understood as meaningful communication among participants in socially and culturally situated events. This provides a solid basis for promoting cross-cultural dialogue in a foreign or additional language. In such interactional contexts, multimodal communication, which is pervasive and ever present in authentic communicative events, is a default support for comprehension, both in FL/AL and in L1, and can be seen as an efficient and user-friendly scaffolding strategy for verbal understanding (Wood *et al.* 1976; Krashen 1985; Curtain & Dahlberg 2004; Long 2007; Masoni 2019; Bertoldi 2025a). Thus, dialogic education in ICETEMP seamlessly fits with multimodal meaning-making, which teachers of young learners tend to adopt naturally, given the intrinsically multimodal development of language competence (Halliday 1978; Iverson & Goldin-Meadow 2005; Paradis 2007; Shams & Seitz 2008; Fabbro & Cargnelutti 2018; Wang & Wei 2022). In spite of, or maybe because of this 'natural' way of acquiring languages, the relevance of multimodality is not always considered during pre-service or in-service teacher education. Building on a more logocentric dialogic approach deriving from mainstream L1-focused literature, ICETEMP moves towards an innovative multimodal dialogic approach for FL/AL teacher education, in which picturebook mediation instruction is seen as the ideal ground for practising and reflecting on the affordances of multimodality (Bertoldi & Bortoluzzi 2019; Bertoldi 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

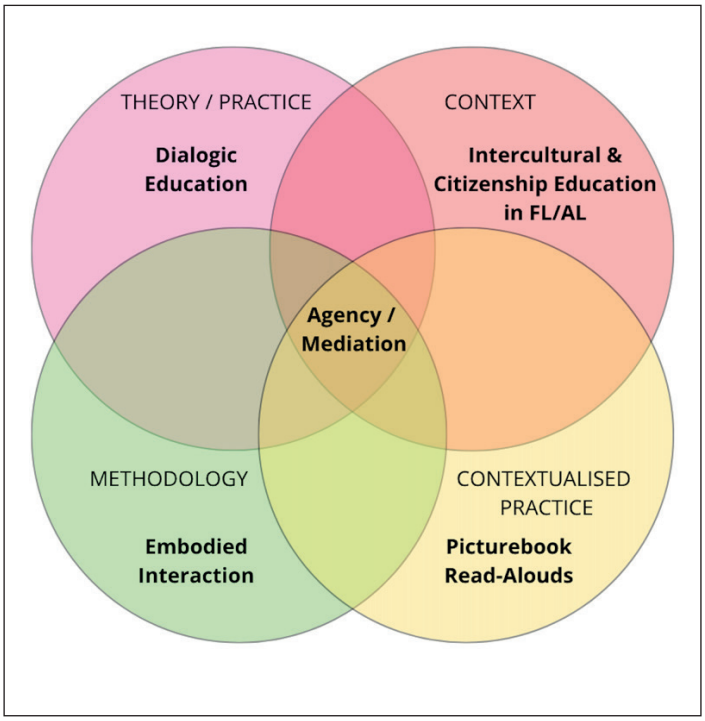

Figure 1. Dialogic education in multimodal interaction for picturebook mediation.

Reflections and discussions during the initial phases of the ICETEMP project led to the development of a model that represents the conceptual synthesis of picturebook mediation as multimodal and dialogic. The model, shown in Figure 1, illustrates the interaction of the four main educational areas in FL/AL picturebook mediation. Dialogic education (top left circle) informs both the theoretical framework and the applied practice within the broader context of intercultural and citizenship education in FL/AL (top right circle). Embodied interaction (lower circle on the left) combines a range of different modes that guide the co-construction of meaning among all participants. It is specifical-

ly through this embodied interaction that the contextualised practice of the picturebook read-aloud performance (lower circle on the right) takes place. At the intersection of these four areas lie agency and mediation (centre of the model), highlighting their central role in the interaction among all participants (children, student teachers, and teacher educators).

Within the context of the project and the preliminary reflections about the theme of dialogic education for language teacher education and picturebook mediation, the present paper positions itself as a theoretical discussion informed by previous practice and implementations and potentially sustaining future experimental research developments in this field. The innovative contribution of the present paper consists in positing multimodal interaction in educational settings as crucial for dialogic education, whereas, so far, the literature in dialogic education has predominantly focused on verbal features, neglecting non-verbal modes. In line with the purpose of the present paper, the following sections offer an outline of how dialogic approaches can be embedded in teacher education within the context of language teacher education for picturebook mediation. Section 1 has introduced the theoretical and project framework and has outlined the four interrelated planes of dialogic interaction; Section 2 discusses how dialogue can be promoted through shared communicative principles. Section 3 focuses on multimodal embodied dialogue in classroom practice through inner dialogue, peer dialogue and enacted dialogue, and presents guidelines for picturebook mediation supported by brief indicative references rather than extensive empirical evidence (see Bertoldi 2025a for such evidence). Finally, Section 4 summarises some key reflections on multimodal dialogic interaction for teacher education.

2. Promoting Dialogue Through Shared Communicative Principles

Among the fundamental conditions for promoting learning is the creation of a context of interaction that facilitates communication. Traditionally, one way of achieving this has been through an educational class contract, discussed, agreed upon and sometimes metaphorically or literally signed by learners and their teacher. In the project *Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools (*DIALLS) this contextual situation facilitating exchange is created through the dialogue and argumentation objectives of the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme (CLLP) (Rapanta *et al.* 2021). In the *Thinking Together Project* (2025), "ground rules" are established to create an atmosphere conducive to classroom dialogue, and more specifically to support the more complex level of "thinking together" through "exploratory talk" in which learners engage in constructive dialogue based on respectful critique of one another's ideas (Mercer 1995: 104). To reach this complex level, teachers need to foster a sense of trust and respect in the class (Littleton & Mercer 2013) supported by the 4Cs of good thinking, as illustrated in the diagram developed by Phillipson and Wegerif (2017: 20). The 4Cs - Caring, Critical, Collaborative and Creative thinking - are dispositions of dialogic thinking and one of the pedagogic means of fostering them is the establishment of ground rules instantiated through talk, and established and enacted with the class (Phillipson & Wegerif 2019: 39; Figure 2).

In this kind of classroom environment, respectful exchange and shared dialogue can take place and offer the educational atmosphere of respect in which ICETEMP classroom

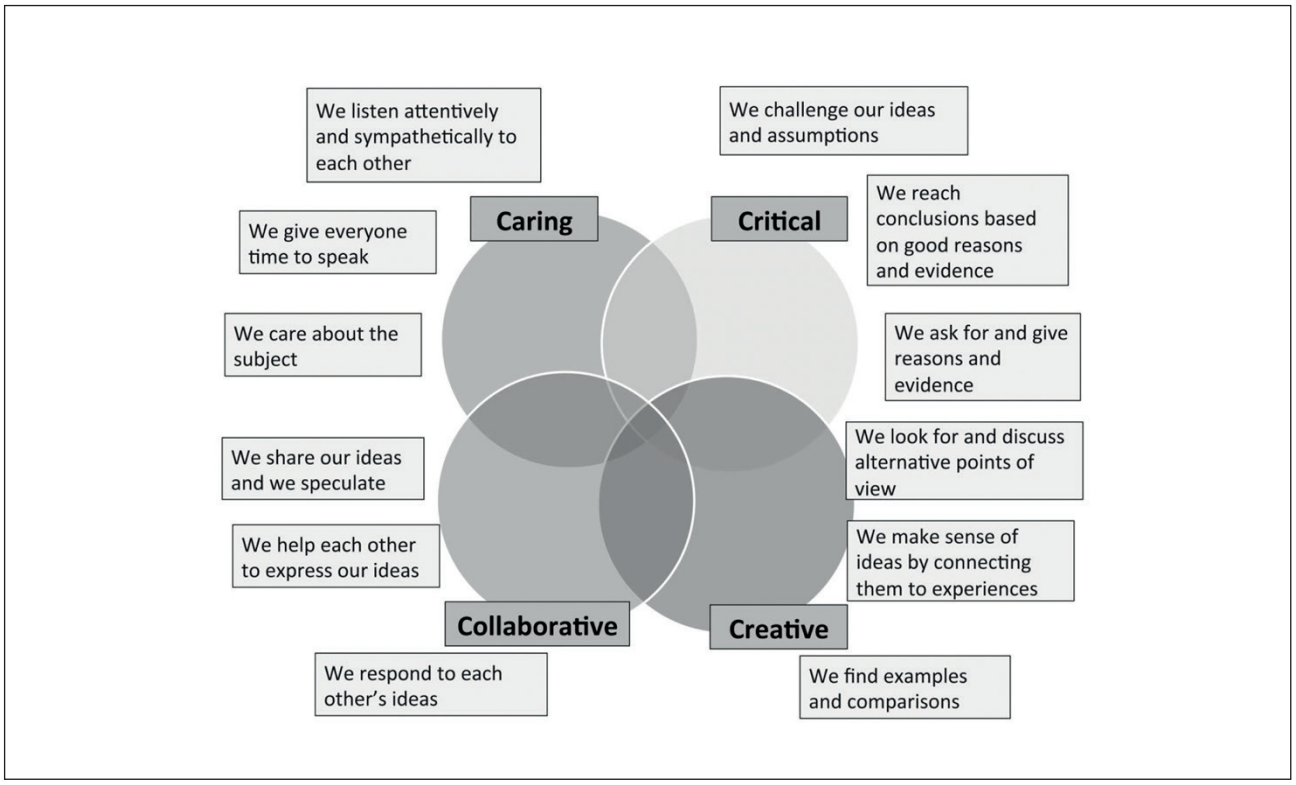

Figure 2. Ground rules for critical, caring, collaborative, and creative thinking (Phillipson & Wegerif 2019: 39).

practice can thrive, both in student teacher education classes and in picturebook mediation with children. However, we believe that this can be achieved only if embodied, in-context interactions are taken into consideration and included in the teacher education process and critical awareness-raising. Verbal and non-verbal communication are inextricably intertwined; it is Western knowledge and its pedagogical tendency towards logocentrism that has traditionally given prominence to verbal interaction in human exchanges, even in oral classroom dialogue, which is eminently embodied. Drawing on the *Thinking Together Project* (2025) ground rules, we select those that are more relevant to interaction in FL/AL for ICETEMP teacher education contexts and complement them with multimodal aspects related to embodied communication for classroom learning (Lim 2021; Lim, Cope & Kalantzis 2022) and read-aloud performances (Masoni 2019; Ellis & Mourão 2021; Bertoldi 2025a, 2025b).

Drawing on established literature on multimodality, Bertoldi (2025a, 2025b) discusses the main modes that orient the co-construction of meaning in read-aloud performances in FL/AL and classroom dialogue in the mediation of picturebooks with FL/AL children. These variables underlie face-to-face interaction and are crucial for classroom dynamics in read-aloud performances. They were extrapolated and used by Bertoldi for her data analysis annotation model (2025a: 162); however, they can also be used to reflect on how ground rules for dialogic education can be complemented with multimodal features. The categories are adapted for the ICETEMP context and for teacher education purposes:

Spoken language: picturebook text read aloud, read-aloud talk (see Ellis & Mourão 2021); phatic exchanges and classroom dialogue (the latter two may or may not be part of read-aloud talk depending on the context of use).
Voice quality: intonation (statement, question, exclamation), volume, pitch, speed and tone (surprised, amazed, excited, curious, frightened, sad, bored, etc.).
Gaze orientation: directed to students, peers, teacher educators, the picturebook, one specific element in the picturebook, a prop, directed elsewhere, etc.
Facial expression: surprised, amazed, excited, curious, happy, frightened, sad, angry, irritated, etc.
Gesture: deictic (pointing at one item), metaphorical (representing a concept, object), supporting comprehension of a vague and redundant concept, highlighting an emotional state, eliciting response/participation.
Body movement and proxemics: moving closer or further away from the audience.
Object handling: moving objects, such as props, closer or further away from the audience.
Picturebook handling: moving the book closer or further away from the audience according to the communicative function in context.
(adapted from Bertoldi 2025a).

These multimodal variables have been extensively documented in research on multimodal communication (Kress 2010; Bezemer & Kress 2016; Jewitt 2017; Norris 2019) and in FL/AL teacher education contexts, particularly in picturebook mediation (Masoni 2019; Ellis & Mourão 2021, 2022). Bertoldi's empirical studies (2024; 2025a; 2025b) demonstrate how the orchestration of these modes contributes to meaning-making and scaffolds learners' comprehension in FL/AL contexts. When reflecting critically on these variables for teacher education, we need to take into consideration that they are deeply influenced by socio-cultural norms and repertoires, as language usage is. Within a multicultural and intercultural project such as ICETEMP, participants will need to be reminded that awareness of cultural expectations and differences underpins intercultural competence. This was particularly relevant during the COIL/telecollaboration experience of the ICETEMP project when groups of student teachers from different countries interacted online during joint tasks (e.g., selecting a picturebook, planning its mediation, etc.). Additionally, categories and sub-categories overlap and combine, creating multimodal orchestrations and ensembles (Kress 2010) in which oral language is not necessarily cognitively and affectively more relevant than other modes. In fact, often it is not, even though it is given great prominence in pedagogy and in dialogic education (Bourne & Jewitt 2003). An example would be arguing a point correctly from a linguistic and factual perspective, but doing so with an aggressive tone or questioning intonation. In this case, the argument might be acceptable, but at the pragmatic level it is not dialogic; rather, it either represents an attempt at imposing a point of view (aggressive tone) or reveals uncertainty (questioning intonation). The same can happen when the argument

is accompanied by gestures or facial expressions that show distancing, imposing attitudes or hesitations. Our point is that dialogue is always embodied and never merely verbal; it involves affect and emotion, as well as knowledge and cognition. Additionally, dialogue is performed and enacted in socio-cultural contexts by participants who have specific and often emergent verbal and multimodal repertoires and culture-bound social expectations.

By complementing the ground rules in Figure 2 with multimodal variables (Phillipson & Wegerif 2019; Bertoldi 2025a), we obtain *shared principles of embodied dialogue*: they are not rules, because, as pragmatic principles (Leech 1983), they vary according to the context, the specific moment in the communicative event, and the participants' socio-cultural repertoires and expectations. They therefore need to be shared and reflected upon because they are the common ground for classroom communication and class dialogic interaction. The teacher education classroom is a sandbox in which these variables can be observed, discussed, learned, rehearsed, reflected upon and adapted to specific learning contexts such as, for instance, the COIL/telecollaboration experience as cross-cultural practice. It should be noted that learning about and adapting multimodal features is far more complex than working with other aspects, such as verbal expressions: multimodal features are embedded in individual and group development from birth, are generally used unconsciously and taken for granted as 'natural', and yet, they are not always reflected upon or discussed due to the logocentricity of our Western pedagogic system.

Following the 4Cs of *Thinking Together Project* (2025) - Caring, Critical, Collaborative and Creative talking and thinking (Figure 2) - and adapting the communicative actions to the ICETEMP context, it becomes possible to reflect with student teachers on how these need to be complemented by embodied interaction in order to develop shared principles of embodied dialogue. Table 1 operationalises the proposed framework by integrating the dialogic principles of the *Thinking Together Project* (2025) with multimodal features relevant to picturebook mediation. It must be underlined that embodied dialogue is context-sensitive and culturally mediated; therefore, some features might be more relevant than others in different contexts.

Table 1. Shared principles of embodied dialogue.

Shared principles of embodied dialogue in context	
Thinking Together Project (2025) (adapted from Phillipson & Wegerif 2019)	**Multimodal Aspects of Dialogic Interaction (adapted from Bertoldi 2025a)**
CARING	
Listen attentively and sympathetically	Gaze (directed to speaker), receptive facial expression, open body posture, minimal vocal responses (mm-hmm), respectful proxemics
Give everyone time to speak in the FL/AL	Strategic silence (pause before responding), encouraging gaze, patient facial expression, calm voice quality, inviting gestures

Show care for the interaction, the participants and the topic	Warm voice quality, engaged facial expression, appropriate proxemics, inclusive gestures, responsive body movement, sustained gaze
CRITICAL	
Challenge our ideas and assumptions	Questioning voice intonation, direct but respectful gaze, precise gestures (pointing, contrasting), thoughtful facial expression, leaning forward (engagement)
Accept and respect explained challenges	Open body posture, receptive facial expression, calm voice quality, nodding (acknowledgement), sustained gaze, measured response pace
Ask for and give reasons and evidence	Clear voice articulation, explanatory gestures (enumerating, connecting), alternating gaze (peers-topic-peers), thoughtful pauses, referential body movement
COLLABORATIVE	
Share our ideas and speculate	Inclusive gaze (scanning group), open gestures, inviting voice tone, forward-leaning posture, encouraging facial expression, appropriate volume
Help each other express ideas	Supportive gestures (offering floor), encouraging gaze, warm voice, proxemics (reducing distance), nodding, mirroring significant gestures and other non-verbal responses
Respond to questions and ideas	Direct gaze (to questioner), clear voice articulation, responsive gestures, acknowledgement through facial expression, appropriate pausing, engaged posture
CREATIVE	
Look for and discuss alternative points of view	Exploratory gestures (opening, expanding), curious facial expression, varied voice intonation, shifting gaze, dynamic body movement, wondering tone
Acknowledge others' ideas and build on them	Affirming gestures (yes, plus), connecting voice ("and also...", "building on that..."), gaze towards idea-giver, bridging gestures, enthusiastic facial expressions
Compare ideas and arrive at shared solutions	Comparative gestures (weighing, contrasting), inclusive gaze (whole group), synthesising voice tone, mediating body position, collaborative facial expressions
Respect different views	Accepting gestures (open palms), respectful gaze, validating voice quality, calm facial expression, neutral body posture, appropriate proxemics

What are here called **shared principles of embodied dialogue** (Table 1) can be expanded and adapted to the context of interaction. This adaptation depends on the type of dialogic activity to be carried out. Drawing attention to multimodal communication as the synergic interplay of visual and verbal interaction also highlights that dialogue is not only verbal.

Dialogue will often not be effective, positive or even respectful if intonation, voice quality, gestures and facial expressions – which differ cross-culturally and are particularly complex to control in a FL/AL context – are not taken into due account. One often overlooked aspect in teacher education is that, in oral face-to-face or online synchronous communication (what teachers do all the time), the verbal aspects of interaction are only a fraction of the multimodal communication ensembles we are exposed to (Ngo 2018; EUMADE4LL n. d.; Sindoni *et al.* 2019; Sindoni 2023). Nevertheless, in mainstream education verbal aspects are presented as prominent. Reflecting on how gestures, tone of voice and facial expressions can contradict or support our verbal communication represents a crucial activity for student teachers and educators, especially when the context includes a read-aloud performance with children.

3. Shared Principles of Embodied Dialogue for Picturebook Mediation During Classes and COIL/telecollaboration

Selecting picturebooks and deciding on moves of picturebook mediation should also take into account the orchestration of multimodal ensembles in FL/AL contexts; the process of building on each other's ideas needs to be grounded in carefully-orchestrated embodied dialogue. Bertoldi's guidelines for the process of selection and planning picturebook mediation in FL/AL offer suggestions that are inherently dialogic: first, they promote the teacher's inner dialogue when they reflect on picturebook mediation; second, these guidelines can also be adopted to reflect on picturebook mediation together with peers (Bertoldi 2025a, 2025b).

The shared principles of embodied dialogue, as presented in the previous section, can be adapted to synchronous and asynchronous COIL interaction. In asynchronous COIL interaction, the dialogue about the activities to be carried out, commented on, and posted on digital platforms can mainly occur through multimodal texts shared online. In the case of ICETEMP, this is done on Padlet and the eTwinning platforms. Note that all these texts have a verbal component (oral, either audio- or video-recorded, or written), but also include ensembles of modes including intonation, images, graphic aspects, sounds, music, etc. (Sindoni *et al*. 2019; Vasta & Baldry 2020). In addition, the mixed groups formed by two or more student teachers from each university (here referred to as "Erasmus Groups"[1]) had very different socio-cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds and needed to mediate their dialogic sharing, feedback and final decisions on the assigned activities through verbal and non-verbal forms of respectful interaction. Their interactional context is the online "third space" which provides a shared environment used synchronously or asynchronously, a common ground for shared principles of embodied intercultural dialogue (O'Dowd & Lewis 2016; Dooly & O'Dowd 2018; Helm 2018; Orsini-Jones & Lee 2018; Helm 2024). This

[1] For the COIL component of the ICETEMP pilot module in spring 2026, approximately 127 student teachers were involved from the seven partner universities of the project. Student teachers worked in telecollaboration divided into groups of four or five students from two different universities. At the University of Udine (Italy), where the authors of this paper are based, 20 student teachers worked in telecollaboration with 16 student teachers from the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain). The total 36 student teachers were divided into 8 groups of four or five, with students from both universities working together.

third space, which is also the online space in which materials and activities were posted, becomes a space of mediation and negotiation both linguistically and non-verbally. On the one hand, features other than verbal language gain relevance online because affordances multiply through the use of digital tools (videos, graphic design, emojis, etc.), on the other hand, some features that are generally used to scaffold comprehension and interaction become less visible or usable online. A clear example is gaze and proxemics in synchronous interaction: to look at our interlocutor, participants have to look at the webcam lens; to come closer to the interlocutor they have to come closer, but not too close, to the camera lens. In synchronous interaction we partly miss out on proxemics and gestures which tend to change in front of a screen or become less prominent for the interlocutors. In asynchronous interaction as well, feedback and reactions to resources and activities or videos posted by others have to be approached with extreme care and respect: student teachers should be reminded that this long-distance and time-displaced dialogue is going to remain online much longer than a simple fleeting oral interaction. As a consequence, participants have to ensure that the asynchronous interaction is carefully organised and clear, respectfully worded and multimodally cogent and coherent to promote comprehension and favour asynchronous dialogue and learning.

COIL/telecollaboration in ICETEMP took place in spring 2026 and focused on picturebook selection and decisions regarding how the selected book will be mediated for children in the classroom. We report here the guidelines summarised by Bertoldi (2025b) for planning the read-aloud performance through dialogue. A more detailed version of these guidelines can be found in Bertoldi (2025a: 152-155). For the purposes of ICETEMP, Bertoldi's guidelines are adapted to support dialogic reflection and practice at three interconnected planes: (1) the student teacher's inner dialogue during planning and preparation; (2) peer-to-peer dialogue during COIL/telecollaboration; and (3) enacted dialogue with children during read-aloud performances. Each guideline first presents a rationale drawn from research on multimodal picturebook mediation (Bertoldi 2025a), and then offers sample questions that invite dialogic inquiry across the three dimensions of practice. As illustrated in the Dialogic Mediation Triangle (Figure 3), these dimensions are not conceived as sequential stages but as mutually informing aspects of picturebook mediation: inner reflections become shared explorations with peers, which in turn shape dialogic interaction with children. Together, they offer a pedagogical logic oriented towards noticing, discussing, and enacting; however, this movement is not linear but reciprocal, as planning informs practice, practice reshapes reflection, and peer dialogue mediates between the two. In the following subsections, the three types of dialogue presented in Figure 3 are contextualised across different phases of read-aloud planning and performance, and their interrelationship is further developed with potential applications to teacher education.

Teachers need to become familiar with and reflect on the characteristics of the picturebook they are going to use in class and plan how best they can do it for their classroom context. The three types of dialogue can be used by teachers and educators to identify the most appropriate strategies for classroom mediation, as presented in the following sections. Note that cultural differences and specificities of the educational context require a different emphasis in applying the guidelines presented in the following sections.

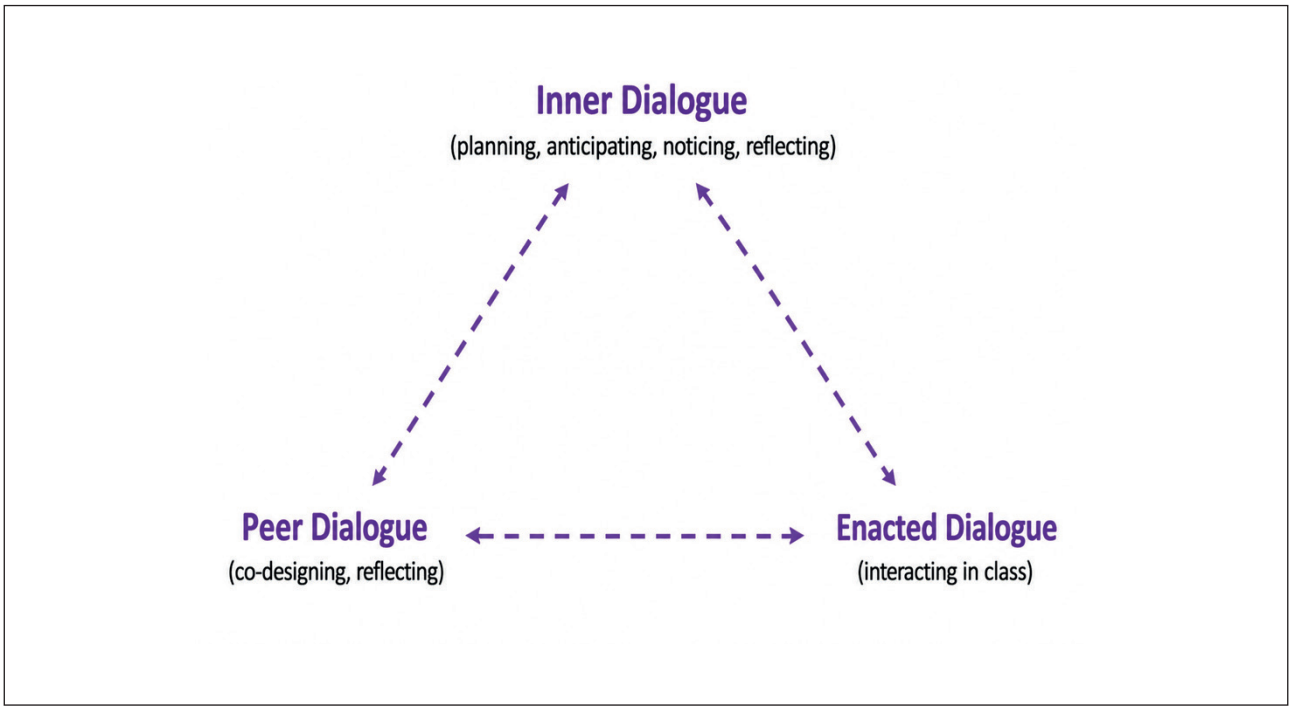

Figure 3. Dialogic Mediation Triangle.

3.1. Reading and Discussing Picturebook Verbal Texts

A close reading of the verbal text of picturebooks allows teachers as storytellers to identify key expressions (technical terms, formulaic expressions, repetitions, key structures and words) that can contribute to conveying the general meaning of the information, facts and events in the picturebook. Equally important is identifying any difficulties for specific FL/AL target audiences. Such a close reading becomes the foundation for both peer dialogue about picturebook selection and the implementation of a dialogic approach with children, as understanding what is central and what might be challenging shapes how we mediate meaning multimodally (Bertoldi 2025a: 152). In the ICETEMP project, the following types of dialogues can be implemented in the planning stage and during the selection of the picturebook for the class.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting
• How can a close reading of the selected picturebook be maximally effective?   • What key expressions, technical terms, repetitions, or structures can help convey meaning to children? • Where might difficulties arise for this specific FL/AL audience? • What can be noted about language patterns and structures?
PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting
• What joint observations do we share about the verbal text? • Which expressions in the verbal text does each of us consider "key"?

- How do our different linguistic and cultural backgrounds shape our reading of these texts?
- What challenges might we anticipate, and how can we support each other when identifying solutions?
- How do our diverse first languages help us spot features that others might miss?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How will these key expressions come alive in dialogue with children?
- Which words in the text invite questioning or wondering?
- Which structures facilitate children's participation in the conversation?
- How can I scaffold comprehension while preserving the integrity of the written text?

3.2. Exploring the Visual Text Together

Reflecting on how to make the most of the visual text in a picturebook can help teacher storytellers effectively orient children's attention to specific items in the illustrations with a view to facilitating comprehension, scaffolding communication and promoting interaction. The illustrations in picturebooks often present information that complements, extends, or even contradicts the written text, creating opportunities for meaning-making that go beyond words alone. Understanding word-image interplay is fundamental in multimodal mediation (Bertoldi 2025a: 152-153). These guidelines are particularly relevant in the planning stage of the mediation and also in reflecting what can be improved or changed.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- How can I make the most of the visual text?
- Which illustrations might help scaffold comprehension of challenging concepts or obscure vocabulary?
- Where should I direct children's attention, and when?
- What does the visual text reveal that the written text does not? How do images and words work together to create meaning?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- What do we each see in these illustrations?
- How might our different cultural and visual literacy backgrounds enrich our collective understanding?
- Which visual elements resonate with us, and why?
- How can we help each other identify details, symbolic meanings, or visual narratives that we might otherwise miss?
- What multimodal strategies might we share for orienting children's attention effectively and dialogically?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How will I invite children to explore the illustrations dialogically rather than simply directing their gaze to the illustrations?
- What questions might open up visual discovery, such as "What can you see here?" "Can you find...?" "What do you think is happening in this image?"
- How can visual exploration become a shared journey of discovery where children act as co-investigators and co-constructors of meaning?

3.3. Embodying Meaning Through Multimodal Orchestration

Weighing up how key expressions in the written text might be embodied through gestures, voice quality, use of props, and facial expressions can help teacher storytellers effectively convey meaning so that children can understand information, facts and events without altering the verbal text. This embodiment is not ancillary but constitutive of meaning: the non-verbal and suprasegmental realms (gestures, facial expressions, use of voice features and intonation) play a crucial role in children's comprehension, particularly in FL/AL contexts where verbal language alone may be insufficient for full understanding (Bertoldi 2025a: 153). These guidelines are relevant at the planning stage of picturebook mediation, but they should also be used throughout for reflecting on practice and, if needed, changing how it is implemented in class. They can even be used during the read-aloud to orient children's attention and involve them in the co-construction of meaning.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- How might key expressions be embodied through gestures, voice quality, props, and facial expressions?
- What multimodal combinations best convey meaning while preserving the integrity of the written text?
- Which concepts in the text are more abstract and therefore most in need of embodied representation?
- How can I ensure that my embodiment clarifies rather than confuses?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- How do we each embody these expressions differently?
- What can we learn from each other's gestural repertoires, voice modulation techniques, and use of available resources?
- Can we try different embodied approaches together and reflect on their clarity and effectiveness?
- How might cultural differences in embodied communication enrich our collective repertoire?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How will embodied communication invite children into dialogue rather than simply transmit information?
- Can my gestures become invitations for children to mirror, extend, or respond with their own embodied meanings?
- How does my voice quality (its warmth, enthusiasm, wonder, or curiosity) create an affective space that invites children to engage emotionally and intellectually with the content?

3.4. Achieving Coherent Multimodal Orchestration

Reflecting on the orchestration of gestures, voice quality, use of props, and facial expressions to achieve communicative purposes and bring about effective interaction means being aware of the need to avoid information and multisensory overload for children. While multimodal resources enhance meaning, their uncoordinated or excessive use can confuse rather than clarify. Coherence between modes, ensuring that gesture, voice, gaze, and facial expression work in harmony rather than competition, is essential for children's meaning-making (Bertoldi 2025a: 153). These guidelines for dialogue can also be adopted when reflecting on

practice through video recording, a technique that allows teachers to see themselves mediating the picturebook.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting
• How can I orchestrate gestures, voice, props, and facial expressions coherently? • What might create multisensory overload for children? Where is "less" actually "more"? • Are my modes working together to create a unified, comprehensible message, or are they potentially competing for attention? • How can I achieve balance between richness and clarity?
PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting
• What do we notice about each other's multimodal orchestration? • Where do we see coherence and harmony between modes? • Where might we risk overwhelming children with too many simultaneous inputs? • Can we practise together, observe each other, and offer constructive feedback on achieving multimodal balance? • What criteria can we develop together for evaluating effective orchestration?
ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class
• How does multimodal orchestration support rather than dominate dialogic flow? • Am I leaving sufficient pauses and spaces for children's multimodal responses? • Can children breathe, think, and respond, or am I filling every moment with my own performance? • How can I coordinate modes without monopolising the communicative space that should be shared?

3.5. Memorising Texts to Enable Dialogic Presence

Focusing on memorising both the verbal and visual text in the picturebook allows teacher storytellers to: (a) move the picturebook closer to children, giving them a better view of the illustrations, and (b) maintain eye contact with the audience. Being familiar with the visual text also allows storytellers to act as "tour guides" (Sipe 2008) orienting children's attention to specific images, inviting them to spot specific objects, characters or their features, thus scaffolding communication and facilitating meaning-making. Memorisation is not rote repetition but deep internalisation that frees the storyteller to be fully present and responsive to children (Bertoldi 2025a: 153). Familiarisation with the picturebook and the performance can contribute to self-efficacy for the teacher who can thus focus better on the interaction with the children.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting
• What would it mean to internalise this book so deeply that I can be fully engaged with the children rather than dependent on the page? • What are the rhythms, patterns, and key moments I need to embody?
PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting
• Can we rehearse together, helping each other become so familiar with the texts that we can focus on interaction rather than reading? • How can we practise to orient attention dialogically?

- What feedback can we offer each other about eye contact, engagement, and responsiveness to our audience?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How does memorisation free me to maintain eye contact with children, perceiving their engagement, interest, or wonder?
- How can I follow children's curiosity and interests while scaffolding their exploration of the text?
- How does deep familiarity with the book enable spontaneous, dialogic interaction rather than scripted performance?

3.6. Preparing and Rehearsing as Dialogic Practice

Preparing and rehearsing the read-aloud several times before the event with children ensures multiple dimensions of readiness. This rehearsal is not about perfecting a fixed script but rather about developing the flexibility and confidence needed to engage dialogically. Rehearsal includes: (a) developing familiarity with both visual and verbal texts and identifying formulaic expressions needed for managing group dynamics and using read-aloud talk; (b) reflecting on voice quality, speed, movement, gestures and facial expressions, using voice recording and/or videorecording to identify and control coherence between modes; and (c) pre-selecting categories of read-aloud talk that provide children with opportunities to join in, while planning moments when children can respond, react, answer, move, without interrupting the performance's flow (Bertoldi 2025a: 153-154).

3.6.1. Building Familiarity and Facilitating Language

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- What formulaic expressions will I need for managing group dynamics (e.g., "Let's look together", "Who can tell me...?", "Wait, let's see…")?
- How can I become fluent in both the book's language and the language of dialogic facilitation? Which picturebook-specific moments, images, or multimodal features might require particular questions or prompts, and how can I anticipate these in my planning?
- What transitions will I need between moments of reading and moments of interaction?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- What facilitative expressions do we find useful in our different teaching contexts?
- Can we create a shared repertoire of phrases that invite participation, acknowledge contributions, and sustain dialogue?
- Alongside these more general dialogic prompts, what picturebook-specific questions need to be anticipated and prepared, arising from the particular images, narrative moments, and multimodal features of the book?
- How do different types of dialogic questions (e.g., exploratory, interpretive, or justificatory) support children's meaning-making during read-alouds?
- How do these facilitative expressions and question types work differently across our cultural and linguistic contexts, and what can we learn from each other's ways of inviting, acknowledging, and building on children's responses?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How will familiar facilitative expressions create a predictable, safe structure within which children can take dialogic risks?
- Do my phrases genuinely invite participation ("What do you think?" "Tell us more") or do they mask closed questions?
- How can formulaic expressions support rather than constrain the spontaneity of dialogue?

3.6.2. Reflecting on Multimodal Coherence Through Recording

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- How coherent are my voice quality, gestures, movements, and facial expressions?
- Can I record myself and reflect critically on what I can see and hear?
- Do my modes work in harmony or do they send conflicting messages?
- Are there distracting or irrelevant gestures I should eliminate?
- Where do I see alignment between what I intend to communicate and what my body actually conveys?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- What do we notice about coherence between modes in each other's performances?
- Where do we see alignment or dissonance between gesture and voice, between facial expression and verbal content?
- How can we support each other in eliminating distracting elements while strengthening meaningful multimodal combinations?
- Can we develop shared criteria for evaluating coherence?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How does multimodal coherence support children's meaning-making and engagement?
- When modes align – when gesture, voice, gaze, and facial expression all point in the same direction – how does this create clarity for children?
- When there is productive tension between modes, how might this stimulate dialogic inquiry and deeper engagement with complexity?

3.6.3. Planning Read-Aloud Talk and Participation Moments

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- Which categories of read-aloud talk (questioning, commenting, extending, connecting) will enhance meaning and expand content?
- Which picturebook-specific moments, images, or multimodal features invite particular forms of talk or questioning?
- Where will I create openings for children to join in through verbal responses, gesture, sound effects, movement?
- How can I balance advance planning with openness to children's spontaneous contributions? Where are the natural breathing spaces in the text?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- What types of read-aloud talk do we each plan to use?
- How do different cultural traditions shape our approaches to questioning (open vs. closed), commenting (evaluative vs. wondering), and extending (building on children's ideas)?
- Can we learn from each other's diverse repertoires?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How do different forms of read-aloud talk create different dialogic spaces?
- When do open-ended questions ("What do you think?" "What surprises you?") invite exploration and divergent thinking?
- When do focused questions ("Can you find...?" "What colour is...?") scaffold understanding and build confidence?
- How can I ascribe value to individual differences in how children choose to participate (some verbally, some gesturally, others through attentive silence) without privileging any single mode of contribution?

3.7. Creating a Welcoming Dialogic Environment

Creating a welcoming environment for children and being open to communication can help storytellers effectively promote interaction. Smiling conveys empathy, happiness, and willingness to interact. Posture and proxemics are crucial, as they show the level of interest, attentiveness, and engagement with interlocutors. Friendly and pleasant tones of voice create a positive atmosphere, making children feel comfortable and at ease. Effective combinations of voice features, facial expressions, proxemics, and gaze contribute to creating rapport between storytellers and children, making the read-aloud performance an enjoyable and memorable experience (Bertoldi 2025a: 153-154).

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- What does "welcoming" mean in this specific context, with these specific children?
- How can my smile, posture, proxemics, and voice tone communicate genuine openness and readiness for dialogue?
- What might make children feel safe enough to take risks, ask questions, or offer unexpected contributions?
- How do I want children to feel during the read-aloud?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- How do we each create welcoming environments differently, shaped by our cultural backgrounds and teaching contexts?
- What can we learn from different cultural approaches to warmth, appropriate proximity, and engagement?
- How do norms about smiling, eye contact, and physical distance vary across our contexts, and how can this awareness help us understand the diverse ways children might respond to us?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How does a welcoming environment become a genuinely dialogic space where children feel their contributions matter?

- Do children sense that I am engaging "with" them rather than performing "for" them?
- Does my posture communicate "I am here to listen as much as to speak"?
- How do effective combinations of voice, facial expressions, proxemics, and gaze create the kind of rapport that enables authentic, rather than performative, dialogue?

3.8. Using Gaze to Perceive Engagement and Sustain Dialogue

Contemplating the function of gaze in read-aloud performances can help storytellers understand how it can be used to 'perceive' the children's engagement during the read-aloud: their interest, involvement, enthusiasm, boredom, and excitement offer constant feedback to the storyteller. Reflecting on the relevance of eye contact between teacher storytellers and children can contribute to promoting engagement and communicating to all children that they are considered fully-fledged agents and active participants during the performance. Gaze is not simply about looking but about seeing and being seen, about recognition and acknowledgement (Bertoldi 2025a: 154). Through gaze, every child can feel involved and a protagonist in the read-aloud event and called to participate in the dialogic interaction.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting

- What are the functions of gaze in dialogue?
- How can I use eye contact not just to transmit but also to perceive, to notice engagement, interest, involvement, confusion, enthusiasm, or withdrawal?
- What does it mean to truly see children rather than simply look in their direction? How can gaze become a form of listening?

PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting

- How do we each use and interpret gaze differently?
- What cultural norms shape our eye contact patterns, when direct gaze signals respect or disrespect, engagement or challenge?
- How can we help each other understand that gaze in dialogue is not about surveillance but about holding space, about communicating "I see you, I acknowledge you"?
- How does gaze function in our own peer dialogue, when do we make eye contact, when do we look away, and what does this communicate?

ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class

- How does eye contact communicate to each child that they are a fully-fledged agent and active participant, not merely a passive recipient?
- How can my gaze invite rather than evaluate, welcome rather than judge?
- How do I notice children's subtle signals – a furrowed brow, a slight lean forward, a glance towards a peer – and respond dialogically to what I see?
- Can I perceive children's engagement without my gaze becoming intrusive or demanding?

3.9. Valuing Children's Multimodal and Plurilingual Repertoires

Reflecting on the importance of giving children the opportunity to interact through their multimodal and plurilingual repertoires (i.e., FL/AL, own language(s), other languages,

voice sounds, gesture, body movements, focused gaze, attentive silence) can support teacher storytellers in recognising children's existing knowledge and linguistic resources as assets. This recognition that children bring rich and varied resources to interaction is fundamental for dialogic pedagogy. When children can draw on their full communicative repertoires, they become active meaning-makers rather than passive language learners (Bertoldi 2025a: 154).

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting
• How can I create opportunities for children to interact through their full multimodal and plurilingual repertoires? • Am I prepared to value not only verbal responses in FL/AL, but also contributions in my own language(s), in other languages, through gesture, through sound effects, through attentive silence? • What messages do my planning decisions send about which of these forms of participation "count"?
PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting
• What multimodal and plurilingual resources do we each bring to our own dialogue in COIL/telecollaboration? • How can our first-hand experiences of negotiating meaning across languages and modes help us better understand children's experience? • How can we support each other in genuinely valuing all forms of participation, including the use of different languages?
ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class
• How am I noticing, interpreting, validating children's diverse ways of participating? • Am I truly listening to silence as a form of engagement? • Am I recognising gesture, gaze, facial expression, body movement, and the use of children's own language(s) as legitimate, valuable contributions to dialogue, rather than as precursors to verbal participation in FL/AL? • How can I create space for children to draw on their knowledge and plurilingual abilities as assets, trusting that meaning can be made across and between languages and modes?

3.10. Respecting Socio-Cultural Differences in Dialogic Interaction

Considering how verbal and non-verbal repertoires are influenced by socio-cultural variables is crucial for storytellers seeking to understand and interpret the interactions of different participant groups (in terms of age and other variables), along with their socio-cultural and multimodal backgrounds and expectations. It is also essential to respect individual differences in the way each child establishes a relationship with the storyteller and the other children and interacts with the picturebook. There is no single "correct" way to participate in dialogue; rather, there are multiple culturally shaped ways of being present, attentive, engaged, and responsive. Dialogic pedagogy requires cultural humility and responsiveness to difference (García & Li Wei 2014; Bertoldi 2025a: 154). One of the several instances of cultural and individual differences in dialogue is the use of gestures and facial expressions that can be used with more or less emphasis during picturebook mediation.

INNER DIALOGUE: planning, anticipating, noticing, reflecting
• How are verbal and non-verbal repertoires influenced by socio-cultural variables? • What assumptions do I bring about "appropriate" participation, turn-taking, proximity, eye contact, gesture, and silence? • What do I need to unlearn? • What do I need to learn about the specific children I will engage with? • How can I approach cultural differences with genuine curiosity and humility rather than with assumptions about deficit or deviance?
PEER DIALOGUE: co-designing, reflecting
• What have we learned from each other about cultural differences in communication and interaction? • How do expectations about participation, appropriate proximity, eye contact patterns, volume, turn-taking, and the meaning of silence vary across our contexts? • How has our COIL/telecollaboration experience revealed our own cultural assumptions and helped us develop greater awareness and flexibility? • How can this cross-cultural dialogue prepare us to respect and learn from children's diverse ways of engaging?
ENACTED DIALOGUE: interacting in class
• Am I respecting individual differences in how each child establishes connection with me, with peers, and with the picturebook? • Can I recognise that a child who rarely speaks may be deeply engaged? • Can I recognise that a child who moves constantly may be intensely focused? • Can I recognise that a child who avoids eye contact may be showing respect? • How can dialogue remain genuinely open to multiple valid, culturally shaped ways of being and communicating?

4. Concluding Reflections on Embodied Dialogue for Teacher Education

The purpose of the paper has been to identify which DE practices and principles can be considered more relevant for mediating picturebooks during read-aloud performances in relation to the educational context in English FL/AL. By exploring dialogic education as an embodied practice, the paper has offered innovative reflections and guidelines across three interconnected levels: the dialogic relationships between student teachers and teacher educators, peer dialogue among student teachers in the teacher education class or in COIL/telecollaboration contexts, and enacted dialogue between student teachers and children during picturebook mediation (Figure 3). What emerges is not a linear sequence but a recursive, spiralling relationship in which each dimension of dialogue informs and transforms the others.

The guidelines presented for picturebook selection and mediation exemplify this recursive quality and demonstrate that shared principles of embodied dialogue inform teacher education. Beginning with inner dialogue, that is, individual reflection on how to orchestrate multimodal resources, the guidelines expand into peer dialogue in COIL/telecollaboration or in presence, where diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives enrich collective understanding. Both forms of dialogue then shape and are reshaped by enacted dialogue with children, whose embodied responses continually challenge and expand pedagogical under-

standing. By positioning agency and mediation at the centre of dialogic interaction, Figure 1 captures this ecology, which lies at the core of the present article and gives explicit attention to embodied and multimodal dimensions often ignored or neglected in the theory and practice of dialogic education.

By recontextualising established practices of dialogic approaches (DIALLS n.d., *Thinking Together Project* 2025) as shared principles of embodied dialogue (Table 1 and Section 3), we posit that authentic dialogue is inherently multimodal: intonation, gesture, gaze, facial expression, proxemics, and body movement constitute meaning-making in their own right. This extends mainstream approaches to dialogic education from a predominantly logocentric perspective towards an explicitly embodied and multimodal model of dialogue. This theoretical re-contextualisation of dialogue as embodied and multimodal practice is particularly relevant in FL/AL contexts, where children's emerging linguistic competence makes them highly attuned to paralinguistic and embodied cues. The paper also contributes to teacher education for FL/AL contexts and picturebook mediation in particular, since learning to orchestrate non-verbal modes coherently becomes as fundamental as learning to ask productive questions or to build on ideas verbally to establish the dialogic relationship with children. We believe that the teacher education classroom thus becomes a "multimodal rehearsal space" for dialogic principles and practices where student teachers can identify, adopt, and reflect upon embodied and performed communication before enacting those dialogic interactions with children. COIL/telecollaboration offers particularly rich learning contexts, as encounters with diverse cultural norms around gaze, proximity, gesture, and silence become opportunities to develop the cultural humility and multimodal flexibility that dialogic pedagogy requires. Learning to teach dialogically is itself a dialogic process that is embodied, multimodal, intercultural, and distributed across multiple planes. Student teachers do not learn by first acquiring principles abstractly and then applying them, but through authentic participation in dialogic interactions at all three levels simultaneously. This paper suggests that FL/AL teacher education requires creating conditions for dialogic encounters across diversity and supporting the development of embodied competences to facilitate such encounters with children. It also implies that the whole of student teacher learning practice must attend to multimodal dimensions: the focus should rest not only on what student teachers say, but also on how they say it and how they listen to students and peers with their whole bodies, how they use gaze to invite rather than evaluate, and how they orchestrate modes while leaving space for others' contributions.

In recontextualising dialogic education from primarily logocentric to explicitly embodied practice, we aim not to prescribe new rules but to invite ongoing inquiry into how meaning is made together through a rich orchestration of all communicative resources. Teacher education for dialogic, intercultural, plurilingual classrooms centres on students and teachers being fully engaged, with their whole selves, in attentive and respectful relationships with others.

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Reimagining Landscapes of the Mind: Trespassing Borders and Relational Futures in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*

Abstract I: Questo contributo analizza *The Nature of Blood* (1997) di Caryl Phillips come esplorazione del superamento e della ridefinizione dei confini attraverso appartenenza, memoria e amore. Muovendo dai *global trespassers* di John McLeod, dalla critica decoloniale della *modernity/coloniality matrix of power* e dalla distinzione di Riane Eisler tra sistemi di dominio e di *partnership*, mostra come Phillips decostruisca concezioni essenzialiste di razza, nazione, identità e storia. Attraverso Stephan ed Eva Stern, gli ebrei di Portobuffolè e un Otello riscritto, il romanzo recupera storie dimenticate e immagina forme di convivenza fondate su relazione, reciprocità e cura, invitando a reimmaginare futuri più inclusivi e orientati alla *partnership*.

Abstract II: This article examines Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997) as an exploration of trespassing and reimagining borders through belonging, memory, and love. Drawing on John McLeod's "global trespassers", decolonial critiques of the "modernity/coloniality matrix of power" and Riane Eisler's distinction between "dominator" and "partnership" systems, it argues that Phillips dismantles essentialist notions of race, nation, identity, and history. Through the stories of Stephan and Eva Stern, the Jews of Portobuffolè, and a rewritten Othello, the novel recovers forgotten histories and imagines coexistence grounded in encounter, reciprocity, and care, inviting readers to reimagine more inclusive and partnership-oriented futures.

Keywords: Trespassing borders, partnership, relationality, decoloniality, Caryl Phillips.

1. Introduction

"Landscapes of the mind" are not geographical locations but imaginative spaces through which literature enables us to rethink the worlds we inhabit. They emerge whenever inherited narratives are rewritten, forgotten histories are recovered, or established certainties are questioned. In many respects, they also extend one of the foundational insights of postcolonial studies. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin famously argued:

> A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the

> concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (2002: 8).

Rather than reproducing the world as it is, literature possesses the capacity to imagine alternative forms of belonging, revealing that identities, communities, and histories are never fixed entities but dynamic and complex processes of encounter and transformation.

Few contemporary writers explore this imaginative potential more powerfully than Caryl Phillips. Throughout his literary career, Phillips has persistently challenged the narratives through which Europe has represented itself[1], exposing the silences that underpin its ideals of civilisation, democracy, and cultural unity[2]. His fiction returns repeatedly to those histories and subjects that have been marginalised, displaced or erased, exposing the structures of representation through which, in Gayatri C. Spivak's formulation, "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988: 308). In doing so, Phillips demonstrates that exclusion is never an isolated historical phenomenon but a recurring structure embedded within Western modernity itself.

Published in 1997, *The Nature of Blood* arguably represents the culmination of this project. Rather than recounting a single historical experience, the novel interweaves Jewish, African, and European histories across five centuries, juxtaposing apparently unrelated narratives into a fragmented yet profoundly interconnected whole. Through this polyphonic structure, Phillips dismantles myths of racial purity, stable identity, and linear history, revealing instead how mechanisms of exclusion continuously resurface across different temporal and geographical contexts. The novel therefore questions not only the violence of racism and antisemitism but, more fundamentally, the epistemological assumptions that sustain every attempt to classify human beings into fixed categories.

Yet *The Nature of Blood* does considerably more than expose exclusion. Alongside its critique of domination and violence, the novel repeatedly imagines alternative forms of relation grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and ethical encounter. Refugees, migrants, survivors, racialised subjects and exiles are not represented merely as victims of history but as figures through whom new possibilities of belonging become imaginable. Literature consequently emerges as a space where suppressed memories are recovered, canonical narratives are rewritten, and more inclusive visions of communal life may begin to take shape.

This article argues that Phillips constructs what may be described as "landscapes of the mind": imaginative and relational spaces in which identities are continuously rewritten through encounter rather than essentialist notions of race, nation, religion or origin. These landscapes challenge linear Western historiography and invite readers to reconsider the very categories through which history has traditionally been narrated.

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[1] As Bénédicte Ledent observes, any attempt to define Phillips through a single geographical or cultural category, "Caribbean, Black British, European, or even postcolonial – is bound to be unsatisfactory in the long term" (2017: 3), precisely because his writing constantly exceeds such classificatory frameworks.

[2] Phillips had already begun interrogating Europe and its exclusionary narratives in *The European Tribe* (1987), where he reverses the colonial gaze by turning it back upon Europe itself. See also: *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and *Colour Me English* (2011), which further develop his reflections on migration, identity and belonging.

To examine this process, the article combines John McLeod's (2024) concept of "trespassing borders" with the decolonial critique of the "modernity/coloniality matrix of power" and Riane Eisler's (1987) distinction between "dominator and partnership systems". Read together, these perspectives illuminate Phillips's rewriting of canonical texts and forgotten histories not simply as acts of literary revision[3], but as imaginative practices capable of rethinking inherited forms of representation and envisioning more relational and partnership-oriented futures. Phillips himself has explicitly described this rewriting as an attempt to destabilise the authority of the English canon. As he observed in an interview with Maria Festa:

> It is probably an attempt to engage with, and somehow destabilize, the English canon. If you can engage with it, but also make people try and see it in a new way, thus destabilizing it, you are inevitably taking away some of its authority […] It's a way of making the reader see things afresh, which is after all what literature is, a way of making you see the world anew (2020: 166).

Building on this authorial emphasis on "destabilisation", the present article shifts attention from the crossing of borders itself to the forms of relationship that become imaginable once inherited boundaries have been unsettled. Rather than approaching displacement, hybridity, memory, and historical rewriting as its ultimate analytical categories, it examines how Phillips mobilises them to envision relational modes of belonging grounded in encounter, reciprocity and care.

2. Trespassing Borders: Towards Relational and Partnership Futures

John McLeod's notion of the global trespasser provides the starting point for the integrated relational framework developed in this study. In *Global Trespassers* (2024), McLeod argues that mobility is never entirely free but always "sanctioned", simultaneously authorised and restricted through cultural, political, racial, and epistemological boundaries. Consequently, trespassing extends beyond the crossing of geographical borders. It becomes an act of questioning the normative structures through which identities and relationships are organised. McLeod's formulation is particularly illuminating because it shifts attention from borders themselves to the relations they produce. As he argues, "to trespass is to threaten normative relations", opening "creative possibilities" for those who refuse to "stay put" within inherited identities (McLeod 2024: 13, 3). Trespassing therefore becomes both "a strategic challenge to authority" and "the negotiation of new ways of knowledge" (McLeod 2024: 14). Rather than understanding identity as fixed or culturally predetermined, McLeod proposes a notion of relating personhood, according to which subjects emerge through mutable, transgressive and continually evolving encounters with others.

This relational understanding closely resonates with the decolonial option. Long be-

[3] On the need to read Phillips beyond the conventional postcolonial paradigm of "writing back", see Ledent, who argues that his work should be approached "outside the usual 'writing back' paradigm" as it occupies a position that is simultaneously "outside and inside the Western canon" (2017: 6).

fore McLeod's study, decolonial thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa[4], Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo[5], Madina Tlostanova and Catherine Walsh had already demonstrated that colonialism survives beyond formal empire through what Quijano (2007) terms "the modernity/coloniality matrix of power": an enduring epistemic structure that regulates whose histories, knowledges, identities, and ways of inhabiting the world are recognised as legitimate. From this perspective, borders are never merely territorial; they are cognitive, cultural, and affective constructions that organise perception itself. As Mignolo and Walsh observe:

> Decoloniality […] does not […] imply the absence of coloniality but rather the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living; that is, an otherwise in plural (2018: 81).

Decoloniality therefore represents neither a final destination nor the simple reversal of colonial power, but a continuous practice of opening alternative relational possibilities. In this sense, Tlostanova and Mignolo's invitation to "learn to unlearn" (2012: 1) becomes both an epistemological and an ethical gesture: it requires questioning inherited certainties in order to recover those memories, narratives and forms of knowledge that dominant histories have systematically silenced or marginalised. Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* performs precisely this decolonial gesture. By rewriting Shakespeare's *Othello*, revisiting the Holocaust through forgotten perspectives, recovering the history of the Jews of Portobuffolè, and bringing to light the experiences of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, Phillips demonstrates that literature may itself become an act of epistemic trespassing. Hidden stories do not simply supplement official history; they transform our understanding of history itself.

Such relational thinking also recalls Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), where identities emerge through unpredictable, rhizomatic encounters rather than singular origins. Phillips similarly constructs identities that remain fluid, interconnected and resistant to essentialist definitions. His protagonists never inhabit isolated narratives but continuously enter into dialogue across historical, geographical and cultural boundaries.

Yet relation alone is insufficient. As Riane Eisler (1987, 1995) reminds us, relationships may reproduce domination as easily as they may foster reciprocity and partnership. Her distinction between dominator and partnership systems therefore provides the ethical horizon of the present reading. While dominator systems are sustained through hierarchy, exclusion, violence, and fear, partnership systems privilege care, dialogue, mutual recognition, and cooperation. The crucial question raised by Phillips's novel is therefore not simply whether borders can be crossed, but what kinds of relationships become possible once they have been crossed.

As Eisler and Douglas P. Fry argue, human beings are not biologically destined for

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[4] Gloria Anzaldúa defines the *border* as "a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge", while the *borderland* is "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (1987: 3). Rather than conceiving borders as fixed geographical limits, Anzaldúa understands them as fluid spaces of negotiation, hybridity and transformation.

[5] Walter Mignolo's theorisation of coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience has been developed across several influential works. See Mignolo (2003, 2011a, 2011b, 2012).

violence or domination. Rather, evolutionary, neuroscientific, and anthropological evidence suggests that our species is predisposed towards empathy, care and cooperative relationships, receiving 'neurochemical rewards of pleasure' when giving or receiving empathic love (Eisler & Fry 2019). This position finds further support in Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöller's (2008) "biology of love", which understands love not merely as a private emotion but as a fundamental relational disposition through which the other is recognised as a legitimate other in coexistence. From this perspective, mutual recognition, care and cooperation are constitutive possibilities of human social existence rather than merely idealistic alternatives to domination. Partnership is therefore not a utopian aspiration but a biologically and culturally viable human possibility.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a relational framework for reading *The Nature of Blood*. McLeod explains how identities trespass inherited borders; decolonial thought reveals why those borders persist; Glissant illuminates the plurality of relational identities; and Eisler offers the ethical distinction through which those encounters may be understood as either reproducing domination or opening the possibility of partnership. The following analysis therefore examines Phillips's novel as an imaginative practice of rewriting: a literary act that questions inherited certainties in order to reimagine more communal, relational, and partnership-oriented futures.

3. *The Nature of Blood*

The fragmented architecture of *The Nature of Blood* invites readers to move across distant histories, cultures, and identities without allowing any of them to remain isolated. Rather than portraying persecution as the experience of a single people or historical moment, Phillips reveals its recurrence across different historical and geographical contexts, exposing the fragile foundations upon which notions of nation, race, and belonging have traditionally been constructed. The novel gradually dismantles every illusion of purity and stable identity, suggesting instead that belonging cannot be guaranteed by territory alone but must be continually negotiated through ethical relations with others. Stephan Stern's story introduces this central paradox and establishes the interpretative trajectory of the novel.

3.1. Reimagining Belonging: Stephan Stern, Malka and the Illusion of the Promised Land

The novel both opens and closes with Stephan Stern, whose trajectory frames Phillips's reflection on homeland, identity and the limits of national belonging. Having dedicated his life to the Zionist project, Stephan initially appears to embody the possibility of renewal after centuries of Jewish persecution. Israel represents not simply a geographical destination but the promise of security, historical justice, and communal restoration. Yet Phillips progressively dismantles this expectation, revealing that even projects founded upon liberation may reproduce the very mechanisms of exclusion they seek to overcome. The novel does not question the legitimacy of the desire for a homeland; rather, it questions the assumption that belonging can ever be secured by political borders alone.

Stephan's awakening arrives only in old age, when memory compels him to confront the personal cost of the choices that had shaped his life:

> He sat heavily and tried not to think of his wife and child. But it was useless. Every day, assaulted by loneliness. Every day, eaten up with guilt. His only companion was memory [...] He now understood that to remember too much is, indeed, a form of madness. And he understood that people are not made to live alone, neither when things are good, nor when they are bad (Phillips 1997: 211)[6].

This passage marks a decisive turning point in Stephan's journey. Throughout his life he had believed that belonging could be achieved through the construction of a national homeland; only at the end does he realise that the deepest form of exile originated not in geographical displacement but in the abandonment of those relationships that once constituted his true community. Memory therefore becomes more than recollection: it functions as an ethical space of self-recognition, exposing the inadequacy of every identity founded exclusively upon territory, ideology or historical destiny. The homeland imagined as the culmination of collective redemption ultimately reveals itself as another borderland, where inclusion continues to depend upon exclusion and where political liberation remains inseparable from personal loss.

Phillips thus shifts the meaning of home from a territorial reality to a relational condition. Stephan's tragedy lies not in the failure of Zionism as such, but in the recognition that no national project, however necessary or historically justified, can replace the human bonds sacrificed in its pursuit. Belonging emerges instead through reciprocity, care and shared humanity rather than through the possession of land or the affirmation of collective identity[7].

Stephan's encounter with Malka subsequently transforms this personal realisation into a broader historical and political reflection. If Stephan exposes the limits of national belonging, Malka reveals how communities founded upon histories of persecution may themselves reproduce new structures of domination. Through her testimony Phillips introduces one of the least discussed episodes in the history of modern Israel: the migration of Ethiopian Jews, welcomed as descendants of the House of Israel yet rapidly marginalised because of their ethnicity, cultural background, and social condition. Malka recalls the hope that accompanied the journey towards Zion:

> On the plane there were no seats. Just mattresses [...] We were frightened [...] My sister and I wondered, in this new land, would our babies be born white? We, the people of the House of Israel, we were going home. No more wandering. No longer landless [...] What is your name? Malka. Malka, do not be shy. You are going home. And when we arrived, and stepped down off the plane, we all kissed the ground. We thanked God for returning us to Zion (201).

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[6] All subsequent references to *The Nature of Blood* refer to this edition. Page numbers will hereafter be given parenthetically.

[7] Phillips's reflections on Israel in his interview with Maria Festa further illuminate his critique of identities constructed around a single organising principle: "I have been to Israel a couple of times and didn't feel comfortable and I left the country early. I simply didn't like the idea of a state where identity was principally built around just one thing. I saw young Israeli children carrying machine guns who were militarized and I thought, 'no, don't do that to the children, don't do that to them. This is not healthy'" (2020: 170).

The emotional force of this passage lies in the tension between expectation and reality. Zion is imagined as the end of exile, the place where displacement finally gives way to belonging. Yet Phillips deliberately juxtaposes this hope with the subsequent experience of discrimination, revealing that historical suffering does not automatically generate more inclusive communities. Victimhood, he suggests, offers no guarantee against the reproduction of hierarchy, prejudice or exclusion.

By recovering the largely forgotten history of Ethiopian Jews, Phillips also rewrites the history of Israel itself. Rather than celebrating the nation exclusively as a refuge after the Holocaust, he reveals the contradictions that accompanied its formation and questions every narrative founded upon ethnic or cultural homogeneity. Malka herself recognises that entry into the promised land was already conditioned by mechanisms of selection: "Not everybody was here. It was impossible to take everybody. Relatives were being abandoned. [...] I was lucky, for my parents, and my brother and sister, were relatively healthy" (199).

The language of rescue is therefore inseparable from the language of exclusion. Even within a community created in response to persecution, distinctions between those considered worthy of inclusion and those left behind continue to operate. Phillips thus demonstrates that the logic of domination is not confined to colonialism or fascism; it re-emerges whenever human value is determined through categories of purity, usefulness, race or difference. Malka's final reflections expose this contradiction with remarkable clarity:

> This Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did. The man at the hostel, he said to us, 'Welcome, my black brothers and sisters. You are helping us to understand what we are doing here'. Is this true? Are we helping you? I know now what a stamp is. I can use a telephone. I, too, can turn night into day by simply pressing a switch. I wear shoes. I have seen a highway. But please. My people never killed themselves (207-208).

The distinction between the Holy Land and "the people" is crucial. Phillips does not condemn the idea of home itself; he questions the human relationships through which that idea is enacted. The failure lies not in the aspiration to build a community, but in the persistence of hierarchical forms of thinking that transform difference into exclusion. Stephan's encounter with Malka therefore becomes the ethical centre of this section of the novel. Together their stories shift the meaning of belonging away from territory, blood, and national identity towards a relational understanding of community founded upon reciprocity, mutual recognition and shared responsibility. Phillips consequently begins to imagine an alternative to the exclusionary logic that has shaped so many historical projects of belonging: a community grounded not in purity but in relation.

3.2. Reimagining Memory: Eva Stern and the Jews of Portobuffolè

If Stephan and Malka expose the fragility of belonging whenever it is grounded in territory or national identity, the story of Stephan's niece, Eva Stern, shifts Phillips's attention towards another form of trespassing: the recovery of memories that history has attempted to erase. By linking uncle and niece across generations, Phillips suggests that exile, trauma,

and unbelonging are not isolated experiences but inheritances that reverberate across family histories as well as across collective memory. Throughout *The Nature of Blood*, remembrance is never presented as a nostalgic return to the past. Rather, memory becomes an ethical act through which forgotten lives are restored to visibility and silenced histories are reinserted into the collective imagination. Phillips's fragmented narrative therefore performs what the theoretical framework has defined as a practice of "learning to unlearn" (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012: 1): readers are invited to abandon linear and selective understandings of European history in order to recognise the plurality of voices that have traditionally remained outside its official archive.

Eva's narrative embodies this process more painfully than any other character in the novel. Having survived Bergen-Belsen after witnessing the extermination of her entire family, she appears initially to represent the possibility of renewal. Her transfer to Cyprus and subsequent arrival in England seem to promise a new beginning after the catastrophe of the Holocaust. Yet Phillips deliberately frustrates this expectation. Gerry's betrayal is not presented as the simple failure of a romantic relationship but as the final denial of belonging. Having already lost her family, her homeland and her community, Eva also loses the possibility of imagining a future built upon reciprocity and love. Her tragedy therefore lies less in deception than in the impossibility of reconstructing a relational self after systematic dehumanisation. Her final words encapsulate this longing for a home that no longer exists:

> I know that somewhere, buried deep inside me, is a place where I will be able to lay down in peace [...] Mama. Papa. I do not know in what strange land you are buried. Or what stubbled growth or building defaces the earth above your precious bones. But I am tired. And I want to come home [...] Everything will be fine. Please. Don't worry (198).

Home, here, ceases to designate a geographical destination and becomes instead an impossible landscape of memory. Eva does not seek England, Palestine or any other national space; she longs for the relationships violently erased by genocide. Phillips thus demonstrates that the most devastating consequence of the Holocaust was not only physical extermination but the destruction of the human bonds through which identity and belonging become imaginable. The desire to "come home" ultimately expresses the longing to recover a community that history has rendered irretrievable.

Eva's testimony invites comparison with one of the foundational narratives of Holocaust memory, *Anne Frank's Diary*. Like Anne Frank, Eva is a young Jewish woman whose voice survives the destruction of her family; like Anne, she passes through Bergen-Belsen, where silence itself becomes a strategy of survival. The comparison, however, also illuminates the significant differences between the two narratives. Whereas Anne's diary has become one of the most powerful symbols of hope, Eva's story resists any consolatory interpretation. Liberation from the concentration camp does not coincide with liberation from trauma. Instead, Phillips exposes the enduring psychological violence that persists long after the physical end of persecution, reminding readers that survival alone cannot restore the relational world destroyed by genocide.

This commitment to recovering neglected memories reaches its fullest expression in the episode of the Jews of Portobuffolè. At first glance, the narrative appears disconnected from the rest of the novel; yet it performs one of Phillips's most radical acts of historical rewriting. By reconstructing the fifteenth-century persecution of a Jewish community in northern Italy, Phillips retrieves an almost forgotten episode of European history and places it alongside the Holocaust, colonialism, and contemporary racism. The effect is not to equate different historical events but to reveal the persistence of recurring mechanisms of exclusion across time.

As Phillips recalls, many of these Jewish families had migrated from Cologne seeking greater security within the Venetian Republic, believing that Venice offered protection from persecution. Yet, despite this promise, "they arrived as foreigners, and foreigners they remained" (50). Once again, migration fails to guarantee belonging. The community becomes the object of suspicion, religious prejudice, and economic resentment until three Jewish men are falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Christian child and condemned to death. Before their execution, one of them quietly rejects the fabricated accusation:

> We rise with the sun [...] My brothers, do not let them see you weeping like this. Today, we must leave this cell and begin our final journey, but let us do so with dignity [...] We are going home [...] (*I tell you, I have never heard of this boy, Sebastian New. I have never seen such a boy. I know not what you are talking about*) (181-182).

The dignity of this testimony contrasts sharply with the irrational violence surrounding it. Phillips is less interested in reconstructing the historical event than in exposing the mechanisms through which prejudice becomes accepted as historical truth. Rumour, fear and inherited stereotypes prove stronger than evidence, allowing fabricated narratives to justify exclusion and death. By restoring this forgotten episode to literary memory, Phillips challenges the selective nature of European historiography and reminds readers that persecution did not begin with the twentieth century but forms part of a much longer genealogy of intolerance. Rather than simply recovering a forgotten episode, Phillips imagines what Cecile Sandten defines as a "post-empire imaginary"[8], a narrative space where Europe's hidden histories are brought into dialogue rather than organised through exclusionary hierarchies.

Read together, Eva and the Jews of Portobuffolè illuminate the ethical function of Phillips's rewriting. Both narratives recover lives that dominant historical accounts have marginalised, refusing to allow them to disappear into silence. If Eva restores an individual voice to the history of the Holocaust, Portobuffolè restores an entire community to European cultural memory. In both cases, literature becomes an act of resistance against oblivion. Phillips does not simply remember forgotten histories; he reimagines them, inviting readers to question inherited narratives and to recognise memory itself as an ethical form of relational responsibility towards those whom history has attempted to erase.

[8] Sandten describes Phillips's project as one that "extends, complements, and fills in the gaps of collective memory, […] creating a post-empire imaginary that 'writes back' to, but also transcends, the former centres of colonial discourse" (2015: 345).

3.3. Reimagining Love: Rewriting Othello Beyond the Borders of Race

If Eva and the Jews of Portobuffolè recover forgotten memories from the margins of European history, Phillips's rewriting of Shakespeare's *Othello* represents the culmination of his ethical and imaginative project. Here, trespassing borders no longer concerns only geography or historical memory, but the literary *canon* itself. By rewriting one of the foundational texts of Western literature, Phillips demonstrates that canonical narratives are neither immutable nor complete: they too can be questioned, transformed and reimagined. As Maria Festa observes, although the protagonist is never explicitly named, his identity is ultimately confirmed by an editorial note referring to Shakespeare's tragedy (2020: 30). The omission is significant. Phillips is less interested in reproducing Shakespeare's Moor than in reconstructing the humanity that the tragic narrative ultimately destroys.

Like the other protagonists of *The Nature of Blood*, Othello initially experiences exclusion and unbelonging. Conscious of his African origins, he recognises that he remains an outsider within Venetian society: "I was clearly not one of their own" (129). At the same time, however, he proudly recalls his royal lineage, carrying his "blood" as a sign of identity and historical rootedness rather than racial superiority. Phillips immediately complicates this apparent certainty during a dinner at a Venetian senator's house, where one of the senator's sons provocatively reminds him of the presence of Black slaves in Venice. Othello responds:

> I countered with the information that I had once been held as a slave, yet, as unpleasant as this situation had been, I had survived to tell the tale. I watched this boy carefully and, deciding that the victory was already secured, I chose not to mention my royal blood, or the fact that many Romans and Greeks had also been held as slaves, and so the moment passed (126).

The exchange reveals that identity is never reducible to a single category. Royal blood, slavery, military prestige, and foreignness coexist within Othello's experience, resisting every essentialist definition. Phillips thus dismantles racial binaries while exposing the inadequacy of inherited notions of purity, origin and social hierarchy. As Alejandro Nadal-Ruiz observes, Phillips's Othello ultimately becomes "master of his narrative" (2021: 201), reclaiming the authority to narrate his own multifaceted identity and to challenge the cultural hierarchies that have traditionally defined him from the outside.

Yet Othello's greatest struggle is not his racial difference but his inability to understand the language of intimacy. Throughout this section, Phillips transforms Shakespeare's military hero into a man profoundly vulnerable before love. His deepest fear is not rejection because of the colour of his skin, but the possibility of failing to communicate with Desdemona and of misunderstanding the emotional language that binds two people together. Reflecting upon his own life, Othello confesses:

> After all, since the age of seven I had known only the power that comes through confident usage of the arm in the heat of battle. Despite my royal blood, the remote language of love had remained alien to me (142-143).

This confession fundamentally reorients Shakespeare's tragedy. Phillips suggests that violence is not Othello's natural condition; rather, it is the consequence of a world that has taught him the language of war but never that of love. The novel therefore shifts the centre of the narrative from military power to emotional vulnerability, presenting love not as weakness but as the most radical form of trespassing. To love another person is to cross the boundaries of race, language, culture, and identity without seeking to dominate or possess them.

Such a perspective resonates with Riane Eisler's distinction between dominator and partnership systems. Whereas domination is sustained through hierarchy, fear and control, partnership emerges through reciprocity, dialogue and mutual recognition. Phillips's rewriting repeatedly privileges this second possibility. Othello does not conquer Desdemona; he gradually learns to encounter her. Significantly, his desire to understand her letters leads him to the Venetian Jewish ghetto, where he seeks the help of a Jewish scholar. Once again, Phillips intertwines narratives that history and literature have traditionally kept apart. The Moor, the Jews, Venice, and Shakespeare cease to exist as separate stories and become part of a broader relational network founded upon dialogue and shared vulnerability. Unlike Shakespeare's tragedy, Phillips allows this encounter to culminate in hope rather than destruction:

> Then I fell to one knee and sealed our union with the tenderest of kisses. Was I truly the same man who had arrived lonely and unannounced? The same man who had sailed in a state of spellbound wonder right into the heart of this city-state? [...] The same man who had initially struggled with the language, and who had, at times, wondered if he would ever settle among these strange and forbidding people? (144).

This scene represents far more than a romantic conclusion. It symbolises the possibility of imagining relationships that are not determined by exclusion, suspicion or violence. Phillips rewrites Shakespeare's tragedy not to erase its ending but to demonstrate that every canonical narrative contains unrealised possibilities. A different future can be imagined because a different form of relation is possible.

Phillips nevertheless refuses a naïve optimism. The reader already knows that Othello's later desire for acceptance within Venetian society will once again expose him to the logic of possession, jealousy, and domination that ultimately shapes Shakespeare's tragedy. The possibility of partnership therefore remains fragile rather than guaranteed. Partnership is not presented as a stable condition that permanently supersedes domination, but as a contingent relational practice that remains vulnerable to the re-emergence of exclusion and violence. Yet this fragility is precisely the point. Throughout *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips repeatedly insists that belonging, memory and love are never fixed achievements but ethical practices that must be continually renewed. His rewriting of *Othello* ultimately becomes an invitation to imagine that even the most canonical stories, and the histories they continue to shape, may be rewritten through encounter, reciprocity and the courage to recognise the humanity of the Other.

In this sense, Othello's story mirrors what has been described as the novel's "flu-

id, horizontal model of relationships" (Nadal-Ruiz 2021: 212), a partnership architecture through which Phillips dismantles the traditional centre/margins opposition by weaving together previously disconnected histories.

4. Weaving Histories Beyond Linear Narratives

Phillips's project of trespassing representational borders extends beyond the novel's characters and historical episodes to shape the very form of *The Nature of Blood*. The fragmented structure of the novel refuses chronological progression, stable narrative perspectives and clearly separated historical narratives. Rather than organising events into self-contained chapters, Phillips constructs a continuous movement of memories, voices, and temporalities that interrupt, overlap and illuminate one another. Form itself thus becomes an ethical and political strategy: the novel dismantles the linear logic through which Western historiography has traditionally classified identities, histories and cultures into separate and self-sufficient categories. As Maria Festa observes, *The Nature of Blood* is Phillips's "most elaborate and challenging novel". The narration

> is not organized into chapters: it is an aggregate of historical occurrences and situations that occur over a large span of time between the fifteenth and the twentieth century [...] [Phillips's] reflections shift from Africa, which was at the centre of the European colonial expansion and the slave trade, to Europe, where the prejudice against Jews has its origin, persisted across the centuries and culminated in the murderous master race ideology of the German Nazis (Festa 2020: 28-29).

Phillips's narrative technique may therefore be understood as a weaving of relational histories rather than a succession of isolated events. Stories migrate across centuries just as his protagonists migrate across borders, generating unexpected encounters between Renaissance Venice, the Holocaust, colonialism, Zionism, and Shakespeare. Temporal distance is progressively dissolved, suggesting that prejudice, displacement, violence, and exclusion are not discrete historical episodes but recurring patterns that continually resurface under different political, cultural and ideological forms. The novel consequently invites readers to perceive history not as a linear sequence but as a network of echoes, interruptions and recurring human experiences.

This relational structure also challenges conventional expectations of narrative coherence. Characters often appear before they are identified; voices emerge without immediate explanation[9]; stories begin only to be interrupted by different temporalities before returning many pages later. Significantly, Othello himself remains unnamed for much of the narrative, while dictionary entries such as "Venice" (160), "Ghetto" (160), "Othello" (166), or "Suicide" (185) abruptly interrupt the flow of the text. These formal dislocations compel readers to

[9] Phillips's reflections on his creative process confirm the centrality of voice to his characterisation. As he explained in an interview with Maria Festa: "I don't even know I have a character fully realized until I hear the character's voice. The key element is the voice. […] I need to *feel* the rhythm when they're speaking. I need to know if they have an accent. Once I can hear the voice then I know that I have a character", Festa (2020: 168).

question the stability of the categories through which both literature and history have traditionally been organised. Identity itself becomes a process of discovery rather than a fixed point of departure.

Phillips's fragmented narrative therefore performs formally what the novel repeatedly argues thematically. If the protagonists trespass geographical, cultural and emotional borders, the text itself trespasses the borders separating genres, historical periods, canonical and marginal narratives, fiction and history, memory and testimony. The form refuses closure because human experience itself cannot be reduced to neat chronological or ideological divisions. Instead, the novel constructs what may be described as a relational archive in which forgotten lives, suppressed histories and canonical narratives coexist in continuous dialogue.

Ultimately, *The Nature of Blood* demonstrates that form is never merely aesthetic. The novel's fragmented architecture embodies its ethical vision, inviting readers to move across identities, histories and cultures with the same openness that its protagonists continuously seek. Phillips does not simply represent relationality through his characters; he asks readers to experience it through the very act of reading. By weaving together stories that initially appear disconnected, he transforms narrative itself into an act of trespassing and reimagining, suggesting that alternative futures can only emerge once the artificial borders separating histories, communities and memories have been dismantled.

5. Concluding Remarks

Throughout *The Nature of Blood*, Caryl Phillips demonstrates that borders are never merely geographical. They are historical, cultural, emotional, and epistemological constructions that shape the ways in which individuals and communities imagine themselves while excluding others. By bringing together Jewish, African and European histories, Phillips refuses the compartmentalisation upon which dominant historical narratives have long relied. Instead, he constructs a relational landscape in which seemingly distant experiences of exile, racism, persecution, migration, memory, and love continually illuminate one another. Trespassing, in this sense, becomes far more than the crossing of physical frontiers: it is an ethical and imaginative practice of questioning inherited certainties and reimagining alternative forms of coexistence.

Read through McLeod's notion of *trespassing*, the decolonial critique of the *modernity/coloniality matrix of power*, and Eisler's distinction between dominator and *partnership* systems, *The Nature of Blood* ultimately emerges as an invitation to rethink not only history but also the future. As Johny Pitts has observed, Phillips "connects dots that challenge collective amnesia about Empire and writes and rewrites black people into their own history with depth and nuance" (2017: 46). Phillips does not simply recover forgotten stories or rewrite Shakespeare's *Othello*; he reimagines the very conditions through which communities are formed. Belonging is no longer grounded in blood, territory, race or nation, but in the continual ethical practice of encounter, reciprocity and shared humanity. Literature itself becomes a borderland: an imaginative space where fixed identities dissolve, forgotten memories return and new possibilities of relation begin to emerge.

Significantly, Phillips concludes the novel not with triumph or reconciliation, but with an image of openness: "alone on the bench, his arms outstretched, reaching across the years" (212). This final gesture encapsulates the ethical vision that permeates the novel. Those outstretched arms do not embrace one nation, one culture or one history alone; they reach across centuries, borders, memories, and identities, affirming the possibility of relation where violence has produced separation. Ultimately, *The Nature of Blood* reminds us that the most radical act of trespassing is neither political nor geographical, but profoundly human: the willingness to recognise ourselves in the lives and stories of others. In doing so, Phillips invites readers not only to remember differently but also to reimagine more just, caring and partnership-oriented landscapes of the mind.

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Environmental Mindscapes: Cultural Mediation and Ecocritical Narratives in Digital Journalism

Abstract I: Il presente lavoro analizza il giornalismo ambientale digitale come forma di mediazione culturale. Muovendo dall'ecocritica, dai Translation Studies e dagli studi sulla comunicazione ambientale, introduce il concetto di *environmental mindscapes* al fine di esaminare come le realtà ecologiche vengano percepite, interpretate e negoziate. Lo studio analizza sei articoli ambientali pubblicati da *The Guardian* e *The Conversation* tra il 2025 e il 2026, concentrandosi su tre dimensioni interconnesse: luogo, crisi e responsabilità. Attraverso una lettura qualitativa e un'analisi lessicale, i risultati mostrano come il giornalismo digitale trasformi realtà ecologiche situate in narrazioni culturalmente significative, costruendo appartenenza, consapevolezza e coinvolgimento ambientale e orientando l'immaginazione di possibili futuri ecologici.

Abstract II: This article explores digital environmental journalism as a form of cultural mediation. Drawing on Ecocriticism, Translation Studies, and Environmental Communication, it introduces the concept of *environmental mindscapes* to examine how ecological realities are perceived, interpreted, and negotiated. The study analyses six environmental articles published by *The Guardian* and *The Conversation* between 2025 and 2026, focusing on three interconnected dimensions: place, crisis, and responsibility. Qualitative close reading and lexical analysis show how digital journalism transforms situated ecological realities into culturally meaningful narratives, constructing environmental belonging, awareness, and engagement, while shaping how readers imagine ecological change and possible environmental futures.

Keywords: Environmental mindscapes, cultural mediation, ecocriticism, digital journalism.

1. Introduction

Climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, and sustainability challenges have become increasingly prominent in contemporary public discourse, shaping political, cultural, and social agendas across the globe. Within this context, digital media have emerged as crucial sites for the circulation of ecological knowledge, enabling environmental concerns to circulate across geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Environmental journalism plays a particularly significant role in this process because it transforms

situated experiences of ecological change, scientific knowledge, and environmental events into narratives that can be accessed and interpreted by geographically dispersed audiences. Environmental communication, therefore, extends beyond the simple dissemination of scientific information: it mediates between expert knowledge, public discourse, and everyday understandings of environmental change (Hansen & Cox 2015; Davis *et al.* 2018; Cox & Pezzullo 2016).

This mediating function has important implications for the way environmental realities are perceived and imagined. Digital environmental narratives connect specific places, communities, ecosystems, and ecological events to broader debates concerning climate change, sustainability, biodiversity, and environmental justice. In doing so, they contribute to the construction of shared ecological imaginaries through which audiences interpret environmental transformations and their implications for human and more-than-human worlds. Environmental journalism can consequently be approached as a form of cultural mediation, through which situated ecological realities are selected, contextualised, framed, and narrativised for wider interpretive communities.

This perspective also resonates with Translation Studies, particularly with approaches that understand translation as extending beyond interlingual transfer to encompass processes of cultural negotiation and mediation. Esperança Bielsa and Susan Bassnett (2008) demonstrate the close relationship between journalism and translation, particularly in the processes through which news is selected, adapted, and circulated across linguistic and cultural contexts. From this perspective, journalistic practices may be understood as translational insofar as they relocate experiences, knowledge, values, and narratives from one communicative and cultural context into another. In environmental journalism, such processes acquire particular significance because ecological realities are frequently geographically situated while their implications are increasingly transnational.

The concept of landscape provides a further point of departure for this argument. Environmental realities are not encountered simply as neutral physical settings but are interpreted through cultural representations, memory, affect, and narrative. Landscapes may therefore function simultaneously as material environments and as repositories of cultural meaning. When such landscapes are transformed into digital narratives, their material and symbolic dimensions become available to audiences who may have no direct experience of the places represented. Digital journalism thus participates in a process through which local environmental realities acquire meanings that can circulate beyond their immediate geographical contexts.

This shift from the material landscape to its symbolic and narrative dimensions finds an important parallel in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theorisation of global cultural flows. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai introduces the notion of various "-scapes" – including ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes – to describe the fluid and disjunctive dimensions of contemporary globalisation.

> These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what […] I would call imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. An important fact of

> the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them (Appadurai 1996: 33).

Of particular relevance to the present study is the concept of mediascape, which refers to the images, narratives, and representations through which individuals construct their understanding of distant realities. Media do not simply reflect the world; they actively participate in the production of interpretive frameworks through which the world becomes intelligible. In other words, "discussing media simply from the point of view of its material conditions, or productions, is not enough. It is necessary to reach out to the realm of imagination and critically address it" (Granja do Amaral & Obute 2023: 4).

Building on these perspectives, this article introduces the notion of "environmental mindscapes" to describe the cognitive and cultural frameworks through which environmental realities are perceived, interpreted, and emotionally experienced. If landscapes refer to material environments and digital media provide the means through which representations of those environments circulate, environmental mindscapes designate the interpretive frameworks through which environmental narratives acquire meaning. They emerge through processes of mediation that transform geographically situated experiences into narratives capable of circulating across cultural and geographical boundaries.

This perspective can also be situated within recent theoretical developments in both Ecocriticism and Translation Studies. Ursula K. Heise's (2008) concept of "environmental imagination" highlights the transnational dimensions of ecological thinking and the growing need to understand environmental issues beyond strictly local frameworks. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's (2014) "material ecocriticism" emphasises the narrative agency of places, landscapes, and material environments, suggesting that ecological realities are embedded in processes of meaning-making. From the perspective of Translation Studies, Michael Cronin (2017) argues for an ecological understanding of translation that situates acts of mediation within broader environmental and cultural networks, while Mona Baker's (2006) "narrative approach" foregrounds the role of mediation in shaping public understandings of social reality.

Environmental journalism can consequently be understood as a form of journalistic translation, provided that translation is conceived here not exclusively as interlingual transfer but as a process of cultural mediation through which local ecological experiences are recontextualised and circulated across broader frameworks of understanding. Environmental journalists act as mediators who transform environmental events, scientific knowledge, and place-based experiences into narratives that circulate across multiple interpretive communities. Through processes of selection, framing, and narration, environmental journalism contributes to the production of environmental mindscapes that influence how environmental crises, responsibilities, and possible futures are imagined.

While questions of ecology, mediation, and sustainability have attracted increasing scholarly attention, comparatively less attention has been paid to digital journalism as a site of intercultural environmental mediation. In particular, the processes through which locally

situated ecological realities are reframed for geographically and culturally dispersed audiences, and thereby transformed into shared environmental imaginaries, remain relatively underexplored.

The present study addresses this gap through a small purposive corpus of six environmental articles published between 2025 and 2026 by *The Guardian (Environment)* and *The Conversation*. The two platforms represent distinct yet complementary models of environmental communication: one primarily grounded in journalistic storytelling and public-interest reporting, the other operating at the intersection of academic expertise and public communication.

Thus, the article addresses the following research question: how do digital environmental narratives mediate ecological realities through representations of place, crisis, and responsibility, and how do these processes contribute to the formation of environmental mindscapes?

More specifically, the analysis focuses on three interconnected narrative dimensions: place, crisis, and responsibility. These dimensions are not intended as an exhaustive taxonomy of environmental journalism. Rather, they provide a possible analytical framework for exploring how environmental narratives articulate connections to place, make ecological threats intelligible, and negotiate questions of agency and responsibility.

The analysis suggests that digital environmental journalism does more than disseminate information about ecological issues. Through lexical choices, semantic fields, framing, narrative positioning, and representations of agency, it transforms local and situated ecological realities into culturally meaningful narratives. Across the corpus, place is associated with belonging, memory, and ecological connectivity; crisis with risk, vulnerability, visibility, and urgency; and responsibility with political choice, environmental literacy, stewardship, and collective action. Taken together, these processes reveal how digital environmental journalism contributes to the formation of environmental mindscapes in which ecological realities become not only knowable but also imaginable, emotionally meaningful, and potentially actionable.

2. Landscapes, Memory, and Environmental Narratives

The concept of landscape has undergone significant transformation within the humanities over recent decades. No longer understood merely as a physical or geographical setting, landscape is increasingly regarded as a cultural construct shaped by historical memory, symbolic meanings, practices, and narrative forms. Denis Cosgrove (1998), for instance, emphasises the cultural and representational dimensions through which landscapes become ways of seeing and interpreting the world, while Simon Schama (1995) famously observes that "before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind" (1995: 7). From this perspective, environments become meaningful through the stories, memories, values, and practices through which individuals and communities establish relationships with particular places. As Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow argue:

> But landscape as a way of seeing is not to be confined to the mediated representations of space in art and literature. It is a broader concept pertaining to how we view

> and interpret space in ways that are contingent on geographical, social, economic, legal, cultural and emotional circumstances, as well as our practical uses of physical environment as nature and territory, aesthetic judgements, memory and myth, for example drawing on religious beliefs and references, historical discourses, politics of gender relations, class, ethnicity, and the imperial projects of colonization – all of which are still present today and consistently reproduced in, for example, contemporary tourist landscapes (2010: 3).

Landscape consequently involves not only what is materially present but also the cultural frameworks through which that material reality is perceived and interpreted. This perspective converges with broader approaches to memory and place. Pierre Nora's (1989) notion of *lieux de mémoire* highlights the extent to which particular locations can become repositories of collective remembrance, while Jan Assmann (2011) emphasises the role of cultural memory in preserving and transmitting shared meanings across generations. Landscapes may therefore be understood not simply as material environments but as mnemonic spaces in which memory, identity, and experience converge. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), similarly, argues that place emerges through lived experience and emotional attachment, transforming abstract space into meaningful human environments.

Landscapes can consequently function as narrative structures through which communities organise their understanding of the world. Hayden White (1987) emphasises the role of narrative in conferring coherence and significance upon experience, and environmental realities are no exception. Places acquire meaning because they are embedded within stories that connect physical environments to cultural values, historical memories, and collective identities. The significance of landscape thus derives not solely from its material features but from the narratives through which it is interpreted and remembered.

This shift from landscape to its symbolic and narrative dimensions resonates with Appadurai's (1996) influential discussion of global cultural flows and mediascapes, defined as "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" (1996: 35). Media do not simply mirror the world but actively participate in the production of interpretive frameworks through which reality becomes intelligible. Environmental journalism can therefore be approached as a specific form of mediascape in which ecological realities are translated into narratives capable of circulating across cultural and geographical boundaries.

The relationship between place and narrative has acquired particular relevance within contemporary ecocriticism. Greg Garrard (2023) notes that environmental narratives play an important role in shaping ecological awareness by providing interpretive frameworks through which environmental issues become culturally meaningful. Heise (2008), likewise, argues that contemporary environmental consciousness requires forms of imagination capable of linking local experiences to global ecological processes.

A further step is provided by Tim Ingold's (2000) conception of "dwelling", which challenges static understandings of landscape and emphasises the dynamic relationships between people and environments. Landscapes emerge through ongoing interactions among human and non-human actors, memories, practices, and material conditions. This perspective converges with material ecocriticism, which questions the traditional separation between

human storytelling and the material world. Iovino and Oppermann (2014) developed the concept of "storied matter" to describe the narrative agency embedded within material environments, arguing that places, landscapes, and ecological processes participate in the production of meaning rather than functioning as passive settings for human experience. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that landscapes should be understood as mnemonic, narrative, and relational constructs: simultaneously material realities, repositories of memory, and cultural texts.

Environmental journalism operates precisely at the intersection of these dimensions. By transforming places into stories and connecting local environments to global concerns, digital media contribute to the production of environmental narratives through which readers interpret ecological realities and their implications for contemporary society. It is within this context that the notion of environmental mindscapes becomes particularly relevant. If landscapes represent culturally mediated environments and narratives provide the means through which such environments acquire meaning, environmental mindscapes may be understood as the cognitive and cultural configurations emerging from the interaction between place, memory, media, and narrative.

3. Corpus and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach situated primarily at the intersection of Ecocriticism and Translation Studies, with particular attention to digital journalism as a form of cultural mediation. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the study examines how environmental journalism transforms geographically situated ecological realities, scientific knowledge, and place-based experiences into narratives capable of circulating beyond their immediate contexts.

The corpus consists of six environmental articles published between 2025 and 2026 by *The Guardian (Environment)* and *The Conversation*. The two platforms were purposively selected because they represent distinct yet complementary models of contemporary environmental communication. *The Guardian* is an established international news organisation whose environmental coverage combines public-interest reporting, investigative journalism, and narrative approaches to climate and sustainability issues. *The Conversation*, by contrast, operates at the intersection of academic expertise and public communication: its articles are generally written by scholars and researchers and edited for a wider non-specialist readership. The comparison therefore makes it possible to examine different modes of environmental mediation: one primarily grounded in journalistic storytelling and public-interest reporting, the other in the mediation of specialised knowledge for broader audiences.

The six articles were chosen through purposive sampling and organised around three analytical dimensions that emerged from the theoretical framework and were subsequently refined through close engagement with the corpus: place, crisis, and responsibility. The texts are "'I don't like being stuck in an office': the young people helping plant a ring of trees around London" (Tomkins 2026) and "Farmers are key to restoring native woodlands – here's what's holding them back" (Harrington & Zhu 2026) for place; "Environmental damage is putting European way of life at risk, says report" (Niranjan 2025) and "One of the

world's most important climate threats has an image problem" (Thomson 2026) for crisis; and "An equal and habitable world is possible" (Watts 2026) and "Eco-literate children can be stewards of nature: here's how to boost environmental education" (Sumner 2026) for responsibility.

The three dimensions are not treated as mutually exclusive thematic categories. Rather, they constitute overlapping narrative processes through which environmental realities acquire cultural meaning. Place concerns the transformation of landscapes, ecosystems, and local environments into sites of belonging, memory, identity, and ecological relationship. Crisis addresses the ways environmental threats, uncertainty, and ecological change are framed as intelligible forms of risk, vulnerability, or urgency. Responsibility concerns the distribution of agency and the construction of possible forms of environmental action, including collective political intervention, education, stewardship, and care.

The analysis was conducted through comparative qualitative close reading. Four interconnected aspects were examined across the six texts: (1) lexical choices and semantic fields; (2) framing and evaluative language; (3) the representation and distribution of agency among human, non-human, and institutional actors; and (4) narrative positioning, particularly the ways in which environmental realities are connected to human experience, social values, and possible futures. Particular attention was paid to recurring words and expressions that establish spatial, affective, temporal, epistemic, or ethical relationships with the environment. Metaphors, contrasts, evaluative formulations, forms of attribution, and representations of action were considered where they contributed to the construction of environmental meaning. The procedure therefore moved from textual evidence to interpretive category rather than simply using predetermined categories to confirm initial assumptions. For each article, salient lexical and narrative patterns were first identified; these were then considered in relation to the broader framing of the text and compared with the corresponding article from the other platform. The analysis subsequently examined how these patterns contribute to the construction of an environmental mindscape. For instance, expressions of embodied experience and ecological connectivity are considered evidence of the construction of place as belonging; lexical fields of risk, damage, visibility, or uncertainty indicate ways of making crisis intelligible; and references to political choice, learning, stewardship, or collective action reveal how responsibility and environmental agency are constructed.

This approach is consistent with the article's understanding of environmental journalism as cultural mediation. Translation Studies provides the conceptual basis for viewing mediation as a process through which situated experiences and forms of knowledge are recontextualised for audiences beyond their original settings. Bielsa and Bassnett (2008) are particularly relevant in this regard, as their discussion of news translation foregrounds the processes of selection, adaptation, and circulation through which journalistic discourse moves across cultural and linguistic contexts. Ecocriticism, meanwhile, foregrounds the relationships among material environments, human experience, environmental imagination, and ecological futures. In this sense, environmental journalism does not simply transmit information about an external environmental reality. Through selection, framing, lexical choice, and narrative organisation, it constructs interpretive pathways through which readers

can perceive, understand, and evaluate ecological change. Environmental mindscapes are therefore understood as the interpretive configurations produced through these processes: the cognitive and cultural frameworks through which environmental realities become meaningful and readers are invited to imagine relationships among places, ecological processes, human communities, and possible futures.

The methodological approach avoids treating place, crisis, and responsibility as an exhaustive taxonomy of environmental journalism. Their value lies instead in their interconnectedness: places provide the experiential and cultural contexts within which environmental change is perceived; crisis narratives transform ecological processes into socially intelligible forms of risk and urgency; and responsibility narratives construct possible forms of agency in response to those conditions.

4. Environmental Mindscapes in Digital Journalism: A Comparative Analysis

The analysis below treats place, crisis, and responsibility as interconnected processes rather than isolated themes. Across the corpus, these dimensions reveal three complementary ways in which digital environmental journalism makes ecological realities culturally intelligible: by locating environmental change in meaningful places, by translating complex ecological processes into recognisable forms of crisis, and by constructing possible forms of agency and response.

4.1. Translating Place

The representation of place constitutes a key dimension of environmental mediation because geographical locations become meaningful through the relationships, memories, practices, and values attached to them. The two selected articles construct place differently: *The Guardian* foregrounds embodied experience and ecological connectivity, whereas *The Conversation* combines land management with narratives of attachment, identity, and inherited memory.

In *The Guardian* article "'I don't like being stuck in an office': the young people helping plant a ring of trees around London", place is initially constructed through embodied and affective language. The title establishes a contrast between being "stuck in an office" and being outdoors, while a participant explains: "I love being outdoors – I can breathe". The opposition between office and outdoors, reinforced by the bodily verb *breathe*, turns the environment into an experienced space rather than a merely geographical setting. Another participant describes his emotional response to the project: "I feel very happy – the trees are growing already". The article thus uses direct speech to give environmental experience a bodily and affective dimension.

This experiential dimension is then expanded into an ecological understanding of London. The London Tree Ring is described as a project creating "corridors of plant and animal life around the capital", while its longer-term objective is to create habitats that are "better connected and more diverse". The spatial vocabulary is significant: ring, corridors, connected, habitats, and environment construct London not as a fixed urban entity but as an ecological network in which human and non-human environments intersect. The project is explicitly described as seeking to "reconnect a new generation with their environment",

making reconnection a particularly productive lexical choice. The relationship between people and place is presented as something that can be restored alongside ecological systems.

The article consequently produces an environmental mindscape in which place is associated with experience, connection, and participation. Hadley Wood does not remain merely a geographically specific backdrop; it becomes a model through which readers can imagine urban space as capable of ecological recovery and social inclusion.

The Conversation article "Farmers are key to restoring native woodlands – here's what's holding them back" constructs place through a different lexical and narrative configuration. Its focus is on land, tree planting, farming, land use, economic decisions, and the institutional conditions surrounding afforestation. Place is therefore presented as a material environment shaped by human decisions and policy frameworks. Yet the article complicates this managerial perspective through the affective language of a farmer who states: "I [would] die for this piece of land. It's ingrained in me so much. My DNA, our fields have all names and stories".

The sequence linking "land", "ingrained", "DNA", "names", and "stories" is particularly revealing. The possessives "my" and "our" establish a relationship of ownership and collective identity, while ingrained metaphorically inscribes the landscape within the person. The reference to DNA intensifies this connection by presenting attachment to land as almost constitutive of personal identity. Finally, names and stories transform fields into repositories of cultural memory. Place is thus simultaneously material, familial, historical, and narrative.

The contrast between the two texts is therefore not simply one between an experiential *The Guardian* and an explanatory *The Conversation*. Both construct environmental place as relational, but they foreground different forms of relationship. *The Guardian* emphasises embodied experience and ecological connectivity, whereas *The Conversation* links landscape management to identity, memory, and attachment. In both cases, geographically situated environments become environmental mindscapes because linguistic and narrative choices transform physical space into a meaningful configuration of belonging and ecological relationship.

4.2. Translating Crisis

If place concerns the formation of environmental belonging, crisis concerns the ways in which ecological change becomes publicly intelligible as a condition of risk, vulnerability, or urgency. Here the two texts reveal particularly contrasting strategies. *The Guardian* makes environmental degradation socially immediate by foregrounding damage and risk, while *The Conversation* focuses on the representational difficulty of making slow and largely invisible ecological processes perceptible.

The title of *The Guardian* article "Environmental damage is putting European way of life at risk, says report" establishes a clear lexical field of damage and threat. The expression *putting ... at risk* converts environmental degradation into a direct threat to a culturally recognisable social order: the "European way of life". The article further describes the "death of wildlife and breakdown of the climate" as "ruining ecosystems that underpin the economy".

The verb ruining is particularly forceful: rather than representing ecological deterioration as a neutral or gradual process, it assigns environmental change a destructive trajectory. At the same time, the reference to ecosystems that underpin the economy translates ecological degradation into social and economic consequences.

The article's lexical pattern consequently moves from environmental damage to collective vulnerability. Expressions concerning biodiversity loss, climate breakdown, environmental degradation, and risks to prosperity are embedded within a broader narrative of European well-being. The crisis becomes meaningful because ecological deterioration threatens systems on which human societies depend. Ecological crisis is therefore not represented as something occurring elsewhere in "nature", but as a condition affecting the organisation and future of European society.

The Conversation article "One of the world's most important climate threats has an image problem" approaches crisis from almost the opposite direction. Its subject, the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC), is introduced as a system operating "largely out of sight". It is described as existing "far below our own" perceptual world and moving "slowly, silently through the Atlantic". The lexical cluster "out of sight" / "far below" / "slowly" / "silently" constructs crisis through invisibility, spatial distance, and temporal scale.

The expression "image problem" is itself significant because it shifts attention from the material existence of the environmental threat to its communicative status. The problem is not that AMOC is scientifically insignificant, but that it lacks the immediately recognisable visual forms associated with other environmental crises. The article contrasts it with burning forests, calving icebergs, hurricanes, and beaches strewn with plastic, whose images have become familiar elements of climate journalism. These visual conventions operate as stand-ins for ecological systems that cannot easily be observed directly.

The discussion of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch makes this representational problem even clearer. The phenomenon is often imagined as a "floating island of waste", whereas in reality it is a diffuse concentration of microplastics spread across a vast area of ocean. The contrast demonstrates how media representation can give an otherwise dispersed phenomenon a recognisable spatial form, while simultaneously risking simplification. Environmental mediation therefore becomes part of the crisis itself: making an ecological process visible can increase public attention, but the process of visualisation may also reshape its meaning.

The comparison reveals two different ways of constructing an environmental crisis mindscape. *The Guardian* relies on the semantic fields of risk, damage, consequence, and collective vulnerability, making ecological degradation socially urgent. *The Conversation*, instead, foregrounds invisibility, distance, uncertainty, and representation, showing that some environmental threats are difficult to imagine precisely because they unfold beyond ordinary human perception. In both cases, crisis is therefore not simply a material condition reported by journalism. It is a mediated cognitive framework through which readers learn what counts as urgent, what can be perceived, and how ecological futures can be imagined.

4.3. Translating Responsibility

The third dimension concerns the construction of environmental agency. Environmental journalism not only describes ecological conditions; it also identifies actors, distributes responsibility, and constructs possible responses. The two articles considered here offer particularly productive examples of different forms of environmental agency: *The Guardian* frames responsibility primarily through collective political transformation, whereas *The Conversation* constructs it through environmental literacy, experience, and stewardship.

The Guardian article "An equal and habitable world is possible" establishes possibility as a central element of its future-oriented framing. The article presents a "habitable, equal" future as materially achievable and explicitly identifies "political choice" and "the hard but crucial work of building a coalition" as necessary conditions for realising it. The semantic field is therefore centred on possible, choice, coalition, cooperative redistribution, and political action rather than on individual lifestyle adjustments alone.

This framing becomes particularly significant because environmental sustainability is connected to economic inequality. The article situates ecological action within a broader programme involving redistribution, decarbonisation, reduced consumption, education, healthcare, and reform of global financial structures. Responsibility is consequently distributed across political and economic institutions rather than located exclusively in individual behaviour. The environmental future becomes inseparable from questions of justice and the distribution of resources and power.

The resulting environmental mindscape is one in which ecological agency is collective and systemic. Readers are encouraged to imagine environmental change not simply as a matter of personal sacrifice but as a politically achievable transformation of social arrangements. The modal formulation "is possible" is particularly important because it constructs the future as open to intervention. Environmental responsibility is therefore linked to political imagination: before systemic change can be enacted, it must become conceivable as a realistic alternative.

The Conversation article "Eco-literate children can be stewards of nature: here's how to boost environmental education" constructs responsibility through a different sequence. Its title directly links knowledge with stewardship, while the article identifies a lack of environmental literacy and argues that "Noticing nature is the first step toward understanding it". It further insists that this process requires "directly experiencing nature".

The lexical progression is crucial, moving from "notice" to "understand", then to "experience" and finally to "steward". Responsibility is not represented as an obligation that can simply be imposed; it is constructed as the result of developing the cognitive and affective capacities necessary to perceive the non-human world. The discussion of plant blindness is particularly significant. The problem is partly perceptual: people fail to notice forms of life that are physically present around them. Environmental education therefore becomes a process of restoring attention and, through attention, cultivating care.

The article consequently constructs responsibility as relational and prospective. Children acquire the knowledge, experience, and attachment that may enable them to become future stewards of the natural world. Environmental literacy is therefore not simply the ac-

quisition of factual knowledge. It involves learning to perceive ecological relationships and developing the affective orientation necessary for sustained environmental care.

The contrast with *The Guardian* is significant but should not be reduced to a simple opposition between collective and individual responsibility. The two texts operate at different levels of agency. *The Guardian* makes systemic environmental transformation politically imaginable, while *The Conversation* makes environmental stewardship cognitively and affectively attainable. Both, however, construct responsibility through a prior transformation in perception. Political agency requires imagining alternative social and ecological futures; stewardship requires learning to notice, understand, and value the non-human world.

Responsibility thus becomes a constitutive dimension of the environmental mindscape: readers are positioned not merely as observers of ecological change, but as potential participants in shaping environmental futures.

Taken together, the three analytical dimensions reveal a broader progression from place to environmental belonging, from crisis to environmental awareness, and from responsibility to environmental engagement. This progression should not be understood as strictly linear. Rather, it describes the way in which environmental journalism can connect different dimensions of ecological meaning. A meaningful relationship with place may facilitate awareness of environmental change; representations of crisis may intensify the need for action; and narratives of responsibility can help audiences imagine how ecological futures might be changed.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined digital environmental journalism as a form of cultural mediation, asking how environmental narratives construct place, crisis, and responsibility and how these processes contribute to the formation of environmental mindscapes. The analysis of six articles from *The Guardian* and *The Conversation* suggests that environmental journalism does more than transmit information about ecological realities. Through lexical choices, semantic fields, framing, narrative positioning, and the distribution of agency, journalistic texts transform situated environmental experiences and forms of knowledge into culturally meaningful narratives capable of circulating across geographical and interpretive boundaries.

The analysis identifies three interconnected processes. First, place is constructed as more than physical location. In the selected texts, landscapes become associated with embodied experience, ecological connectivity, memory, identity, and belonging. Second, crisis is constructed not only through descriptions of environmental damage and risk but also through processes of visibility and representation. Environmental threats may become socially urgent when they are connected to collective vulnerability, while less visible ecological processes require narrative and representational strategies that make them perceptible to audiences. Third, responsibility is constructed through different but complementary forms of agency. *The Guardian* text foregrounds political choice, structural transformation, and collective action, whereas *The Conversation* article emphasises environmental literacy, experience, and stewardship.

These findings provide an answer to the research question by showing that digital en-

vironmental narratives mediate ecological realities through a process in which place, crisis, and responsibility are mutually constitutive dimensions of environmental meaning. Place gives ecological change an experiential and cultural location; crisis renders that change intelligible as a condition requiring attention; and responsibility provides ways of imagining agency and possible responses. The three dimensions therefore operate together in the construction of environmental mindscapes.

The concept of environmental mindscapes offers a way of bringing these processes together. Environmental mindscapes emerge where material environments, mediated representations, cultural meanings, and possible forms of action intersect. The three dimensions identified in the analysis can consequently be understood as a progression from environmental belonging, through environmental awareness, to environmental engagement. This progression is not linear or exhaustive; rather, it indicates how environmental narratives may connect perception of place with recognition of ecological crisis and, ultimately, with the imagination of possible responses.

Digital journalism thus constitutes a significant site where local ecological experiences can enter broader environmental imaginaries. In this respect, the findings resonate with Rob Nixon's observation that contemporary societies must confront the "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges" (2011: 3) posed by environmental change. At the same time, the study echoes Heise's call for a shift "from a sense of place to a sense of planet" (2008: 114), highlighting how digital journalism translates situated environmental experiences into broader ecological imaginaries.

The findings also suggest that differences between media platforms matter. *The Guardian* tends to construct environmental meaning through more immediate experiential, political, and socially oriented narratives, while *The Conversation* more frequently foregrounds explanatory, educational, and expert-mediated forms of knowledge. These differences do not produce entirely separate environmental imaginaries. Rather, they demonstrate that similar ecological concerns can be translated into different narrative forms depending on the communicative mission, authorship, and intended audience of the platform.

The study is necessarily limited by its small purposive corpus and by its focus on two English-language digital platforms. Its findings should therefore be understood as exploratory rather than statistically representative. Future research could extend the framework to larger corpora, different media environments, and other linguistic and cultural contexts, as well as investigate how environmental mindscapes vary across national media systems and audiences. Such comparative work could further clarify how digital environmental communication contributes to contemporary understandings of ecological change and to the cultural imagination of environmental futures.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that digital environmental journalism does more than disseminate environmental information. It provides audiences with ways of seeing, imagining, and relating to ecological change. By transforming places into sites of belonging, crises into intelligible forms of urgency, and environmental responsibility into imaginable forms of agency, journalistic narratives actively participate in shaping how environmental futures are culturally imagined.

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"Naked Beauty Display'd". Bodies, Souls, and Sexuality in William Blake's Composite Art (*Part II*)

Abstract I: Le due parti di questo saggio si soffermano su alcuni aspetti della poetica e dell'arte verbale e figurativa di William Blake, entrambe dominate dal significato e dal ruolo del corpo umano. Mentre la Parte I analizza il profondo rapporto tra uomo e mondo naturale (sezione 1), l'idea 'radicale' di una società democratica, egalitaria e sessualmente libera (sezione 2) e il sentimento fondamentale di Blake nei confronti del corpo umano (sezione 3), questa seconda Parte studia come l'umano e il divino si compenetrano (sezione 4) e come Blake concepisce un modello ideale e assai originale di sessualità androgina – la *coincidentia oppositorum* alchemica – attraverso la rappresentazione visiva di corpi caratterizzati da torsioni 'serpentinate' che evocano l'arte di Michelangelo (sezione 5).

Abstract II: The two parts of this essay dwell on some aspects of William Blake's poetics and of his verbal and figurative art, both dominated by the meaning and role of the human body. Whereas Part I investigates the profound relationship between man and the natural world (section 1), the idea of a radically democratic, egalitarian, and sexually free society (section 2), and Blake's fundamental attitude towards the human body (section 3), this second Part studies how the human and the divine interpenetrate (section 4) and how Blake conceives of an ideal and highly personal model of an androgynous sexuality – the alchemic *coincidentia oppositorum* – by visually representing bodies endowed with a writhing movement and a serpentine pattern that evoke Michelangelo's art (section 5).

Keywords: Panism, Word and Image, Socio-political Radicalism, the Human and the Divine, Body Language.

4. *"All deities reside in the human breast"*. Humanity as the "likeness & similitude" of Divinity

Longing for the union, or, better, for the re-union of the human and the divine, Blake merges Christian culture with two tightly intertwined alchemical principles and goals: the idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and the need to recover the original perfection of humanity, i.e.

[*] Continuation of *Part I*, Romero Allué (2025).

its divine dimension. The conviction that there is a connection between the universe and humanity, above and below, and macrocosm and microcosm is one of the main tenets of the *Tabula smaragdina*, the sacred text of alchemists and, more generally, of Hermetic culture. According to legend, the *Tabula smaragdina* is an emerald tablet found in a cave in the hands of the statue of Hermes Trismegistus, the father of alchemy.

The second postulate of "the Smaragdine Table of Hermes", as Blake calls it (*Jerusalem*, plate 91. K. 738), solemnly decrees that "quod est inferius, est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius, est sicut quod est inferius" (Manget 1702, vol. I: 385): "That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below"[1]. Its tenth postulate reiterates the identification between above and below, or, in Blakean terms, the idea that "God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" (*There is No Natural Religion - second series*, plate 12. K. 98), by proclaiming that "Ascendit a terra in coelum, iterumque descendit in terram, et recipit vim superiorum et inferiorum" (Manget 1702, vol. I: 386), a formula generally translated as "The structure of the microcosm is in accordance with the structure of the macrocosm". Blake derives the theory of the identity of *quod est inferius* and *quod est superius* both from alchemic culture and from the doctrine of correspondences expounded by Böhme and Swedenborg (Böhme 1651; Swedenborg 1784).

On plate 76 of *Jerusalem*, Blake visually represents the specular identification of Los, his alter ego, with Jesus crucified on an oak tree (see plate 9)[2]: in more general terms, with this plate the poet illustrates the mirroring identification between humanity – in "naked beauty" – and divinity. Highlighting the correspondence of above and below and drawing inspiration from Platonic theories, in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810), Blake proclaims:

> There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. All Things are comprehended […] in the divine body of the Saviour, […] The Human Imagination (69-70. K. 605-606).

If we consider that the design of plate 76 of *Jerusalem* can be regarded as the visual illustration of the text of plate 96, "the divine body of the Saviour" is interpretable as Los and the figure before the cross is interpretable as Albion, the archetype of humanity:

> Then Jesus appeared standing by Albion as the Good Shepherd
> […] And the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 96, ll. 3, 7. K. 743).

This full-plate design can also be regarded as another example of Blake's visual self-representation because the man before the cross in a pose echoing that of Christ is also identifiable with the very author. A couple of lines already mentioned depict Jesus-Los – overtly associated with poetic and creative power – as he was seen by the author of the poem:

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[1] Hermes's tablet was translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth century. See, among others, Jung (1977), Burckhardt (1972).

[2] As in *Part I* of this essay, the illustrations are at the end of these pages, before the Bibliography.

> […] I see the Saviour over me
> Spreading his beams of love & dictating the words of this mild song
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 4, ll. 4-5. K. 622).

The identification Los-Jesus presented in this design is anticipated, in a specular position, by plate 18 of *The Book of Urizen*, a plate that depicts Los as a poet, as a smith holding his hammer, as an alchemist surrounded by the fire of his furnace, and as Christ on the cross (see plate 10). Naked and in a Christological frontal pose, on this plate Blake's alter ego is busy creating and giving life to his female counterpart, Enitharmon, an endeavour that can be read as a reference to one of the central goals of alchemy: the creation of a human being, the *homunculus*. The "globe of life blood" Los is holding in his right hand is an allusion to his creative and quasi-divine power and to the product of his work at the furnace, i.e. Enitharmon's birth. The first lines of this plate explain that

> The globe of life blood trembled
> Branching out into roots,
> Fibrous, writhing upon the winds,
> Fibres of blood, milk and tears,
> In pangs, eternity on eternity
> (*The Book of Urizen*, plate 18, ll. 1-5. K. 231).

Plate 5 of *The Gates of Paradise* represents the element of Fire, the symbol and basic force of the blacksmith and alchemist Los, in anthropomorphic terms and in the same pose as Los on plate 18 of *The Book of Urizen* and on plate 76 of *Jerusalem* (see plate 11): instead of Los's globe and hammer, here Fire is holding a spear and a shield. It is worth observing that plate 2 of *The Gates of Paradise* illustrates Water, its opposite, by displaying a contracted and crouching man with a tragic expression, as if to reinforce the idea that the two main Blakean postures – expansion and contraction – are to be united in a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum* since, as already noticed, every living form derives from the union of fire and water, the two contraries par excellence: according to Ovid "though fire and water are naturally at enmity, still heat and moisture / produce all things, and this inharmonious harmony is fitted to the growth of life" (*Met.*, I: 432-433. Ovid 1951, vol. I: 32-33). The principle that fire and water are necessary opposites is also highlighted by Thomas Aquinas, and by alchemists in general. In an influential treatise of alchemy, St Thomas states that minerals are made of water and are generated by the heat of the sun and fire: "Mineralia dividuntur in lapides et metalla: […] Materia autem lapidum est aqua […], sicut videmus generari lapides […] per calorem solis et ignis" (Tommaso d'Aquino 1996: 28). Embracing Aquinas's train of thought, in a study on water, minerals, and grots, the French architect of gardens, alchemist, naturalist, and ceramist Bernard Palissy demonstrates that all metals derive from water and are purified by fire (see Palissy 1580).

Fire, represented on the fifth plate of *The Gates of Paradise* as a *miles Christi*, as a naked man within burning flames in an expanded Christological posture (see plate 11 again), alludes to the never-ending labours implied in creation, as highlighted by the words that describe the design: "Fire. That end in endless Strife". The "endless Strife" implied in the process of creation alludes both to Los's labours and to the *opus alchymicum*, a work defined *rota* because

of its cyclical and infinite symbolical deaths and rebirths, "continually building & continually decaying" (*Jerusalem*, plate 53. K. 684). It should be noticed that, since etching implies writing and drawing on the copperplates in a reversed way, Blake engraves the name Los as *sol*, therefore obliquely alluding to the identification of Los with the sun, with the sacred fire, with God, and with Jesus: God says of himself "I am Alpha and Omega"[3] to highlight his circular, perfect, and infinite essence, while Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection reflect the never-ending process of births, deaths, and rebirths implied in the *rota* of the *opus alchymicum*.

If alchemists identify themselves with Jesus and with God because of their ability to create human beings and to cure, heal, and redeem the world, Blake interprets Jesus and God as the creative power: according to the poet, "The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself The Divine Body, Jesus" and "All Things are comprehended […] in the divine body of the Saviour, The Human Imagination" (*The Laocoön* K. 776; *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, 70. K. 605-606).

In a colour-printed line engraving known as *Albion Rose*, as *The Dance of Albion*, and as *Glad Day*[4] (see plate 12), the naked man surrounded by sunbeams in the centre of the plate is the almost exact complementary image of Los on plate 76 of *Jerusalem*. This naked figure, moreover, can be connected to Blake's abolitionist theories if we consider that below an uncoloured impression of this line engraving dated 1780 appears the following inscription[5]:

> Albion rose from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves:
> Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death (K. 160).

Although Anthony Blunt maintains that Blake based this portrayal of Albion on illustrations of a Roman bronze of a dancing faun from Herculaneum (Blunt 1959: 34-35), I am convinced that the poet has drawn inspiration from the classical proportion diagrams, also known as Vitruvian diagrams, representing the human body inscribed in a circle and a square. In his influential treatise *De Architectura* (III, 1: i), Vitruvius explains that the human body is a model of perfection that mirrors the macrocosm because with arms and legs extended it fits in the two perfect geometrical forms that constitute the whole world: the circle and the square. By referring to Vitruvius, I think Blake is obliquely paying homage both to the Renaissance graphic tradition and to John Dee, Elizabeth I's alchemist: strenuously supporting a spiritual reform imbued with alchemy, Hermeticism, and Vitruvian Neoplatonism[6], in his most influential *Preface to Euclid* Dee proclaims that arts and sciences should be based on number, proportion, music, painting, mechanics, perspective, i.e. on the principles that reflect the geometric structure of man and the world (Dee 1570).

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[3] "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending […] I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last […]. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end […] I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (*Rev.*, 1: 8, 11; 21: 6; 22: 13).

[4] A version of *The Dance of Albion* created by Blake in 1794-1796 circa and finished in pen and watercolour (27.2 x 19.9 cm) is in the British Museum, London. Lister (1991: plate 10).

[5] As reported by Keynes, the print with the inscription is in the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery, Washington D. C. (K. 888).

[6] For Dee's Vitruvian and Neoplatonic theories, see French (1972); Hart (1994); Yates (2002).

The earliest Vitruvian diagram of the "homo ad circulum et ad quadratum" we know is contained in *Trattato di architettura civile e militare*, a manuscript with numerous illustrations composed by the Vitruvian architect Francesco di Giorgio Martini between 1470 and 1490 and now preserved in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana[7] (see plate 13). Today the most popular Vitruvian diagram is undoubtedly the one made by Leonardo da Vinci in 1490, precisely after he got to know Francesco di Giorgio Martini: thanks to this meeting, Leonardo started studying Vitruvius's *De architectura*, a treatise that Martini was translating in that period. Leonardo, who later was to become the owner of Martini's manuscript, in the years 1504-1505 wrote twelve marginal glosses on some of its pages: Martini's *Trattato* is allegedly the only text annotated by Leonardo and the only surviving book among those he possessed[8].

Luca Pacioli, a mathematician and a friend of Leonardo's, explicitly aligns the Vitruvian diagram with Platonic theories in *Della mesura e poportioni del corpo humano della testa e altri suoi membri simulacro delarchitectura*, a chapter included in his important treatise *Divina Proportione*, published in 1509:

> li antichi considerata la debita dispositione del corpo umano tutte le loro opere maxime li templi sacri ala sua proportione le disponivano. Peroche in quello trovavano le doi principalissime figure senza le quali non e possibile nessuna cosa operare cioe la circular perfectissima […] Laltra la quadrata equilatera (Pacioli 1509: Pars III, cap. I: 17r)[9].

Two years later, Giovanni Giocondo da Verona devotes one plate of his illustrated edition of Vitruvius's *De Architectura* to the graphic representation of "homo ad quadratum" and one to "homo ad circulum et ad quadratum"[10] (see plate 14). The first Italian version of Vitruvius's treatise, edited by Cesare Cesariano and illustrated by 117 woodcuts, also contains a drawing of "homo ad quadratum" and one of "homo ad circulum et ad quadratum"[11].

> In a chapter entitled *Dell'eccellenza delle forme naturali, e proportioni del corpo humano […]* contained in his volume *L'idea della architettura universale*, Vincenzo Scamozzi dedicates a full-page design to "homo ad circulum et ad quadratum" (see plate 15), a design that can be regarded as the precise source of inspiration for Blake's *Albion Rose*[12]. Quoting Plato, Aristotle, Vitruvius, and Hermes Trismegistus, Scamozzi argues that the human body is a *Microcosmos* because it has a perfect spherical and square form:

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[7] Cod. Ashburnham 361: the Vitruvian drawing is on f. 5r. Martini's treatise was first published in 1841: see *Trattato di architettura* (1841).

[8] According to a recent study, however, the marginal glosses attributed to Leonardo were written by Guglielmo Libri, a famous nineteenth-century Italian scientist, scholar, bibliophile, and forger. See Becchi & Biffi (2024).

[9] In this edition Pars III is wrongly indicated as Pars I. The above-quoted passage is reported with modern spelling in Bruschi, Maltese, Tafuri & Bonelli (1978: 96-97).

[10] *M. Vitruvius per Iocundum solito castigatior factus cum figuris et tabula ut iam legi et intelligi possit* 1511: Liber III: 22, 23.

[11] *Di Lucio Vitruvio Pollione De Architectura Libri Dece traducti de latino in Vulgare, affigurati, Cõmentati, & con mirando ordine Insigniti […]* 1521: XLIXr, Lr.

[12] For Blake and Scamozzi's Vitruvian man see Lister (1975).

> E perche abbiamo tocco più volte del corpo dell'huomo, il quale da' Savij con voce Greca fù chiamato Microcosmos, cioè picciol mondo […] per la forma sferica in tutte le sue parti perfettissima; e per la proportione, e corrispondenza di tutte le sue parti, e membra interne, & esterne […]; oltre a ciò tenendo aperte le gambe e parimente le braccia in modo, che l'estremità delle dita delle mani stiano à perpendicolo dell'estremità delle dita de' piedi; allhora formerà un quadrato perfetto; perciò Aristotele disse: *Quadratus homo*; & anco un cerchio (Scamozzi 1615: Parte I, Libro I, capitolo XII: 38).

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, the most renowned alchemist of the Renaissance, draws specifically on the Vitruvian theories to demonstrate the links between *maior mundus* and *minor mundus*. In his treatise *De occulta philosophia*, the sacred text of alchemy, Agrippa defines the human being as "dei opus & imago, & minor mundus" (Agrippa 1533, Book II, Ch. XXVII: 160). A chapter contained in the second book of *De occulta philosophia*, entitled *De humani corporis proportione & mensura harmoniaque*, is illustrated by three drawings displaying a man inscribed in a circle and three others displaying a man inscribed in a square in order to concretely demonstrate the relationship between man and macrocosm (Agrippa 1533, Book II, Ch. XXVII: 161-166).

The title page to Robert Fludd's *Utriusque […] Cosmi historia* visually represents a man named *Microcosmus* inscribed in a circle named *Macrocosmus*, explicitly alluding to the identification above-below (Fludd 1617-1619). I am convinced that the rope held by the human figure walking in the clouds – a creature with wings and goat legs bearing an hourglass and a hooked cross on his head (see plate 16) – is a reference to the so-called *aurea catena Homeri*, a chain that links heaven and earth, heaven and hell (wings and goat legs), time and eternity (hourglass and hooked cross). Milton refers to this neo-Platonic concept when claiming that the earth is hung from heaven by means of a golden chain:

> […] another world
> Hung o'er my realm, linked in a golden chain
> To that side heav'n from whence your legions fell
> (*Paradise Lost*, II: 1004-1006).

In the watercolour *Ezekiel's Wheels*, accomplished in 1803-1805[13], Blake manages to represent the square and the circle implied in the human body by visually illustrating Ezekiel's "four living creatures":

> the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. […]. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. […] and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel (*Ez.*, 1: 1, 5-6, 16).

Blake interprets Ezekiel's vision as a four-faced, winged, and naked man inscribed

[13] *Ezekiel's Wheels* (black chalk, pen and watercolour over pencil, 39.5 x 29.5 cm) is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts. Lister (1991: plate 30).

within a series of wheels that are decorated with eyes inscribed in stars (see plate 17). Besides being a Petrarchan conceit – "et gli occhi eran due stelle"[14] –, Blake's eyes-stars can be read as a witty reference to the alchemic *coincidentia oppositorum* if we consider that in his *Eroici furori* Giordano Bruno associates two eyes shaped as stars with the motto *Mors et vita* (Bruno 2002: 664). Blake's fourfold "living creature" opens his arms and legs in a posture that evokes and goes beyond the Vitruvian diagram: whereas the arms are extended frontally, parallel to the two-dimensional plane of the plate, his right leg extends before his body and his left one extends behind it, thus creating a three-dimensional depth and movement that evoke a square and, at the same time, a spherical form.

Since Blake reproduces this posture in a watercolour created in 1805 entitled *Satan in his Original Glory*[15] (see plate 18), it is inferable that for him Ezekiel's "visions of God" and Milton's Satan can be identified and represent the dualisms inherent in every living form, including divinity. Besides being endowed with numerous wings and besides being surrounded by a myriad of stars, Blake's Satan holds in his left hand a sceptre and in his right hand the *globus cruciger*, the globe and cross generally held by Christ – traditionally in his left hand – when represented as the *Salvator mundi* or as Christ Pantocrator: it is worth noticing that above the "fourfold creature" depicted in *Ezekiel's Wheels* appears God as a heavily dressed and crouched old man in the pose of the Pantocrator (see plate 17 again). *Satan in his Original Glory* illustrates both Milton's Satan[16] and, further evoking Blake's "fourfold man", Ezekiel's words:

> Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee (*Ez*., 28: 14-15).

In *Jerusalem*, Blake expounds the circular and fourfold substance of both humanity and the whole world quoting Ezekiel's vision and making explicit the classical relationship between architecture and the human body, or, in other terms, between body and soul, the human and the divine, the square, and the circle[17]:

> Fourfold the Sons of Los in their divisions, and fourfold
> The great City of Golgonooza: fourfold toward the north,
> And toward the south fourfold, & fourfold toward the east & west,

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[14] "La testa òr fino, et calda neve il volto, / hebeno I cigli, et gli occhi eran due stelle, / onde Amor l'arco non tendeva in fallo" (Petrarca, sonnet 157, ll. 9-11).

[15] This pen and watercolour design (42.9 x 33.9 cm) is in the Tate Gallery. Lister (1991: plate 40).

[16] "[…] He above the rest / In shape and gesture proudly eminent / Stood like a tow'r; his form had yet not lost / All her original brightness […]", Milton (1993: I, 589-592).

[17] Basing his influential essay of architecture on Vitruvian principles, Henry Wotton considers the house as "an Epitomie of the whole World" (1624: 82) and establishes a link among house, human body, and universe: "Now the exact *Circle* is in truth a Figure, which for our purpose hath many fit and eminent properties; as fitnesse, for Commodity and Receit, being the most capable; fitnesse for strength and duration, being the most united in his parts; Fitnesse for beautie and delight as imitating the celestiall *Orbes*, and the universall *Forme*" (1624: 17).

> Each within other toward the four points […].
> And the Four Points are thus beheld in Great Eternity:
> West, the Circumference: South, the Zenith: North,
> The Nadir: East, the Center, unapproachable for ever.
> These are the four Faces towards the Four Worlds of Humanity
> In every Man. Ezekiel saw them by Chebar's flood
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 12, ll. 45-48, 54-58. K. 632).

Besides distorting the commonly recognised three dimensions, Blake alters the conventional notion of the four points and of the mental and spatial organisation of reality by presenting man and cities as a circle and a square[18]. I am convinced that the design on plate 76 of *Jerusalem* (see plate 9 again) can be interpreted as another witty representation of the square and circular essence of humanity and of the universe if we consider Los's cross-posture and his identification with the sun. Los as a *sol* is highlighted by the "beams of love"[19] of the sun behind and around Christ-Los's head and by the sunrise on the left horizon, close to Los-Blake. Associated with divinity in all cultures, in the Western world the sun implies both the circle and the square since it is traditionally regarded as number four because it was created on the fourth day (*Gen*., 1: 14-19) and its movement follows a never-ending circular path, a continuous cycle of birth-death-rebirth close to the everlasting process of creation and of the *rota alchymica*, "continually building & continually decaying". The idea that Los, as the sun, concentrates a circle and a square is corroborated by the reference to a cross and by the organisation of this full-plate design. The cross represents the central phase of the alchemic *quinta essentia* and symbolises both the square and the circle: if the intersection of the arms of the cross coincides with the centre of the circle in which it is inscribed, the line that unites its extremities forms a circle that, in its turn, is divided into four sections.

5. *"The Female-male & the Male-female"*. The Primeval Condition of Humankind

Plate 99, the page that concludes *Jerusalem*[20], presents the union, fusion, and identification of the human – portrayed in a Christological pose and in a slightly imperfect Vitruvian posture – with the divine (see plate 19): by representing God-Albion as a bearded old man in a crouched posture wearing a white tunic and humanity-Jerusalem as a naked young woman in an expanded pose and with androgynous features, here Blake is also displaying, twice, the identification and union of the male and the female dimensions as well as the alchemic concept of *puer et senex*, i.e. the union of youth and age, beginning and end, and Alpha and Omega. The Latin-cross position of humanity and the circular halo with rays of light on God's head, moreover, underline the square and circular essence of microcosm and macrocosm, of *quod est inferius* and *quod est superius*.

This plate evokes the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise*, a plate showing a contracted

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[18] For Blake's maps and networks see Ritchie (2025).

[19] "[…] I see the Saviour over me / Spreading his beams of love […]" (*Jerusalem*, plate 4, ll. 4-5. K. 622).

[20] The text of the poem ends on plate 99 but the conclusion of *Jerusalem* is plate 100, a full-page design displaying Los in a Christological posture and Enitharmon – his wife – in a Vitruvian pose.

worm-body and an extended chrysalis-soul (see plate 1 again) in complementary poses to visually testify that, just as body and soul are inseparable, the two Blakean contrasting postures and all the other oppositions – such as male and female, the human and the divine, and water and fire – are necessary and have to be united. The "reclaimed" slave and the tortured slave depicted in *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, one of Blake's illustrations for Stedman's *Narrative*, are also represented in a complementary posture (see plate 2 again): as stated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (plate 3. K. 149). As already noticed, Blake also represents the "inharmonious harmony" (*discors concordia*) of Fire and Water, the two elements "naturally at enmity" (*cumque sit ignis aquae pugnax*) that are at the basis of any living form, respectively as a man in an expanded and Christological posture and as a man in a crouched pose (*The Gates of Paradise*, plates 5 and 2, respectively).

Plate 99 of *Jerusalem* alludes to the goal of alchemy, i.e. the union of opposites, defined *coniunctio* and "marriage of king and queen": the fire of Los's alchemic furnace wrapping both God and humanity is undoubtedly a reference to the object of the *opus alchymicum*. If in his *Annotations to Swedenborg* Blake argues that "Good & Evil are […] both Good & the two contraries married" and that "Heaven & Hell are born together" (K. 91, 92), in *Jerusalem* he represents the eponymous character as an androgyne. On plates 4 and 99, for example, Jerusalem is visually depicted as an athletic, naked and explicitly androgynous figure in an expanded posture (see plates 3 and 19 again) and in the text of plate 54 she is described as "Jerusalem in every Man, Male & Female Clothings":

> […] This is Jerusalem in every Man,
> A Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness, Male & Female Clothings
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 54, ll. 3-4. K. 684).

One of the main unions that Blake, as the alchemists, strives to recover is the original union of man and woman – or king and queen – since he is convinced that the condition of humanity in its primeval and perfect state was androgynous[21]. Although he criticises the visual arts after Raphael, thus anticipating Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics by many decades, Blake endows his bodies with a writhing, serpentine movement and with androgynous features that reveal a Mannerist taste referable to Michelangelo's art[22]. Despising the colourism of Titian and of the Venetians[23], of Correggio, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck, Blake appreciates classical, Medieval, and Renaissance artists – in particular Raphael, Michelangelo, Dürer, and Giulio Romano – because they devote more attention to form and outline than to colour: at the beginning of his *Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures*[24], he argues that "Colouring does not depend on where the Colours are put, but on where the lights and darks are put,

[21] For Blake and androgyny see Hayes (2004).

[22] For Blake's debt to Michelangelo see Blunt (1959); Hagstrum (1964); Mellor (2020).

[23] It should be noticed, however, that Blake's *Ezekiel's Wheels* (see plate 17 again) is explicitly indebted to Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* (National Gallery, London).

[24] *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures, Poetical and Historical Painted by William Blake in Water Colours […]*, 1809.

and all depends on Form or Outline, on where that is put" (K. 563). He is even convinced that "Both Raphael and Michael Angelo knew the Venetian [Titian], and contemned and rejected all he did with the utmost disdain, as that which is fabricated for the purpose to destroy art" and concludes that "Till we get rid of Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt, We never shall equal Rafael and Albert Durer, Michael Angelo and Julio Romano" (K. 563, 564).

Sincerely admiring Michelangelo's art, Blake then declares that he wishes his drawings "were in Fresco on an enlarged scale to ornament the altars of churches, and to make England, like Italy, respected by respectable men of other countries on account of Art" (*A Descriptive Catalogue.* K. 584): with his watercolour *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, a subject he paints in several versions, Blake attests his profound interest in Italian religious paintings and, above all, in the majestic frescoes created by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, particularly the *Last Judgment*. In *Description to A Vision of the Last Judgment*, written on the eighteenth of January 1808 and addressed to the miniaturist Ozias Humphry[25], Blake explains that he has included Ezekiel's "Four Living Creatures" in his version of Michelangelo's fresco:

> The whole upper part of the Design is a view of Heaven opened: around the Throne of Christ, in the cloud which rolls away are the Four Living Creatures filled with Eyes, attended by seven Angels (K. 444).

As observed when surveying plate 4 of *Jerusalem* (see plate 3 again), Blake is also interested in the five grandiose Sibyls that decorate the Sistine Chapel. The Libyan Sibyl, accomplished in 1512 (see plate 20), is a stately example of Michelangelo's *figura serpentinata*, a pattern that would be in vogue among Mannerist painters and sculptors and adopted by Blake, especially in his mature works: the muscles, the athletic and twisted pose, and the evident androgynous features of the powerful Libyan Sibyl can be regarded as Blake's source of inspiration for his human bodies. Besides being another source of inspiration for Blake, the imposing Cumaean Sibyl (1508-1510), an old muscled woman also represented in a twisting pose and with unequivocal masculine traits (see plate 21), visually anticipates the milkwoman with "old shrunken paps" described by Joyce and the androgynous prophet Tiresias, presented by Eliot as an "old man with wrinkled dugs" (Eliot 2004: I, 228): Stephen Dedalus "watched [the milkwoman] pour into the measure and thence into the jug rich white milk, not hers. Old shrunken paps. […] Old and secret she had entered from a morning world, maybe a messenger" (Joyce 1992: 15).

If "the soft soul of America" Oothon, represented as a muscled and androgynous classical statue on the frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and the "Male-female" blond angel in the watercolour design *The Good and Evil Angels struggling for Possession of a*

[25] The version of *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (pen and watercolour over pencil, 51 x 39.5 cm) Blake refers to in his letter is commissioned by the Countess of Egremont and accomplished in 1808. Today it is in The National Trust of Petworth House, Sussex.

Child can be regarded as the embryo of Blake's "Double-sexed"[26] bodies (see plates 4 and 8 again), Jerusalem on plate 4 of the eponymous poem (see plate 3 again) and Albion, Vala, and two women in serpentine athletic poses and with masculine muscles and features on plate 25 of the same prophetic work are majestic examples of his mature Michelangiolesque designs (see plate 22): the crouched woman on the left is an interesting blend of classical statuary, Dürer's *Melencolia I*, and Michelangelo's androgynous Sibyls. The sun and the moon depicted in Albion's thighs are an explicit reference to the alchemic *coincidentia oppositorum* since the two planets symbolise Apollo and Diana, the male and the female dimension, night and day, silver and gold, and mercury and sulphur.

Like most drawings by Blake, this plate can be read both from a negative and from a positive perspective: it is not clear whether the goddess of Nature is hiding under her veil Albion, victim of a Druid sacrifice, or if she is guarding and protecting him with motherly care, as if she were a benevolent *Madonna della misericordia*. On the last plate of *The Marriage*, below the crouched figure of Nebuchadnezzar, appear the words "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (see plate 6 again), a Sibylline message conceivably inspired by an illuminated Catalan Bible[27] meaning that everything implies multi-perspectival significances and interpretations, not unique and absolute truths: one of the *Proverbs of Hell* – "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees" (*Marriage*, plate 7. K. 151) – and the couplet that describes the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise* – "The Sun's Light when he unfolds it / Depends on the Organ that beholds it" (see plate 1 again) – explicitly expound Blake's relativistic standpoint.

Blake regards onefold interpretation or "single vision" ("Single vision & Newton's sleep") as not properly vision at all since it is seeing *with* and not *through* the eye; "twofold vision" is seeing *through* the eye, is the perception of the human values in all things; "threefold vision" is a sexual and creative state, where thought appears in emotional form, whereas "fourfold vision" means mystical ecstasy and is true vision, as he explains in a poem:

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[26] "The Twofold form Hermaphroditic and the Double-sexed, / The Female-male & the Male-female […]" (*Milton*, plate 19. K. 501).

[27] I am convinced that a design contained in the *Biblia Sancti Petri Rodensis*, a large illuminated manuscript also known as *Roda Bible*, can be regarded as Blake's source of inspiration for the words "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" placed below his Nebuchadnezzar: in the lower part of a full-design page of this Bible, a naked and squatting Nebuchadnezzar on his fours is portrayed precisely between an ox and a lion. Considering Blake's profound appreciation of medieval art – and considering that he started his early artistic career studying and copying medieval manuscripts and sculptures –, engravings of this Catalan Bible were probably known to him. Accomplished in the Monastery of Ripoll (Girona, Spain) in the eleventh century, the Roda Bible is now preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (ms. Latin 6, 1-4): the design in question is on folio 65v of tome 3. The lion and the ox are often linked in the iconographic tradition related to Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but only the Roda Bible does depict these two animals when representing Nebuchadnezzar's madness. In the tenth-century illuminated Mozarabic Bible of San Isidoro de León (León, Spain), for example, Nebuchadnezzar's dream is visually represented as an ox and a lion under a tree (*Codex Biblicus Legionensis* f. 319v): an ox and a lion close to each other under a tree are also depicted in the upper part of the mentioned folio of the Roda Bible (tome 3, f. 65v), but they are among other animals. A naked and squatted man in the background of *The Penance of St. John Chrysostom*, an engraving by Albrecht Dürer, one of Blake's favourite artists, may be another source for the poet's Nebuchadnezzar. I will further develop elsewhere this interesting net of iconological references.

> Now I a fourfold vision see,
> And a fourfold vision is given to me;
> 'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
> And threefold in soft Beulah's night
> And twofold Always. May God us keep
> From Single vision & Newton's sleep!
> (ll. 83-88 from a poem included in a letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802. K. 818).

Plate 47 of *Jerusalem* combines again the *figura serpentinata* and androgyny (see plate 23). Here Albion is with Vala, his natural counterpart, and with Jerusalem, his spiritual spouse. The three androgynous and heavily muscled figures are writhing in a serpentine dance, a sort of tragic dance of the spheres in which their naked bodies, explicitly evoking Michelangelo's art, are intertwining: since Blake links number three with the sexual dimension, it is no wonder that Vala treads down Jerusalem, who – anticipating plate 99 (see plate 19 again) – stretches out her arms as Christ on the cross in a desperate search of Albion-God. Albion, in his turn, recalls the twisted and triangulated posture of Michelangelo's Libyan Sibyl (see plate 20 again).

The presence of three characters and the triangulated pattern of this design visually expound Blake's conviction that the natural and sexual aspect of womankind is a threefold power ("A triple Female Tabernacle") that tries to subdue mankind[28], as declared by Enitharmon, Los's female counterpart:

> Enitharmon answer'd: "This is Woman's World, nor need she any
> Spectre to defend her from Man. I will Create secret places,
> And the masculine names of the places, Merlin & Arthur.
> A triple Female Tabernacle for Moral Law I weave,
> That he who loves Jesus may loathe, terrified, Female love,
> Till God himself become a Male subservient to the Female"
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 88, ll. 16-21. K. 733).

Considering that Blake's main goal is to recover the original union of body and soul, above and below, macrocosm and microcosm, and male and female, androgyny is a recurring theme throughout his macrotext, both visually and verbally. With the choice of merging text and image Blake makes explicit and concrete his conviction that "Without Contraries is no progression", that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul" and the need to recover the original androgynous condition of humanity. Respecting the emblem tradition, Blake identifies words, outlines, and time with man and with the soul, whereas he associates images, colour, and space with woman and with the body: as is well known, Lessing argues that the subject of poetry is action and the peculiar object of painting is the body (Lessing 1766). For the emblem tradition, the verses that verbally describe the design are called *significatio* and are defined the 'soul' of the emblem, whereas the image that visually illustrates the poem is called *pictura* and is traditionally defined the 'body' of the emblem: the *anima* of the emblem, moreover, is associ-

[28] For Blake's representation of women see Mellor (1982-1983).

ated with the male dimension and the *corpus* with the female gender[29]. Blake's *Gates of Paradise* is a tiny example of a traditional emblem book (see plates 1 and 11 again).

Besides projecting himself onto Los, Blake identifies his wife Catherine with Enitharmon, Los's spouse. A couple of lines from *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, an incomplete prophetic poem written and revised between 1795 and 1804, unequivocally allude to the poet's household artistic activity. He writes, draws, and etches whereas Catherine paints with watercolours the printed plates:

> And first he [Los] drew a line upon the walls of shining heaven,
> And Enitharmon tinctur'd it with beams of blushing love
> (*Vala, or the Four Zoas*, "Night the Seventh", ll. 467-468. K. 332).

Los and Enitharmon represent the male and female principles of creation and symbolise time and space, line and colour, word and image, and body and soul, i.e. the indivisible aspects of Blake's own illuminated works. Los is a blacksmith busy creating within the flames of his alchemic furnace and Enitharmon is a weaver working at her looms, tools of creation and generation regarded by Blake as female furnaces and as metaphors for the womb: at the beginning and end of *Jerusalem* the poet repeats that "the Male is a Furnace of beryll; the Female is a golden Loom" (plates 5, 90. K. 623, 736) and on plate 67 declares that "every Female is a Golden Loom" (K. 704). Words and outlines are associated with nakedness whereas design and colour are linked with garments. Moving from the principle that "Art & Science cannot exist but by Naked Beauty display'd" (*Jerusalem*, plate 36. K. 663) and that "Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed" (*The Laocoön*. K. 776), Blake always opposes nakedness and transparent garments to long and heavy clothes, as attested by the vestments generally worn by his crouched figures and by a letter he sends to George Cumberland: "I cannot paint Dirty rags & old shoes where I ought to place Naked Beauty or simple ornament" (26 August 1799. K. 795).

By means of his composite art Blake tangibly demonstrates that man and woman, body and soul, time and space, word and image, line and colour, and above and below must be reunited, as they were before the Fall. Profoundly indebted to Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, alchemy, Böhme's theories, and Swedenborg's philosophy, Blake believes that in the original state of eternity the sexes were not divided and, thus, the essence of humanity was androgynous, complete, and perfect. As announced by Los, in Eden – or "in Eternity" – the Human Form Divine is "Four-fold" and "both Male & Female":

> When in Eternity Man converses with Man, they enter
> Into each other's Bosom (which are Universes of delight)
> In mutual interchange […]
> […] if they embrace & comingle,
> The Human Four-fold Forms mingle also in thunders of Intellect
> […] For Man cannot unite with Man but by their Emanations

[29] See Innocenti (1983); Bath (1994).

> Which stand both Male & Female at the Gates of each Humanity
> (*Jerusalem*, plate 88, ll. 3-5, 6-7, 10-11. K. 733).

Further highlighting the androgynous substance of humanity and rejecting the conventional division into genders[30], Blake believes that "Humanity knows not of sex" and that "Sexes must vanish & cease / To be when Albion arises from his dread repose" (*Jerusalem*, plates 30, 92. K. 656, 739). With an almost literal reference to St. Matthew[31], he also argues that "In Eternity they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (*Jerusalem*, plate 34. K. 660) and, quoting Matthew's words, evokes Marlowe's Mephistopheles ("Marriage is but a ceremoniall toy")[32] and Hamlet ("I say we will have no more marriages")[33] and anticipates the idea of androgyny that pervades Joyce's *Ulysses*: according to Stephen Dedalus, "in the economy of heaven, foretold by Hamlet, there are no more marriages, glorified man, an androgynous angel, being a wife unto himself" (Joyce 1992: 274).

Blake is close to Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and alchemic readings of the Bible and believes that the holy book testifies to the original androgyny of the first human being created in the image of God:

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. […] Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam (*Gen.*, 1: 27; 5: 2).

Reading the Bible "in its infernal or diabolical sense", the lines "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (*Ps.*, 133: 1) and "Two are better than one; […] how can one be warm alone?" (*Eccl.*, 4: 9, 11) are often associated with the above-mentioned lines of *Genesis* and are regarded as further evidence of the original and perfect androgynous substance of humanity, or, as Blake would say, of "both Male & Female at the Gates of each Humanity". Most significantly, Blake's Satan is represented as an androgynous being and is perfectly identifiable with the "Male & Female" Jerusalem: in the watercolour *Satan in his Original Glory* and on plate 4 of *Jerusalem*, the fallen angel and the spiritual dimension of humanity have the same face, hair, body, and wings and are depicted in a similar Christological posture (see plates 3 and 18 again). Moving from the standpoint that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (*Marriage*, plate 3. K. 149), for the poet restoring the identity of microcosm and macrocosm and the unity of man and woman, of "Good & Evil" and of "Heaven and Hell" means recovering the primeval condition of completeness of the human being, i.e. the circular, square, androgynous, and perfect "Human Form Divine".

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[30] For Blake's unconventional ideas on gender and sexuality see Matthews (2019); Kim (2024); Bruder & Connolly (2010).

[31] "In resurrectione enim neque nubent neque nubentur"; "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage" (*Matt*. 22: 30).

[32] Marlowe, *The Tragicall History of Doctor Faustus*, l. 535.

[33] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i: 149.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Plate 9. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 76.



Plate 10. William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, plate 18.

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Plate 11. William Blake, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, 1793, plate 5.

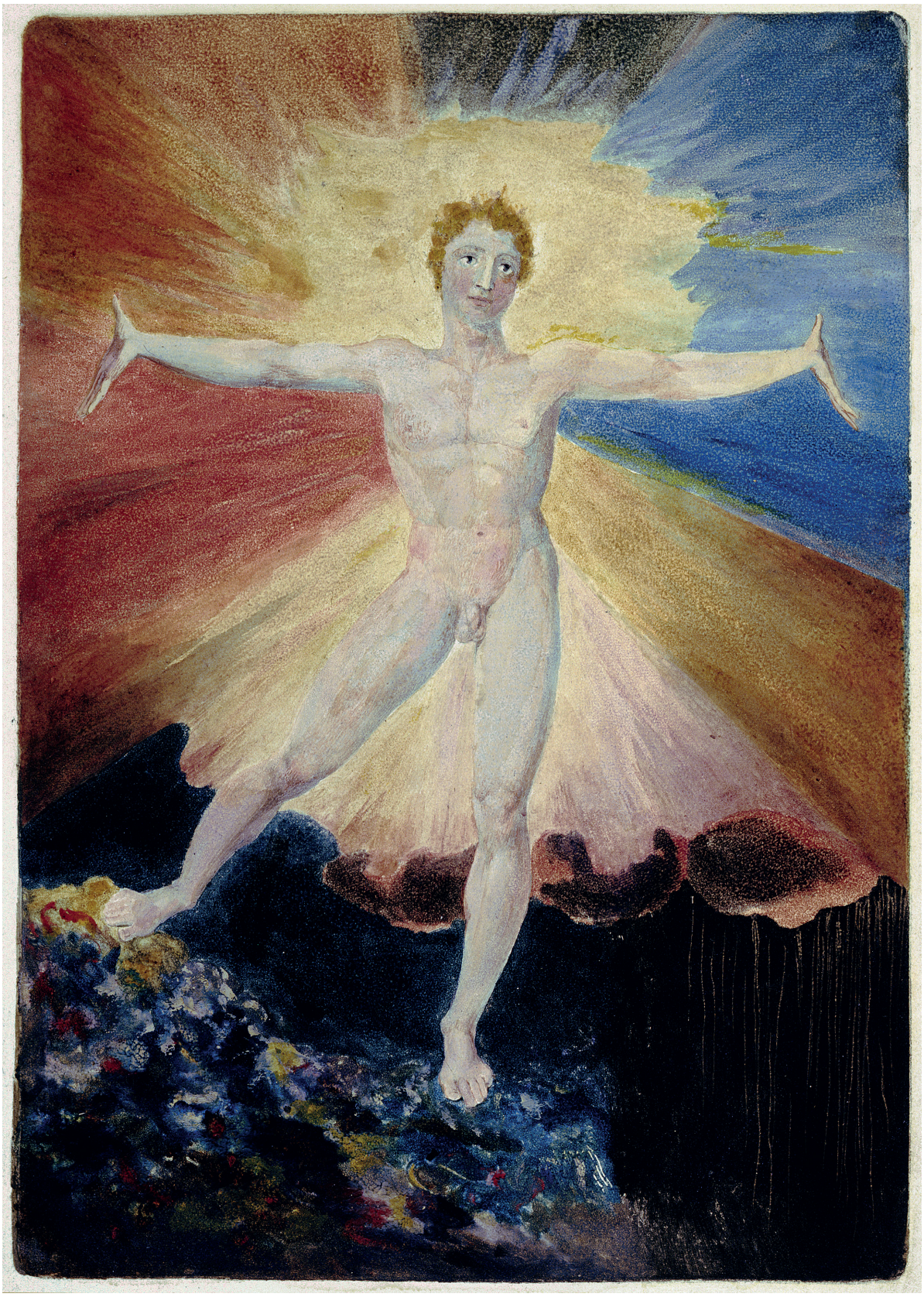
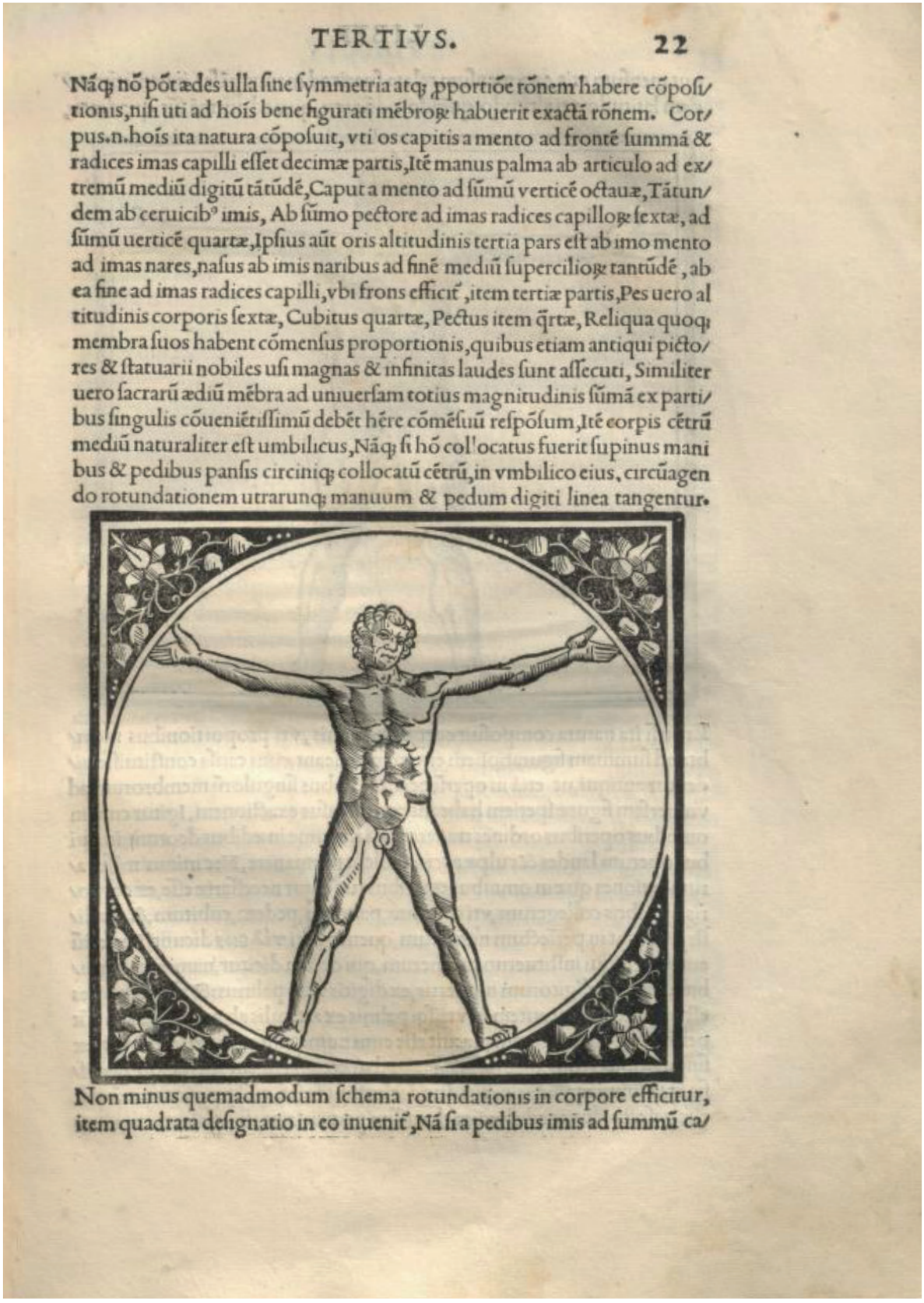


Plate 12. William Blake, *Albion Rose*, 1794-1796.



Plate 13. Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Trattato di architettura civile e militare*, 1470-1490, f. 5r.



TERTIVS. 22

Nãq; nõ põt ædes ulla ſine ſymmetria atq; ꝓportiõe rõnem habere cõpoſi/ tionis, niſi uti ad hoís bene figurati mẽbroꝝ habuerit exactã rõnem. Cor/ pus.n.hoís ita natura cõpoſuit, vti os capitis a mento ad frontẽ ſummã & radices imas capilli eſſet decimæ partis, Itẽ manus palma ab articulo ad ex/ tremũ mediũ digitũ tãtũdẽ, Caput a mento ad ſũmũ verticẽ octauæ, Tãtun/ dem ab ceruicibꝰ imis, Ab ſũmo pectore ad imas radices capilloꝝ ſextæ, ad ſũmũ uerticẽ quartæ, Ipſius aũt oris altitudinis tertia pars eſt ab imo mento ad imas nares, naſus ab imis naribus ad finẽ mediũ ſupercilioꝝ tantũdẽ, ab ea fine ad imas radices capilli, vbi frons efficit, item tertiæ partis, Pes uero al titudinis corporis ſextæ, Cubitus quartæ, Pectus item q̃rtæ, Reliqua quoq; membra ſuos habent cõmenſus proportionis, quibus etiam antiqui picto/ res & ſtatuarii nobiles uſi magnas & infinitas laudes ſunt aſſecuti, Similiter uero ſacrarũ ædiũ mẽbra ad uniuerſam totius magnitudinis ſũmã ex parti/ bus ſingulis cõueniẽtiſſimũ debẽt hẽre cõmẽſuũ reſpõſum, Itẽ corpis cẽtrũ mediũ naturaliter eſt umbilicus, Nãq; ſi hõ collocatus fuerit ſupinus mani bus & pedibus panſis circiniq; collocatũ cẽtrũ, in vmbilico eius, circũagen do rotundationem utrarunq; manuum & pedum digiti linea tangentur.

Non minus quemadmodum ſchema rotundationis in corpore efficitur, item quadrata deſignatio in eo inueniẽ, Nã ſi a pedibus imis ad ſummũ ca/

Plate 14. Giovanni Giocondo da Verona, *M. Vitruvius per Iocundum […]*, 1511, Liber III, p. 22.

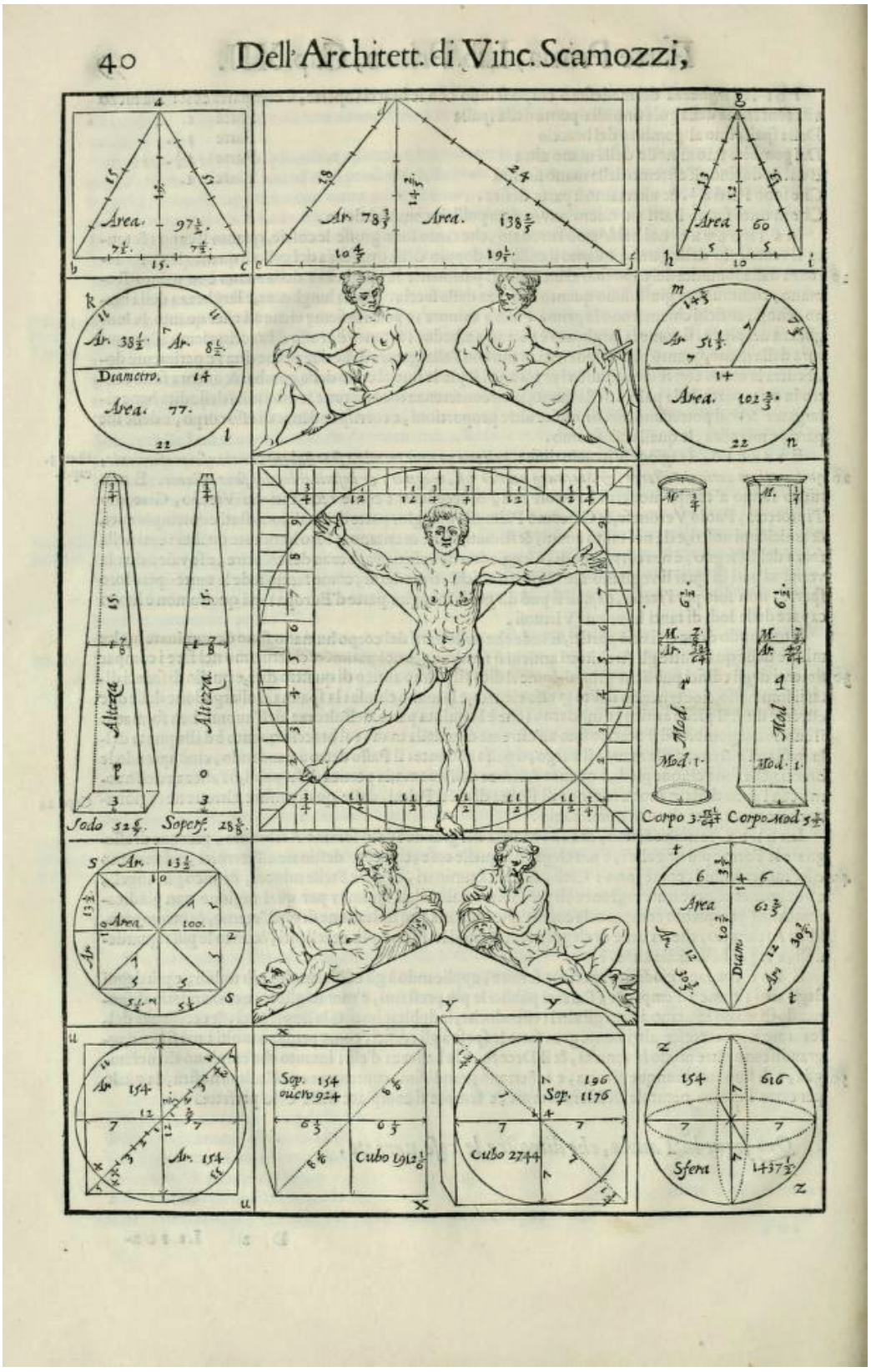


Plate 15. Vincenzo Scamozzi, *L'idea della architettura universale*, 1615, Parte I, Libro I, cap. XII, p. 40.

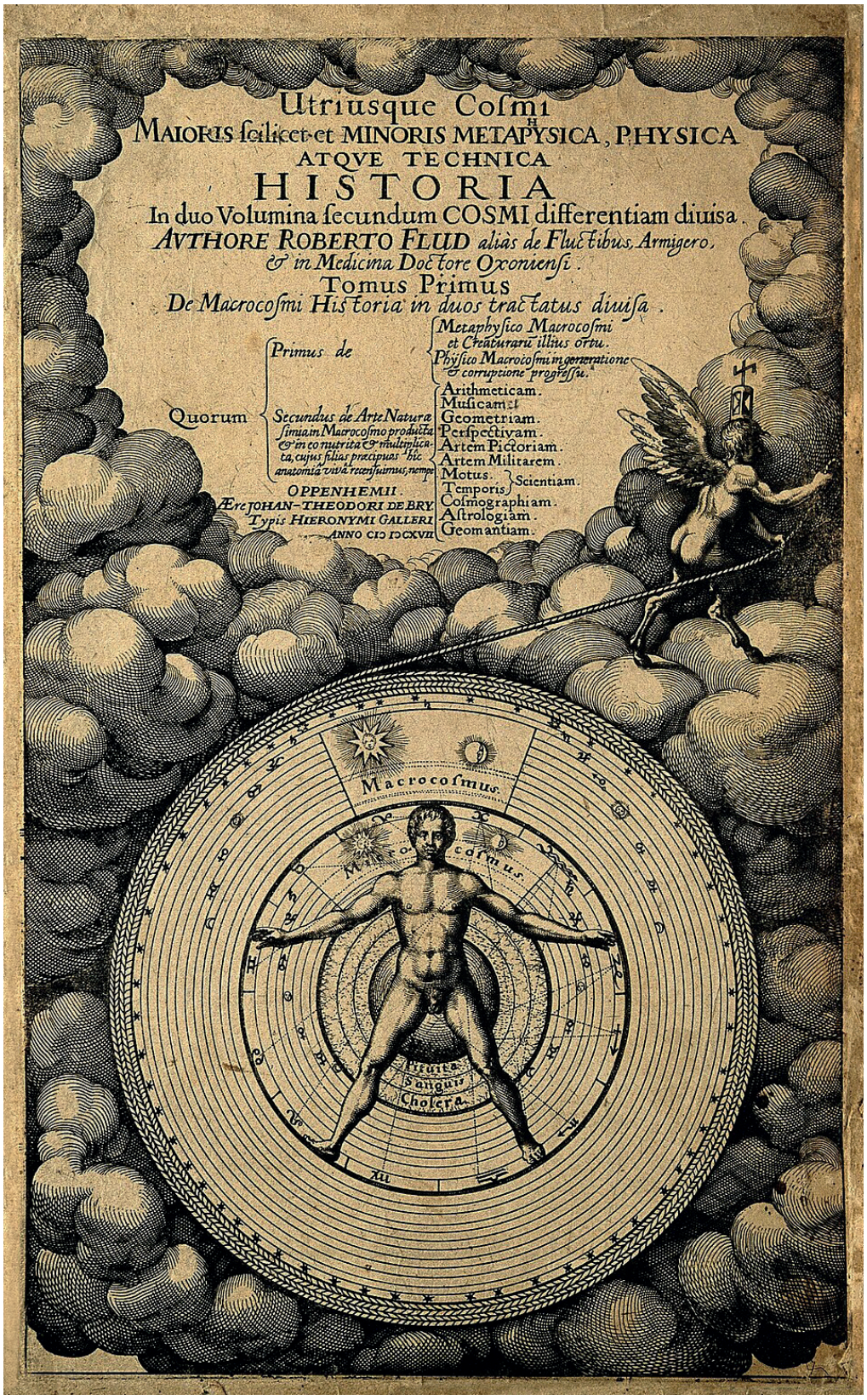


Plate 16. Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris, Metaphysica, Physica atque Technica Historia […]*, 1617-1619, title page.

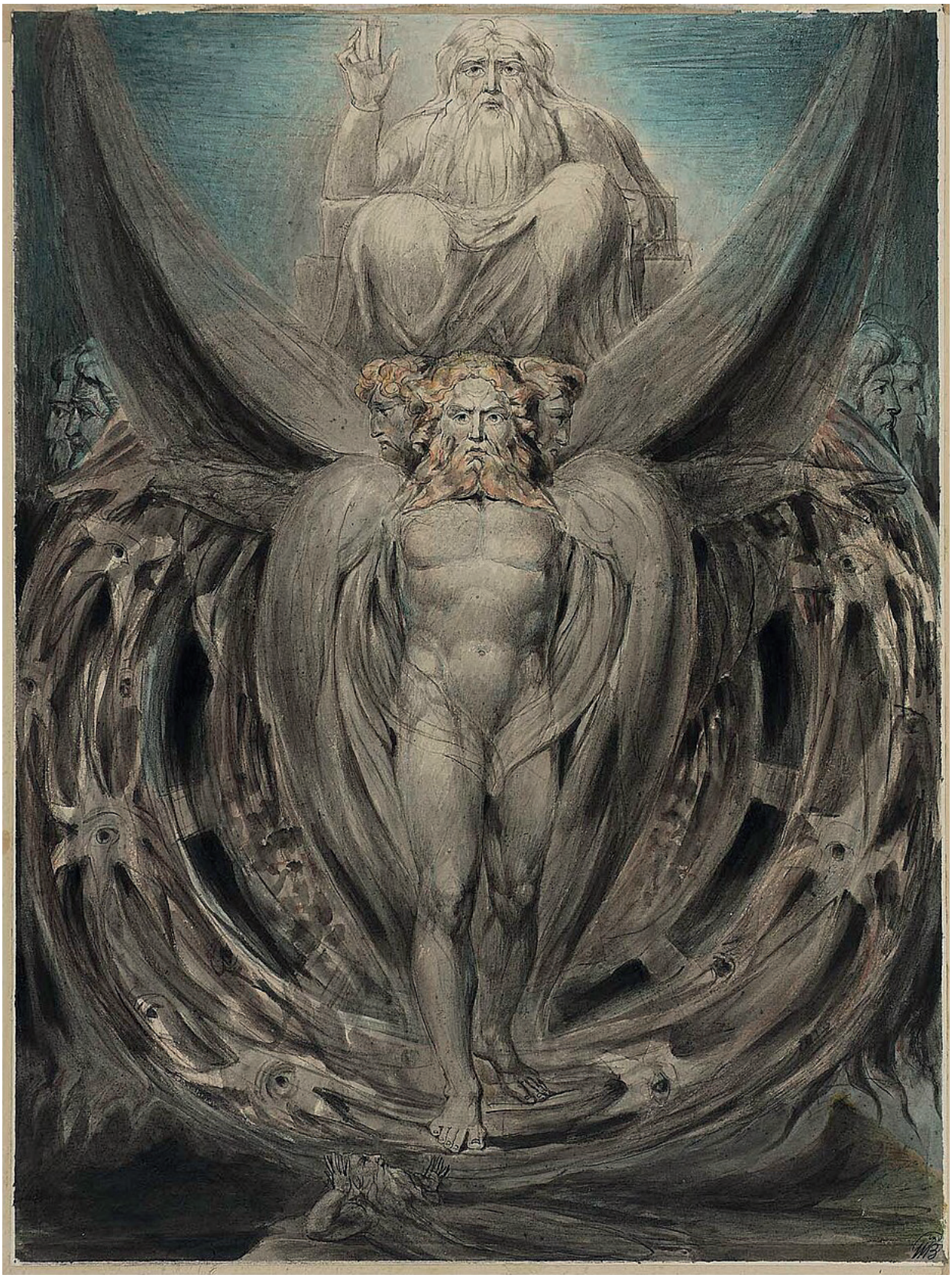


Plate 17. William Blake, *Ezekiel's Wheels*, 1803-1805.



Plate 18. William Blake, *Satan in his Original Glory*, 1805 circa.



Plate 19. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 99.

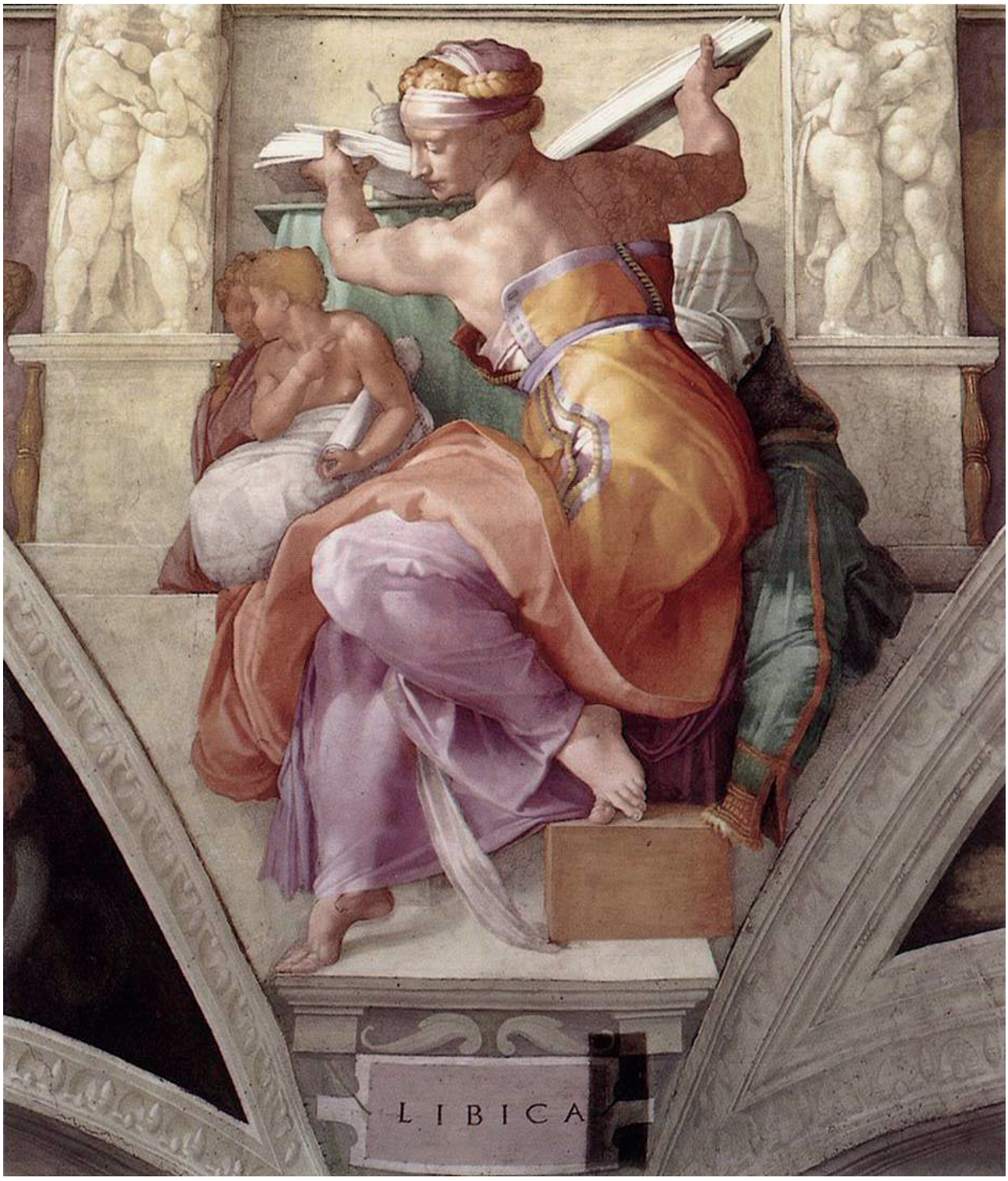


Plate 20. Michelangelo, *Libyan Sibyl,* fresco, 1512 circa. Vault of the Sistine Chapel, Musei Vaticani, Rome.



Plate 21. Michelangelo, *Cumaean Sibyl*, fresco, 1511. Vault of the Sistine Chapel, Musei Vaticani, Rome.



Plate 22. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 25.



Plate 23. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 47.

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In ricordo di Milena Romero Allué

Ricordiamo con affetto e stima la collega e amica Milena Romero Allué. La sua ricerca, originale e di spessore, ha esplorato le relazioni tra parola e immagine dalla prima età moderna alla contemporaneità, con studi su autori quali Shakespeare, Milton, Marvell, Blake e Virginia Woolf.

Nel corso degli anni, Milena ha partecipato ai progetti di ricerca coordinati dalla Prof. Antonella Riem, tra cui i PRIN del 2005, 2007, 2009 e 2022 e il progetto PRID del 2019, condividendo un percorso di collaborazione segnato da armonia e amicizia. Questo contributo, consegnato prima della sua scomparsa e qui pubblicato postumo, costituisce la seconda parte del saggio apparso su *Le Simplegadi* nel 2025. Di Milena desideriamo ricordare l'impegno scientifico, la raffinata sensibilità e il profondo amore per la parola poetica.

Prof.ssa Antonella Riem e il Comitato di Redazione

In Memory of Milena Romero Allué

We remember our colleague and friend Milena Romero Allué with affection and esteem. Her original and insightful research explored the relationships between word and image from the early modern period to the present, with studies of authors including Shakespeare, Milton, Marvell, Blake, and Virginia Woolf.

Over the years, Milena participated in the national and University research projects coordinated by Professor Antonella Riem, including the PRIN projects of 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2022 and the PRID project of 2019, in a spirit of friendship and shared endeavour. This contribution, submitted before her passing and published here posthumously, forms the second part of her essay published in *Le Simplegadi* in 2025. We honour Milena's scholarly dedication, refined sensibility, and profound love of the poetic word.

Professor Antonella Riem and the Editorial Board

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Milena Romero Allué taught English literature at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Udine. She was the author of numerous essays and five monographs, the most recent of which was awarded the *Premio nazionale di Anglistica Sergio Perosa* in 2026. Her research explored the relationship between literature and the visual arts, with particular attention to early modern England and modernist writing. Her publications include studies on the correlation between word and image in the works of Andrew Marvell and William Blake (*Art is the Tree of Life. Parola e immagine in Marvell e Blake*, 2000); the symbolism of gardens in seventeenth-century literature (*Qui è l'Inferno e quivi il Paradiso*, 2005); visual perception and Renaissance culture (*Immagini della mente*, 2016); and modern literary horizons in Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde and Virginia Woolf (*Il colore di parole in movimento*, 2019). Her final book, *Cultura ermetica e nuova scienza nella letteratura inglese del Rinascimento* (2025), examines the coexistence and interweaving of Hermetic culture and new science in Renaissance England.
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Loredana Salis

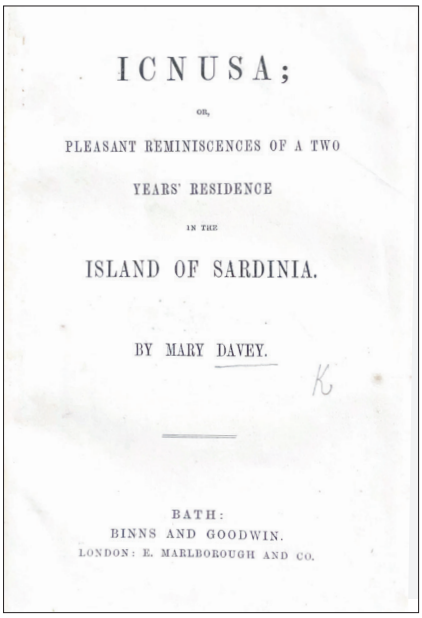
"Where every sense is charmed": *Icnusa* by Mary Davey (1860) as a Landscape of the Mind

Abstract I: *Icnusa* (1860) di Mary Davey non è semplicemente il resoconto di 'due piacevoli anni' trascorsi in Sardegna quanto piuttosto un ritratto affascinante di un paesaggio della mente, il racconto di un singolare incontro interculturale. La cultura inglese si incontra e scontra con quella sarda; le due si influenzano vicendevolmente oppure affermano, ognuna, le proprie peculiarità. L'incontro con l'alterità sarda restituisce momenti preziosi di coinvolgimento plurisensoriale che garantiscono un contatto profondo con una terra e un popolo arcaici. Riscoprendo un testo a lungo dimenticato, questo studio rilegge il resoconto di una viaggiatrice inglese in Sardegna con attenzione particolare alla narrazione di paesaggi culturali, naturali e linguistici proposti dall'autrice.

Abstract II: Mary Davey's *Icnusa* (1860) is more than a 'reminiscence' of a 'two years' residence in Sardinia'. It is a fascinating portrait of a Sardinian landscape of the mind, a peculiar tale of cultural encounters. As Davey toured the Island, her own culture and the local culture sometimes clashed, and sometimes blended; often borrowing from each other, when not reasserting their own specificities. In the text, the encounter with the Sardinian Other demands, and allows for, a cross-sensory engagement, involving most especially visual, aural and language perceptions of an ancient land and its people. This study explores Davey's narrative of cultural, natural and linguistic landscapes, with a view to reviving a largely neglected sample of nineteenth-century travel writing.

Keywords: Mary Davey, *Icnusa*, nineteenth-century British travel writing.

There is more to Mary Davey's *Icnusa* (*sic*) than the simple 'reminiscence' of a 'Two Years' Residence in the Island of Sardinia'. Published in 1860 by Binns and Goodwin, Bath, and Goodwin-Malborough and Co., London, this precious sample of odeporic literature narrates a peculiar tale of natural, cultural and linguistic encounters which articulate Sardinia as a landscape of Davey's mind. The expression "landscape of the mind" notably owes its inception to the British geographer J. Douglas Porteous, the author of a pioneering study entitled *Landscapes of the Mind. Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (1990). Taking its cue, possibly, from the work of the Canadian composer and ecologist Raymond Murray Schafer (creator


ICNUSA;

OR,

PLEASANT REMINISCENCES OF A TWO YEARS' RESIDENCE IN THE ISLAND OF SARDINIA.

BY MARY DAVEY.

BATH:
BINNS AND GOODWIN.
LONDON: E. MARLBOROUGH AND CO.

Figure 1. M. Davey, *Icnusa* (1860). Frontispiece. From the archive of the British Library (BL_10151.c.23).

of the "World Soundscape Project")[1], the volume responds to Guy Debord's conceptualisation of "spectacle" (1977) and to art-critic John Berger's notion that our sight "is not well developed" (1987: 57), and that "seeing comes before words … [*it*] establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it" (1972: 7). Faced with the "overwhelming emphasis on seeing" in Western culture, with the primacy of "the sense of sight, whether actual or imagined" in people's identification with a place, Porteous calls for the exploration of non-visual and metaphorical constructs (1990: 4). He thus advocates our engagement with places and spaces by way of other sensory and existential perceptions that involve smells, tastes, sounds, touch, memory and travel – what he terms "the convoluted, intricate, and always rewarding landscapes of our minds" (1990: xiv). These landscapes he also terms "otherscapes" (Porteous 1990: 17) to contend, citing also Gretel Ehrlich, the North American travel writer, that "although the land exists, the scape is a projection of human consciousness. [*It is*] an image received" (1987: 24-27, cit. in Porteous 1990: 4). Interestingly for us here, as Porteous further maintains, "metaphorical landscapes are almost wholly the domain of novelists and poets" (1990: 5). Over the past two decades, cultural and eco-studies have contributed to expand on such views to enquire on the way in which places are experienced not only visually but also in a cross-sensory way, thereby promoting a different kind of relation with the environment, subverting traditional modes and finding in literary works viable means for the negotiation and transformation of our perceptive worlds. Focussed on a largely neglected sample of nineteenth-century British travel writing[2], with an aim to reviving it and investigating it, this study endeavours to revisit Mary Davey's *Icnusa: Or Pleasant Reminiscences of a Two Years' Residence in the Island of Sardinia* as a landscape of the mind. Sardinia – its ancient land and people – are recast not simply as natural objects, but also as the interior country of its authoress' imagination and imaginative experiences. The Island thus turns into a world of correspondences, of cultural encounters and mutual understanding, between the English guests and their Sard hosts (Figure 1).

[1] The World Soundscape Project (WSP) was established as an educational and research group during the late 1960s and early 1970s with the aim "to find solutions for an ecologically balanced soundscape where the relationship between the human community and its sonic environment is in harmony" (*The Canadian Encyclopedia,* https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/world-soundscape-project (consulted on 23/07/2026). See also the WSP webpage: https://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/WSP/index.html (consulted on 23/07/2026).

[2] Brought back to public attention in 2001, when the Sardinian football player Gianfranco Zola, then a sports celebrity in the UK, chose it as his contribution to the British Library 'Adopt a Book' project, Brigaglia, Mastino & Ortu (2002: 146), the volume was translated into Italian a year later Davey (2002) but it remains of small interest and little researched.

Very little is known about the authoress (she is not mentioned in the *Dictionary of National Biography*) other than she reached Sardinia along with her family aboard a small war steamer called 'La Gulnara', which was "bound from Genoa to Cagliari" (Davey 1874: 3)[3], sometime in the mid 1850s[4]. Similarly, very little is known about her "short narrative of most true events", as Davey describes her first literary effort (1860: 324), followed by a second travelogue entitled *Sardinia. An Account of a Residence in Sardinia*, which was essentially a shorter version of *Icnusa*, and which appeared under the auspices of the Christian Knowledge Society in London (Davey 1874). Davey was neither a professional, nor an ambitious or distinguished writer. And yet she remains, to this date, the first and only British female travel writer on the topic of Sardinia. She toured the Island for a couple of years, from the capital city of Cagliari to the vast northern province of Sassari, back to the deep south, and across the mountainous midland areas. Subsequently, in recollection, she recounted those places and the people she had encountered. *Icnusa* is addressed to an English readership of prospective travellers, possibly a curious and educated upper middle-class lot, who would have heard and read of Sardinia in numerous travel accounts circulating at the time as the Island became increasingly appealing to British eyes. In this respect, it should also be noted that when "Britain emerged as the world's dominant economic, military and colonial power, a rich and substantial archive of British writing about Sardinia [*also*] took shape" (Salis & Leonard-Roy 2025: 286). The Island, then part of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, was not a destination in the Italian leg of the Grand Tour, and prior to the nineteenth century it had been visited mainly by sailors and naval officers. Admiral Nelson Davey reports "liked the place, and was, in turn, much revered and loved by the wild sailor population" (1860: 266). By contrast, tourists and leisure travellers tended to avoid the place owing to "the difficulty of the voyage and the island's reputation as a hotbed of malaria" (Salis & Leonard-Roy 2025: 289). British travel to Sardinia changed, by the nineteenth century, with several nationals "reaching the island to study her resources, institutions and ancient civilisations" (Salis & Leonard-Roy 2025: 292). They came as engineers (involved in planning and constructing the first Sardinian railway network), hunt-

[3] Incidentally, perhaps, 'La Gulnara' is also the name of a character in a novel by Lord Byron entitled *The Corsair* (1814), which Davey cites in *Icnusa* (the Anglo-Sard Edward is depicted as "he is reading a long passage out of Byron's Corsair, to Jeanie", 1860: 50).

[4] There is a reference to her stay in Cagliari in a letter dated 15 March 1854 which Lord Alfred Tennyson sent to his friend, John William Parker (1792-1870), a renowned printer and publisher who worked also for the Christian Knowledge Society (publishers of Davey's *Sardinia* in 1874). To Parker, the English poet recommends "A Mrs. Davey (a friend of mine many years ago) [*who*] has been living at Cagliari in Sardinia and has written a tale illustrative of Sardinian customs", Tennyson (1987: 80). Parker had an interest in Sardinia, evidently, as he published an article entitled "The Kingdom of Sardinia" by M.E.M. in the September issue of his *Fraser's Magazine* in 1855 (257-263). As to Mary Davey, she makes no explicit reference to the period of her stay, though a few hints, most especially references to a performance of Vittorio Alfieri's *Antigone* which Davey saw at the Teatro Diurno in Stampace, Cagliari. The production featured "La Farnese" as Antigone and Jacopo Billi as Emone (Davey 1860: 90, 95-99). Billi had been director of a theatre company based at the Teatro Diurno since the late 1840s. On the question of dates, and the dissonant thesis by scholars Myriam Cabiddu and Marina Sechi-Nuvole; see Salis & Leonard-Roy (2025: 290, n.13). I am grateful to Elisabetta Erre (Politecnico di Torino) and Silvia Lecca of the MyCagliari blog for sharing information on Davey's Sardinian stay (https://www.mycagliari.net/, consulted on 23/07/2026).

ers of rare animal species and of precious minerals, or simply as tourists to visit the island and its people, which they would then report on in travel diaries. Davey belonged to the latter category, the purpose of her journey being pure leisure, and that of her writing being not so much a trivial or self-referential exercise as it may seem, but a literary venture proper, and deliberately so. Cognisant of earlier travel accounts, and adding to the extant rich bibliography, Davey appears to make a timid attempt at entering a sometimes-unscrupulous and male-dominated publishing market, one which would not have spared her and her book ungenerous remarks[5]. Prompted by friends to publish her story, she preferred insertion "into any Magazine whatsoever", as opposed to publishing in book form, which she considered to be "a troublesome and expensive proceeding" (Tennyson 1987: 80). It is significant, in fact, that she addressed her *Icnusa* as a "little work", almost belittling that effort of hers to qualify its pages as "insignificant", deeming "her pen" unable to "depict scenery so lovely" (Davey 1860: 119, 147), yet authoritatively vindicating its "faithfulness" and the uniqueness of that experience (Salis & Leonard-Roy 2025: 290-295). A uniqueness which partly rests on her attention to and recollection of sensory and existential perceptions of that "far-off" land of Icnusa, "the largest, and least known, of the sunny islands of the bright Mediterranean" (Davey 1860: Preface). A world of nostalgia, Sardinia turns into an imaginary landscape whose features are essential for the working out of Davey's plot and its value as a literary product. "Icnusa", she instructs her reader, "is the traditionary name of Sardinia", an island "successively colonised" by "several races", and fallen, finally, "under the dominion of the Ducal house of Savoy" (Davey 1860: Preface). The title, a misspelling of the ancient Greek toponym of 'Ichnusa', was possibly meant to facilitate the correct pronunciation by Anglophone readers, also partially replicating a popular image of the Island as archaic, wild, with a scarce inclination or desire for modernity. That image had been widely disseminated through earlier travel accounts that made derogatory comments on the place and on the primitive nature of the Sards, something which Davey must have been sceptical of, when not in disaccord with, following her residence on the island, and one which she likely sought to recast. For her, Sardinia was only "half-barbarous" (Davey 1860: 162), a place partly Edenic and partly feudal and its people were "a singular combination of power, pride and plainness", an "admixture of extreme culture and refinement with the most primitive simplicity of manners" (Davey 1860: 84). A colony imbued with noble traits, the Sardinian landscape of Davey's mind was evidently unlike Ireland, that land of savage barbarians which Britain had long been striving to civilise. Icnusa (*sic*) had her rogues too, of course, but while some *banditti*s were "bloodstained villains", some others belonged to "the Robin Hood species" (Davey 1860: 212) and proved to be God-fearing men (Davey 1860: 281) of exquisite manners and hospitality.

Language plays a significant role in this tale of cultural encounters and in its transcription of otherscapes: the English "are entirely ignorant of the Sard" (Davey 1860: 120), the

[5] One such example is found in *The Athenaeum*. For the anonymous reviewer, "the amount of affectation is so great as to render the book distasteful, where it was meant to be attractive. The author's amblings, and ejaculations, and coquetries distract attention from the matter of her discourse. We are glad to escape from them, and to shut the book", Anonymous (1860: 473).

Sards have a rather poor English (Davey 1860: 125), but conversation would flow, nonetheless, and stories were recounted and shared by the travelling party in a joyful atmosphere. Thus, somehow replicating Chaucer's pilgrims, "one evening in each week", one of the guests would ritualistically produce a story – a topical essay, a real-life adventure, an elaborate disquisition on a scientific object, the account of a visit to a beautiful place, a reflection on clocks and the flight of time (Davey 1860: 286-288). All along the British tourist gains familiarity with local terms, which Davey cites in the original Sardinian language as if to instruct her "dear" English reader (1860: *passim*) into their meaning and use, however adding to the text's exotic quality and to the musicality of its diction. Pointing at its pictorial intent and evocative style she calls her narrative "a sketch", echoing perhaps the title of William Smyth's 1828 book on Sardinia (*Sketch of the Present State of the Island of Sardinia*, the first on the subject to be written in English), if not a well-established tradition of eighteenth-century travel writing to which she aimed to contribute (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A postcard from Cagliari. M. Davey, *Icnusa* (1860). From the archive of the British Library (BL_10151.c.23).

A tale of place and home, *Icnusa* reveals what Porteous defines as "the inevitable outsider's view of an alien landscape", a view that is at once concerned with "rootedness and rootlessness" (1990: 10). Indeed Davey's Sardinia represents a *paysage intérieur* drafted by way of a distinctive compare-&-contrast approach, whereby Sardinia and the Sard are observed *vis à vis* an English model of absolute perfection (people, navy, locks, saddles, tea, roads, dance, theatre,

religion: everything English knows no equal). And yet, if, on the one hand, Davey asserts the superiority of her native culture and land, somehow repeating and reinforcing the received negative image of Sardinia, on the other she deems the Island's primitive nature a precious trait, almost an added value. For instance, while attending the "Festa of St. Efisio" (1860: 60), a majestic commemoration of Cagliari's martyred patron saint, Davey reflects once more on the English abroad, and on the impact Sardinia can have and actually has on its visitors. To this attentive tourist, evidently, we, as humans, are forged by the places in which we live and have lived:

> The English who have long dwelt in the land of the stranger are among the pleasantest in the world. *The hard outlines of coldness and pride are worn away, and all the sterling, honest worth is left* (15, emphasis added).

The English, or more properly British people abroad are among the nicest in the world:

> Doubtless, dear reader, you will say they are the nicest and best everywhere. It may be so, but it has often appeared to me that in their own country there does seem sometimes to lurk about them a certain jealousy of their dignity, which will in spite of all their intrinsic goodness, grow into a dull and cold formality, forming an icy barrier to many a warm and gentle heart. Very frequently, perhaps, I may say generally, *this icy barrier thaws entirely away in the land of the stranger*, at any rate, we find it so in this far-off land; and our little band of English are, by the influence of early education, and sympathies, drawn together, *like children of one family* (75, emphasis added).

At the heart of a positive transformation – the "icy barrier" thaws entirely, allowing for a serene and secure sense of shared community – lies a combination of intrinsic virtues (of the English, on the one hand, and of the Sards on the other), both of them ending up feeling "like children of one family". If, upon their first arrival on the Island, the English had found that there was "something very quaint" about the place, "something almost deathlike in the grey uniformity of its colouring […] a sense of utter loneliness, and a vague, heavy desolate feeling it is" (14-15), soon their perception of ancient Icnusa (*sic*) would change as they experienced

> a peculiar loveliness in the *fresh, gentle breeze of early morning*; delightful everywhere […] as if the gates of heaven had been opened to send forth a message of love and peace to every earth-born pilgrim […]. And if thou art not already an early riser, dear reader, take our advice and become one! (29, emphasis added).

Davey's enthusiastic delight becomes pervasive the more she acquaints herself with the place and comes to fully appreciate the "things of daily occurrence". On her way to Oristano, in the "west end" of Sardinia:

> We are quite tired of saying how *smiling nature* is – for she does smile very much on this side of Sardinia […] so the travelling, and the pleasant encamping, and the kind hospitality continue to be *things of daily occurrence* (207, emphasis added).

The notion of a fortunate encounter between 'the nicest' people, the English, and those champions of hospitality, the Sards, between two different peoples and cultures, is reiterated throughout the book as if to suggest that an alchemy occurs because the place and its "smiling nature" allow for it. Exposed to the "the deep devotion [*and*] the absolute faith" of locals celebrating St. Efisio, Davey cannot refrain from saying how "they are very beautiful to behold, and have their effect on the imagination, if not on the heart also" (52). The experience, clearly, is more than simply visual. It turns olfactive, sometimes: "A most delicious perfume of orange blossoms […] tempts us into the garden […] a pleasant most pleasant place withal" (107). More often, though, diverse non-visual worlds surround the sensor, at times penetrating her body, stirring ("thrilling" and "witching") her emotions and imagination in a powerful way, allowing for a unique cross-sensory engagement with the place (the air, the fauna, the locals):

> Listen! The softest strains of the organ are wafted on the breeze. Was ever music more thrilling? […] Oh, listen still, for it is beyond words lovely! And then, as the ear drinks in the melody, let the eye wander over the blue waters of the waveless bay (37).
>
> How soul stirring is the music; there is something positively seraphic in the soft strains that steal through yonder grating; are they nuns, or are they angels who are singing? (58).
>
> How exquisitely [*the band*] play, how softly the strains vibrate on the fresh morning breeze […] there is something witching and catching in the gaiety; one feels as though one could not be gloomy even if one wished (61-62).
>
> The sounds lovely too, are they […] a rustic church-bell sends its musical sound, echoing and re-echoing through the clear soft air; then the tinkling of the sheep bells, the bleating of sheep and goats, the barking of dogs, the monotonous pipe of the shepherd, and […] the song of the peasant; and […] the notes of the birds, in plenty […] an eagle, a covey of quails (217).

There is a distinctively aural quality to those descriptions which reflects the major cultural turn towards listening typical of the Victorian age, when the value of hearing changed considerably to signify both "a response to a physical stimulus and as a metaphor for the communication of meaning" (Picker 2003: 7), but also a means to encounter diverse places where sounds possess special qualities. Thus, for instance, Davey reports that "the wild piping sounds (of native instruments of great antiquity) have a most peculiar effect, *and the horses evidently hear it with extreme delight*" (67, emphasis added).

The soundscape of Icnusa (*sic*) appears to be full of what Schafer terms "soundmarks", which make "the acoustic life of the community unique" (1994: 10). "Community" and "unique" are key terms here. As she recollects her time in Sardinia, this English traveller also re-creates ideal communities whose members share the same sensory stimuli and experiences. These acoustic communities at times harmoniously combine hosts and guests, the Sards and the English ("the words are different […] but the spirit is the same", 1860: 58), at times they virtually bring together Davey's (English) readers and the travelling party she belongs to, or else

they gather humans and other-than-humans (the sea, the air, the horses, sheep and goats, birds etc.) sharing the same soundscape of Icnusa (*sic*). As to the second key term, "unique", while Davey tours the Island variations in sounds are recorded that make up *Icnusa*'s peculiar and soul-stirring acoustic landscape. As Schafer notes, "the ear is always much more alert while traveling in unfamiliar environments" rather than familiar, and therefore, acoustically less distinguished contexts (1994: 211). In Davey's case, such an alertness to sounds and soundmarks is prompted by the need to share with her reader and therefore narrate a soundscape that is at once "an object of curiosity and of aesthetic enjoyment" (212). It is in these terms that *Icnusa* represents the work of "a good tourist", of a human being that is "sensitive" and knows, or perhaps has learnt, that the environment "is not merely what is seen or possessed" (212).

To conclude, *Icnusa* adds to a tradition of British odeporic literature that promoted an image of Sardinia as a remote and wild place alien to modernity. Having experienced life on the Island over a period of two years – longer than most travellers who had written about Sardinia – Davey could challenge their primitivist attitudes and contradict a misleading received image of the place. In the midst of several popular narratives circulating at the time, her dissonant voice strongly insists on the "faithfulness" and the "true nature" (Davey 1860: *passim*) of that story, one which her reader is promptly and repeatedly invited to believe in. To such aims, Davey constructs Sardinia as an otherscape, a landscape of Davey's mind, whose contours are clearly marked by personal beliefs and motivations, by what the attentive traveller perceived about the place, the way she felt about it, the way it made her feel. Driven by a cross-sensory experience of an ancient and remote land "beyond words lovely" (Davey 1860: 37), the nostalgic recollection of her "distant pilgrimage" recasts Sardinia as a somewhat exotic place where "every sense is charmed" (Davey 1860: 37). Like Caliban's Island in *The Tempest*, Davey's Sardinia too is "full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs" (Shakespeare 2013: III, ii, 127-128) and of pleasant smells whose "excessive loveliness" (Davey 1860: 121) dispels all negative notions and memories of it and allows for the unique and mutually enriching encounter between the English guests and their Sard hosts.

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"Poor Visitor": Jamaica Kincaid on Place, Belonging, and Environmental Justice

Abstract I: Con esempi tratti da *Lucy* (1990), *A Small Place* (1988) e *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005), e rifacendomi al dibattito teorico sullo spazio e la giustizia ambientale, in questo articolo esploro la riflessione di Jamaica Kincaid sulla giustizia socio-ambientale e su categorie fluide quali 'senso del luogo', 'visitatore', 'turista' e 'residente'. Nell'opera di Kincaid, lo spazio non è mai neutro; emerge piuttosto come un costrutto socioculturale plasmato da forze sociali ed economiche e segnato da strutture di dominio e disuguaglianza. Kincaid suggerisce infine che qualsiasi autentico 'senso del pianeta' debba fondarsi su una profonda coscienza storica, condizione indispensabile per un attivismo ambientale e politico realmente significativo.

Abstract II: Drawing on *Lucy* (1990), *A Small Place* (1988), and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005), as well as on theoretical debates surrounding space and environmental justice, in this article I explore Jamaica Kincaid's engagement with socio-environmental justice and with such fluid categories as 'sense of place', 'visitor', 'tourist', and 'resident'. In Kincaid's oeuvre, space is never neutral; rather, it emerges as a socio-cultural construct shaped by social and economic forces and deeply entangled with structures of domination and inequality. Kincaid ultimately suggests that any genuine 'sense of planet' must be grounded in a profound historical consciousness, which alone can provide the basis for meaningful forms of environmental and political activism.

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Mobility and Tourism, Planetary Consciousness.

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise offers a critical reflection on the localism that characterized much of the American environmental debate until the final decades of the twentieth century, and links it to what, in a broader context, philosopher Hans Jonas and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman call an "ethics of proximity": the idea that moral obligations derive from, or are primarily connected to, what is close, familiar, and concrete (Heise 2008: 28 ff.). In the words of poet Wendell Berry, quoted by Heise, "without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed" (Heise 2008: 31). According to this perspective, in order to reconnect with the natural world and

overcome the alienation from nature produced by modern societies, people need to develop a 'sense of place', a detailed knowledge of the ecosystems around them, which in turn generates a special attachment to those places. To paraphrase the title of Scott Russell Sanders' book *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (1993), people need 'to stay put'. In *Slow Violence*, Rob Nixon revisits and expands Heise's argument, emphasising how American environmental debates, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Gary Snyder, have often centred on a notion of place infused with an aura of mysticism. In this line of thought, the ideal place, the place that prompts a meaningful connection with the Earth, is often wild, pure and "natural" (Nixon 2011: 233 ff.). Yet the American wilderness, much like the English pastoral, has never been *pure* or *natural*. Both wilderness and the pastoral are socio-historical constructs, shaped by processes of idealisation and the exclusion of other spaces and other histories. "To stand as a self-contained national heritage landscape", Nixon writes, "English pastoral has depended on the screening out of colonial spaces and histories, much as the American wilderness ideal has entailed an amnesiac relationship toward the Indian wars of dispossession" (Nixon 2011: 245). But what happens, Nixon asks, when the memory of the colonial past breaks into the pastoral idyll, exposing its ideological assumptions? This is precisely what occurs in the works of Antiguan American writer Jamaica Kincaid, who debunks the idea that places are stable, pure, or natural. In her novels, essays, and travelogues, space is never natural, but rather a socio-cultural product (Lefebvre 1991), created and experienced through social and economic structures, and embedded in patterns of domination and inequality. Ahead of her time, Kincaid investigated the nexus of colonial history and ecological disaster long before these issues became central to contemporary critical debates. Drawing on *Lucy* (1990), *A Small Place* (1988), and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005), as well as on theoretical debates on environmental justice (Nixon 2011; Robbins 2017), in the following pages I will shed light on Kincaid's analysis of some highly unstable notions such as "sense of place", "visitor", "tourist", and "resident". Such categories are unstable because relationships to place are continually reshaped by history – both personal and collective – memory, perspective, and representation; however, this instability does not erase the unequal structures of power that determine how one can inhabit a place or define its meaning[1]. If our sense of place sets us apart, Kincaid suggests, our sense of planet, "a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape our daily routines" (Heise 2008: 55), should unite us, and must ultimately rest on a deep historical consciousness – the only foundation for any meaningful activism.

I will begin with *Lucy*, a novel from 1990. *Lucy* tells the story of a Caribbean girl who goes to the United States to work as an *au pair* with a wealthy family. At first glance, Lewis and Mariah, her employers, are the image of familial happiness – handsome, rich, in love, and blessed with four beautiful blonde children. The family spends long summers in a house on the lake: an old, restored house that belonged to Mariah's family, where she used to spend her summers as a child. While there, Mariah becomes involved with some friends

[1] Literary critic Steve Mentz expands the metaphor of flow to embrace historical narratives themselves: "Thinking in terms of cyclical flows rather than linear progress makes historical narratives messier, more confusing, and less familiar. These are good things" (2020: XVII).

in a campaign against the ecological degradation of the landscape surrounding the house. Lucy, the West Indian *au pair*, muses:

> Like her [Mariah], all of the members of this organization were well off but they made no connection between their comforts and the decline of the world that lay before them. […] I could have told them how nice it was to see them getting a small sip of their own bad medicine. Some days she would go out from early morning until late afternoon sketching specimens of all sorts in their various habitats; she gave me the impression that everything was on its last legs and any day now would disappear from the face of the earth. Mariah was the kindest person I had ever known. And that was the reason I couldn't bring myself to point out to her that if all the things she wanted to save in the world were saved, she might find herself in reduced circumstances; I couldn't bring myself to ask her to examine Lewis's daily conversations with his stockbroker, to see if they bore any relation to the things she saw passing away before her eyes[2].

Having fled the patriarchal society of her small island, in the United States Lucy discovers feminism and environmentalism through Mariah; through Paul (an artist she meets at a party and who later becomes her lover), she encounters the artistic avant-garde. These movements open new horizons for her, and yet Lucy, with her remarkable ability to cut through the falseness of things and ideas, also perceives the limits of such progressive currents. With her unconventional perspective on the world, Lucy "pulls the rug out from under the carefully balanced assumptions" of the American left-wing intelligentsia (Nichols 2009: 205). Mariah's feminism does not save Lucy from the painful relationship with her mother left behind in Antigua, nor does it save Mariah herself from the myth of domestic happiness and, ultimately, from the breakdown of her marriage. When Lucy confides to Mariah that her suffering stems from the fact that her mother reserved brilliant careers for her brothers born after her, while planning only a career in nursing for Lucy, Mariah tries to console her by generalising her situation:

> Mariah wanted to rescue me. She spoke of women in society, women in history, women in culture, women everywhere. But I couldn't speak, so I couldn't tell her that my mother was my mother and that society and history and culture and other women in general were something else altogether (103).

Paul, the bohemian artist who smokes marijuana, is drawn to things distant and mysterious: "He loved things that came from far away and had a mysterious history" (122). On the windowsill of his living room grow two plants that Lucy recognises as coming from her part of the world: "cassy and dagger" – the first a good purgative, the second a plant children use for dressing up in costumes.

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[2] Kincaid (2022: 54-55). All quotations are from this edition; page numbers will hereafter be given parenthetically in the text.

> These two plants grew so plentifully where I came from that sometimes they were regarded as a nuisance, weeds, and were dug up and thrown in the rubbish. And now here they were, treasured, sitting in a prominent place in a beautiful room, a special blue light trained on them. And here I was also, a sort of weed in a way, and across the room Paul's eyes, a sparkling blue light, were trained on me (77).

By identifying with plants that Paul finds exotic and mysterious, but which she sees as ordinary and invasive, Lucy exposes Paul's love for distant lands as mere exoticism. When one afternoon Paul takes her to visit an old mansion in ruins, "formerly the home of a man who made a great deal of money in the part of the world I was from, in the sugar industry" (100), Lucy wishes that man was dead. As they drive along, Paul speaks of the great explorers who had crossed the oceans, "not only to find riches, he said, but to feel free, and this search for freedom was part of the whole human situation". Lucy observes, corrosively, that it had never occurred to her that Paul had "such a hobby – freedom". On the sides of the road, Lucy notices dead animals – badgers and raccoons – which, in their attempt to cross the road, were run over by speeding cars – and comments: "On their way to freedom, some people find riches, some people find death" (101).

During the stay at Lewis' and Mariah's holiday home, Dinah, Mariah's best friend (who will eventually steal her husband), also a proud environmentalist, approaches Lucy and asks her whether she is "from the islands". Lucy flushes with anger and comments: "I was about to respond to her in this way: 'Which islands exactly do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?'" (42).

What unites Mariah, Lewis, Paul, Dinah, and the group of privileged environmentalists holidaying by the lake, in Lucy's eyes, is their lack of historical awareness – or perhaps simply their habit of seeing the world from their own historical perspective, what Rob Nixon calls "spatial amnesia" (Nixon 2011: 238). Like much American environmental writing and criticism, Lucy's privileged American friends seem "amnesiac toward non-American geographies in which America is implicated" (Nixon 2011: 239). They tend to forget their complicity in the slow violence they inflict, simply through their lifestyle, on less privileged people who live in places like Lucy's small island. On the other hand, Lucy – the racialised migrant domestic servant – knows that every space she occupies is imbued with history and traversed by a dense network of power relations. For Lucy, nothing exists in abstract or universal terms, because it is not she, her culture, or her history that set the standard considered universal. From the very first chapter, Lucy is described by her employers as a "visitor", a "poor visitor", with the implication that she is awkward, does not fit in, or even voluntarily resists integration. During a dinner at home, described with biting irony, Lewis asks Lucy, jokingly, if she has ever seen anyone bring a forkful of French-cut green beans to their mouth. Mariah and Lewis mistake Lucy's bewildered gaze for the naïve look of a poor girl captivated by the comforts of a superior culture. Lucy's bewildered gaze, however, reorients the reader's gaze, inviting them to unmask Mariah and Lewis' cultural arrogance. Would it really be good for Lucy to integrate? Would it be a good thing if she shed the role of the "poor visitor" and embraced the American dream? Does her ability to understand multiple worlds and hold them together in a single vision (the American metropolis and her small

island, Mariah's feminism and her mother's teachings, the superficial progressivism of her American friends and the ecological and social decay of her island fuelled by their lifestyle) not make her a valuable observer? Does her strength not stem precisely from her mobility, from her "sense of existential homelessness" (Mufti 2016) learned through the painful experience of migration?

On the train from the city to Lewis' and Mariah's holiday home, Mariah is ecstatic, already anticipating her embrace with the nature awaiting her at the lake. In the morning, on the train, Mariah opens the door to Lucy's compartment to show her the freshly ploughed fields streaming past the window. Mile after mile, Lucy looks at those turned-up fields and comments, "Well, thank God I didn't have to do that" (24). Mariah then invites Lucy to the dining car, but she seems oblivious to what does not escape Lucy's notice:

> Mariah did not seem to notice what she had in common with the other diners, or what I had in common with the waiters. She acted in her usual way, which was that the world was round and we all agreed on that, when I knew that the world was flat and if I went to the edge I would fall off (23).

For Lucy, the world is not a sphere where the force of gravity bears equally on every point, but a flat surface like the conquerors' map, where the centre is firmly at the centre, while she is always precariously seated on the edge.

Mariah's love for the natural world is depicted in the novel with biting irony. Her environmentalism is intimate, romantic, and "largely indifferent" – we could say, appropriating Nixon's words – "to the international relationship between social inequities, environmental practices, and the cultures of nature espoused by the poor" (Nixon 2011: 253). One March morning, Mariah asks Lucy if she has ever seen spring.

> She said the word "spring" as if spring were a close friend, a friend who dared to go away for a long time and soon would reappear for their passionate reunion. She said, "Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they're in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive". And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way? (11).

The scene in which Mariah leads Lucy, blindfolded, into a daffodil park, to share the joy of seeing the daffodils' heads bowing in the wind, is a locus classicus of postcolonial responses to dominant cultures. Faced with the daffodils, Lucy stiffens, remembering the morning many years earlier when she had been forced to recite Wordsworth's poem in front of the whole school. At that time Lucy had never seen a real daffodil. The night after the recital she dreamed that an army of daffodils was chasing her, and she fell, and the daffodils covered her until she was buried alive[3]. Mariah, "who wanted all of us, the children and

[3] For a discussion of the English landscape as a normative ideal in colonial education, see Tiffin (2005).

me, to see things the way she did" (26), is hurt; she thinks Lucy takes some pleasure in not participating, in remaining forever 'a visitor', 'a poor visitor'. But how can Lucy possibly explain to Mariah what she feels?

> Where should I start? Over here or over there? […] I felt sorry that I had cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes (21).

The fish in the lake, the forest, the rain, and the snow are sources of pleasure for Mariah; more than that, they are part of her personal happiness, one to which she seems to feel entitled. When, after the beginning of spring, a final, belated snowfall arrives, Mariah sulks, as if she had experienced a personal betrayal. Lucy laughs at her and wonders how one gets to be a person who is made miserable because "the weather changed its mind, because the weather doesn't live up to your expectations?" (13).

Mariah and Lewis' friends – those same friends who are unable to see the connection between their wealth, their stock-market dealings, their expensive cars, their cheerful and 'innocent' consumerism, and the environmental degradation around them – go on holiday to the islands. By now, Lucy has learned that when wealthy Americans from the East Coast say, "the islands", they mean the Caribbean.

> They had somehow all been to the islands – by that, they meant the place where I was from – and had fun there. I decided not to like them just on that basis; I wished once again that I came from a place where no one wanted to go, a place that was filled with slag and unexpectedly erupting volcanoes, or where a visitor was turned into a pebble on setting foot there; somehow it made me ashamed to come from a place where the only thing to be said about it was "I had fun when I was there" (49).

In a book from a few years earlier, *A Small Place* (1988), an essay on the painful situation of Antigua, plagued both by its bad administration and by a reckless tourism industry, Lewis and Mariah's friends had already made their appearance. The "American or, worse, European" tourist visiting Antigua, to whom Kincaid addresses her outrage throughout the pamphlet, is one of them. This is the tourist who hopes that it won't rain during their two-week holiday, without questioning the consequences – let alone the causes – of the drought that afflicts the island (the reader is reminded of Mariah's disappointment in *Lucy*, when she frowns because an unexpected snowfall ruins her weekend; incidentally, Lucy could reassure them: at one point in the novel, we learn that on her island it hasn't rained for a year and a half). This is the tourist who goes to the islands for fun, but, like Dinah, Mariah's shallow friend, might not be able to locate them on a map. It is the tourist who would do well not to wonder where the contents of their intestines end up, because they might discover that Antigua has no sewage system.

> You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it […] Oh, it might all end up in the water you are thinking of taking a

> swim in; the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal. But the Caribbean Sea is very big and the Atlantic Ocean is even bigger; it would amaze even you to know the number of black slaves this ocean has swallowed up (Kincaid 2000: 14).

In Kincaid's terse vocabulary of power relations, "visitor" has become "tourist". The social condescension, if not outright racism, that Lucy is forced to endure among Mariah and Lewis' friends, in *A Small Place* appears in the form of the tourist's carefree attitude, which Kincaid describes as a continuation, under another name, of the colonial outlook (Corso 2025). "A tourist is an ugly human being", writes Kincaid, and this ugliness stems from blindness. The tourist's enjoyment is directly proportional to their blindness to the actual living conditions of the locals; it is proportionate to the tourist's amnesia, their ability to forget history. In *Lucy*, when the protagonist confesses to Mariah that, for her, the daffodils symbolise not the rebirth of nature but an education that annihilates, the kind, liberal, well-intentioned Mariah responds, "What a history you have", prompting Lucy's caustic reply: "You are welcome to it, if you like" (Kincaid 2022: 12). Without historical awareness, communication breaks down; Mariah's feminism becomes a blunt instrument, and her environmentalism a ridiculous sentimentality. Although Mariah desperately wants to connect with Lucy, their dialogues often end in silence or misunderstanding.

The tourist, however, represents a larger group. In *The Beneficiary*, Bruce Robbins argues that the target of Kincaid's critique is not merely "the white-skinned tourist in a dark-skinned people's country", but rather the citizen of the global North in their economic, political, and social relationship with the citizen of the global South (Robbins 2017: 37). Kincaid seeks to shake them, not just because the tourist's country has a sewage system while Antigua does not, but "for the lines of causality that connect the lack of a sewage system in Antigua with a more sanitized life back in the United States" (Robbins 2017: 38). The citizen of the global North, who enjoys a disproportionate share of the world's resources and generates waste to an extent far beyond that of the average inhabitant of the global South, is a beneficiary of a system built on inequality, whether they like it or not (Robbins 2017: 2, 40). Incidentally, Kincaid has long aligned herself with the group identified by Robbins as the beneficiaries. With typical frankness in *My Garden (Book)* she writes: "I had lived in America for a long time and had adjusted to the American habit of taking up at least twenty times as much of the available resources as each person needs" (Kincaid 2024: 40).

Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya (2005) sees Kincaid adopt yet another narrative voice. The travelogue emerged from a journey to Nepal in the autumn of 2002, which the writer – an avid botanist – made together with her friend Daniel Hinkley, a renowned American horticulturist, and Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, British botanists and nursery owners. For the four travellers, the aim of the expedition was to collect 'garden-worthy seeds' to bring back to Vermont or Wales, enriching their nurseries and gardens. Thus Kincaid, who had previously written memorable pages on the relationship between gardening and colonialism, now finds herself, somewhat curiously, assuming the role of the Western explorer. At night she reads *The Kangchenjunga Adventure* by Frank Smythe, an account of a 1930 expe-

dition to Kangchenjunga; during the day she photographs flowers she had first encountered in the writings of Joseph Banks, personal botanist to Captain Cook. The Sherpas carry her luggage and cook her meals; they bear on their backs the tent in which she sleeps and the table at which she sits to eat. The porters' names are "so difficult to pronounce" that the travellers, with Victorian condescension, simply refer to them as "Cook" (the boy who cooks) or "Table" (the one who carries the table on his back)[4]. At times the four travellers scold them because the young men are too slow or because they have chosen an inconvenient campsite. The narrator observes:

> We were very used to being comfortable, and in our native societies (Britain, for Bleddyn and Sue; America, for Dan and me) when we were not comfortable, we did our best to rid ourselves of the people who were not making us comfortable. We wished Sunam would fire the porters. But he couldn't even if he wanted to. There were no other porters around (149-150).

The narrator has so fully slipped into the role of the Western tourist – albeit an elegant tourist, a trekker in search of rare seeds – that in a revealing lapse she refers to America as 'my native society'. Has her status as a privileged citizen, a *beneficiary* in Robbins' terms, truly eclipsed the memory of Antigua? Actually, her past repeatedly resurfaces, subtly unsettling the discourse of the explorer. In Tumlingtar, the town from which one of the routes to Everest begins, people stare at her curiously; although they are accustomed to seeing people from other parts of the world, "people who looked like Bleddyn, Sue and Dan", they "were not used to seeing people like me, someone of African descent" (70). A Nepalese woman touches her hair and wishes the writer would style hers the same way; another brushes her face to discover whether she is wearing a mask. Small episodes such as these reveal "Kincaid's interstitial perspective within the group of plant hunters" (Didur 2010: 176) and reproduce, albeit in a different context, the many dislocations of perspective already encountered in *Lucy*. The privileged explorer has retained Lucy's shifting gaze, her sense of estrangement. From the window of her hotel in Kathmandu, the writer sees a large open area crossed by pipes from which water gushes out. People go there to wash themselves, do their laundry, and collect drinking water. The narrator remarks:

> Because of my own particular history, every person I saw in this situation seemed familiar to me. But then again, because of my own particular history, every person I saw in the Thamel was familiar also. The person in the restaurant complaining about the lack of some luxury was familiar, the person at the public baths longing for luxuries of every kind was familiar, the person confused and in a quandary was familiar (55-56).

It is this confused and perplexed person, suddenly sensing a mysterious affinity with the local people, who declares: "Life itself was perfectly fair, people had created injustices; it

[4] Kincaid (2020: 52). All quotations from *Among Flowers* are taken from this edition; page numbers will hereafter be included in the text.

was the created injustices that led to me being here, dependent on Sherpas, for without this original injustice, I would not be in Nepal and the Sherpas would be doing something not related to me" (149).

Unlike *A Small Place*, a lucid indictment of irresponsible tourism portrayed as a new form of colonialism, *Among Flowers* is a contradictory text in which the narrator's voice is never univocal: at times it is the voice of the rich and privileged class that plunders and renames the beauties of the world in order to adorn their own garden; at other times it is the voice of someone fully aware of the power relations that shape human interactions, someone who never deceives herself about the fact that travelling, observing, and writing are forms of power to be handled with care: "I saw the people and I took them in, but I made no notes on them, no description of their physical being since I could see that they could not do the same to me" (139-140). While Kincaid acknowledges that she shares the passion of those seed hunters who worked side by side with colonisers for centuries, she also recognises that this passion arises from an attitude as universal as it is ordinary: "this really normal thing called human curiosity" (Warner 2006: 54). Yet in *Among Flowers* the narrator's confident voice occasionally falls silent: not only when the awareness of social injustice erupts to disturb taken-for-granted privileges, but also when the impenetrable beauty of the landscape itself invites silence:

> More than a few people have gone beyond the boundaries of the Earth's atmosphere and on returning, participate in parades and festivals and ceremonies with joy and enthusiasm. They have made the unknown normal-seeming immediately. It is just as well that one of these people were me. Had I been the first person to walk on the surface of the Moon, I don't think I would be able to speak for one hundred years afterward. As it is, I just went to Nepal on a plant-hunting, seed-collecting trek and the landscape at the foothills of the Himalayan mountains have left my tongue somewhat stilled, perhaps permanently so (221-222).

Among Flowers is filled with descriptions of a landscape of vibrant beauty. A single day's hike can encompass several climate zones, from subtropical to alpine. In Nepal, the rivers' water, the sunlight, the rain, the sky, and the snow are so perfect that they seem freshly shaped by Nature's own hands: "Every way in which the weather can manifest itself represents the ideal way for it to do so" (260). This bewilderment before the impenetrable beauty of the landscape gives rise to a kind of planetary sublime – an awareness of human smallness in the face of the animal, vegetal, and mineral forces of the universe. Yet, despite this smallness, human beings leave profound traces and envelop the planet in an endless web of connections. It is history that connects distant places, which, however remote and isolated they may appear, bear the imprint of human actions unfolding across time and space. In an essay titled "In History", collected in *My Garden (Book)*, we read:

> What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? If so, what should history mean to someone like me? Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound with each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, and is this healing and opening a moment

> that began in 1492 and has not yet come to an end? Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise details, and if so, when I come across these true and precise details, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself? (Kincaid 2024: 171).

Across her works, Jamaica Kincaid repeatedly asks the question: "Where should I place myself?" For many of her characters, it is an existential necessity; for every human being, it ought to be an ethical imperative. Where should we place ourselves? Lucy asks it – the poor visitor in a world that refuses to acknowledge her perspective. The author herself asks it in *Among Flowers*, when she dons the Western mantle of botanist-explorer and climbs the Himalayan foothills in search of seeds. Mariah ought to ask it, too, when her daffodils trigger a nervous breakdown in Lucy, or when she frets over the shrinking wilderness around her country house. Even the tourist visiting the Southern beaches should ask it – but, by definition, this tourist never questions anything. In *A Small Place*, Kincaid, as a reminder, compiles a list of questions that such a tourist would do well to consider.

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Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*: An Intensive, Multisensorial Narrative of the Anthropocene

Abstract I: Il romanzo di Shubhangi Swarup *Latitudini del desiderio* (tr. it. 2021) può essere letto accanto al saggio di Donna Haraway *Chthulucene. Sopravvivere su un pianeta infetto* (tr. it. 2019), poiché entrambi immaginano forme di parentela con il mondo naturale. Il romanzo di Swarup mette inoltre in scena un coinvolgimento immersivo e multisensoriale con il mondo più-che-umano, in sintonia con le riflessioni teoriche di Báyò Akómoláfé in *Queste terre selvagge oltre lo steccato* (tr. it. 2023). Attraversando paesaggi che si estendono dalle Isole Andamane nel Golfo del Bengala (Ghosh 2019, 2025) alle vette glaciali del Karakorum, il romanzo traccia un viaggio verso nord lungo linee di faglia violentemente attive, ponendo in primo piano esperienze sensoriali telluriche, qui esaminate attraverso la prospettiva ecocritica delle scienze umane ambientali.

Abstract II: Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) can be read alongside Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), as both envision forms of kinship with the natural world. Swarup's novel also stages an immersive, multisensory engagement with the more-than-human, resonating with Báyò Akómoláfé's theoretical reflections in *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences* (2017). Spanning landscapes from the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal (Ghosh 2019, 2025) to the glacial peaks of the Karakoram, the novel traces a northward journey along violently active fault lines, foregrounding telluric sensory experiences that are examined here through the ecocritical framework of the environmental humanities.

Keywords: Non-human agency, earthquakes, fault lines, islands, glaciers.

Canonical literature certainly offers the possibility of re-reading and re-interpreting the classics from an ecocritical perspective as an eco-active practice of literary criticism, even though texts from the past were not meant as harbingers of an ecological message. Conversely, in the twenty-first century a new 'genre' has appeared, namely, the literature of climate change, or 'cli-fi'; more generally, eco-literature has established itself as a relevant and salient genre, and the authors who engage in it might be considered environmental activists by staging and performing a public challenge that may influence society and produce social change[1]: "acts of cultural representation can wield significant power" (Clark 2019: 2).

[1] Cf. Banga (2025: 191-205).

Latitudes of Longing (2018) by Shubhangi Swarup is an environmental novel, not necessarily connected with, or denouncing, climate change, but rather practising deep ecology in an in-tensive and immersive manner. On the one hand, it might be considered a realist novel, in the wake of what John Thieme calls "Anthropocene realism", because of the fullness and richness of material details about everyday life, "realistic minutiae" (2025: 4); on the other hand, it might be considered a magical-realist novel owing to the presence of pro-active ghosts that are sensed by a few shaman-like characters. In spite of all this, the novel is neither descriptive nor representational; it is rather intense or even eco-logically intensive. It certainly shares "engagement with present and future catastrophes"; it does not favour "escapist readings", and through the medium of storytelling it "fosters and augments climate literacy" (Thieme 2025: 1). This novel might be ascribed to "encyclopaedic realism", a category in which for instance Thieme places Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, because of its scientific discourse.

First of all, the novel has a very precise and complex architectural and narratological structure as it is composed of four connected chapters or individual stories that remind us of pearls in a necklace – perhaps the earrings made of a string of pearls looped around the earlobe several times and featured in one of the stories might well represent its structural pattern. One minor character in each story becomes the protagonist of the next one till the end, when the very first protagonist appears once again in the last story whose conclusion is an incident – a bleating lamb in the snow – that recalls the corresponding opening incident – the ghost of a bleating goat – thus giving the novel closure and a consistent looping pattern. The linear journey from South to North – through the four stories – is given geological consistency because the characters re-trace the fault line where the Sunda plate meets the Indo-Australian and the Eurasian plate too in a chain of stories that geologically connects the Andamans to the Karakoram:

> The volcanic islands of Indonesia and the Andaman Sea are a continuation of the Himalayas […] mountain peaks arising from the ocean floor (Swarup 2018: 41).

> The Andaman Islands are part of a subduction zone, like Indonesia to the south east of Burma, Nepal, the Himalayas and the Karakorams to the north. It is here that the Indian plate is sinking under the Asian plate (Swarup 2018: 107).

Botany and geology aside, the first protagonist of the chapter entitled "Islands" is a scientist, Girija Prasad Varma, a botanist with "a doctorate in the English names of plants" (Swarup 2018: 8), who lives immersed in and entangled with more-than-humans, in the company of his wife, Chanda Devi. In this case, it would be useful to resort to the term adopted by Banu Subramaniam, 'embranglements', to define the relationship between the various characters and natureculture:

> I came to adopt the term embranglements (the state of being embroiled or mired in something). I find this older term more useful for discussions of colonialism. While terms like *entangled, intertwined*, and *implicated* imply the interconnections of worlds, *embranglements* also imply tension within – shaking, wavering, confusing (2024: 7).

Since earthquakes and fault lines cause vibrations, tensions, and waves through which the characters connect to the Earth, the ecosystem, and the surrounding environment, the term embranglements seems most appropriate to define the human-vs-non-human relations in this in-tensive ecological novel. Evidence of this is the heightened sensitivity experienced by Chanda Devi during the earthquake of 1954: "I knew something was wrong. I could feel tension rise from the ground as I stood in the garden" (Swarup 2018: 87).

The incipit of the novel is already an example of this in-tensiveness. The tension is provided by the clash between silence and sound: "Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water" (3). The soundscape evoked through an oxymoron and a synesthesia is also a realistic description of the Andaman Islands' ecosystem of sounds. The chain of entangled matter continues: "The waves, like the sound of your breathing, never leave you" (3). The second sentence is a truism that binds the breathing of the ocean to human breathing, both a sound and a rhythm that characterise the outside world of nature and the inside of a human's lungs. This is also the basis of Murray Schafer's famous theory of soundscape:

> The ocean of our ancestors is reproduced in the watery womb of our mother and is chemically related to it. Ocean and Mother. In the dark liquid of ocean the relentless masses of water pushed past the first sonar ear. As the ear of the fetus turns in its amniotic fluid, it too is tuned to the lap and gurgle of water (1994: 15).

The characters in the novel are "earwitnesses" who practise "clairaudience", as Schafer would put it; they are attuned to nature's sounds, particularly Girija Prasad's wife, who sees and hears ghosts.

This is the proof that there is no distinction between outside and inside, that life is made up of embranglements and natureculture, thus rejecting these binaries (Subramaniam 2024: 6). The sound of the breathing of the ocean is the sound of life itself, the breath of the world, embracing and enveloping the individual and also coming from inside the body. Thus, the body of the earth and ocean forms a continuum with the body of the human being:

> For a fortnight now, the gurgle and thunder of clouds has drowned out the waves. Rains drum on the roof and skid over the edge, losing themselves in splashes. Simmer, whip, thrum and slip. The sun is dead, they tell you (3).

In the above passage, the soundscape becomes more complex and tempestuous, uniting sky and earth. The clouds are noisy and their language is full of onomatopoeic terms: "gurgle" and "thunder" express actions that are both human and non-human. These sounds silence the waves with a verb that again can be used for both human and non-human agents: "drowned out". The water coming from the sky, noisily, silences the water of the waves. The water from the sky, that is, the rains, in the plural, beats on the roof as a person might beat a drum, then splashes in an onomatopoeic fall to the ground. Like the verb "drum", the verbs "simmer", "whip", and "thrum" imply a beating sound, intense, rhythmic, repeated, insistent. "To slip" and "to skid" both imply the fluid movement typical of water, but the sound also mimics the action. Finally, the rains and the clouds speak their own language to say that

the sun is dead, as if it were a person. In this case nature's agency is characterised by sound, words, language, and action. In a later episode, when the two characters contemplate the ocean from a high peak on the island, they hear the "crashing of water", which is a realistic expression describing the violent nature of the waves beating against the coast of the island, but they return in the next line to thinking of the sound as that of the "waves breathing" (41).

When the downpour stops, the protagonist asks himself "Who left the room?", thus confusing the "who" and the "what", the human and the non-human agency. A similar confusion or continuum becomes manifest when his wife, Chanda Devi, asks him: "Can you hear it? Hear what? The goat bleating outside" (4). The wife explains that she hears the ghost of a goat on the roof of the house, a goat complaining about having been killed, butchered, deep-fried, and eaten up. This is how the two protagonists are earwitnesses and practise clairaudience (Schafer 1994: 4). Moreover, their dialogue induces Girija Prasad to become vegetarian. Thus, the next morning his wife prepares a vegetarian breakfast for him and asks him how he likes it: "How are they? She asks him again. Who? He asks disoriented. The parathas. Perfect" (5). Once again, disoriented by his wife's questions, Girija Prasad confuses the "what" and the "who"; his wife is able to see and hear ghosts, invisible presences to him, who create a continuum between the visible and invisible worlds, the living and the dead, and material and immaterial beings. This exchange about breakfast is one of many answers to Donna Haraway's questions: "to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than in that one?" (Haraway 2016: 2). Making kin with nature and with the more-than-human is Haraway's injunction, one that this novel seems to put into practice in every single line, thus granting the reader full immersion in the reality of the Andaman Islands, indeed a very peculiar geological ecosystem.

One more instance of the intense continuum between humans and non-humans is the way in which water and dampness characterise and interfere with human emotions rather than with the material world. Dampness accentuates desires, while dreams are flooded, and rain is conducive to fantasies. Moreover, during the monsoons the rains "flooded deep into their beings" (10). The association of "damp" and "desire", "flood" and "dreams", "rain" and "fantasies", and "monsoons" and "flooded beings" is surprising because it blends humans and non-humans, weather conditions and psychology, and combines humidity with temperaments and moods. Monsoons are also considered guests, as if they were people: "the guest has arrived. It has begun to rain" (121); and Girija Prasad melts in the pouring rain: "Bamboo-straight drops of rain connect heaven and earth, with him standing in between" (121). Here, in a single sentence the metaphor drawn from the vegetal world, the world of water, sky, and earth, meteorology and human beings are all touching each other in a chain of continuous and contiguous porosities.

Chanda Devi – a gold medallist in mathematics – is a prominent character who creates a bridge between the science of Girija Prasad and knowledge that is based on kinship with the more-than-humans and the habitat they live in. Their union is defined as a bond between "the man who studied trees and the woman who spoke to them" (8):

> Chanda Devi, the clairvoyant one. She feels for ghosts and enjoys the laconic company of trees. She can sense them, his unexpressed cravings. But she knows he is

> better off giving up flesh. The kingdom of flesh is as ephemeral as it is unreliable, especially when compared to the kingdom of plants […] If she could have had it her way, she would have married a tree (5, 7).

Apart from being able to foresee the future, particularly someone's death, and apart from sensing and seeing ghosts all around, to the point of choosing never to show her naked body, Chanda Devi can talk to trees:

> Chanda Devi didn't openly claim, or even secretly confide to Girija Prasad, that she could talk to trees. She just did. On their walks together, she would often stand next to one, at times laughing, at times surprised or maintaining a solemn gaze. He was intrigued. The possibility of a botanist communicating with a tree was as thrilling as the possibility of a priest chatting with God (108).

In order to talk to the trees, Girija Prasad must resort to his wife's mediation and translation. Thus, through her, he receives guidance on his forestry projects and theses:

> The banyan considered his actions and knowledge largely sensible, but shot down his dream of introducing teak, a foreign species, to the islands. Teak was the most profitable timber in the world. […] But the banyan prophesized that teak would prove vulnerable to fungi the local flora had grown immune to (108).

The passage quoted above is an example of a narrative that abandons the realist mode and approaches the magical realist one, where a suspension of disbelief is required to accept that trees might talk to human beings who are capable of understanding them[2]. The banyan tree is the one that allowed Buddha to attain enlightenment; it is a sacred tree connected with spirituality, divinity, sanctity, and transcendent meditation. Thus, the previous simile comparing a "botanist talking to trees" to a "priest chatting with god" reinforces this implied reference to Buddhism. Moreover, the banyan tree, an autochthonous species, underlines the wisdom of indigenous knowledge (IK). As Subramaniam reminds us, banyan trees and ghosts belong to the Hindu tradition and to the vivid imagery created by Indian myths:

> The banyan tree, with its expansive aerial roots, symbolizes all three gods of the Hindu trinity – Vishnu, the bark; Brahma, the roots; and Shiva, the branches. Our childhood was enraptured with the stories of Vikram and Vetaal: King Vikramaditya and the ghost spirit Vetaal, who lived in a peepal tree at the edge of a crematorium. In these stories, the ghostly spirit would continually outwit the king in clever and conniving plots (2024: 30).

[2] "'Magical realism' is a mode originally associated with novels that engage conflicting 'modern' and 'traditional' belief systems or religions in colonial and postcolonial contexts. It also commonly features the breakdown or destabilisation of the Western strict human/animal distinction", Clark (2019: 101).

Teak, conversely, is a timber typical of other regions, and Girija Prasad's extractivist project, with the aim of creating a cash crop, is doomed to fail. At one point, he orders four hundred teak saplings from Burma; five years later, he notices that "a fungus that had remained undiscovered until then" (Swarup 2018: 109) had been the cause of the death of all the plants. In this case, the scientific experiment fails in the face of vegetal intelligence, a form of indigenous knowledge (IK) that Chanda Devi shares with trees, because she is "kindred to them".

Despite his scientific expertise, Girija Prasad's mistakes are somehow unforgivable. When Girija Prasad first arrived in the Sundarbans, he brought with him eight elephants from Bihar. In Port Blair, "they had to be lifted on to the land by a crane as the jetty wasn't sturdy enough. Hovering over the harbour, the crane gave way and the first elephant plunged into the inky blue depths. There was nothing Girija Prasad could do to rescue the drowning elephant" (37).

The "face" of the elephant will remain imprinted on Girija Prasad's mind as well as the "fearful eyes" of a crocodile who had half-eaten one of his co-workers. As a way to balance the relationship between man as intruder and the non-human, Girija Prasad had nurtured in a fatherly manner a single rose among a bunch he had acquired and had it shipped to Port Blair to welcome his wife. Once on the island, Chanda Devi acknowledges his care, certain, after looking at "Girija Prasad's worried face", that the rose survived and thrived (109); he had "nurtured the shoot into a sapling with the tenacity of Mother Nature. The roses bloomed for his sake" (109). Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi are "equals thriving in a world of unequals" (31) and therefore both share traits with the non-human:

> His attention is on his surroundings, observing perhaps the call of a bird, a shift in the winds, or an increased smell of chlorophyll. A scientist studying the environment looks very much like an animal on the alert, alive to potential predators and prey […]. She moves around in her cotton sari like leaves rustling in the breeze. She breathes as imperceptibly as a tree, sucking in all the room's air and spilling it back, fragrant. Like a bird, her gaze is intense, unblinking (32).

This double portrait is indicative of ecological intensiveness. The continuum between humans and non-humans is sustained through surprising collocations: Girija Prasad is characterised by "observing" sounds and smells as a scientist, but also resembling a very sensitive animal. Chanda Devi, too, shares lightness and breathing with the vegetal world ("leaves, tree"), while resembling a "bird". They both fit perfectly in the Andaman forests lapped by the ocean, with their typical flora and fauna.

When their first child was born, he looked like "a shrivelled, pale raisin with the skin of an aged being" (53), almost non-human in a combination of extreme youth and old age; unfortunately, he was born dead, and thus Girija Prasad decided to bury him as if he had been a flower: "He buries his son in a womb of soft, wet earth – the kind one strives to sow seeds in. He covers him with a blanket of soil. But he cannot bring himself to cover his face. What if he opens his eyes and lets out a cry, choking on the soil?" (54). The father's tears, which drench his shirt, show the intensity and tension of the moving moment, a moment

of love for everyone and everything, combining humans and non-humans in the same act. When his wife was recovering from her miscarriage, he looked at her, his eyes "as fragile as a porcelain doll with cracks running through it" (56). This portrait of Girija Prasad makes him resemble the soil after an earthquake; both cracks and earthquakes frequently recur in the novel.

After his wife's death, Girija Prasad intensifies his study of nature, till the day when he experiences an earthquake and decides to crawl naked, on all fours, into the crack that has opened in the earth:

> Steam, a spontaneous mix of humidity and mud, rises all around him. The centipedes and earthworms, masters of the netherworld, are as confused as he is. They crawl over each other, hanging on the ferns and leaves that dangle from the canopy […] He runs his fingers over the exposed layers, reading them like braille (123).

Thus, in his nakedness and in his crawling Girija Prasad becomes similar and kin to the centipedes and worms he is observing, one among many species – belonging among what Haraway calls "the chthonic ones, replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair" (2016: 2) – touching the earth with their skin, limbs, and body, trying to read the earthquakes' rewriting and reshuffling of the earth, under the spell that "Nature is a continuum. That is how it thrives" (117). Besides, the Karens, a Christian tribe that moved from Burma to the Middle Andamans, settling at Savitri Nagar, a small village-to-be, believe that a person's soul continues to live in the animal which has attacked and killed him or her:

> That is how a Karen villager came to have a shark for a brother-in-law […] That was how a farmer became the father of a centipede […] a woman who believed a certain crocodile to be her mother was devoured by it when she went to give her offerings. And that was how an old man came to have the same crocodile for his wife and daughter, and a younger man for his wife and mothers-in-law (60).

This is why Chanda Devi "had never seen a man speak to a centipede with fatherly tenderness" (62), and to her, who is "kindred" with trees, and with palms in particular, this is not a surprise. As for Girija Prasad, he feels like an ant while he is in the all-enveloping, tall jungle of the South Andamans, at Port Blair, whereas he feels "powerful and gigantic" in the Middle Andamans, where there are "baby volcanoes no higher than a foot" (59). He does not take on an exceptionalist posture, but makes kin with animal non-humans.

Showing tenderness towards the "chthonic ones" is also Báyò Akómoláfé's aim, when he goes in search of "hushes", as suggested by a wise man, Mr Gbóyèga, *Bàbá nì ye*, whom he visited in Nigeria. Akómoláfé proclaims himself a neo-material ecofeminist in the wake of Haraway and Karen Barad. Like Girija Prasad, Akómoláfé explores the cracks and the interstitial zones of our planet and the self:

> Hushes too, like cockroaches, are present, hiding in cracks, staring back out of the dark holes they often inhabit with yellow unblinking eyes, and scurrying past our

> busy lives with their hairy-scaly-tentacular kin, nary a sound made in their ghostly trafficking. They thrive best in the corners of our eyes, stealthily making their way up the wall or floating free in midair without a care in the world. There one moment, gone in the slice of a sigh. We are strangely drawn to hushes and yet simultaneously possessed by a crippling fear to actually meet them (Akómoláfé 2017: 21).

The Nigerian psychiatrist, critic, and intellectual has to meet ten hushes before accomplishing his task of finding the meaning of "home", which he intends to leave as an inheritance to his daughter, Alethea.

Girija Prasad's final choice to embrace an advancing tsunami is a way to confirm that this is home to him; throwing himself into the oceanic waters is a scientist's choice to experience through immersion rather than experimenting by observation: "For how often does a man get to peer into a thriving ocean floor minus the ocean, even though it will go undocumented?" (Swarup 2018: 124). This is a way of becoming-with the ocean: becoming part of a continuum, at one with nature, and fully embracing "Tethys: that mythic ocean" (78). Ultimately, "the water carries him away" (126)[3].

The second story/chapter, entitled "Faultline", is triggered by a letter that reaches Rose Mary, Chanda Devi and Girija Prasad's housemaid, announcing that her son is in prison in Burma. Plato, now twenty-three and a student, had been arrested by soldiers for having organised three strikes. The brutality of the militia – responsible for a *coup* – is immediately evident through casual executions. Plato's life is spared, but after a night in the ditch with the corpses of his mates, he is left with more than forty leeches hanging from his body. In this way, Plato starts experiencing proximity to non-human animals. Thus, Rose Mary starts a journey by water on board a dinghy. She travels northwards, along the fault line, pushed by "Tears, as ancient as life and as young as the rain" (138). Both the mother and the weather are in tears, sharing sadness and apprehension like sisters. For its part, the fault line with its agency exerts gravitational attraction:

> No one […] can escape its elemental pull. There is a danger of slipping into the earth's cleft. It connects Burma to the islands, like a weeping eye to every disowned teardrop. Not all pain, certainly not all longings, can be swept away by the Indian Ocean.
> Once a proud continent, Burma was crushed between India and Asia. India pushed it to the north with its drift, Asia squeezed it to the east in defiance. A weeping eye was all that. Was left of the face buried under rubble (138).

In this reconstruction of tectonic activity, geology is blended with feelings; "weeping", "pain", and "longings" are associated with geological forces capable of "crushing" and "drifting" continents against one another. The earth, its crust, is humanised, while humans are subjected to the effects of the gaping fracture. Moreover, the fault line with its agency, earthquakes, and multiple fractures does not only change the geomorphology of the lands

[3] "Believing in elemental non/human enmeshment requires not just an imaginative leap of faith but also a desire to take a physical plunge into the stuff of which we are composed, to immerse oneself in a potentially lethal elementality, 'to wash' (*lavare*) away", Cohen & Duckert (2015: 14).

around it but also their mood, temperament, and sentiments. Burma has "aquiline edges", but experiences "despair"; its cartographic shape is compared to a "weeping eye"; therefore, it is sentient and human-like, as a person would be. The biggest fault line takes the form of the mighty Irrawaddy River, "down the spine of Burma, connecting the islands below to the Himalayas above" (138). This is exactly Rose Mary's trajectory as well as the novel's structural spine and its trajectory.

Plato has been tortured and is physically maimed, lying in stench and dirt in his solitary confinement cell. When a caretaker brings him some rice, he cannot but run away, commenting that "Even pigs smell better than this" (155). Thus, Plato realises that "the man scurried away like a mouse", while he himself feels that he has transformed into a pig: "I swear I don't know how it happened but the prisoner has turned into a pig" (155). Through these recurrent parallels between humans and animals, the novel demonstrates how captivity and state necropolitics (electrocution) create an intense intimacy between humans and animals. Thus, constant embranglements are shown between humans and more-than-humans: a "renewal of non/human ethical enmeshment" (Cohen & Duckert 2015: 6):

> He bleats like a goat and yawns like a buffalo. He roars like a tiger and hisses like a snake. He crackles like the pouring rain and flip-flops on the floor like a fish out of water. He raises himself off the floor like a flower in bloom and crashes into the walls like a caged rooster […] The junta has shown him […] Current, that's all he is. Passing through different bodies and lives (156).

Finally, just as Girija Prasad had experienced his body as a conduit of rain between the sky and the earth, Plato experiences electricity as a current, the flux of life itself. Similarly, his mother feels for animals. When Rose Mary arrives in Burma and reaches a temple where she devotes herself to praying for her son's release, she pities the caged birds of the street vendors. She buys the birds for the purpose of setting them free, even though she knows that they have been trained to fly back to the cage soon after. Once she finds herself in front of the Buddha statues, she cannot help praying for the birds and all suffering animals before praying for her own son's life: "Her attempts at praying turn into the obsessive rambling of a madwoman. Injured dogs and birds come before the safety of her son" (177). As a Karen woman, Rose Mary embodies indigenous knowledge: "So much of indigenous and local knowledges resides in the hands of marginalised peoples, especially women, who still live close to the land" (Subramaniam 2024: 72).

In order to bide her time while waiting for her son, Rose Mary tells herself a story about a turtle, who was killed by a fisherman right after she had laid eggs on the beach. The fisherman buried the remains of the turtle in his garden and a tree grew with a tall trunk and no leaves. Thus, the tree became a canoe for the fisherman and, when sailing the seas, the wooden canoe recognised her son, a little turtle swimming. The recognition was mutual and they navigated together, till the fisherman caught the little turtle in a net. Next, the boat capsized in order to set the turtle free. Once the turtle was in danger again, the wooden canoe splintered in order to dive and save his life. By hanging on one of the splinters, he reached a beach and lay there exhausted. When he woke up, he noticed he had been transformed into

a young boy and found his mother, now an elderly woman, nearby, along with a man who was his father:

> Together the three of them lived on the island for a while. After resting, they resumed their journey through the different worlds of land, water and air. One can still see them sometimes, as three waves in the sea, or three trees in a grove, or three birds flying in the sky (192).

This story tells of metamorphosis and interconnected beings and lives. The three realms of land, water, and air are not separate, and living beings can transmigrate from one to another in a fluid existence, with no distinction between inert matter (wood) and animal life (turtle); they both have a will, a strength, and an agency. Vegetal, animal, and human beings are interchangeable in the story and are all related through family bonds. Rose Mary can perceive the kinship and sacrality of things. The imagined story is a premonition of her own encounter with her son, eventually released from prison.

Plato, too, is a hypersensitive character. While experiencing an earthquake in his prison, both his body and the earth – maimed – tremble and shake: "The land, reeling from the horror of having its bones crushed and flesh charred, flings him from wall to wall […] The earthquake leaves him to mend the cracks and nurse his bruises" (176). Torture helps Plato better understand tectonics and the ineluctability of physical laws.

The same laws have allowed a drop of amber to embalm a newborn gecko. Plato finds relief in the gem in his palm. It, too, is the fruit of tectonics, of the fault line, of orogenesis, and of symbiosis:

> The resin dripped from a tree's bark at its own pace, indifferent to the speed of transformation around it […] The resin found a temporary grave in a layer of chalk-like limestone below the soil […] The water's force transformed it from an angular block to a translucent egg. Only an infant gecko remained inside (175).

The gecko finds himself in a golden prison, a precious gem; he travels from prehistory to the future as in a time capsule, intact in his infancy, precious in Plato's eyes, as his own body has also undergone a metamorphosis and is now toothless, with scorched and cascading skin. Thus, he will eventually embrace his mother, outside his prison.

The third chapter/story, entitled "Valley", has Thapa as its protagonist. He is Plato's friend. He managed to help Rose Mary reach Rangoon and he facilitated her reunion with her son. Now, he moves on northwards, to his "home", Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal in the Himalayas, situated along the Bagmati River. The city, with its old and typical architecture, looks precarious. Thapa foresees that "the calamity is a certain uncertainty, the greatest one there ever will be. It links them all […] It is not an earthquake, not a tornado, nor is it a flood – it is all of them. The calamity will swallow all life there is and spit out new specimens" (199).

Thapa is a smuggler; he buys and sells things, both legally and illegally, across borders. Once back there, nostalgia overwhelms him. He lost his family in a landslide. Now he roams

the streets, half disgusted by consumerism and tourism, half fascinated by life thriving as usual in bars, night clubs, shops, and restaurants. He befriends Bebo, a young striptease dancer. With her, he shares the little food he has, her poverty, her misery, and her dreams. Thapa hates the rain: "But they scare him, too, the rains. They breed longings like the damp breeds fungus" (213). Thapa hates the rains, for they bring back memories of the landslide and of his lost family. Once more the weather is charged with agency and is associated with affect. This place, however, is peculiar. Here, tectonic forces unleash metamorphosis after metamorphosis:

> Eventually, deep in the womb of the future, the lakes will give way to a glacier and the glacier to a sea […] Reversing all their failed attempts at evolution – from lake to sea to land to mountain (221).

Here, elemental order might be reshuffled by the temperament of the fault line and its tectonic adjustments. More than that, humans and non-humans share the precarity and intention/tension of it all:

> You peer down into the deepest depths, you can see beyond layers of soil, ice, gravel, sand, rocks and embers. You see the cracks connecting you to the earth's core. And when you do, you cease to be human. You have broken the cycle of births […].
> This land is a complete land. It has its own desert, sea, glacier, rivers, even its own unique sun and rain which it doesn't share with the rest of the world. The elements are the rulers […] The elements are human (226).

The elements that compose the landscape are human. This means that they display volition, intensity, a particular mood, and specific behaviour, but it also means that they are kin and family; they are all there is, "partners in worldmaking" (Cohen & Duckert 2015: 15). In this context, Swarup references elemental ecocriticism. In "Eleven Principles of the Elements", the introduction to *Elemental Ecocriticism* edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, the editors quote Empedocles:

> The cosmologist, physicist Empedocles (ca 495-435 BCE) argued that all matter consists of four elements in shifting combination: earth, air, fire, water. Held together by chains of love (*philia*), pulled apart through endemic strife (*neikos*), these primal roots (*rhizomata*) are enduring and unstill […] This disharmonious simultaneity of desire and discord includes the human without centering itself around so small a figure (2015: 2-3).

All this resonates strongly with Swarup's novel, where intense emotions (love and strife) are attributed to both humans and non-humans, and where the four elements, within and without human bodies, are all at work for a continuous, creative sympoiesis of possibilities. Both Thapa and Plato continue on their journeys through life, heading northwards to the Indian border. Thapa will visit Tibet, where he will sell his merchandise to Apo, the old

local chief. Somehow, the last story in the novel circles back to the first. But the four stories, or chapters, are looped together by moving geographically along the most active fault line in the world, the one that runs northwards from the Andaman Islands to the Himalayas and the Karakoram mountain range. This fault line is a subduction zone that causes earthquakes of great magnitude: "Subduction zones, as you may know, are intense" (311), claims Girija Prasad. And it is exactly this concept of intensity that characterises the whole novel, which is an example of intensive environmental narrative. As already said, the second story in the series sees a mother, Rose Mary – the Karen woman Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi had hired as a housemaid – travel to Rangoon, the capital of Burma, to look for her own son, who is kept in prison under the military dictatorship. The third story sees this young man, named Plato, and his friend Thapa travelling to Kathmandu and the snow deserts of Nepal.

The setting of the last story, entitled "Snow Desert", is a small village in Changthang, a plateau on the border between Ladakh and Tibet that forms a sharp incline in the Karakoram Mountains (259) – perched in the no-man's-land among the peaks contested by India and Pakistan, along the Indus Valley. The head of the village is Apo, an octogenarian chief and shaman-like figure:

> Apo, the grandfather of the entire village […] at the age of eighty-seven […] Apo knows the lay of this land like the shape of his own being […] Murmuring winds, shapeshifting sands, the pregnant silence of rocks and the sea's ghost were all he had for company. Based on vibrations, Apo can sense nature's fears and dreams, and predict the onset of earthquakes, even avalanches and floods (259, 266).

He becomes infatuated with a very old Kashmiri woman, to whom he speaks broken Hindustani. Once he reaches her home high up on the sloping peak, "Apo is a red-faced baboon, frothing from the gaps between his teeth". For her part, the old woman "speaks so softly, a breeze could fly off with her words, scattering them among the snow peaks of the Hindu Kush" (263). This double portrait of the elderly couple is similar to that of Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi in the first story. Actually, their profile is even more complex, challenging gender clichés: she smokes bidis, drinks alcohol, and has a definite moustache and beard; he wears earrings made of pearls, a necklace strung with coral and turquoise, and numerous rings (271, 275).

Both Apo and the Kashmiri woman share qualities with the non-human animals and the natural elements. Their embranglements will survive in dreams, telepathy, espionage, and occasional meetings and will culminate in a marriage. Once a Buddhist, now merely a wise man, Apo shares with the old woman, a sort of witch, his beliefs about nature, the seasons, the monsoons, fairies, and spirits. She, a Kashmiri Muslim, shares with him her own kind of indigenous knowledge, while they also tell each other their names: Ghazala Mumtaz Abdul Sheik Begum and Tashi Yeshe, called Apo.

Apo has lived various lives in various forms. He survived the impact of the biggest asteroid on earth as a worm; "in the ice ages, he was deeply attached to herd mentality as a woolly mammoth. During the great melt, he grew courage as a whale, leaving land to wade into water" (279). Thus, Apo had lived lives as a microscopic animal as well as a specimen

of megafauna, before living as a man. He now has a walnut tree as a friend, "a dear and old one. Many constellations ago, they were both albatrosses, traversing the desert when it was still an ocean […] Then the earthquakes resumed and the villagers discovered his ability to predict them" (286).

A scientist, more precisely, a geologist named Rana who comes to the mountains with the Indian Army in an attempt to demilitarise the glaciers, looks for guidance and initially finds it in the figure of Apo, who "saved all the villagers' lives during the four major earthquakes that hit this region in the past sixty years" (297). Apo can predict earthquakes; he knows that

> "the Karakorams are tilting […] They are rising up and pushing the Himalayas down. All the mountains in the world have a new king – Kechu. It is just us humans who refuse to accept it."
> "Do you mean K2?" asks Rana.
> "When I say Kechu, I mean Kechu," Apo replies, confused. It is the highest peak in the Karakorams and stands at the edge of the Baltoro glacier.
> Rana is spellbound. In one breath, Apo has summarized an outcome he has been struggling to express, in spite of the evidence.
> "But how can it be?" he asks Apo.
> "When human bloodshed seeps into the cracks of the land, the earth's scabs and wounds cannot heal […] They can only fester. Your violence and your wars are like gangrene to the earth's flesh. You possess gadgets that can take you to the moon, yet you are blind to the mountains and rivers in front of you. You have hacked Hindustan into a hundred islands with our borders, mutinies and wars. It is crumbling into the ocean. The Kechu is rising because the Himalayas are sinking." The scientist has tears in his eyes. Rana comes across as a defeated man. One who has known the truth all along yet lacks the courage to accept it (298).

In the passage quoted above, orogenesis and geological phenomena are described as entangled or embrangled with geopolitical ones. The partitioning of the countries bordering the mountain chains seems to be the cause of the subduction that creates earthquakes and orogeny. It is as if the earth is processing, or shaking off, anthropogenic chaos.

The second source of guidance that Rana finds manifests itself during a fall into a crevasse, where he meets the ghost of his grandfather, his Nana, who has travelled in the form of vapour from the Andamans to the mountains in his becoming-with water, in order to satisfy his scientific curiosity and his love for snow. Girija Prasad is able to discuss with Girija Rana – who is now hanging from a rope tied to his waist, head down, in a dark crevasse – how the Himalayas are growing higher, for "The pressure of the continents colliding gives them greater height" (310). Moreover, the fact that another mountain might become taller than Everest, defying the laws of isostasy, becomes possible because in the Himalayas gravity is uneven and weaker than elsewhere.

The peculiar orogenesis of this chain of mountains also determines other peculiar geophysical characteristics, as the dialogue between Rana and his Nana explains:

> "I'm researching geodetics. The axis of the trans-Himalayan ranges and the western Himalayas, especially the Karakorams, is tilting. I suspect this region is the fulcrum. It began with the Muzaffarabad earthquake in Kashmir, where we saw peaks grow by eight to ten feet. Then the Gorkha series happened, where some peaks experienced an increase or decrease of up to sixteen feet […]"
> "It is apparent that Mount Everest will not remain the world's highest mountain in the next thousand years. Based on the tilt of the axis, we can predict which one it might be. I hope it's Kanchenjunga […]"
> "But for any mountain to grow taller than the Everest, it must defy the laws of isostasy. It is impossible to maintain the equilibrium of the earth's crust in such a hypothesis."
> "The Himalayas are an exception. The pressure of the continents colliding gives them greater height."
> "Unless the gravity is weaker here" (309-310).

Another lesson Rana learns from his grandfather is that "There is no better way to study the mountains than getting down on all fours and scraping the rocks and ice for answers" (308). Once again, crawling on the earth is the best way to know its chthonic and telluric behaviour and temperament. This lesson is similar to the one learned by Akómoláfé during his encounter with the hushes, a way to learn humility and equality with all that exists, against exceptionalism and anthropocentrism:

> I kneel down a respectable distance from the abominable things […] I suddenly know what to do. My skin crawls as I consider it […] I stretch out my finger to touch the body of the first hush. It sluggishly recoils, folding into itself as it secretes droplets of a transparent viscous stuff along the length of its body. I touch the thing, and put the stuff on my tongue – squeezing my eyes as I taste the rank, disgustingly acidic thing go down my throat. While I am overwhelmed by a desire to vomit, I quickly do the same thing again – touching the second hush, causing it to recoil, taking a drop of its stuff on the tip of my finger, and touching my tongue. Don't ask why I did this. It just felt like the right thing to do (Akómoláfé 2017: 194).

In this episode as well as in the previous episode, the two male protagonists renounce oculo-centrism, the power of the knowledge derived from the gaze, and privilege a multisensory experience of the world based on touch and taste, which in turn becomes a scientific method. Crawling is also the simplest way to understand gravity.

The idea that gravity is uneven is correct, because Rana remembers a scientific article by NASA which mapped the earth's uneven gravity, highlighting the Karakorams as a case study. However, on the same topic, Girija Prasad has first-hand knowledge based on his wife's intuition and sensitivity: "I scoffed at your Nani when she accused the fluctuating gravity of burning up her dal and rice on the islands. It took me decades to realize that we lived on a fault line and that gravity was a whimsical force there" (310). Girija Prasad goes on to describe these as some of the "connections and relationships illuminating the most disconnected things" (311), thus emphasising the interconnectedness or embranglements of all things.

Subduction zones are intense, and the scientist, too, is neither a detached observer nor a disembodied mind but is immersed in nature; his mind is "embodied, embedded, enactive and extended" in the experience (Weik von Mossner 2017: 4) of a landscape, an ecosystem, and an orography: "Sometimes, I feel like the ice and winds are trying to say something through me, I am just a voice. An expression. A reflection, twinkling light-years away from its source" (311). Haraway's ideas of kinship and/or sympoiesis (2016: 5) are intensively practised in this novel; the human being speaks with the voice and the language of nature; kinship becomes both the scientific method and the narrative modality of this novel, producing a less human-(self)centric view of life, intensely sensitive to the claims of non-human eco-centred entities. As the ecologist and Indigenous scholar Robin Kimmerer claims, "Science can be a way of forming intimacy and respect with other species that is rivalled only by the observation of traditional knowledge holders. It can be a path to kinship" (Kimmerer 2013, quoted in Subramaniam 2024: 41).

The story ends with a lamb heard bleating in the snowy and stormy night. Both Ghazala and Apo, now officially married and living as a couple, go out in the tempest. Apo slips, but is prevented from falling and helped by a ghost. Sitting down, Apo has a nice chat with the ghost of Girija Prasad, who remembers when his wife, too, heard a goat in the middle of the night. Girija Prasad puts a lamb in Apo's lap, and Apo recognises it as one of his ancestors: "He has come from my tribe's sheepfold to meet my new bride" (322). Ghazala comes in and puts the lamb in a woollen cradle close to the stove. The old couple thus nurture a non-human being. Kinship is thereby reaffirmed once again, while the moon and the sun are together in the sky as a sign of partnership, possibilities, coevolution, and coexistence.

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Land-shapes in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*

Abstract I: Questo articolo analizza la rilevanza materiale e metaforica dei ciottoli in *On Chesil Beach* (2007) di Ian McEwan, concentrandosi in particolare sul ruolo della ghiaia di cui si compone Chesil Beach nella costruzione narrativa e simbolica del romanzo. Attraverso un approccio geoletterario, con specifico riferimento alla geografia tattile e sensoriale, l'articolo interpreta la ghiaia come una presenza materiale attiva, mostrando come i ciottoli evochino tanto l'immobilità quanto la frattura. L'opera di McEwan attribuisce all'ambientazione una funzione centrale: la disastrosa notte di nozze di Edward e Florence è inseparabile dallo spazio liminale di Chesil Beach, con la sua distesa apparentemente infinita di ciottoli. Il narratore osserva che "the matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature", stabilendo un rapporto diretto tra la materialità della spiaggia e le barriere emotive e comunicative che separano i protagonisti. Un ruolo fondamentale è svolto dalla dimensione temporale, in cui si intrecciano il tempo geologico, l'eredità culturale vittoriana e i cambiamenti degli anni Sessanta.

Abstract II: This article examines the material and metaphorical significance of the pebbles in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), focusing specifically on the role of the shingle that forms Chesil Beach in the novel's narrative and symbolic construction. Drawing on a geoliterary perspective, especially on haptic and sensory geography, the article interprets the shingle as an active material presence, showing how the pebbles evoke immobility as well as fracture. McEwan's novel assigns a central function to setting: Edward and Florence's disastrous wedding night is inseparable from the liminal space of Chesil Beach, with its apparently endless expanse of pebbles. The narrator observes that "the matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature", establishing a direct connection between the materiality of the beach and the emotional and communicative barriers separating the protagonists. A fundamental role is played by the temporal dimension, in which geological time, the cultural legacy of the Victorian age, and the social and cultural shifts of the Sixties intersect.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*, pebbles, shingle, geoliterary studies.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
T. S. Eliot (1974: 92).

1. A Geoliterary Approach

This article adopts a geoliterary approach primarily informed by haptic and sensory geography. Foundational to this perspective is Yi-Fu Tuan's (1974) notion of topophilia, which foregrounds the affective and experiential dimensions of place. It also engages with the spatial approaches to literature developed since the Spatial Turn, including Gregory's (1994) geographical imagination, Westphal's (2011) geocriticism, and Tally's (2019) spatial literary studies. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual background for the discussion by suggesting that the meaning of place emerges through bodily and sensory engagement as much as through representation[1]. The analysis focuses mainly on the lived spatial experience, drawing on the phenomenological tradition which privileges the subjective and embodied relations with space (Wylie 2019). Particular attention is given to tactile perception, movement, and the body's spatial relation to the surrounding environment: Paterson's haptic geography (2009) emphasises that "feeling" a place, through touch, texture, and sensory immersion, is integral to its interpretation.

This framework makes it possible to move beyond predominantly author-centred or historically contextualised readings by privileging the dynamic interplay between narrative and spatial configuration. It therefore offers a suitable approach for examining how material landscapes shape perception, affect, and narrative meaning. Read in the light of these theoretical perspectives, Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), often overshadowed by some of the author's more acclaimed novels, emerges as a compelling case study because of its sustained engagement with landscape and spatiality, as well as its dense intertextual framework[2].

The seaside occupies a prominent position in the English literary tradition, where it frequently functions as a liminal and transformative space, suspended between land and water, stability and uncertainty (Meiner & Andersen 2024). Especially from the modernist period onwards, coastal landscapes have frequently been associated with introspection, emotional tension, and states of psychological crisis. In *On Chesil Beach*, the seaside becomes a space of transition that condenses the novel's central tensions: the failed wedding night of Florence and Edward, set in July 1962, becomes emblematic of a historical and cultural threshold, poised between the sexual repression in post-war Britain and the profound social and sexual transformations that would come to define the 1960s.

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[1] The interaction between geography and literary imagination has a much longer critical history than the Spatial Turn itself. The latter did not inaugurate the study of literary space but rather renewed and systematised longstanding reflections on the imaginative construction and cultural experience of place. See Crang & Thrift (2000).

[2] Among the many critical studies devoted to McEwan's fiction, Head (2019) is especially relevant. A detailed reading of *On Chesil Beach* has been provided by Head (2009).

Located in Dorset, Chesil Beach, the long ridge of pebbles separating the English Channel from the Fleet Lagoon, provides the physical and symbolic setting in which this historical and personal transition is dramatically enacted. McEwan combines modernist and postmodernist strategies (Gefter Wondrich 2012: 117-118), notably through the device of compressing entire lives into the temporal frame of a single day. Within this tightly concentrated narrative structure, the beach assumes a crucial function: its liminal geography becomes the stage for a "negative" epiphany, a moment of painful awareness that reveals the impossibility of reconciling private stories and the forces of history.

Florence and Edward, the protagonists of the novel, arrive at a hotel overlooking Chesil Beach to spend their wedding night. From the outset, their relationship appears marked by profound emotional and psychological asymmetries: Florence, a gifted violinist from an upper-middle-class background, is restrained, self-controlled, and deeply uneasy with physical intimacy, whereas Edward, more impulsive, experiences desire with a mixture of longing, confusion, and frustration. Through a third-person voice that moves fluidly between the consciousness of both characters, the narrative reconstructs, by means of flashbacks and retrospective fragments, the personal stories that have shaped their fragile relationship, including family tensions, class differences, and emotional misunderstandings. Set on the threshold of the social and sexual transformations associated with the 1960s, and on the eve of what Philip Larkin famously termed the *Annus Mirabilis* in the poem of the same name (1967)[3], which constitutes an important intertext for *On Chesil Beach*, the novel presents Florence and Edward as figures suspended between two historical moments. They emerge as the reluctant inheritors of a repressive moral culture that is already beginning to disintegrate, yet whose constraints continue to shape their inability to communicate and to achieve intimacy. The failed consummation of their marriage and the subsequent confrontation on Chesil Beach ultimately crystallise both a personal tragedy and a wider historical rupture.

The bedroom scene is remarkably extended (Courtney 2013: 191-194) within a narrative deeply structured by temporality. It forms the emotional and psychological core of the novel and precipitates the crisis culminating in the couple's final separation on Chesil Beach. Time operates on multiple interconnected levels: it shapes the landscape through geological processes, informs the emotional and communicative difficulties that define the protagonists' relationship, and permeates the social context in which they are embedded.

Edward's identity as a history student further reinforces the novel's concern with the relationship between private lives and historical change. His interest not only in medieval millenarian movements and contemporary campaigns for nuclear disarmament, but also in historical marginal figures who intersect with major events without shaping them, reflects a broader preoccupation with individuals caught within larger historical processes. Edward and Florence themselves emerge as marginal figures amid social and sexual transformations. As Mathews observes, the novel primarily focuses on the transition from Victorian moral restraint to modern sexual attitudes (2012: 84). In this respect, Florence appears as the embodiment of a repressed Victorian femininity still present at the beginning of the 1960s.

[3] The year evoked in Larkin's poem is 1963, "between the end of the 'Chatterley' ban / And the Beatles' first LP", ironically identified as the symbolic beginning of Britain's sexual revolution (1970: 146).

Through Florence, McEwan suggests that the Victorian inheritance survives not as a set of explicit social rules but as an internalised form of sexual repression. Her reaction to the handbook she consults before the wedding reinforces her sense of disgust and apprehension and clearly illustrates the extent to which inherited anxieties and prohibitions continue to shape her perception of intimacy.

Against this historical and spatial background, the following sections focus on the materiality of Chesil Beach's shingle, examining how its geological properties and tactile qualities shape the protagonists' embodied experience and acquire narrative and symbolic significance.

2. Matter and Metaphor

Much of the criticism devoted to the novel has focused on the beachscape, whose material instability and multiple metaphorical meanings are central to McEwan's spatial imagination. Neither fully land nor sea, the beach constitutes a liminal and constantly shifting environment, shaped by erosion, sedimentation, and movement. As a transitional and mutable space, it resists fixity and becomes suited to the novel's exploration of uncertainty and emotional fracture[4]. Cavalié's analysis (2018) has been influential in highlighting the beach as a tactile and sensory environment. Building on this insight, the present article shifts attention from the beachscape as a whole to the materiality of the shingle itself. A geoliterary reading foregrounds the pebbles' geological properties and tactile qualities, revealing how the shingle functions as a material and affective agent that shapes bodily perception and contributes to the novel's narrative, symbolic, and historical meanings.

Chesil Beach constitutes one of Britain's most remarkable shingle formations. Traditionally identified as a tombolo, it is more accurately described in geomorphological terms as a barrier beach gradually rolled landwards until it connected the mainland to the Isle of Portland. Stretching for almost twenty-nine kilometres, the massive ridge of pebbles forms an apparently continuous line along the Dorset coast, enclosing the Fleet, a shallow tidal lagoon. Its scale, density, and material compactness contribute to the beach's distinctive physical presence and to the sense of separation and isolation that permeates McEwan's novel[5]. Far from providing mere topographical background, these geomorphological features determine the beach's tactile qualities and material consistency, making the shingle a constitutive element of the protagonists' experience and of the novel's symbolic economy. Chesil Beach thus emerges as a geographical formation in which geological materiality and literary imagination converge, generating a dense network of cultural and intertextual resonances.

McEwan constructs Chesil Beach simultaneously as a material landscape and as a literary landscape. The most explicit intertext is Matthew Arnold's 1867 poem "Dover Beach",

[4] The beach is constructed through multiple material, cultural, and symbolic practices. Given the multifaceted nature of the beachscape and the plurality of processes involved in its construction and representation, an interdisciplinary approach proves not only useful but necessary, as Breidenbach, Fröhler, Pensel, Simon, Telsnig & Wittmann (2020) have demonstrated.

[5] Several scientific and geomorphological studies have highlighted the specificity and ecological uniqueness of this coastal environment, emphasising the exceptional geological formation and dynamic evolution of Chesil Beach. See Carr (1969), Carr, Gleason & King (1970), Carr & Seaward (1981).

because McEwan's title clearly recalls its Victorian precursor. The connection is strengthened by the circumstances surrounding the composition of Arnold's poem, written during his honeymoon and addressed to his bride while the two figures stand together by the sea at night. Similar emotional tensions between intimacy, uncertainty, and estrangement permeate *On Chesil Beach*. "Dover Beach" also recalls McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), where Daisy Perowne recites Arnold's poem to Baxter during his intrusion into the family home: the poem acquires a salvific function by suspending violence through the power of poetic language. In this sense, Arnold's text serves as a key intertextual reference, linking *On Chesil Beach* both to the English literary tradition and to McEwan's own fictional world. Further intertextual connections may be traced with John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), likewise set on the Dorset coast and similarly concerned with history, sexuality, and repression, as well as with D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), another key text in the literary history of sexual transgression and emotional intimacy. Further significant parallels emerge with Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), from which McEwan appears to have borrowed the names of his protagonists (Utell 2016).

The narrator's observation that "the matter lay between them, as solid as a geographical feature" (McEwan 2007: 139) establishes a powerful equivalence between physical substance and emotional obstruction. The image evokes the immovability of a mountain or a rocky formation. Florence's and Edward's affective distance is thus spatialised and materialised into an insurmountable obstacle, suggesting that the separation between them has acquired the permanence and solidity of the landscape itself. Significantly, the environment surrounding the couple is a maritime landscape strongly characterised by rock and stone, namely by the pebbles that constitute Chesil Beach. The pebbles are fragments of matter whose physical density reflects the psychological burden that obstructs communication; their endless multiplicity suggests the fragmentation of perception and experience that increasingly defines the relationship between the two protagonists. The metaphor thus operates simultaneously on three interconnected levels. Geologically, it derives its force from the material compactness and apparent permanence of the shingle itself. Emotionally, it externalises the protagonists' inability to communicate, transforming affective distance into a tangible obstacle. Narratively, it becomes a structuring principle that binds landscape and plot together, so that the physical environment does not merely reflect the protagonists' crisis but actively shapes the unfolding of their relationship.

The shingle of Chesil Beach is composed predominantly of flint and chert pebbles whose size gradually decreases from the large stones near Portland to the much smaller pebbles extending towards West Bay. This geological variation is explicitly foregrounded in the novel when Edward reads aloud from a guidebook describing how "thousands of years of pounding storms had sifted and graded the size of pebbles along the eighteen miles of beach, with the bigger stones at the eastern end" (McEwan 2007: 19). The same passage recalls the local legend according to which "fishermen landing at night knew exactly where they were by the grade of shingle" (McEwan 2007: 19). These details emphasise not only the immense spatial scale of Chesil Beach but also the subtle ordering imposed upon it by natural processes operating over geological time. The apparently impersonal logic governing the formation and distribution of the pebbles becomes a significant metaphor within the novel:

McEwan draws on this slow, cumulative, and inexorable process to reflect on the equally powerful forces of history shaping individual lives and relationships. The vast shingle ridge conveys a powerful impression of permanence and immobility. Yet this apparent stability is itself a product of extremely slow processes: the forces that continue to reshape the beach operate on temporal scales far exceeding human perception, making change appear as stasis. In this sense, the shingle invites a reading in terms of "deep time", foregrounding forms of material temporality that extend beyond the scale of human history while remaining intimately entangled with it[6].

Poised between the moral restraints of the past and the approaching sexual revolution, the novel presents its protagonists as figures caught in a moment of cultural transition[7]. Edward's and Florence's inability to consummate their marriage may thus be read as a microcosm of a wider historical transition, in which inherited codes of behaviour were beginning to disintegrate without yet being replaced by new forms of emotional and sexual openness. The ancient and seemingly immutable landscape of Chesil Beach provides a striking counterpoint to the rapid social transformations surrounding the characters, exposing their incapacity to inhabit the new cultural and emotional landscape taking shape around them.

This interplay between natural processes and historical change also makes Darwin's implicit presence especially significant. The gradual variation in the size of the pebbles along the beach, shaped over millennia by the relentless action of tides and waves, reflects a process governed by impersonal natural forces. The landscape thereby evokes an evolutionary logic of selection and adaptation that subtly parallels the historical and emotional pressures acting upon the protagonists. This geological sorting becomes a powerful analogue for the forces of history that silently yet inexorably shape the lives of Florence and Edward. The two characters stand at the beginning of adult life while simultaneously living in a period marked by profound transformations in British attitudes towards sexuality. In both cases, individual destinies emerge not from isolated acts of will but from slow, cumulative processes operating across temporal scales far beyond human perception.

As a transitional environment, the seaside acquires a symbolic function, while the failed wedding night dramatises the cultural tensions underlying the passage from one social order to another (Mohácsi 2021: 375). Hence, Chesil Beach functions simultaneously as a geographical boundary separating the English Channel from the Fleet Lagoon and as a metaphorical dividing line charged with historical significance. For both protagonists, the beach initially appears as a possible escape from the oppressive formality and emotional discomfort of the honeymoon dinner, during which they experience a growing sense of unease and constraint. Edward reflects that "trudging along the beach would have been better than sitting here" (McEwan 2007: 19), imagining the open coastal landscape as an alternative to the rigid social conventions governing their behaviour inside the hotel. Both Florence

[6] Recent ecocritical discussions of deep time have highlighted the need to read human histories within geological temporalities operating on scales far beyond individual experience (Clark 2015).

[7] The social context and sexual relationships of the 1960s have been extensively examined in numerous studies, which have emphasised the scale and significance of the transformations that reshaped British society during the decade. See Cook (2004), Sandbrook (2006) and Szreter & Fisher (2010).

and Edward would prefer to walk along the shore with its infinite shingle, examining the changing sizes of the pebbles and escaping the suffocating ritual of the wedding meal. Significantly, Edward senses that "if he had known how to propose it, or justify it, he might have suggested going out straightaway" (McEwan 2007: 19), an observation that reveals the extent to which even spontaneity requires social justification within their world. Their shared after-dinner project "to collect stones along the way and compare their sizes to see if storms really had brought order to the beach" (McEwan 2007: 142) acquires an additional symbolic resonance. The apparent order imposed upon the shingle by geological and coastal processes contrasts with the emotional disorder and communicative failure experienced by the protagonists. The projected act of collecting and comparing pebbles transforms the shingle into an object of shared inquiry. Yet while the protagonists seek to understand the ordering of the beach, they remain incapable of interpreting the emotional and historical forces that shape their own lives.

3. Beachscape with Pebbles

Viewed from the hotel window, the beachscape immediately acquires a distinctly sexualised dimension, and every element of the surrounding environment contributes to an atmosphere of erotic tension. At the same time, however, McEwan introduces a subtle irony, since the sensuous vitality of the landscape sharply contrasts with the protagonists' sexual anxiety. The passage can be read in the light of Paul Rodaway's (1994) reflections on sensuous geographies and Tim Ingold's (2000) understanding of landscape as an embodied and experiential environment, perceived not only visually but through touch, sound, movement, and atmospheric immersion. McEwan describes the scenery in markedly sensual terms:

> The garden vegetation rose up, sensuous and tropical in its profusion, an effect heightened by the grey, soft light and a delicate mist drifting in from the sea, whose steady motion of advance and withdrawal made sounds of gentle thunder, then sudden hissing against the pebbles (McEwan 2007: 5).

This passage develops a dense sensory texture in which visual, tactile, and auditory impressions converge. The luxuriant vegetation, the soft light, the drifting mist, and the rhythmic movement of the sea create a sensuous atmosphere that sharply contrasts with the protagonists' emotional inhibition. Particularly significant is the recurring movement of "advance and withdrawal" whose oscillating rhythm anticipates the couple's failed attempt at physical intimacy (Mohácsi 2021: 376). Even the hissing sound of the waves against the pebbles contributes to this emotional architecture, transforming the material landscape into an active participant in the scene.

McEwan progressively constructs the landscape through multiple sensory registers. The beach is experienced as sound and movement before it becomes fully visible, anticipating the haptic mode of perception that dominates the protagonists' encounter with the shingle. As Elsa Cavalié remarks:

> The role of the beachscape goes much further than just outlining the pre/post 1963 divide. Chesil Beach's shingle indeed seems to delineate the very passing of time, an almost philosophical meditation about man's place in the grand order of things, for its virtually infinite space may at first be considered as a *ligne de fuite* opening up endless potentialities for the individual (Cavalié 2018: para. 13).

Building on this perspective, the present analysis argues that the pebbles shape not only the representation of the landscape but also the protagonists' bodily engagement with it. Walking across the shingle is repeatedly presented as a strenuous and physically demanding activity. The narrative evokes movement through the "heavy shingle" (McEwan 2007: 139), the prospect of "trudging along the beach" (2007: 19), and, later, walking up and down on the "exhausting shingle" (2007: 158), emphasising the material resistance of the pebbled landscape. For Florence, the physical effort of traversing the shingle mirrors the painful resurfacing of long-repressed memories, turning movement across the landscape into a bodily expression of psychological trauma. The pebbled surface resists movement, slowing, destabilising, and exhausting the body while materially reinforcing the protagonists' emotional impasse. The landscape does not merely mirror their predicament: it actively shapes the way it is experienced.

During the climactic confrontation on the beach, the landscape no longer functions as a potentially liberating or protective space in which Florence might articulate her traumatic experience. Instead, it intensifies her isolation and underscores the impossibility of meaningful mutual understanding between the two characters. The material and symbolic significance of the shingle culminates in the novel's final image of Florence:

> He stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurrying along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light (McEwan 2007: 166).

Florence's departure is rendered not only visually but acoustically: the "sound of her difficult progress" foregrounds the physical resistance of the shingle, making the effort of movement itself audible. The landscape thus materialises separation through bodily exertion rather than through visual distance alone. The striking image of the "straight road of shingle" momentarily transforms the beach into a linear trajectory, suggesting both an irreversible departure and the impossibility of return. What had initially appeared as a space of potential escape becomes instead the material trace of definitive separation. As Florence's figure is gradually absorbed by the vast extension of the beach, the scene becomes the image that will continue to haunt Edward throughout his life. Florence's suffering remains largely inaccessible, as the novel ultimately privileges Edward's retrospective perspective and enduring sense of loss.

As suggested earlier, both Edward and Florence initially perceive the beach as a potentially liberating haptic environment (Cavalié 2018: para. 17). For Florence, running out of the hotel room momentarily signifies an escape from the oppressive reality of the wedding

night, whereas Edward associates the open coastal landscape with release from the rigid social conventions constraining their behaviour. Their experience of the beach may therefore be understood in terms of Deleuze's and Guattari's (1987) notion of "smooth space", where orientation derives from movement and sensory experience rather than from stable coordinates or clearly demarcated boundaries. Its immense linear extension encourages movement without offering the reassurance of fixed orientation, reflecting the uncertainty that characterises both the landscape and the protagonists' relationship.

The sea itself is frequently perceived not visually but through sound, motion, and especially smell, often in unsettling ways. For Florence, maritime sensations are inseparable from disturbing memories connected to the sailing trips she took with her father across the Channel. The failed consummation of the marriage is therefore deeply intertwined with the novel's gradual reconstruction of her past. The narrator appears to imply a history of paternal abuse, suggesting that Florence's revulsion towards sexuality may originate in childhood trauma. The sea functions as a sensory trigger for these repressed memories, which violently resurface during the wedding night when its smell evokes the indistinct recollection: "She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting…" (McEwan 2007: 99). Although the novel deliberately leaves aspects of Florence's childhood experience unresolved, several critics have read its allusions to the sailing trips with her father as evidence of sexual abuse and repressed trauma (Mohácsi 2021: 377-379).

As sea, lagoon, and sky become almost indistinguishable, the landscape is experienced less as a clearly delimited space than as a fluid sensory continuum:

> A shift or a strengthening of the wind brought them the sound of waves breaking, like a distant shattering of glasses. The mist was lifting to reveal in part the contours of the low hills, curving away above the shoreline to the east. They could see a luminous grey smoothness that may have been the silky surface of the sea itself, or the lagoon, or the sky – it was difficult to tell (McEwan 2007: 18).

Continuously reshaped by tides and long-term processes of erosion and sedimentation, Chesil Beach exemplifies the liminal nature of littoral environments (Preston-Whyte 2004). Situated between land and sea, it embodies what Thomassen defines as "permanent liminality" (2012: 28). The beachscape participates in a long literary tradition that associates the seashore with rites of passage, transition, and the possibility of transformation. In McEwan's novel, however, the transformative potential traditionally associated with the seashore remains unfulfilled, as the beach comes to reflect the uncertainty and emotional fragility that permeate Edward's and Florence's relationship. At the same time, the tactile materiality of the shingle paradoxically complicates visual perception. Florence observes Edward approaching across the beach as "at first no more than an indigo stain against the darkening shingle, sometimes appearing motionless, flickering and dissolving at its outlines, and at others suddenly closer" (McEwan 2007: 139). Edward's blurred figure does not simply mirror the uncertainty of their relationship; it is produced by the material conditions of the beach itself, where the shingle and the fading light destabilise visual perception. In both passages McEwan systematically undermines visual certainty. Boundaries between

sea, lagoon, and sky become indistinct, just as Edward's body gradually dissolves into the shingle. The erosion of visual definition parallels the protagonists' inability to establish clear emotional and communicative boundaries.

McEwan draws a striking contrast between the apparent order of the beach, shaped by long-term processes of geological accumulation and stratification, and the progressive disintegration of the protagonists' relationship. The enduring physical presence of the beach makes the fragility and brevity of Edward's and Florence's marriage all the more evident. The shingle thus emerges not simply as the defining feature of the landscape but as the material medium through which McEwan explores the disproportion between geological permanence and human fragility.

The image of the countless pebbles covering the shoreline crystallises many of the novel's central concerns: the fragility of human relationships, the consequences of miscommunication, and the lasting effects of emotional hesitation. The shingle, however, functions not merely as a metaphorical reflection of these concerns but as an active material presence. In the light of Jane Bennett's (2010) notion of "vibrant matter", its geological properties, tactile resistance, and incessant movement participate directly in the protagonists' experience, giving its material presence a significance beyond the symbolic. The shingle's unstable surface, its constant noise, and its resistance to movement generate discomfort and disorientation, while the plurality of its pebbles suggests fragmentation and the impossibility of fluid continuity. The beach thus emerges not as a static setting but as a dynamic configuration in which shingle, bodies, memory, desire, and silence interact to produce emotional and narrative effects. Ahmed's (2004) account of affect further clarifies how emotions become attached to material objects and environments. Throughout the novel, shame, fear, and sexual anxiety are repeatedly displaced onto the shingle, whose tactile resistance and unstable surface acquire an affective force of its own.

In conclusion, the pebbles of Chesil Beach come to embody the central paradox in the novel: a landscape shaped by incessant movement appears immobile, while the protagonists' relationship, seemingly founded on permanence, proves unexpectedly fragile. From a geoliterary perspective, the shingle reveals how geological materiality, bodily experience, and historical consciousness converge to shape the novel's narrative and emotional structure. By shifting attention from the beachscape to the pebbles themselves, this reading suggests that geological materiality is not simply represented in the novel but becomes one of the conditions through which narrative, perception, and affect take shape.

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Sensing the Chthulucene: Multisensory Scapes and Posthuman Kinship in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*

Abstract I: Nel contesto dell'Antropocene, la letteratura fatica a rendere conto delle proporzioni sistemiche del collasso ecologico globale. Questo articolo esamina *The Overstory* (2018) e *Bewilderment* (2021) di Richard Powers come testi fondamentali che provano a superare questa parziale crisi immaginativa con la costruzione di paesaggi multisensoriali radicati nel "presente denso" di Donna Haraway e nell'ecocritica materiale. Si sosterrà che Powers, attraverso ambienti immersivi e ricchi di stimoli sensoriali, che spaziano dalle reti arboree alle simulazioni astrobiologiche, va oltre il semplice smantellamento dei binarismi cartesiani per esplorare le possibilità trasformative, ma anche i rischi, delle epistemologie e ontologie postumane proiettate verso una radicale riconnessione fenomenologica con gli equilibri della materialità della Terra.

Abstract II: In the Anthropocene, literary representation struggles to capture the sheer scale of planetary ecological collapse. This article examines Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021) as key texts that address this imaginative crisis through the construction of multisensory scapes. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of the "thick present" and material ecocriticism, the article explores how Powers' multisensory environments unsettle conventional distinctions between human and non-human forms of agency and perception. Through phenomenologically immersive landscapes, ranging from the communication networks of ancient forests to astrobiological experiments, Powers goes beyond merely dismantling Cartesian binaries to explore both the transformative possibilities and the risks of posthuman epistemologies and ontologies oriented towards a radical phenomenological reconnection with the Earth's material equilibrium.

Keywords: Multisensory scapes, Richard Powers, Material ecocriticism, Posthuman kinship, Anthropocene.

1. Storied Matter and Multisensory Scapes against the Imaginative Paralysis of the Anthropocene

The emergence of the Anthropocene era has inevitably ruptured our established notions of historical and geological time. Human activities now operate as destabilising agents driving

extinction, deforestation, and environmental degradation on an unparalleled scale. However, depicting this reality in fiction poses a severe epistemological challenge, as traditional forms of the bourgeois novel tend to break down in the face of nonlinear realities such as ecological catastrophe and the surrealities of global warming (Ghosh 2016), or when attempting to cram geological eras into the scope of human existence. To make sense of this collapse, environmental philosophy has turned towards what Donna Haraway (2016) defines as the "Chthulucene", an epoch marked by humanity's messy entanglements with an ill Earth. Haraway encourages us to "stay with the trouble" by making kin in the "thick present" (Haraway 2016: 1), a complicated mesh where humanity and other beings are interlinked through mutual impacts, akin to the synaptic hyphae of fungi connecting the Earth's roots. Inhabiting this present requires abandoning the Cartesian dualism that severs Nature from Culture and enables the exploitative "dominator model"[1] identified by Riane Eisler (1995; Eisler & Fry 2019). Instead, material ecocriticism offers a language for radically attuning to the senses: Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue that matter possesses agency and acts as communicative "storied matter" (2014: 1), while Jane Bennett (2010) urges a recognition of "vibrant matter" actively participating in worldly events. This communicative materiality is echoed in David Abram's (1996: 137-179) embodied phenomenology, which frames human perception as a participatory exchange with an animate landscape, and in the "ecosophy" which seeks a partnership between humans and the Earth, based on the realisation that the whole world is unified and all life shares a common evolutionary ancestry from its cellular beginnings (Panikkar 1994; Sjöö & Mor 1991).

Against this theoretical backdrop, Richard Powers emerges as a prominent contemporary voice addressing the representational crisis of the Anthropocene. In his novels *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021), Powers deftly weaves scientific knowledge with literary theory and posthumanism, reshaping literary sensibility to reflect the pressing realities of ecology. A substantial body of scholarship has fruitfully mapped this response, analysing his characters' ecological grief (Hess 2019), his conceptualisation of interspecies empathy (Song 2023; Mohiuddin 2024), his formal use of "eco-ekphrasis" to visually mediate unthinkable scales of geological time (Kurr 2025), and, more generally, Powers' shift away from a patriarchal model towards what Antonella Riem (2021) has termed a "biocultural partnership" based on love and reciprocity. However, existing criticism often favours cognitive or ocularcentric ecological analyses, portraying the posthuman pursuit of kinship as an aspirational expansion of human empathy. What remains underexplored is the profoundly somatic, visceral friction involved in dismantling the boundary between human and environment. Indeed, while it is true that Powers reiterates the need to overcome anthropocentrism, he does not do so by establishing an overly broad opposition between Western epistemology and more-than-human relationality. Rather than presenting posthuman kinship as a utopian cure for habitat destruction, he uses these crises to also explore the frictions

[1] Riane Eisler's "dominator" and "partnership" models describe two different orientations along a relational and sociocultural continuum. Whereas the former is structured by rigid hierarchies, control, and exploitation, the latter favours more equitable relationships grounded in care, cooperation, reciprocity, and respect for the more-than-human world.

and limits of adopting fully posthuman knowledge and being. Consequently, a critical gap persists in understanding how Powers formally translates systemic theories of planetary entanglement into lived, bodily realities.

Building on my previous analysis of environmental ethics, interconnectedness, and posthuman ecologies in *The Overstory* (De Riso 2025), the present study places *The Overstory* in dialogue with *Bewilderment* and extends the theoretical framework through material ecocriticism and embodied phenomenology in order to explore a broader range of phenomenological experiences, from terrestrial environments to astrobiological and AI-mediated landscapes. It thereby shifts the focus towards multisensory scapes and the transformative possibilities, contradictions, and risks of posthuman epistemologies and ontologies. To address this underexplored dimension, I introduce the concept of multisensory scapes to extend, revise, and complicate current understandings of posthuman kinship in Powers' fiction. Drawing on material ecocriticism and bodily phenomenology, I argue that Powers circumvents the representational crisis of the Anthropocene by forcing his characters, and the reader, into a radical somatic surrender to the Earth's storied matter. I define multisensory scapes as sensory-rich, immersive environments experienced via a full phenomenological array of sight, sound, smell, and touch. Powers' environments refuse to remain passive stages; weather patterns, ancient alders, paramecia, and atmospheric compositions exert constant, undeniable pressure on the characters, enabling the reader to recognise non-human agency as a fundamental epistemological shift required to survive our epoch. Whether through the biochemical communication networks of ancient redwoods, the primal moisture of the Great Smoky Mountains, the virtual life of video games, or the disorienting synesthesia of astrobiological exoplanets, these multisensory scapes demand a physical and emotional decentring of the anthropocentric subject. As anticipated, however, by reading *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* together it becomes apparent that Powers does not use these immersive environments to merely expose the transformative, sympoietic possibilities of decentring the human. In fact, moving from arboreal frequencies to tactile immersions and astrobiological speculations, Powers also reveals the inherent physical weaknesses and fatal risks of dissolving the boundaries between human bodies and an indifferent Earth, thereby exposing the possibly tragic limits of adopting fully posthuman ontologies.

2. Arboreal Frequencies: Recalibrating the Sensorium in *The Overstory*

The Overstory unfolds as a vast ecological narrative investigating the intimate dependencies between humans and trees, whose lives form what Riem aptly describes as the "understory" (Riem 2021: 34), separate human paths that progressively intersect and entangle with the roots and branches of the forest. According to Powers, humanity's insatiable exploitation of nature stems from a fundamental perceptual deficit, the inability to grasp the temporal dynamics and languages specific to the plant world. From the very beginning, the novel emphasises the urgent need to radically re-educate our senses. The opening chapter, "Roots", acts as a veritable phenomenological threshold: it immediately transports the reader into a multisensory dimension where typically human logocentric communication is transcended and put into perspective by the extraordinary biosemiotic richness of the natural world. Powers models this somatic shift through an anonymous woman engaging

in deep tactile and auditory listening with a pine tree. By deliberately quieting the cognitive dissonance of modern human commerce, she allows her perception to "tune down to the lowest frequencies" (Powers 2018: 6). This sensory re-tuning is essential for inhabiting Haraway's thick present, since only through such profound immersion can subjects begin to interpret the biochemical and vibratory signals – the "messages, [frequencies, and] words before words" (6) – pulsing through the environment. This early insistence on expanding the human sensorium not only anchors the ecological awakening in *The Overstory*, but also prefigures the intense, trans-corporeal empathy that young Robin will seek in the terrestrial and speculative scapes of *Bewilderment*.

More than static backdrops, Powers' silvan environments function as sympoietic webs of active, communicative matter. Echoing Panikkar's ecosophical principles and Haraway's concept of posthuman kinship, the narrative imbues the plant kingdom with an undeniable, dynamic agency. The plant world communicates constantly through a ceaseless flow of complex information. Maple trees, for example, release chemicals into the air to alert neighbouring trees to insect attacks, whilst Douglas-firs interconnect their vascular networks to share nutrients and provide support to damaged plants. Nevertheless, as Powers points out, our access to this communicative exchange faces a significant epistemic limitation, a disconnection that stems from our pervasive "plant-blindness"[2] and a profound imbalance in our sensory perception channels. Humanity is largely unaware of the slow biochemical processes that govern the biosphere. This is because we are constrained to interact with the environment only within narrow time frames that are commensurate with the actual cognitive capacities of the human mind. This narrowing of our sensory bandwidth not only underscores the ecological alienation depicted in *The Overstory*, but also establishes a core epistemological crisis present across Powers' broader eco-fictional project. By reading *The Overstory* alongside *Bewilderment*, it becomes possible to delineate how Powers transitions from merely diagnosing humanity's perceptual failure to actively exploring radical, posthuman methodologies for curing it. The need to transcend our ecological myopia in *The Overstory* becomes the driving structural force of the later novel, manifesting through visceral tactile immersions in the wild and the unprecedented, interspecies neuro-empathy facilitated by the DecNef machine.

Powers employs narrative techniques to help humans transcend their natural time frame and understand that of trees. By formally intertwining individual human paths with the broader biosphere, the text constructs what Marco Caracciolo (2020) defines as an anti-anthropocentric "we-narrative". Through this collective framework, the narrative perspective expands to embrace "nonhuman assemblages" (Caracciolo 2020: 86) of plants and ecosystems, thereby dismantling human exceptionalism on a structural level. The human

[2] This term refers to the inability to perceive or pay attention to the presence of plants in one's surroundings, a phenomenon that leads one to mistakenly regard them as merely a static and passive element of the background, in contrast to animal life, rather than as living, dynamic biological entities. This condition stems from evolutionary factors: the human visual system is structured to prioritise movement, colour variations, and immediate environmental or social threats. Consequently, as plants operate according to distinct temporal rhythms and lack motor capacity and immediate visual stimuli, the mind tends to categorise them as mere visual background noise or as an indistinct green expanse.

protagonists of the "understory" are symbolically allied with specific trees, revealing the mythic and healing potential of a partnership with nature. Patricia Westerford is identified with the beech tree, which is associated with a sacred grove and with the Tree of Knowledge. Her character resembles a solitary tree standing apart from everything else that vibrates as an entire forest. Mimi Ma is paired with the mulberry tree, which is symbolic of the Tao as well as an axis, meaning the whole world order, thus indicating her ability to harmonise feminine and masculine qualities in herself in order to perform a holistic silent healing. After surviving certain death thanks to a banyan tree, Douglas Pavlicek becomes an indefatigable planter of Douglas firs in order to compensate for the destruction caused by clear cutting. Nick Hoel's family documents the growth of a chestnut tree for over a hundred years through a photographic archive that serves as a prime example of a visual prosthetic. By accumulating thousands of static images, the archive constructs a dynamic visual scape that overrides cognitive blindness, allowing the human eye to process non-human frequencies of existence. This optical aggregation translates the abstract concept of natural evolution into a directly observed, sensory-rich reality, making the tree's material presence perceptually accessible. As Antonella Riem observes, embracing such arboreal primacy requires us to adapt to a cycle of "continuous metamorphosis, 'seed into tree, tree into soil'" (2021: 35). Within this multisensory reading, the Hoel archive operates as an immersive tool that visually anchors the subject in the continuous resilience of the biosphere, transcending the limits of the anthropocentric gaze.

Powers deploys narrative devices that function as prosthetic extensions of our perceptual bandwidth, thus counteracting humanity's sensory limitations. This demand for multisensory attunement is further radicalised through Patricia Westerford's embodied engagement with the forest's invisible chemical frequencies. To overcome the pervasive plant-blindness that isolates humanity, Patricia immerses herself in the imperceptible architecture of volatile organic compounds, discovering that untouched maples detect the chemical alarms of infested neighbours:

> The trees under attack pump out insecticides to save their lives. That much is uncontroversial. But something else in the data makes her flesh pucker: trees a little way off, untouched by the invading swarms, ramp up their own defenses when their neighbor is attacked. Something alerts them. They get wind of the disaster, and they prepare [...] The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are signaling. They're linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other (Powers 2018: 116).

Her research reconfigures the forest into a dense, interactive olfactory and biochemical scape which ceases to be a mute backdrop and emerges, instead, as a breathing, aromatic network where airborne aerosols constitute a material syntax. By decoding these transmissions, Patricia acts as a sensory translator, rendering the biochemical respiration of the woods into a legible phenomenological experience. Ultimately, *The Overstory* creates a narrative where forging posthuman kinship demands an acute, multisensory surrender and an

epistemological breakthrough that pave the way for the intensely tactile immersions and neuro-cognitive empathy that Powers will explore in *Bewilderment*.

3. Decentring the Human: Terrestrial, Virtual, and Astrobiological Scapes

Insofar as *The Overstory* reconfigures the human relationship to time and agency in plants, Powers' subsequent novel, *Bewilderment*, emphasises the direct experience of the human body within the biosphere. Following the tragic death of his wife, Alyssa, astrobiologist Theo Byrne relocates his highly sensitive son, Robin, to a rented cabin in the Great Smoky Mountains to escape their suburban alienation. Powers brings this terrestrial setting to life through a rich sensory array that brutally reconnects the protagonists with nature. Visually, the pristine landscape offers celestial clarity, sitting on "the edge of one of the last patches of darkness in the eastern U.S." (Powers 2021: 6), where the Milky Way is rendered as "countless speckled placers in a black streambed" (6)[3]. Olfaction further anchors the characters, collapsing the Cartesian boundary between the domestic interior, smelling of "pine spritzed with bacon" (7), and the wild exterior. Smellscapes are rife throughout the narrative, directly connecting man to nature without the interference of reason. Scent operates on an ancient, limbic level, demanding immediate physiological acknowledgement.

Most importantly, tactile immersion plunges the characters into the tangible matter of the biosphere. The somatic shock of freezing river rapids forces a total physical surrender to the power of nature, dispelling the notion of human exceptionalism:

> The water shocked my chest and shoved me toward a tumble of rocks. What looked level from the shore was a whole rolling range of submerged micro-mountains. I plunged into the turbulence. My foot slid on a slick stone worn smooth by centuries of falling water. Then I remembered how to do this. I sat down in the torrent and let the chill river crash over me. At his first touch of frigid current, Robin screamed. But the pain lasted only half a minute and his shrieks turned to laughter. "Keep low", I called. "Crawl. Channel your inner amphibian" (Powers 2021: 21).

The "ecstatic churn" of the water represents a tactile experience that feels "like a planet where the gravity keeps changing" (Powers 2021: 21, 22). By forcing the human posture back into a primal state, this multisensory scape washes away abstract intellectualisation, allowing Robin to experience what Stacy Alaimo (2008) defines as "trans-corporeality", the continuous exchange of matter and agency with the more-than-human world.

However, while Robin's immersion in the rapids forces a raw, localised surrender of the physical body, Powers recognises that the systemic scale of the Anthropocene cannot be comprehended through somatic shock alone. To overcome this imaginative limitation, the narrative deliberately oscillates from the violently embodied to the radically disembodied. Indeed, confronted with the claustrophobia of terrestrial ecological collapse, Powers shifts the narrative gaze outward to speculative, non-physical scapes: the virtual reality ecosystems in *The Overstory* and the astrobiological exoplanets in *Bewilderment*. These speculative

[3] Hereafter, references to Powers (2021) will be indicated by page number only.

environments act as vast thought experiments designed to systematically dismantle human exceptionalism. Powers lays the formal groundwork for these speculative, disembodied environments in *The Overstory*, where Neelay's attempt to rectify capitalist accumulation by modelling a digital game on natural laws, Mastery, functions as an immersive, algorithmic prosthetic designed to artificially expand human sensory bandwidth. Frustrated by the limited digital environments of the early versions of the game, which offered "no smell, no touch, no taste, no feel" (2018: 196), and which also suffered from the Midas syndrome (that is, prompting players to accumulate capital endlessly), Neelay redesigned his virtual universe from scratch with the aim of modelling the material and historical complexity of the Earth. By creating a biologically rich cybernetic ecosystem, within which players come to "count 750 kinds of simulated plants" (238) endowed with realistic nutrient cycles, Powers explores how the experience of virtual immersion can broaden our cognitive understanding of the Anthropocene. In this cyber-empyrean dimension, human users and artificial intelligence converge to the point of "absorb[ing] everything, eat[ing] every scrap of data" (419), learning to "think like rivers and forests and mountains" (411). By projecting human consciousness into a digital scape that employs ecological processes, this simulated immersion aligns with Haraway's notion of "tentacular thinking" (2016: 30) to reveal how real intelligence necessitates the reconciliation between human constructions of language and the "language of green things" (Powers 2018: 411). Moreover, it also serves as the structural precursor to the speculative scapes in *Bewilderment*, prefiguring how Theo and Robin will later rely on planetary models to synthesise multispecies empathy.

Indeed, the latter novel further decentres the human sensorium through astrobiological thought experiments that divest human senses of their presumed superiority. Theo utilises scientific data on biosignature[4] gases to take Robin on fantastic adventures into alien worlds, plunging the reader into environments that facilitate the exploration of new bioethical perspectives and render ocularcentric epistemology useless. On Geminus, a planet whose surface is divided into day and night regions, the novel makes use of binary contrasts that parallel the planet's ecology of fire and ice. On Pelagos, an infinite oceanic planet, rampant aquatic biodiversity is expressed through "intelligent kelp hundreds of meters long [that] spelled messages in colors" (Powers 2021: 55). Drifting in "interstellar emptiness", on the rogue planet Falasha:

> We went to the bottom of [...] oceans, into their volcanic seams. We aimed our head lamps into the deepest trenches, and he gasped. Creatures everywhere: white crabs and clams, purple tube worms and living draperies. Everything fed on the heat and chemistry oozing from hydrothermal vents [...] The vents spewed and cooled. The currents of the waters shifted. Small upheavals and local catastrophes favored the cagey. Sessile barnacles turned into free swimmers, and swimmers developed the power to predict. Pilgrim adventurers colonized new places (Powers 2021: 35).

[4] The term refers to specific atmospheric compositions or mixes of gases on exoplanets that indicate the presence of living processes. Theo creates computational models to predict these biosignature gases to determine if a distant planet is alive. In other words, such models act as spectral "fingerprints" of ecosystems.

Challenging the long-standing ocularcentric tendency of Western epistemology, Powers transports the reader to the perpetually dark planet Nithar. Here, subjects are compelled to inhabit an alien phenomenology where they "hear in something like color" and navigate by instinctively reading "thermal gradients and magnetic fields" (172). By replacing visual dominance with raw thermodynamic pulses and synesthetic arrays, Powers achieves a profound cognitive estrangement, proving that our default mode of perception is merely one of countless evolutionary possibilities for encountering the universe's communicative materiality. More generally, in all of these speculative biomes, the human gaze is humbled by the sheer scale of deep time and extreme materiality, a cognitive estrangement that deliberately reallocates the sensorium to prove that our default mode of perception is but one fragment of a vastly larger cosmic syntax. Our existence in an infinite cosmos capable of spawning intelligent beings in any number of bizarre ways leaves our arrogance in a state of absurdity at best and morally indefensible at worst.

4. The Empathy Machine and the Limits of Simulation

Powers does not arbitrarily juxtapose virtual reality and river rapids; rather, he systematically exhausts all available scales of human perception to break down anthropocentric thinking. And if the cosmos offers vast, unimaginable scapes, *Bewilderment* violently retracts its gaze inward to the microscopic architecture of the human brain, searching for an internal scape where profound ecological empathy might be forged. This occurs as Decoded Neurofeedback (DecNef), an experimental machine for AI-mediated empathy, is introduced. While undergoing fMRI training, Robin is taught to replicate the neural patterns of the target individual, in this case, a recording of his dead mother when she experiences pure ecological "ecstasy" while thinking about the natural world. Thanks to the technology, Robin gains insight into the profound happiness and affinity for the biosphere that Alyssa feels, thus undergoing a radical transformation of his own understanding of the world. Now he is able to examine the micro-ecosystems around him and differentiate bird songs by their pitch, as well as to notice small red hairs beneath the leaves of scarlet oaks. Using DecNef, Robin achieves posthuman community and eliminates the separation between the internal and external worlds.

But looking at this breakthrough purely from the perspective of a technological utopia raises significant philosophical problems. By offering a simulated landscape, the DecNef machine generates a heavily mediated and highly filtered form of empathy that acts as a neuroprosthetic shield. Through this device, Robin's painful solidarity with a declining Earth is converted into a more bearable sense of wonder. This emotional shift initially seems to align with what Linda Hess identifies in Powers' work as an "aesthetics of wonder" (2019: 190), a state that ideally functions to weave human subjects into more-than-human "networks of the grievable". Serving as a stark counterpoint to this organic ideal, however, the novel exposes a profound tension in this technological utopia: because the posthuman connection is synthesised in a laboratory, it remains unstable, artificial, and algorithm-driven. Although it allows Robin to reintegrate into society by temporarily alleviating his anxiety about the Anthropocene, DecNef represents nothing more than a precarious palliative, with the

inherent risk of commodifying ecological sensitivity itself. When the political establishment abruptly shuts down the programme, the fragility of this technologically synthesised empathy is violently exposed. Robin is severed from his artificial sanctuary and, as the neuroprosthetic shield is stripped from him, the limits of simulated kinship are exposed, dropping him harshly back into a world of unfiltered ecological destruction.

The tragic ending of the novel forces an examination of the danger of artificial stability, necessitating a return to the unfiltered experience of tactile immersion. While running away from the mountains with Theo, Robin finds hundreds of rock formations along the riverbeds, tourist constructions that have violently disturbed the habitats of salamanders and microorganisms living there. Without his shield, he uses the empathic power cultivated through his mother's memories to fix the river. In the freezing dead of night, Robin slips into the treacherous centre of the rapids to dismantle the cairns. The sensory architecture of this scene is harrowing, stripping away all abstract theory to reveal raw, physical peril. Its tragic climax exposes a terrifying asymmetry in material ecocriticism: vibrant matter possesses agency, but it is entirely indifferent to human empathy. Stripped of his neuroprosthetic shield, Robin's ultimate trans-corporeal surrender is met with the lethal reality of the elements:

> I lifted him onto the tiny island he'd been hugging and held him in place while I climbed up next to him. I stripped off his pants and shirt, taking forever to get the wet clothes off his skin. His T-shirt clung in a heap on the narrow boulder; his tiny jeans slipped off and washed downstream. His shivering got worse. I tried to dry him, but only succeeded in speeding the chill of evaporation. I fought to stay calm and concentrate [...] But my skin was as cold and wet as his. I lifted my head. The world was silvered and still. Even the river tumbled too slowly to be real (Powers 2021: 223).

Such a chilling sensory closure completely dismantles the romantic utopianism of interspecies harmony. As Robin's father desperately pulls him from the freezing current, the posthuman subject is reduced to its fragile biological limits: "Slurred sounds came from his mouth, nothing like words" (223). The logocentric boundaries that once insulated the human subject are washed away, revealing that an unmediated immersion in the thick present can bring its own mortal vulnerabilities, draining the abstract ideal of ecological kinship into an environment of unfeeling detachment. Despite Theo's frantic efforts to pull him to the bank and warm him, the sheer physical force of the environment Robin sought to protect ultimately consumes him.

Robin's death in the freezing river marks the tragic culmination of his absolute ecological attunement, functioning as a stark warning against the romanticisation of posthuman kinship. While his physical surrender to the multisensory scape of the river represents the ultimate act of bodily trans-corporeality, it also reveals that vibrant matter is not inherently benevolent or reciprocal. The river does not reciprocate Robin's empathy; its indifferent, material agency simply consumes him. In effect, he literally loses his life by rebuilding the ecology of a riverbed for amphibian species. Here, Powers introduces an unsettling counterargument to the dream of frictionless multispecies harmony: unmediated, radical immersion in Ha-

raway's thick present may ultimately prove incompatible with individual human survival. Rather than offering a comforting catharsis or suggesting that a mere rejection of Cartesian dualism will save us, Powers is aware of the possibility that the absolute dismantling of the boundaries between human and environment brings its own share of unpredictable dangers. Here, the novels' exploration of posthuman ontologies reaches its tragic limit. Multisensory scapes expose posthuman kinship's inherent contradictions and physical risks, demonstrating that moving beyond Western anthropocentrism is not a simple return to harmony, but a transition which may demand a toll that humanity could hardly be equipped to pay.

5. Conclusion: Inhabiting the Thick Present

At a time when humanity is increasingly disconnected from its environment, *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* do more than chronicle the unravelling of our environment. These novels are written as stories whose purpose is to literally change the way humans perceive their surroundings. The paralysis of knowing during the Anthropocene epoch cannot be cured through the collection of more information about climate change or through remote optical surveillance via satellites. Rather, Powers believes that true environmental consciousness requires a deeper dive into the material reality of our existence. By utilising immersive multisensory environments, from the biochemical tongue of roots to the cold physical crunch of mountain rivers to the disorienting synesthesia of hypothetical exoplanets, Powers compels us to experience an extreme decentring of the human subject. Not only does the environment play an active rather than passive role in the narrative, but it demands a sympoietic existence for both characters and the reader. We must learn to co-think, co-feel, and co-exist through the practice of making kin, in accordance with Donna Haraway, in order to survive the epistemological upheaval of our epoch. Both Robin's tragic sacrifice in the river and the Hoel family's hundred-year dedication to photography point to the same demanding ethical challenge.

Crucially, however, Powers does not offer posthuman kinship as a simplistic or utopian panacea to Western dualism, but rather as a fraught dialectical struggle. To make kin in the Chthulucene, we must shed our anthropocentric shells, lower our frequencies and fully immerse ourselves in the complex immediacy of life, even as we accept the potential pitfalls and deadly challenges that this immersion entails. Through their unflinching exploration of the potential and tragic limits of multisensory attunement, Powers' novels offer a fictional reimagining of the body as the living Earth itself, and a means of navigating life after the human, albeit one still clouded in mystery.

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Letteratura (italiana) di frontiera: *humanitas*, riconoscimenti e distinzioni

Abstract I: Il saggio coniuga, nel concetto di *humanitas*, il riconoscimento della comune appartenenza umana e la valorizzazione della distinzione attraverso l'educazione. Su questa base si riprende un parallelo tra confucianesimo e umanesimo: entrambi rispondono a crisi storiche valorizzando virtù e studio, ma la centralità dell'élite dirigente nel primo si distingue dall'impegno umanistico a favore del sapere come bene pubblico. Il mondo contemporaneo richiede tuttavia di conciliare riconoscimento e distinzione. Carlo Dionisotti anticipa una possibile risposta, qui riformulata come letteratura italiana concepita quale frontiera, spazio d'incontro geografico e sociale. Le migrazioni impongono un'ulteriore esigenza: articolare identità e differenza attraverso distinzioni che non producano esclusione.

Abstract II: This essay brings together, within *humanitas*, recognition of a shared humanity and the cultivation of distinction through education. It draws a parallel between Confucianism and humanism: both responded to historical crises by valuing virtue and learning, although the former's focus on a ruling elite differs from the humanist commitment to knowledge as a public good. The contemporary world, however, requires recognition to be reconciled with distinction. Carlo Dionisotti anticipated one response, reformulated here as Italian literature conceived as a frontier: a space of geographical and social encounter. Migration creates an imperative: distinctions that articulate identity and difference without producing exclusion.

Keywords: *Humanitas*, letteratura italiana di frontiera, riconoscimento, distinzione.

Alla base della definizione dei caratteri della letteratura italiana si è consumato un "processo storico" in cui "una comunità letteraria latina" ha dimostrato apertura "al riconoscimento e alla impresa di una comunità letteraria italiana" (Dionisotti 1967: 36), all'interno di una "tradizione letteraria transazionale […] che per secoli in Europa ha parlato latino" (Quondam 2018: 27).

Muovendo dalla nozione umanistica di *humanitas*, arricchita dal confronto con il confucianesimo proposto da James Hankins, il contributo indaga il rapporto tra il sentimento di comune appartenenza umana, l'educazione attraverso lo studio e la capacità di distinzione. La tesi che si avanza riguarda una proposta di aggiornamento della letteratura italiana

che, guardando alle radici plurali del contesto storico-culturale italiano, è chiamata a tenere anche conto della letteratura in lingua italiana prodotta da generazioni di italiane e italiani riconoscibili per le loro diverse origini migratorie.

1. *Humanitas*: riconoscimento, educazione e confronto con il confucianesimo

Non si può oggi non guardare con favore all'emersione di riflessioni che sottolineano il legame dell'*humanitas* – intesa come principio fondante e ispiratore di quegli *studia humanitatis* che dell'Umanesimo sono stati alimento – con una propensione d'animo che è affine alla stessa generosa disponibilità di quel "riconoscimento": "humanity as humane-ness or good will, a recognition that we belong to the human whole, that to harm another is to harm oneself" (Hankins 2020: 13). Affermare con abnegazione la comune appartenenza al genere umano quale fondamento di un reciproco rispetto tra gli uomini, secondo Hankins, costituisce solo una delle sfumature del significato di *humanitas*, che è concezione "chiave" per comprendere l'intera civiltà umanistica ("a key to the whole humanistic enterprise"), avviata in Italia nel Tre-Quattrocento (2020: 8).

Mutuato dalla latinità classica, il valore di *humanitas* si è arricchito, acquistando articolato spessore semantico nel corso di una ridefinizione e rielaborazione operate anche alla luce della cultura cristiana: "the ancient virtues were reshaped to fit the Christian culture of the Renaissance" (Hankins 2020: 11). Secondo questa prospettiva, nella simpatia e considerazione per l'umanità dei nostri simili si sono coniugate diverse prospettive filosofiche e di pensiero: l'impegno di Aristotele, specialmente nell'ottavo e nel nono libro della sua *Etica*, a trovare nell'amicizia le basi affettive per un bene comune che agisca, per così dire, da collante sociale, "as a kind of social glue"; la riflessione greca sulla *philanthropia*; e l'agostiniano "ordo caritatis, an ordered benevolence towards others rooted in the Christian's love of God" (Hankins 2020: 15): "un altruismo gerarchicamente organizzato e radicato nell'amore cristiano per Dio".

Mettendo a fuoco il *De regno et regis institutione* (1481-1484) di Francesco Patrizi (Quintiliani 2014), Hankins fornisce un'esemplificazione che illustra e generalizza il grado dell'innovazione umanistica rispetto al precedente patristico. Patrizi rovescia l'argomentazione medievale secondo cui solo la carità cristiana poteva fornire il fondamento affettivo della società politica, dimostrando che la simpatia naturale tra gli esseri umani, radicata nella loro comune natura, fornisce un fondamento solido per una società basata sul valore. Il legame con il bene comune, di tutti, diventa quindi organico: uno stato governato da uomini che sentono naturale e istintiva compassione e benevolenza verso i loro simili avrà necessariamente come base il bene di tutti piuttosto che l'interesse particolare (Hankins 2020: 16).

Per maturare in *humanitas* serve l'aiuto della ponderazione e dell'esercizio, affinché alla virtù naturale della spontanea inclinazione alla benevolenza si associno i valori intellettuali di razionalità e di determinazione: "When strengthened by habit and reflection […] the general disposition to benevolence becomes the virtue of *humanitas*" (Hankins 2020: 17). Allora, particolarmente rilevante è il modo in cui Patrizi collega *humanitas* all'educazione. Egli sottolinea come la *paideia* ("educazione") vada in soccorso alla *philanthropia*: per questo motivo gli antichi usavano *humanitas* per significare istruzione e formazione nelle "arti buone", e chiamavano le discipline liberali *humaniores litterae*, gli studi che rendono l'umanità pienamente tale.

In sintesi, secondo Hankins, gli umanisti trasformarono il concetto antico di *humanitas* in una visione integrata dove il bene comune, di tutti, emerge dall'esercizio della simpatia naturale tra gli esseri umani, mentre la diffusione della conoscenza attraverso l'educazione letteraria e filosofica diviene strumento principale per coltivare sia il valore individuale che il benessere collettivo, creando una base affettiva e intellettuale per il progresso della società (2020: 17-18). Suggestivo e pieno di significato è poi il parallelo proposto da Hankins tra il pensiero e i modelli di comportamento umanistici e alcuni valori della tradizione confuciana:

> The humanist conception of *humanitas* bears a great resemblance to values of Confucianism, the culture of the scholar-officials who ruled imperial China for most of the 1800-year period from the Han dynasty, coeval with the Roman empire, and the Qing dynasty that ended in 1912 (2020: 18).

Le consonanze si misurano anzitutto dalla risposta a condizioni analoghe di crisi politica e disordine sociale. Sia Confucio che Petrarca – precursore degli studi umanistici – risposero a una crisi politica e al disordine sociale: l'Aretino, si può documentare per rafforzare la tesi, nel corso del XIV secolo visse in anni di diffuso disordine e di crisi (Quaglioni 1995), rappresentati dalla cosiddetta "cattività avignonese" dell'autorità papale, una condizione di vacanza contro cui egli prese posizione e che denunciò con virulenza (Suitner 1985; Griggio 1996-1997); il confucianesimo si formò anch'esso in una fase della storia cinese, il periodo di Primavera e Autunno (770-454 a. C.) e degli "Stati Combattenti" (453-222 a. C.), in cui illegittimi signori della guerra avevano sovvertito un precedente stato di ordinato governo e pace sociale:

> Confucius' philosophy, like Petrarch's, was a response to war, illegitimate rule and social chaos that looked back to a lost Golden Age for moral guidance (Hankins 2020: 19)[1].

Molteplici sono ancora gli aspetti che l'umanesimo condivide con il confucianesimo: la ricerca della soluzione alla crisi, non sul piano legislativo, ma in un rinnovamento umano interiore; il rivolgersi allo studio degli antichi cui attingere modelli etici da replicare nel presente; un nuovo concetto di nobiltà, fondato sul merito e sull'idea che tutti hanno la possibilità di progredire attraverso l'educazione e lo studio (Hankins 2020: 19). A nostro parere, sono proprio alcuni contenuti dell'ideale di *humanitas* a costituire un elemento comune qualificante: "Confucian sources also taught that the ruler's virtue generated love among the people and true friendship among the ruling class" (Hankins 2020: 18).

Il valore dell'amicizia – dalla dimensione dei rapporti personali a quella più ampia della coesione sociale, in vista di un bene condiviso fondato su valori etici – secondo gli insegnamenti confuciani è il prodotto di governanti virtuosi; mentre la centralità del nesso tra educazione e merito personale nella competenza di governo costituirebbe il tratto che avvicina gli umanisti più agli ideali educativi cinesi che a quelli dell'antica Roma:

[1] La filosofia confuciana, come l'esperienza petrarchesca, fu una risposta alla guerra, all'ordinamento illegittimo e al disordine sociale che guardava al passato, a una perduta Età dell'oro in cerca di una guida morale.

> … the humanists' emphasis on an education that produced personal merit and the ability to rule well seems much closer to Chinese ideals of education than Roman ones (Hankins 2020: 19).

Tuttavia, all'interno dell'indovinato e produttivo parallelo, che è tra due metodi di pensiero e pratiche di vita, quello che è importante rilevare è il modo peculiare in cui l'*humanitas* è stata ripensata dagli umanisti: l'accento posto sullo studio e sull'educazione, infatti, è coniugato in un modo articolato con il rilievo dato a ciò che unisce le persone, guardando a un bene comune. Nel confucianesimo queste attività hanno concorso a formare la classe dirigente cinese; nell'esperienza umanistica, invece, fin dal suo inizio con la cosiddetta "riscoperta" dei classici, emerge l'impulso a trasmettere e diffondere il sapere ricevuto dal patrimonio scritto degli antichi. Esso può essere considerato, allora, come un valore originario costitutivo dell'umanesimo, che vede in Petrarca un precursore. Infatti, la conoscenza conservata nei manoscritti dei classici, via via riscoperti e nuovamente assunti a patrimonio condiviso, diventò "un capitale materiale e di conoscenza considerato bene pubblico comune", una *respublica litteraria*, appunto, da diffondere largamente[2].

Accogliere i concetti di *humanitas* e *respublica litteraria* qui richiamati ci spinge a identificarli come fattori qualificanti e progressivi di ciò che viene storicamente definito umanesimo, e a mettere da parte modelli antropocentrici che ora hanno definitivamente perso legittimità e valore, come quelli di matrice burckhardtiana, grazie ai quali "l'individualismo" è stato interpretato "quale cifra della modernità rinascimentale"[3].

2. Riconoscimenti: da Dionisotti alla letteratura italiana di frontiera

Lo stesso antico spirito di riconoscimento visto sopra ("recognition that we belong to the human whole") si è per più aspetti riproposto, attraverso i secoli, nel rovesciamento "aperto e radicale" (Antonelli 2011: 39) del modello storiografico di Francesco De Sanctis, il quale era stato espressione "di una comunità nazionale in formazione […] di un popolo particolare che stava diventando nazione" (Luperini 2012: 396). Il ribaltamento si deve a Carlo Dionisotti e culminò proprio nel 1967 con la pubblicazione del suo saggio *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*, che assunse un punto di vista inclusivo sotto più rispetti: per aver accolto nel quadro degli studi letterari la concretezza della geografia e della storia, con le loro coordinate di spazio e tempo; perché ha mostrato un'ineludibile disponibilità nei confronti dell'articolazione delle espressioni letterarie regionali e locali; ancora, in forza della sua indagine sulla dimensione plurale dell'intreccio tra la questione della lingua e le "tradizioni cosiddette dialettali", che sono indicatori primari della molteplicità culturale dei territori "ai margini di quella unificazione" (Dionisotti 1967: 33, 44).

La progressiva apertura del paradigma storiografico al panorama europeo oltre i con-

[2] Si rimanda anche a Norbedo (2020) e al saggio in via di pubblicazione, da parte del medesimo: Umanesimo restituito. La genesi della "Respublica litteraria" da Petrarca a Francesco Barbaro, per Salutati e Guarino, *Epistolographia* (in c.d.s.).

[3] Cf. Fantoni (2005: 12); e si consideri anche che l'interpretazione del Rinascimento è stata di volta in volta piegata "ai fini della legittimazione del presente, a partire da Petrarca, attraverso l'Illuminismo, fino alla storiografia contemporanea" Fantoni (2005: 5).

fini nazionali e la sua graduale estensione "verticale" al campo della formazione, attraverso l'antologia *L'Europa degli scrittori* del 2008 (Antonelli *et al.* 2008), ne testimoniano la concretezza e la flessibile vitalità (Fera 2008: XV-XVI). La critica alla "nozione di *letteratura nazionale*", identificata con la "*letteratura italiana* […] che ancora oggi configura corsi di laurea, concorsi e insegnamenti" per una funzione attiva svolta nella "fondazione dell'Italia unitaria" (Quaquarelli 2014), mostra quanto a fondo il modello desanctisiano abbia permeato la società e la cultura, nonostante la "revisione del processo unitario" della letteratura italiana (Dionisotti 1967: 45) sia stata concepita da tempo. Nondimeno, l'attualità di quella spinta al rinnovamento della letteratura italiana ora si realizza nell'aggiornamento accademico disciplinare del maggio 2024, che apre a tutte "le opere in altra lingua e in dialetto, prodotte in Italia e all'estero, che si riferiscono al contesto storico-culturale italiano"[4].

Ribadendo, allora, la "validità del paradigma storiografico proposto da Carlo Dionisotti", nello spirito e nelle sue linee essenziali (Antonelli *et al.* 2008: iv), attestata anche dalla critica e declinata nella manualistica nei decenni a cavallo del XXI secolo (Antonelli 2011: 39-51), in forza di un dispiegamento partito da lontano e di onda lunga, si vuole qui ritornare su alcuni concetti ai quali si è ispirata quell'operazione, che mantengono stringenti requisiti di novità e cambiamento.

Allarghiamo ora lo sguardo alla sensibilità che induce al riconoscimento, all'inclusione e alla cura dei margini. Tali persuasioni sono diventate patrimonio culturale comune e diffuso dopo aver ripreso vigore nell'alveo delle scienze sociali e antropologiche, con indagini e discussioni sul principio di *recognition* (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1994), per approdare nuovamente agli studi linguistici e letterari: con la critica di Edward Said all'affermazione di una "identità dell'Occidente […] formata attraverso un comportamento di annessione/esclusione di tipo imperialistico" (Luperini 2012: 397), fino agli ultimi anni con l'attenzione per le aree di emarginazione mostrata dall'Associazione degli italianisti, con il suo ventottesimo congresso nazionale (Genova, 11-13 settembre 2025), dedicato alle *Egemonie e margini nella letteratura italiana*[5]. Le medesime idee e convinzioni fondamentali, in effetti, erano anche state alla base della riflessione e dell'elaborazione storiografica di Dionisotti – contrassegnata come si è visto da una forte volontà di riforma, apertura e accettazione – e continuano a valere quali presupposti per il costante rinnovamento degli studi sulla letteratura italiana. Così quelle critiche a un'idea superata di "letteratura italiana" e l'auspicio "allo smantellamento della nozione di letteratura nazionale" per "leggere la letteratura *contemporanea*, tutta la letteratura contemporanea" alla luce della "*mondialità* della letteratura" (Quaquarelli 2014), sembrano fuorvianti.

Da un lato perché i giudizi non distinguono la "letteratura nazionale", formatasi secondo un'ottocentesca prospettiva di consolidamento unitario, da una "letteratura italiana" che ha da tempo saputo riconoscere la propria molteplice articolazione interna e ha saputo mostrare una propensione a confrontarsi con tutto ciò che vi è di allogeno (Ara & Magris 2015), conservando consapevolezza della propria "polivalenza linguistica" (Dionisotti 1967: 33, 38); sotto un altro aspetto, si è convinti che un fenomeno certo innovativo come la "cosid-

[4] Si veda Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca (2024).

[5] Si veda Associazione degli Italianisti (2025).

detta *letteratura postcoloniale italiana*", pur partecipando a quella "mondialità" (Quaquarelli 2014), trovi il suo posto in una letteratura italiana che, di fronte "all'inevitabilità dell'attraversamento delle frontiere" (Pellegrini 2002: 73), si trasforma seguendo i cambiamenti del pubblico delle italiane e degli italiani che scrivono e che leggono.

3. Distinzioni: migrazioni, identità e nuovi canoni

Allora, si impongono ulteriori messe a punto insieme a esercizi di duttilità, a fronte dell'inedita urgenza migratoria che ha investito l'Italia e l'Europa nell'ultimo quarantennio, delle trasformazioni sociali seguìte, che hanno indotto a estendere i significati tradizionali di frontiera (Raffestin 1987), e dell'impellenza dell'inclusione. Anche alla luce della cosiddetta 'antropologia della frontiera', questa non è più considerata una linea di separazione ma uno spazio interno di confronto e un "processo socio-spaziale articolato e dinamico che […] contribuisce alla produzione delle identità individuali e collettive, partecipando alla costituzione della differenza nello spazio sociale" (Brambilla 2014: 46). Allora, nuovi riconoscimenti si richiedono e "distinzioni", per le quali è ancora necessario ma non più sufficiente aver "riguardo alla geografia e alla storia" (Dionisotti 1967: 45).

Una delle fotografie dello spazio delineato si ritrova, drammaticamente, nel romanzo-reportage di Alessandro Leogrande *La frontiera*, pubblicato nel 2015: collocato tra il Mediterraneo centrale e quello orientale in una zona esposta ai movimenti migratori attraverso il continente africano (2015), esso è stato anche definito "un'area, più che una linea, che si allarga nello spazio e nel tempo" (Scego 2015).

La storiografia letteraria, in risposta, ha intrapreso mirate iniziative di aggiornamento del canone: in una direzione, iniziando con le questioni generali e definitorie, e con la formula scrittori "afroitaliani […] che usano l'italiano non più soltanto per sopravvivere e comunicare, ma con l'ambizione di una forma letteraria" (Brogi 2011); per altro verso, facendo reagire i concetti di alterità, riconoscimento, multiculturalismo, attraversamento e "ibridismo culturale" con opere di autori della letteratura italiana e mondiale[6]. La multiculturale disponibilità nei confronti delle opere di scrittrici afroitaliane e autori afroitaliani, fondata su una "idea reciproca, simmetrica e reversibile, di *riconoscimento*" (De Rogatis 2023: 14), sembra possa in ogni caso integrare le coordinate di spazio e tempo dionisottiane, per essere a sua volta convenientemente irrobustita e orientata. Guardando ai fondamenti critici condivisi, si scoprono analogie, punti di contatto e sviluppo. Tra questi punti di contatto si può ricordare il forte afflato "militante" (Pellegrini 2024) che spinse Dionisotti a promuovere la discussione sull'inscindibile nesso tra filologia e storia e a contrastare i retaggi della politica culturale fascista: un'operazione guidata dalla profonda "coscienza del legame tra dottrina e impegno che caratterizza gli *studia humanitatis"* (Scaffai 2014). Analoga e maggiore sollecitudine si ritrova, ad esempio, nell'allestimento nel 2019 di un'antologia esemplare come *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (Scego 2019).

Presentata come un "*J'accuse* […] per denunciare pubblicamente soprusi e ingiustizie" (Scego 2019: 9), la raccolta è stata rivendicata quale "opera senza precedenti" (Hawthorne

[6] Si veda De Rogatis (2023: 5-16) e, nel medesimo volume, gli interventi di Eugenio Burgio, Anna Baldini e Franca Cavagnoli.

2019: 24): gli "scritti di donne afroitaliane" qui contenuti si fondano sulla prospettiva di un attuale reale "riconoscimento" e "convergono intorno a una serie di soggettività e lotte condivise" (Hawthorne 2019: 24, 26, 27). Nelle storie pare consumarsi un superamento delle istanze rappresentate da Scego in veste di autrice nel 2008 in *Oltre Babilonia*, romanzo che avrebbe messo in mostra "la consunzione" e "l'usura […] del repertorio critico e teorico [...] post-coloniale" (Pinzuti 2012: 201). La combattuta voglia di riconoscimento della "molteplicità delle esperienze della diaspora africana" (Hawthorne 2019: 24), invece, si sposa appunto, anche qui e ancora, con una viva esigenza di "distinzioni". Lo mostra ed esemplifica il racconto *Il mio nome* dell'italo-ghanese Djarah Kan, in cui la bambina Lisbeth scopre dalla "Zia ricca" del Ghana (2019: 58) che i genitori immigrati in Italia le hanno dato solo un nome occidentale, deprivandola del nome tradizionale, "il suo nome segreto, il nome degli antenati" (2019: 61):

> È il nome che ti permette di stare con la tua famiglia e con i tuoi antenati sempre, ovunque tu vada. Puoi vivere anche alla fine del mondo, da sola e senza nessuno, ma quel nome ti ricorderà sempre da dove vieni e dove puoi arrivare.

Soffocata dai comportamenti omologati dei propri genitori, che in nome dell'integrazione hanno rinunciato a conservare i valori della tradizione ghanese, ostentandone il rifiuto, la protagonista Lisbeth/Elisabeth conclude la narrazione chiedendosi "che ne sarà di me, adesso che ancora non ho un nome" (Kan 2019: 65). Uno scritto di poco successivo dichiara, in modo ancora più esplicito e conflittuale, la volontà di Kan di recuperare le origini della propria individualità. In *"Non chiamatemi afroitaliana"* (Kan 2020), infatti, l'autrice affronta il tema della rappresentazione della "molteplicità di una singola identità":

> Non posso accettare, in quanto singola di essere definita afroitaliana. Italo-ghanese è quello che voglio essere ed è quello che sono sempre stata. Perché so da dove vengo, perché l'Africa non è solo Storia schiavitù, di vaghezza di terminologie che tolgono a quel Continente le sue particolarità e la sua specificità.

Recuperare una parte costitutiva delle proprie origini, quella ghanese, riconosciuta nella sua specificità all'interno di un vasto e differenziato continente africano, significa per Kan esercitare un principio di distinzione, che la può mettere nelle condizioni di ricostruire un'identità piena e compiuta. Dagli auspici di una pacifica "cittadinanza nei territori del racconto" da conferire alle autrici e agli autori di "seconda generazione" per una fioritura di "grandi narrazioni" (Brogi 2011) è passato un quindicennio, e la serie di discendenti è ormai giunta "alle terze e alle quarte" (Scego 2019: 13).

Al di là della "difficoltà dello stile", che vale per "ogni autore che intenda raccontarci bene una storia" (Brogi 2011), l'inserimento in un canone affollato ha senz'altro anche bisogno che si definiscano altre e peculiari "distinzioni", da aggiungersi a quelle "che nello spazio e nel tempo stringono ed esaltano la vita degli uomini" (Dionisotti 1967: 45). In questa prospettiva, più che guardare a un "approccio mondiale alle lettere" secondo un "unico possibile orizzonte critico-metodologico", con il "grave rischio […] di obbligare lo studioso

a stabilire un certo grado di uniformità tra le culture e le letterature", è certo sensato "un lavoro scientifico collettivo, di scambio e collaborazione" (Quaquarelli 2014), che permetta di confrontarsi con le molteplici prospettive e sfide. La strada segnata è ancora quella di un umanesimo "che nasce e rimane Nuovo" (Giammattei 2021) e quella della repubblica delle lettere e comunità degli studiosi nata e cresciuta nel suo alveo, per la quale il dialogo e la collaborazione sono dati identitari, e "la comunicazione altruistica del sapere" è il "suo ideale" (Bots & Waquet 2005: 36), sostanziato di *humanitas*. Il versante dell'alta formazione è uno dei piani sui quali sembra proficuo affrontare le emergenze culturali di una società e di un'università in movimento. Anche qui la metafora della frontiera, nell'insegnamento di *Letteratura italiana di frontiera,* si presta a soddisfare un bisogno di confronto che faccia propri il principio di riconoscimento e di distinzione di autrici, autori e testi, nelle lingue e nelle letterature[7].

In un panorama linguistico e letterario che sui testi si fonda (Buroni 2019), le specificità legate ai temi identitari si possono direttamente avvicinare attraverso i modi del *close reading*, "la lettura del testo approfondita, cui segue l'analisi e infine l'interpretazione critica, di singoli testi (o al massimo di gruppi ristretti di testi)" (Ciotti 2022: 23); ciò in concorrenza con i principi del *distant reading*, una pratica di lettura che privilegia gli "atteggiamenti generali" per i quali "l'obiettivo primario […] non è più l'*interpretazione* ma la *spiegazione*" (Ciotti 2022: 19, 29)[8], per arrivare a un legittimo ma diverso scopo, quello "di ricostruire le strutture astratte, di validità generale" della cultura (Moretti 2005: 106). Il riconoscimento di una comune appartenenza non deve tradursi in consequenziale assimilazione o indifferenziato crogiolo, ma accompagnarsi alla distinzione e alla preservazione delle singole specificità storiche, linguistiche e culturali.

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[7] Secondo questa prospettiva è stato attivato dall'a.a. 2025/26 al Dipartimento di Lingue e letterature, comunicazione, formazione e società (DILL) dell'Università di Udine l'insegnamento di *Letteratura italiana di frontiera*, per i corsi di Laurea Magistrale di Lingue europee ed extraeuropee (LM-37) e di Traduzione e mediazione culturale (LM-94).

[8] Corsivi nel testo; e si veda anche Ciotti (2015).

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Annalisa Pes

Ben Judah's *This is London*: Stories of Encounters in the Landscape of Migration

Abstract I: L'articolo offre una lettura del reportage letterario *This is London* (2016) del giornalista e analista politico Ben Judah. Analizza la rappresentazione delle comunità di immigrati nella Londra globale e multiculturale e il ruolo che assumono gli incontri relazionali in questa società, mostrando come la metropoli venga percepita come un paesaggio della mente. Indaga i concetti di identità e appartenenza in relazione all'appropriazione e alla riconfigurazione dello spazio e del luogo. Affronta inoltre la funzione dello stile letterario utilizzato dall'autore per trasmettere emozioni e per restituire centralità all'essere umano in un approccio che sfida le dinamiche di razzismo ed esclusione che affliggono le società globali postcoloniali.

Abstract II: The article focuses on the literary reportage *This is London* (2016) by the journalist and political analyst Ben Judah. It analyses the representation of immigrant communities and relational encounters in global and multicultural London, showing how the metropolis is perceived as a landscape of the mind. It investigates the concepts of identity and belonging in connection with the appropriation and reconfiguration of space and place. It also tackles the function of the literary style employed by Judah to convey emotions and to give back centrality to human beings in an approach that challenges the dynamics of racism and exclusion affecting postcolonial global societies.

Keywords: Ben Judah, London, landscape, migration, encounters.

Published in 2016 to widespread acclaim, *This is London: Life and Death in the World City* by the foreign correspondent and political analyst Ben Judah is a documentary collection of portraits and first-hand experiences that provides a composite picture of the hidden world of the city's immigrants. The UK's most populous, richest, and most powerful capital city, London stands out in this book as a world apart from the rest of the country, an undiscovered island within the island, a multilayered metropolis that many Britons, foreign diplomats, and readers have only a vague awareness of (Oliver 2016). Through an experimental and fascinating journey – literally, a journey in which Judah walks and takes the bus with the people he meets – the author shows how, in the global environment of this "world city" where life and death overlap, the identities of Londoners are continuously redefined and reconfigured by power dynamics of social, cultural, and economic disparity.

In his highly influential work on black diaspora and the struggle against coloniality and racial capitalism, Paul Gilroy employs the concept of "routes", in a play of contrast with "roots", to express the hybrid identities and cultural forms produced by the transnational passage and circulation through multiple material and figurative locations (1995: 3). It can be argued that the characters inhabiting Judah's London are fully representative of the condition of "routed" characters: natives or foreigners, rich or poor, legal or (mostly) illegal migrants, whose dynamic and hybrid identities have been formed by the routes they have travelled and the borders (be they geographical, social, or cultural) they have crossed throughout the experience of migration and of cultural exchange. The stories reported by Judah prove that their unfixed and negotiated identities are being shaped every day, not only by the migratory paths they tread upon, but also, and above all, by their encounters with a world that is rapidly changing, that is, in its turn, constantly shaped and reshaped by their presence.

In this light, the aim of this paper is to show how in Ben Judah's non-fictional narrative the representation of relational encounters across cultural, geographic, and social borders may contribute to redefining our understanding of identity and belonging and to challenging enduring dynamics of racism and exclusion that still affect global postcolonial societies. It is a matter of fact that encounters are rarely neutral and that they are often governed by prior histories of racialisation and (non)belonging that determine power asymmetry. It is my concern to show that encounters in Judah's work reflect the systemic inequality caused by hierarchical structures of power, but they can also be read as sites of resistance. In this sense, the physical, sensory, and affective interactions of the narrator with the people he meets result in "embodied" encounters that develop multisensorial empathy and that, ultimately, challenge the lack of knowledge on which the process of otherisation is based. In other words, Judah's narratives of encounters with Otherness in the multicultural landscape of London release the Other from the condition of being unknown, unheard, and unseen: the Other is given visibility, their story is heard, and this can provide a more comprehensive, inclusive and adaptable understanding of human identities.

It is worth saying that, despite the journalistic acclaim and commercial success of Ben Judah's *This is London*, the text has received surprisingly little attention from academic literary criticism. While the book has been widely praised by reviewers for its immersive, reportage style, a significant void persists in literary scholarship, especially if compared with fictional representations of multicultural London. To date, no comprehensive academic articles have been published that critically analyse the text's narrative strategies and architecture, its depiction of contemporary urban migration, or its contribution to twenty-first-century metropolitan literature. Therefore, an article dedicated to analysing this book through the theoretical lenses of postcolonial and migration studies will contribute to filling this gap, offering an investigation, with an attention to genre and style, of how Judah's literary reportage represents transnational encounters, displacement and power asymmetries in the new global metropolis by using knowledge not as a source of power, but as a challenge to otherisation and to invisibility.

Having said that, it is crucial to begin by highlighting that the undisputed "protagonist" of Judah's book – as the pride of place in the title proves – is London, a postcolonial multicultural metropolis that is not just a geographical location, but a complex and contra-

dictory way of being; a city that, borrowing the famous words of Zadie Smith, "is a state of mind" (Bollen 2012). It should be pointed out in this regard, however, that the term "protagonist" is not used to convey that sense of imperial centrality that London embodied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when, as Clement Ball argues, it "projected itself to the inhabitants of its pink-stained territories as the centre of the world" (2004: 4). On the contrary, London is represented as a metropolis that has been transformed demographically, ethnically, and even nationally, and so, borrowing Ball's words again, it is the protagonist of a process of "transnational decentredness [which] has become its most visibly constitutive feature" (2004: 5).

Hence, defining Judah's London is not an easy thing. It is a fluid and multisensorial "landscape of the mind" in which the border between hopelessness and illusion is continuously redrawn and crossed. It is a decentred and reappropriated cultural and political space that is struggling with a sense of "postcolonial melancholia" (Gilroy 2004) after having lost power and control over a previously dominated part of the world. It is a landscape perceived through the mind of the invisible underworld that inhabits it. According to the American author and essayist Gretel Ehrlich, the outside "scape" (the physical land) is always connected to an observer's internal reality (the subjective meaning we assign to it): "Landscape does not exist without an observer, without a human presence. The land exists, but the scape is a projection of human consciousness, an image received" (1987: 24). In this light, in Judah's book, London exists through its sounds, smells, glittering lights, illusory images of wealth, and stark realities of destitution and privation – all projections of the consciousness of the people who live in it, see it, and think of themselves in it. Hence, the space is redefined by the encounter between mind and sight: sight is "the dominant sensory mode" to acquire knowledge of the external world, and it ultimately leads to insight and to the exploration of the inner space that lies within ourselves (Porteous 1990: 3).

If encounters are, therefore, fundamental in *This is London*, as they reconfigure the concept of space and the understanding of identity, they are also essential to understanding the author and his book. Indeed, this collection of stories is an encounter of different genres, written by an author who is himself an encounter of different cultures and identities. Ben Judah was born in London into a family of Baghdadi Jewish descent. He spent most of his childhood in the 1990s in the Balkans (where his father worked as a reporter) and travelled extensively in Central Asia and the Middle East. Back in London, he was educated both in French and in English before graduating from Oxford University. Judah is not a novelist, but he is the author of three books: *Fragile Empire* (2013), *This is London* (2016), and the most recent *This is Europe* (2023). All three books show the author's interest in the relational dynamics of encounters in contact zones, and they are all written in the approach of the frontline reporter. Judah, in fact, is a journalist: a foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Evening Standard*, and *The Financial Times*. He has also had an active role in politics, until early 2026, as the adviser of David Lammy, the Labour deputy Prime Minister of the UK, and previously foreign secretary (Oliver 2016). This multi-layered identity of a successful writer[1] with plural interests in the political, social, economic, psychological, and

[1] This is London was longlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-fiction 2016 and shortlisted for the

relational dynamics of the contemporary multicultural world makes Judah an "embodied encounter" of commitment, competence, ethical involvement, and empathy for human beings and the way they live.

All these elements converge in the more than four hundred pages of *This is London*, in which Judah chronicles the new contemporary London by reporting his encounters with the immigrant underclass. The book is structured in twenty-five chapters, each one named after a different area of London, starting with Victoria coach station and expanding throughout a conurbation of districts many visitors have most likely never heard of: Neasden, Catford, Plaistow, Harlesden, and Beckton.

Victoria station is introduced as the gateway to the book, to London, and to a new life, "our miserable Ellis Island. The point from which our society is changing" (Judah 2016: 1). It is the limbo of the city, the borders of a nation and the boundaries of an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) where two thousand migrants arrive every week, tens of thousands every year, "the equivalent of a whole city, the size of Basildon or Bath. They are all part of the same thing: the new London" (Judah 2016: 3). The station is a concentration of metaphorical images and symbolic meanings that give the sense of a place where identities are reshaped and redefined in terms of belonging/unbelonging, inclusion/exclusion: "Automatic doors slide and close. Crowds are dazed with arrival" (Judah 2016: 1). The environment is unwelcoming: it is raining and cold, the freeze steams every pane, the air is damp. The station is not only a culturally and emotionally shaped landscape, it is also a soundscape where the sounds (as well as the smells) charge the place with meanings and evoke a sense of belonging (or not belonging) to a community (Ingold 2011): wheels crash, coaches bleep and reverse, pigeons flutter, ventilators moan, and incomprehensible languages echo incessantly – all this conveys the idea of confusion, dizziness, and bewilderment. It is interesting to note that this sensory description of the place does not just set the scene; it also establishes the ethical and political framework that dictates how the reader relates to the migrant and the host community. Disorientation and daze function as dehumanising elements in the migrant's journey and the reader, who is captured by these perceptions, is forced to acknowledge the structural estrangement and racism embedded in everyday spaces.

The division of the book into place-chapters with a specific ethnic, cultural and social connotation reflects the image of a metropolis that has been rewritten from the outside as a decentralised centre: a cluster of mostly peripheral areas populated by transient and hybrid communities of people in constant flux. The expression coined by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai to describe the way in which, in the modern world, fixed identities and stable communities are destabilised by global migratory movements – a "warp" that "is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion" (1990: 297) – perfectly fits Judah's representation of a dismembered London. London, indeed, is portrayed as an "ethnoscape", that is "a landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists,

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Ryszard Kapuscinski Award for Literary Reportage 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/ben-judah/ (consulted on 28/08/2026). In 2024, the New Statesman named Judah as one of the 50 most influential people shaping the UK's progressive politics, https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2024/06/new-statesman-left-power-list-2024 (consulted on 28/08/2026).

immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and persons" (Appadurai 1990: 297). Movement and change are key words in this process of reconfiguration of the complex landscape of migration, where different communities are dislocated and relocated, and where the experiences of integration, adaptation, and estrangement are connected to the perception, appropriation, and redefinition of space.

When Judah introduces London as the city where he was born, he is dismayed to realise he cannot recognise it:

> I was born in London but I no longer recognize this city. I don't know if I love the new London or if it frightens me: a city where at least 55 per cent of people are not ethnically white British, nearly 40 per cent were born abroad, and 5 per cent are living illegally in the shadows. I have no idea who these new Londoners are. Or even what their London really is (Judah 2016: 3).

Reading between the lines of this apparently ethnophobic assertion, one can indeed detect an implicit critique of the sensationalist press, spreading populist words of terror and hostility and fomenting the fear of "invading" migrants. Judah's bewilderedness seems to imply – especially in the last quoted line ("what their London really is") that shifts the perspective on migrants – a challenge to what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson call "the assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture" (1992: 7), that is a perception of the world based on a natural association of culture, society, and place: in this case, the deceptive belief that London is where the English live. In fact, the fluid and dynamic experience of space in the modern global world requires that this association of places and peoples, of a culturally unitary group and "their" territory, must be challenged (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 11).

The above-quoted passage also underlines how, besides being a space of identitarian encounters, London is also a place of social inequalities and economic exploitation. A gleaming capital city that hasn't lost its imperial allure, London continues to be "the place for me"[2] in the collective imaginary of immigrants, caught between "the realities of having to move [and] the fantasies of wanting to move" (Appadurai 1990: 297). But if capitalism, the product of an enduring colonial past, is now sustained by migrant money and migrant workers, Judah's protagonists prove that they are nonetheless forced to live their invisible lives in poverty and in largely inhumane conditions. The Romanian fiddler Judah interviews in Hyde Park Corner, one of the beggars who live unseen on the streets of Knightsbridge, clearly conveys his sense of frustration at being caught between reality and fantasy:

> I want work. I want to feel like a man again. I'll be a painter, a decorator, a sweeper, an animal feeder, anything. I can't keep sleeping here like a rat. I want an address, I dream of an address, and then I want to have a pension […] We're all here to beg to work off our debts. We give the enforcers all the money. They told us to come here. But we are never going to make back the loans they gave us to come here. We're trapped (Judah 2016: 30).

[2] The reference is to the famous song by the Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Kitchener, "London is the Place for Me", written onboard the Empire Windrush in 1948.

It is through recurrent testimonies like these that *This is London* becomes a systematic critique of the modern world and of models of society that continue to advocate the inherent dominance of a Eurocentric world.

A peculiar aspect of *This is London* is its style that presents both the straightforwardness of Judah's journalism and the influence of the language of literature, with a recurrent use of metaphors, symbols and impressionistic descriptions. Belonging to the relatively new, multifaceted genre of "literary reportage" or "narrative journalism", Judah's book is an encounter between rigorous factual reporting and the narrative techniques of fiction, which immerses the reader in true stories with an engaging rhythm. It is a genre in which the events are not reported as completed, like in news articles, but as ongoing and the style implies two kinds of representations: "*mimetic representation* (a scenic representation style, also known as *showing*), and *diegetically narrating representation* (also known as one kind of *telling* and opposed to *diegetically informing representation*, the neutral style that is standard in news language)" (Aare 2022: 1-2). And, indeed, the author opens the book declaring that he is not interested in reporting statistics and numbers (though, in the end, he gives quite a few when the journalist prevails over the writer), but in giving his own subjective and true-to-life experience:

> I have to see everything for myself. I don't trust statistics. I don't trust columnists. I don't trust self-appointed spokesmen. I have to make up my own mind. This is why I am shivering again, in Victoria coach station, at 6 am (Judah 2016: 1).

This thirst for knowledge and need to see, to listen, to understand the reach of the human cost of migration and of the inhuman price of the global economy reveal an attention to feelings, emotions, and the psychological sphere that can more aptly be conveyed through the language of literature rather than through the often aseptic or informing approach of journalism.

> I write down my emotions as it rains: ambiguity first, uncertainty second. We need the N21 for the city. But the rain hardens, slows, then showers – until that sound seems to swallow everything. The night glows more intensely orange. We are becoming numb [...] This is just the night shift for the 250,000 migrant cleaners of London. The rush hour, before the rush hour, that makes sure all of our offices are clean (Judah 2016: 206).

As Marina Gerner notes, journalistic discussions on globalisation generally focus on economic structures and political institutions, whilst they are devoid of individual actors. Judah, instead, captures the deeply personal experiences of London's migrant communities (2016: 11). The real strength of his book is the intimate portraits and the voices, reported with ethnic cadences, errors, ellipses, and repetitions, of persons that are called by name and have, each of them, a personal story to deliver in a sort of therapeutic flow of storytelling.

The encounter with the "other" London means for Judah immersing himself in a hidden world: he walks, notebook in hand, down grubby streets and casts a light into the lives of people inhabiting decentred suburbs. He is keen on knowing, observing, understanding,

but his gaze is nothing like the "fixing gaze" of the racialising subject that objectifies the raced Other into an inferior and subdued identity (Fanon 1986). In spite of the problematic ambivalence intrinsic in his indisputably privileged position as a journalist, and therefore as someone who observes, selects, arranges and mediates the stories of the Others, the author distances himself from an exclusive metropolitan culture that, in the words of Edward Said, produces knowledge of the Other and controls the representation of what it sees as marginal and powerless (Said 2003). As a matter of fact, when Judah meets the protagonists of his reportage, he puts himself in their position.

Walking in their footsteps and taking advantage of his own non-purely Anglo-Saxon features, which help him move around without attracting much suspicion, he wears a sort of counter-Fanonian black mask and becomes one of them for one night or for days:

> I need to know what it feels like to be invisible. I need to know what it means to become unseen on plutocratic boulevards. I need to know what it is like to be glared at like a mangy half-man. This is why I am wearing beggar's clothes: worn out, third hand brogues, thin joggers, a torn puffa jacket and a tight woolly hat (Judah 2016: 12).

In this obsession with fieldwork and the need to live deep down into the experience of the encounter, several reviewers and critics have seen the influence of George Orwell's journalism, noting that Judah's immersive, on-the-ground style of reporting on the hidden underclass of London, relying on direct personal observation rather than on statistics or conventional media, strongly echoes *Down and Out in Paris and London* (2009) (Curtis 2016; Waywell 2016; Colvile 2016). What is interesting, however, is that Judah himself has rejected Orwell's legacy as an outdated model. In a provocative 2017 essay titled "Why I've had enough of George Orwell", Judah argues that Orwell has "nothing to say about social fragmentation, financialisation, ethnic splintering, unaccountable corporations, offshore kleptocrats, or echo chambers" (Judah 2017) and that his rigid, often binary moral framework cannot comply with the complexities of the twenty-first century global systems.

These words are important to understand that *This is London* is deeply rooted in the contemporary global world from which it is generated and, indeed, the representation of the multicultural microcosm of the metropolis cannot be thoroughly understood without referring to the macropolitical situation of the time. In Judah's book, contemporary London is a world that has been strongly inflected by history over the years. It is different, for example, from the London portrayed in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Far from being simply a non-fiction version of Smith's novel, with the same thriving multicultural society in the background and a similar critical eye on racism and on the ongoing consequences of colonialism, *This is London* depicts a city that by early 2016 had changed and was about to change even more dramatically later that year. Smith's vision of London very much had to do with the early years of Tony Blair and a Labour government, but sixteen years later, the initial enthusiasm for an emerging multicultural society had worn off and societal pressures – like unregulated labour markets, housing crises, and working-class alienation – were fuelling the Leave campaign that would lead, just months after the publication of Judah's book, to the Brexit vote.

The connection with contemporary politics explains both Judah's distance from an old-fashioned Orwellian vision and the impossibility for him to draw a generally optimistic picture of multicultural London, having written the book, as he admits, "in the shadow of Brexit" that was, in his opinion, "mainly the result of bad migration policies"[3]. In any case, the hybridisation of the language of literature with the approach of immersive social reportage that Judah, unequivocally of what he says, shares with Orwell, is a narrative method that allows him to avoid a patronising tone or the intent to shock when reporting the stories of the voiceless, thus taking a firm stand against the anti-immigration sentiment and national sovereignty debates of the time.

In this respect, one should be aware, once again, that the reporter Judah enters precarious migrant spaces with the aim of knowing and giving visibility to an underworld of marginal voices that, in the end, he converts into a marketable literary product. This certainly generates the ambiguous position of someone who has the power to aestheticise and authorise these voices, even though, in fact, the author never uses knowledge of the Other as an orientalist weapon to prevail over what is knowable. His fieldwork methods make him listen to the people he meets with attention and take notes, and his receptive rather than imposing role is attested by frequent statements like: "I record their voices" (Judah 2016: 12), "I write what I see" (Judah 2016: 26), "I need to see every story from the other side" (Judah 2016: 34). Besides, another interesting narrative strategy that I think should not pass unnoticed is the way in which Judah describes his characters going away after telling their story: "the fiddler turns his back on me, and descends into the dinge of the underpass" (Judah 2016: 9); "Prince walks out of the tunnel, I hear him praying" (Judah 2016: 32); "Mukhtar seems emotional, and tells me it is time to go" (Judah 2016: 310). If, on the one hand, this seems to be a narrative device to underline the social and political invisibility of migrants disappearing into their underworld, on the other hand, it is my contention that it can also be read as an active strategy of agency and self-determination given to subjects that are usually represented through an epistemic approach of domination and exploitation. The disempowered character is, in this way, given the narrative power to decide what to say and when to leave, reappropriating a reversed position of absolute control over the Western listener.

Having said this, it is necessary to point out that if by using these narrative strategies Judah gives visibility and voice to the underworld of migrants – a voice and a visibility usually covered by the media with sensationalist and racist representations – the fact of writing from the perspective of a western-educated intellectual remains, as mentioned above, a critical issue. The risk is what Gayatri Spivak calls "epistemic violence", that is the systematic marginalisation and subjugation of non-Western knowledge systems by Eurocentric colonial discourse. According to Spivak, the assumption that the subaltern can speak freely within dominant discourse needs to be dismantled because, in fact, the subaltern cannot speak within spaces where any attempt at political articulation is inevitably subsumed and normalised by dominant interpretative grids (Spivak 1988). The crucial point, Spivak (1985) also argues, is that Western critics are often unable to recognise their epistemic privilege and

[3] Judah said this at a book presentation of This is London, held at the University of Amsterdam on 8 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXuckzydJAI&t=289s (consulted on 17/09/2026).

institutional location on which their writing is based and to which it is addressed. So, the danger for Western writers (and journalists in particular) is to aestheticise human trauma, poverty, and systemic exclusion into literary capital and consumable spectacles of suffering designed for a privileged, bourgeois readership. What in my opinion exempts Judah from this risk, which is ever present anyway, is the fact that he does not ventriloquise the Other, he does not speak for them: he records dialogues and transcribes them without correcting mistakes, without exoticising the accent, without translating their words with more politically correct expressions. As he keeps repeating throughout the text: he writes what he sees and hears. Of course, one should not forget that in the end the writer/journalist edits, frames, and arranges the stories for the sake of publication. Yet, I argue that the narrative space and control in *This is London* is left to the interviewed people, forgotten and ignored by most in real life, but masters of their own stories in the book.

Besides the narrative strategies discussed above, this is also demonstrated by the fact that Judah does not speak from the position of the writer who teaches, but from that of the reporter who learns:

> You never learn it all just watching. You never learn it all from the numbers. You have to go up and talk to people: completely, utterly different people from you. I refuse to let someone else tell me what they think (Judah 2016: 4).

It is this shift of the narrative stance from the privileged narrating subject to the peripheral gaze of the narrated object, which comes to occupy an authorial position, that prevents Judah from speaking for the other.

Reinforcing this view is the fact that the city Judah no longer recognises and wants to understand from the perspective of the Other is not a city of "strange" Londoners but of "new" Londoners. The focus on newness rather than strangeness makes me argue that his approach moves away from the hierarchical imposition of the Western point of view. Exploring the contradictory dynamics implicit in the construction of "strangeness", Sara Ahmed argues that the stranger is something which is recognisable, that is, something which is contingent to the self and is produced through a dialectic of proximity and distance. For Ahmed, encounters with others are often based on an absence of knowledge (of the Other) and this absence is necessary to constitute the subject in relation to what is strange: by being temporarily assimilated as the unknown within the encounter, strange bodies function as the border dividing the space the familiar body cannot enter from the space in which it is at home (2000: 54). So, when we meet others, Ahmed suggests, we need to read the signs of difference on their bodies because by fixing them in regimes of difference, we try to achieve recognition of the self (2000: 8).

In *This is London*, however, the categories of strangeness and knowledge are used interchangeably from different perspectives: Judah argues that he wants to know the new London and new Londoners, but he also wants to understand how immigrants view the English and what *their* London really is. In the eyes of Margarita, the Polish cleaner, "the English people are very lazy [...] They don't want to work when it is difficult" (Judah 2016: 176). They are also mean, ugly, cruel, and snobbish. For most Eastern Europeans, Britain is

"a 'mini-America'. But there is no British dream […] Britain is a land of opportunity. But they do not feel particularly welcome. Like they are living in a spare room" (Judah 2016: 182). The change of perspective is fundamental to understand the role of encounter in *This is London* as a site of resistance, where what Homi Bhabha (2004) calls the "denied knowledges" are allowed to enter the dominant discourse and undermine the basis of its authority.

The refusal to accept knowledge constructed by mainstream cultural power is further evidenced by Judah's learning through disparate field experiences. He sleeps rough in an underpass beneath Hyde Park Corner with homeless Romanians in an "invisible village" underground. He passes himself off as a Russian to enter a shabby dosshouse in East London. He travels to the derelict area of Beckton Alps with Polish builders who work night and day to renovate newly owned mansions of wealthy Russians. He takes the night bus with African cleaners who work at night to clean the offices of the City, before the sun rises and the business day begins. He speaks with Vietnamese gangs who furtively wrap little parcels of illegal fur.

In the descriptions of these often surreal encounters, a composite picture of synesthetic experiences emerges (and, again, the narrative switches from journalism to prose poetry) in which sights, sounds, tastes, and smells overlap and take the reader in. The combination and confusion of the senses create a narrative of encounters that is not only physical and cultural, but also sensorial. The senses influence each other and through this sensory response denied knowledges enter and challenge the dominant discourse:

> This is street life: disorientation, a jumble of snatched faces, and car noise. After dinner couples are strolling along Park Lane. Slavic blondes with sad-making eyes drift past on the arms of perfumed Saudi men; euphoric smokers in long coats, with whisky breath, come out of the hotels. When the one newsagent locks up, the Bangladeshi boys working there toss out buckets of foul water. I record their contemptuous voices: "The beggars they sleep here like mice. We have to keep the thieves away. This water means they can't sleep until it dries" (Judah 2016: 12).

The sense of dizzying inebriation deriving from these impressionistic descriptions contributes to decentralising the power of London that comes out as a disrupted, multi-layered city with a prismatic identity: a city within the city divided up into little worlds of isolation and alienation; a contact zone where borders are crossed and, as in Mary Louise Pratt's well-known definition, disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other in highly asymmetrical relations of power (1991: 34). This internal division and fragmentation convey an idea of global London as a landscape of the mind, constructed by cultural elements and by the emotional sense of (un)belonging of different ethnic groups that stick to each other but remain separate from one another. The Lithuanian shopkeeper in Beckton puts it bluntly:

> I don't live in Britain…I live in Lithuania. I watch Lithuanian TV…I use Lithuanian internet…My friends they are all Lithuanians…This shop is Lithuanian…I only meet Lithuanians. The only thing I do in Britain is pay taxes to the British (Judah 2016: 184).

In this modern global mega-city, proud of her powerful past but ashamed of her powerless inhabitants, where thousands of people from all over the world encounter one another, integration is hardly an option, and separation often remains the only way to belong to oneself: "It's like this: Russian and Ukrainian people hate Polish and Lithuanian people. Eastern Europe peoples hate Indian people. Everybody hates the black people. Whites hate everyone". Not an enticing picture but, as the Ukrainian girl says to the author, "That's just the way it is" (Judah 2016: 186).

A few concluding observations deserve to be made on the book's ending. The last chapter of the book ends with a final image that seems to open up to a more hopeful future in which divisiveness can be overcome. In a Muslim graveyard, two boys – one Asian, wearing a red baseball cap, and the other Black, wearing blue jeans – stand in front of a grave under a baby elm tree. "There, they pull out the scratched leather hide covers of the book, sling their arms brotherly over their shoulders and begin to sing" (Judah 2016: 412). The sky is a powder blue and over the fields the blinking bright dots of light of distant towers can be glimpsed. In this symbolic final image, the periphery, the other London, remains separate from the centre and from its glittering skyscrapers (distant towers of illusion and inequality), but when human encounters break the barriers of division and difference, light prevails over darkness, open spaces over invisible underground places, and life over death.

Needless to say, it would be naïve to read this final scene of inter-ethnic friendship and cross-cultural solidarity as a conventional happy ending: there cannot be any "and they lived happily ever after" fairy-tale message in a context affected by day-to-day rivalries, inequality, and urban fragmentation. So, the message of hope is certainly fragile, but it seems to me that the author wants to close on a positive note to underline the wasted potential of contemporary migrant and diaspora London: "this *could be* London" in a different world, he seems to imply, but in actual fact, this *is* London.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated how *This is London* navigates a fragmented migrant landscape, utilising embodied cross-border encounters to challenge dominant forms of systemic ignorance, racialisation, and exclusion. Through a literary-spatial reading of Ben Judah's immersive reportage, this study shows how the text links lived migrant realities with postcolonial literary frameworks. By integrating documentary practice with questions of space, identity, affect, and structural violence, Judah forces a radical rethinking of the modern metropolis. His narrative charts a stark, subterranean geography of the city, replaces cold statistics with humanising oral histories, and directly confronts the ethical privileges and voyeuristic risks inherent in narrating poverty. Ultimately, Judah's work offers a vital contribution to migration and postcolonial studies, proving that the contemporary global city cannot be understood without unmasking the unequal spaces and invisible populations that sustain it.

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Savina Stevanato

"Was That Voice Ourselves?": Virginia Woolf's Soundscapes of Identity

Abstract I: Attingendo ai sound studies e alla critica modernista, questo contributo esamina i *soundscapes* in *Between the Acts* di Virginia Woolf come luoghi di tensione/crisi culturale e identitaria. Attraverso rumori naturali e tecnologici, voci frammentate e collage sonori, Woolf costruisce ambienti sonori che destabilizzano progressivamente identità e narrazione, segnando una rottura epistemologica. I *soundscapes* oscillano, tuttavia, tra rassicurazione e disgregazione: trame polifoniche ed echeggianti svelano una totalità relazionale, mentre sonorità cacofoniche registrano ansia ontologica. Anche l'approdo di Woolf al silenzio ultimo racchiude il paradosso del suono come presenza e assenza, testimoniando un'eco persistente e relazionale che sfuma confini aprendosi a un orizzonte proto-postumanista.

Abstract II: Drawing on both sound studies and modernist criticism, this paper examines soundscapes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* as sites of cultural tension and identity crisis. Through natural and technological noises, fragmented voices, and sonic collages, Woolf constructs aural environments that increasingly destabilise identity and collective narratives, marking an epistemological rupture. Nonetheless, soundscapes oscillate between healing and disruption: rhythmic polyphony and echoic textures foster relational wholeness, while cacophony registers ontological anxiety. Even Woolf's final turn to silence encapsulates the paradox of sound as presence and absence, testifying to a lingering, relational echo that blurs boundaries, opening onto a proto-posthumanist horizon.

Keywords: Echo, Identity, Modernism, Soundscapes, Virginia Woolf.

1. Introduction

By situating both Virginia Woolf's thematised and formal auditory strategies within modernist criticism and sound studies, this essay examines the role of soundscapes in *Between the Acts* as expressive sites of cultural tension, identity crisis, and aesthetic exploration. Woolf's attention to aurality must be located within the broader Western tendency to prioritise visual epistemological paradigms, as well as within her specific attraction to spatiality as a way of opposing the dissolution associated with temporality, itself a distinguishing feature of both verbal art and aural experience. This makes Woolf's aural imagination complex,

since it not only reflects modernist concerns with annihilation but also points to potential remedial responses to a new awareness underpinning what Angeliki Spiropoulou has labelled Modernism's "constitutional fragmentariness" (2015: 76)[1].

From the intrusive urban noises of *Mrs Dalloway* (1992a) to the intersecting variety of voices of *The Waves* (1977) and the chaotic aural collage of *Between the Acts* (2000), Woolf increasingly constructs cacophonous sonic environments that register both personal and communal anxiety, destabilising the coherence of individual identity and collective cultural narratives. Although sound increasingly marks moments of epistemological rupture in Woolf's work, her soundscapes oscillate between healing and disruption, a tension that structurally underpins her modernist interrogation of subjectivity. Healing soundscapes are characterised by their capacity to generate moments of relational attunement that foster aesthetic, emotional, and communal forms of coherence without fully resolving the fragmentariness of modern experience. Conversely, disruptive aural elements expose moments when self-perception falters and the boundaries between self and other, mind and world, are rendered unstable. Correspondingly, Woolf concurrently converts modernist narration into an acoustic form of knowledge. Reading this conversion through the lens of sound theories reveals that her fiction provides not only psychological or visual representations of consciousness but also highly relational and ecological models of listening in modern environments, which simultaneously celebrate the continuation of life in ways that anticipate posthumanism's critique of anthropocentrism. Within this framework, soundscape functions as the article's principal conceptual category and the echo as its key interpretative lens, while "acoustemology" and "proto-posthumanism" provide complementary theoretical perspectives.

In his pioneering work on mainly human-centric acoustic ecology, Schafer coins the term "soundscape", meaning the sonic environment, namely the constant interaction of sounds, whether pleasant or harsh, subtle or overwhelming, heard, listened to, or ignored, within which we continuously live, to which we relate, and in response to which we act (1977). Schafer's statement that a "soundscape consists of events *heard* not objects *seen*" (1994: 8)[2] implies that such events are both physiological (an inescapable phenomenon since we do not have earlids) and psychological, encompassing both hearing and listening (Barthes 1985). Across her macro-text, Woolf "continually makes her reader aware of the acoustic environment" (Flint 2003: 187) as well as of "the internal 'noise' of consciousness" (Toth 2017: 566) through both her thematic focus on aural spatiality and the words that materialise it on the page. Her composite acoustic space conjoins communal knowledge with the individual's physical and psychological experience of sound, which seems to connect to Steven Feld's phenomenological interpretation of sound as a cognitive instrument exposing the

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all italics are original. Spiropoulou crucially connects such fragmentariness to "modernity's destruction of the transcendental" (2015: 86).

[2] R. Murray Schafer further defines the soundscape as "any acoustic field of study", also claiming that "it is less easy to formulate an exact impression of a soundscape than of a landscape" (1994: 7). Moreover, his claim that "the eye points outward; the ear draws inward" (1994: 11) suggests that the visual modality may be more defensive than the aural one.

"conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place [and time]" (1996: 91)[3]. In the case of Woolf's layered soundscapes, such cultural localisation also reveals her attunement to the era's changing soundscape alongside a renewed aural sensitivity and related aesthetic innovations shaped by emergent sound technologies, such as the gramophone and the wireless (Caughie 2000; Flint 2003; Frattarola 2005, 2018)[4].

Woolf's overall soundscapes incorporate thematised representations of sound through hearing and listening, as well as the sonic materiality that the reader experiences through formal phonic plays performed either silently or aloud. Simultaneously, this allows Woolf to trigger the reader's spatial sensibility and an awareness that the distinctive feature of auditory experience is – borrowing Steven Connor's words from his seminal essay on the modern "Auditory I" – "its capacity to disintegrate and reconfigure space" (1997: 206), which Woolf also provides with graphic materiality, particularly in her last novel.

The real and metaphorical sounds of a crumbling world are recorded early by Woolf in "Character in Fiction" (1924): "the smashing and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us […], the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction" (2008: 51). Any crumbling implies the possibility of renewal and rebuilding, but this crashing signals a dramatically destabilising shift in the inherited value system. It is a form of breaking highly emblematic of modernity and deeply connected to the experience of the Great War, which had left profound scars, shaken faith in previously unshakable ideas, and brought about disillusionment with civilisation and its foundational beliefs.

In response to this sense of fragmentation, Woolf devises a kind of remedy through a specific mode of writing aimed at re-establishing relational unity, first of all in aesthetic terms. Crucially, to construct this sense of wholeness, Woolf's poetics employs a device that, in a variety of contexts, she labels "echo" – an *acoustic* metaphor that functions as both a thematic concern and a formal strategy. This idea is explicitly articulated by the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1992b) and simultaneously serves as a metanarrative key to Woolf's own practice: it is a "sense of repetition – of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations" (1992b: 215). The concept resonates throughout Woolf's work, in both its compositional and acoustic dimensions (although here I will focus primarily on the former). Rhythmic polyphony, collective voices, and echoic textures – both thematised and practised by Woolf – act as re-

[3] In this essay Feld also considers the culturally relevant dialectical interplay between audition and vision, which is in line with his later refusal to substitute "ocularcentrism" with "sonocentrism" (2015: 15). In this later essay, he also clarifies the difference between his theory of "acoustemology" and Schafer's "acoustic ecology" and "soundscape". On the importance of the auditory dimension in modernist literature, see also Murphet, Groth & Hone (2017), and Snaith (2020).

[4] On Woolf's radical aurality and her creation of environmental soundscapes in words, see Pamela Caughie (2000). On the role of the gramophone in *Between the Acts*, see Bonnie Scott (2000). Interest in aurality, as part of a concern with the sensory overload of the twentieth century, was shared by European artists and avant-gardes in both celebratory and preoccupied terms, through the internalisation or externalisation of soundscapes. The futurist celebration of external *bruits* (including art, war, and the machine) coexisted with Woolf's focus on external soundscapes and their inner counterpart in the characters' consciousness.

lational markers of wholeness, suggesting possible sites of connection. Coexisting with dissonance, where sound itself becomes a site of tension or rupture, these echoic soundscapes open onto a renewed sense of identity and positive awareness.

2. The Soundscape of *Between the Acts*

Between the Acts is Woolf's last novel, published posthumously in 1941, and it represents a climax that encapsulates the dichotomous nature of her auditory imagination. In her 1938 diary, Woolf writes of her intention to explore a collective form of identity grounded in national history, culture, and literature: "'I' rejected: 'We' substituted […] composed of many different things […] we all life, all art, all waifs & strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole" (1984: 135). If *The Waves* is centred on separation from the Other, which is a form of fragmentation entailed by the development of the self's consciousness and identification (Blodgett 1983), *Between the Acts* shifts its focus to the identity of a community, explored mainly through the lens of art. The novel portrays an emblematic English village as a microcosm of the nation at a moment of crisis, exploring the sense, formation, and recognition of identity across individual and collective dimensions on the brink of World War II. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf had explored similar questions in the aftermath of World War I, ultimately affirming life and the possibility of reconstructing identity in its multiple forms. In *Between the Acts*, this inquiry, with its problematic outcome, is staged through a pageant that traces the general history of England and foregrounds auditory experience as both a communal and individual phenomenon, suggesting at once union and separation. In this last novel, Woolf's soundscapes mark a triple concern:

1) an overarching epistemological shift, reflective of the tensions modernism variously registers;
2) a cultural crisis that encompasses both communal and personal identity construction;
3) a thematised aesthetic failure epitomised by the gradual absence of the echo[5] in its relational capacity (in stark contrast to its formal presence in the novel but conspicuously lacking within the pageant itself).

These dimensions are not discrete but mutually reinforcing: the epistemological shift underpinning modernity informs the crisis of individual and communal identity, while the gradual erosion of the echo's relational capacity registers both processes at the aesthetic level.

Between the Acts is rightly considered by Angela Frattarola to be Woolf's "most sound-oriented novel" (2005: 143), representing a thematic and formal climax in her attention to sound, and Kate Flint likewise argues that its overall soundscape is composed of "an aural collage of interpenetrating rural, human, and mechanical sounds" (2003: 189). Whereas Woolf's other

[5] The novel refers explicitly to the echo by showing that its relational power increasingly becomes simple repetition: "strange echoes through the house, so that in the library, the sitting-room, the dining-room, and the nursery, whatever they were doing, thinking, saying, they knew, they all knew", Woolf (2000: 22); "He said (without words) 'I'm damnably unhappy'. 'So am I', Dodge echoed. 'And I too', Isa thought" (105); "O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together" (116); "'This year, last year, next year, never…'. Isa murmured", "'This year, last year, next year, never', Isa murmured. 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor', Bartholomew echoed" (127, 129).

novels often describe and rely on sound – suffice it to think of the violent, urban, and booming aural experiences in *Mrs Dalloway* (the car, the airplane, the striking clocks) – *Between the Acts* performs sound phonetically by repeatedly incorporating a variety of phonic and onomatopoeic fragments arranged in pairs and triplets ("chuff, chuff, chuff", "ding, dong", "tick, tick, tick"). The novel is thus inhabited by a rich plurality of voices, sounds, and noises drawn from both reality and art, composing a complex and dichotomous soundscape.

The village is full of voices that seem almost autonomous, personified presences rather than metonymically indicating the human or natural beings to which they belong. They pass through open doors and windows as agents of a cacophonous collectivity in which borders become ambiguous:

> Across the hall a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice came wimpling and warbling: gruff – Bart's voice; quavering – Lucy's voice; middle-toned – Isa's voice. Their voices impetuously, impatiently, protestingly came across the hall saying: "The train's late"; saying: "Keep it hot"; saying: "We won't, no Candish, we won't wait" […] Utterly impossible was it, even in the heart of the country, to be alone? […] There must be society (Woolf 2000: 25)[6].

Other sounds – musical, animal, linguistic – rush from open windows: "From the garden – the window was open – came the sound of someone practising scales. A.B.C. A.B.C. A.B.C." (71). When people meet between the acts of the pageant, they are again represented vocally: "Voices interrupted […] More voices sounded" (94), with "sounds of laughter" (39, 106) coming from every direction. Acoustic variety also encompasses inner and outer voices, sounds produced by separate bodily parts, and the music of the pageant: "Feet crunched the gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music […] is expressive of some inner harmony?" (73). Sound also calls the audience back to the performance while providing a form of union: "The audience was assembling. The music was summoning them"; "Scattered, shattered, hither thither summoned by the bell" (72, 73). Accordingly, relational power seems to pertain to aural threads: "Over the tops of the bushes came stray voices, voices without bodies, symbolical voices they seemed to her, half hearing, seeing nothing, but still, over the bushes, feeling invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices"[7] (91).

This sonic diversity is tightly interwoven with the performance of Miss La Trobe's pageant and its layered *phoné*. The outdoor setting enhances the acoustic interplay between nature and art, allowing for a dynamic sonic exchange: the ambient sounds of the natural environment blend with the actors' and the audience members' voices, tunes, songs, the gramophone's music and noises. This plural, fragmented soundscape introduces dissonance and confusion, complicating the process of (self-)identification. It also disrupts narrative coherence, as the disjointed layering of voices and sounds mirrors the disintegration of sha-

[6] All subsequent quotations from *Between the Acts* are taken from this edition, and page references will be provided parenthetically in the text.

[7] In line with the increasing sense of self-fragmentation, the novel also refers to "bodiless eyes" (45).

red meaning and stable subjectivity in a world shattered by war and shaped by shifting cultural paradigms. Ultimately, the soundscape of this novel offers a composite space in which identity resonates with the epistemological uncertainty of its historical moment and reflects the broader crisis at the core of modernist aesthetics.

2.1. Technological Voices and Sounds

There are two specific typologies of sound in *Between the Acts* that deserve close attention. The first is the recurring voice of the gramophone, a technological and multivocal voice that: a) produces a variety of musical tunes; b) emits peculiar sounds, conveyed onomatopoetically, such as the "chuffing" and "ticking" of its needle in the grooves; and c) suggests the haunting formula "dispersed are we".

Concealed behind the bushes, the gramophone mediates a sonic interplay between mechanical and natural sounds, acting as what Lawrence Kramer calls "a dark choral commentary" (2024: 64) on both art and the present moment, within the pageant and the novel alike. The music played by the gramophone is intended to operate as an acoustic and rhythmic device capable of gathering and unifying the audience during and between the acts of the performance, holding the dispersing company together, but this project fails. On the one hand, the music is preceded by a sudden and menacing shower upon the audience in the open air, as if it were nature's voice, figuring a universal pouring of tears – "all the people's tears, weeping for all the people" (107). On the other hand, when the tune begins after the shower, it first seems to be another voice speaking, "the voice that was no one's voice [...] that wept for human pain unending" (107); then the music becomes increasingly erratic, and in the fourth act a crescendo of aural and rhythmic confusion culminates in, and epitomises the smashing of wholeness:

> [music] changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Fox-trot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! […] What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult; And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peek and spy? […] The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole (109).

This dissonant breakdown sonically registers the discord of the age. It reflects the world of the 1930s, marked by social and political fragmentation, and underscores the difficulty of identifying oneself as part of a historical, social, cultural, collective, and familial context, and of perceiving oneself as unified[8]. From the outset, this crisis of recognition is thematised through missing or failed sounds. The play opens ambiguously – "the play began. Was it, or was it not, the play?" – with an empty stage and the gramophone buzzing without mu-

[8] Triplets are not only sound-related; Woolf also uses them to mark the fragmentation of the self visually, as it appears in Isabella's mirror, which is divided into three different parts: "she […] stood in front of the three-folded mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her […] face" (11).

sic: "Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. […] For the stage was empty" (47-48). The baby actress forgets her lines; the actors' voices are inaudible or blown away by the wind; even the playwright's call for louder sounds is thwarted by reality, as nature overtakes art:

> The stage was empty […]; the only thing to continue the emotion was the song; and the words were inaudible […] 'Louder, louder!' Miss La Trobe vociferated […] Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden […] and bellowed (84-85).

Hence, set against art is nature's prehistoric voice, acoustically reminding the present of its force and presence: "It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment" (85)[9], which also functions as a metonymic personification that reduces the figurative unity of the present into shreds.

What further contributes to the near materialisation of a sense of absence is the noise of the needle in the groove, which "exposes spacing as a void" (Kramer 2024: 64). Nevertheless, and paradoxically, it is not meaning or artistic coherence that ultimately unites the audience but the very mechanical regularity of the sounds from the gramophone: "Only the tick tick […] held them together" (92). Union and communal identity are entrusted to the persistent ticking of the gramophone. Even the groove noise, apparently meaningless, potentially signifies something, since the scratching needle[10] also triggers a shared lamentation of dispersal.

In line with this dichotomous potential of sounds, the gramophone also emits a "megaphonic, anonymous" voice, "whose it was no one knew", which intermittently and increasingly addresses the confused collectivity in an attempt to prompt both a shared interpretive conclusion and a form of self-awareness: "The voice said: […] *let's* […] *calmly consider ourselves*" (111). Alongside this anonymous voice, there is another voice, induced by the gramophone and expressing separation and unknowability, which the villagers repeat and remember collectively – "Dispersed are we" (59) – as a paradoxical form of reciprocal recognition in reciprocal dispersal:

> *All you can see of yourselves is scraps, orts and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming …* A hitch occurred here. The records had been mixed. Fox trot, Sweet lavender, Home Sweet Home, Rule Britannia […] was it Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart or nobody famous, but merely a traditional tune? (112); *Dispersed are we*, the gramophone repeated […] *Dispersed are we*, the gramophone […] dismissed them […] triumphed, yet lamented *Dispersed are we* (116-117).

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[9] In *Mrs Dalloway*'s urban panorama, the characters' voices are frail and often overwhelmed by the roar of the city, but here too Woolf introduces a voice that opposes civilization's linguistic and technological soundscapes, singing meaningless and ancestral sounds that gesture toward a different form of pre-civilised existence.

[10] In Woolf's macro-text, the potentially remedial connotation of needles frequently emerges in relation to both thematised and metanarrative references to the acts of knitting and writing, considered healing strategies for obtaining unity out of fragmentariness through the interrelation of parts.

Against the background of a chaotic mixing of musical sounds that prevents the audience from identifying the tunes played by the gramophone, the obsessive refrain marks the breakdown of the pageant's coherence and leaves the audience unsure of its meaning, while simultaneously prompting reflection on their own identity as members of a nation, a tradition, and a community.

Yet, despite this fragmentation, the novel insists on foregrounding shared aural experiences: the villagers feel bound to listen to the pageant by a "communal obligation" (Frattarola 2005: 146); they collectively attend to the gramophone's "chuffs", "ticks", and music, as well as to the sounds of war. These auditory experiences create a fleeting but palpable cohesive effect: "The tune stopped. Chuff, chuff, chuff, the machine ticked […] only the tick of the gramophone needle was heard. The tick, tick, tick seemed to hold them together, tranced" (50). The final movement evokes this paradoxical experience of fragmentation and unity more explicitly:

> Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third […] On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; […] from chaos and cacophony measure; […] To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united […] Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts and fragments, are we, also, that? (112).

Sounds allow a brief experience of togetherness that nevertheless emphasises the persistence of separation, as the Shakespearean quotation indicates. Woolf's use of the gramophone reveals her modern understanding of community and individuality: her characters are briefly united – like a chorus – through shared auditory experience, even as they remain separate, isolated, and unresolved[11].

The second typology of sound in *Between the Acts* is another technological voice that signals the looming threat of war. This voice breaks into the pageant when warplanes rip through the air above the stage and connects directly to what Woolf describes in her coeval essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (1940) as a "death rattle overhead" (2008: 216). These wartime soundscapes become collective auditory events shared by everybody, evoking shared feelings of fear, vulnerability, and even patriotism. Yet, in stark opposition to the harmless airplane in *Mrs Dalloway*, which writes letters in the sky, this sound marks a more violent and irreversible rupture. The booming voice of war becomes a sonic symbol of disintegration, against which both art and religion are powerless.

After the pageant ends, Reverend Streatfield's comment and hopeful words are interrupted mid-sentence by the warplanes' disruptive sound, which imposes an acoustic severance on his words and literally cuts them, as this sentence itself graphically mimics:

[11] Both the chorus-like aspect of the pageant's audience in this novel and the choral component in Woolf's other works have been variously explored by, among others, Melba Cuddy-Keane (2000) and Frattarola (2018).

> Each of us who has enjoyed this pageant has still an opp …". The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation […] came overhead. *That* was the music […] The planes had passed. "… portunity," Mr. Streatfield continued (114-115).

The graphic severance of the word "opportunity" literalises the violence of history on language. Reading this from Kramer's perspective – who also draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of "spacing" as a possible mark of death in writing (1976: 39, 69) – requires attention to the fact that any "articulate expression needs space between its units" (2024: 64) such as, for instance, the gaps separating written or printed words, or the spaces dividing the individual letters within them. Spoken language likewise depends on pauses and separations between words and syllables, though these intervals ordinarily remain unnoticed unless particular attention is directed toward them, as Woolf does through the graphic dots. In such moments, "spacing undercuts articulation; it becomes a kind of fracture that potentially opens into an abyss" and "introduces death into the utterance" (Kramer 2024: 64). The spacing enacted by the planes' sonic intrusion does precisely that – it fractures speech and conveys death. The novel thus invites further reflection on the relationship between fractured soundscapes and the destabilisation of linguistic meaning, a question that exceeds the scope of the present essay but remains closely connected to its concerns. This motif is echoed again at the novel's end when the gramophone voices a final broken utterance: "gurgled *Unity – Dispersity*. It gurgled *Un … dis …* And ceased" (119). Here, too, fragmentation is simultaneously graphic, acoustic, and thematic. It marks the disintegration of both sound and meaning, paralleling the collapse of all forms of unity in Woolf's era.

This leads us back to Woolf's complex use of the echo, a concept that functions not only as a recurring motif but also as a key interpretative lens through which the novel's soundscapes articulate the tension between fragmentation and relationality. The echo serves as a relational and compositional device, while also signifying artistic continuity and the resonance of life. As Kramer argues, we always "need to hear *something*. The continuity of the audible assures us […] of the continuation of life" in that sound is "the sensory medium in which the awareness of continuing life is felt" (2024: 2). Therefore, the idea that "sound is the measure of life" and that "its end must be a measure of death" (x)[12] resonates with Woolf's understanding of the echo.

3. Resonances and After-Sounds

In Woolf's fiction, the thematised and gradual disappearance of the echo signals the collapse of civilisation, culture, and aesthetic form itself. Near the end of *The Waves*, when the grown-up characters confront loss and separation, Bernard reflects on the absence of the echo and compares it to death: "no echo comes when I speak, no varied words. This is more truly death than the death of friends, than the death of youth" (Woolf 1977: 224). Bernard is an aspiring narrator, therefore his reference to the disappearance of the echo may also operate as a metaliterary hint at the failure of artistic form. This is confirmed by Woolf's 1940 diary,

[12] On the "Recovery of Positive Silence", see Schafer (1994: 258).

which recalls Bernard's words and connects writing to identity as mutually interdependent: "the writing 'I', has vanished. No audience. No echo. Thats [sic] part of one's death. Not altogether serious […] But it is a fact – this disparition of an echo" (1984: 293). At the end of *Between the Acts*, the echo appears once again but it is not stabilising; rather, it is formalised only to be weakened through repetition and contradiction, while being ironically undermined since the gramophone only echoes the impossibility of communal togetherness:

> The gramophone was affirming in tones there was no denying, triumphant yet valedictory: *Dispersed are we; who have come together. But,* the gramophone asserted, *let us retain whatever made that harmony.* O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company. *Dispersed are we,* the gramophone repeated (116).

This dynamic appears to invalidate the unifying potential of the echo as a formal and compositional device designed to secure both artistic coherence and authorial identity – a function successfully thematised and formally realised in *To the Lighthouse* by both Lily and Woolf (the painter and the writer), but one that ultimately fails here. Indeed, Miss La Trobe is finally unable to reassemble the fractured voices of modernity.

Still, there may be a final aural twist, implied by the disrupted but inherently choral nature of the polyphonic "dispersed are we" voice. The gramophone's last fragmented utterance – "*Un … dis …* And ceased" (119) – contains within it a hidden acoustic reconstruction that contrasts with its own graphic spacing, apparently conveying death. These phonic shards – *un*, *dis*, *ceased* – when recombined, suggest the opposite: "undeceased" (/ʌndɪsi:st/)[13], a ghostly, aural reversal hinting at life, union, artistic renewal, and art's efficacy. Through this sound play, Woolf suggests that meaning can still be reassembled, since aesthetic efficacy may persist even amid fragmentation. The novel closes accordingly with a line that restores both voice and collective presence, ushering in a further stage: "the curtain rose. They spoke" (130). This final aesthetic soundscape echoes and harmonises with the novel's opening – which is similarly attuned to the villagers' reality: "It was a summer's night and they were talking" (5). This frames the text through audible and communal speech. While the echo has thematically "vanished", it persists formally through this textual configuration despite its thematised absence.

Ultimately, biography and art diverge. Woolf withdrew into silence as her final remedy for the overall crisis and sense of failure she was experiencing in both historical and personal terms. Nonetheless, this turn to silence encapsulates the paradox of sound as both presence and absence, as it is a withdrawal that leaves behind a lingering echo. It is not a return to wholeness, but an acoustic trace that resists oblivion and dissolution while testifying to relationality. As Bernard foresaw in *The Waves*: "When my voice is silent you will not remember me, save as the echo of a voice" (1977: 106-107). This echo articulates Woolf's use of sound as a formal and thematic medium, revealing how, on the one hand, her auditory

[13] This sound play has also been noticed by the Italian translators of the novel, Francesca Wagner and Franco Cordelli.

imagination reflects modernist concerns with an overall sense of crisis. On the other hand, it strongly suggests relational openness and potential mutual recognition through the aural pluralism and vibratory force that foreground betweenness, within and across human and non-human domains. In this sense, Woolf's soundscapes challenge a strictly anthropocentric understanding of subjectivity by presenting identity as an effect of resonance, interdependence, and acoustic coexistence rather than as a self-contained individual essence. From an already proto-posthuman perspective, Woolf's last novel ends with a promise of future sounds still to be listened to: "They spoke" (130).

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Affective Translation: Language as Embodied Performance in a Brazilian Rewriting of Owen McCafferty's *Mojo Mickybo*

Abstract I: Attraverso una lettura comparata di *Mojo Mickybo* di Owen McCafferty e della mia riscrittura brasiliana dell'opera, l'articolo esamina, in una prospettiva autobiografica e autoriflessiva, come le risposte affettive del traduttore possano trasformare la traduzione in azione sociopolitica. Muovendo dalle teorie degli affetti (Damasio; Tomkins), della traduzione affettiva (Koskinen; Robinson) e della traduzione intesa come riscrittura e forma di attivismo (Lefevere; Tymoczko), lo studio indaga il ruolo dell'esperienza corporea e del posizionamento nelle scelte relative a lingua, spazio e caratterizzazione. La ricollocazione dell'opera dalla Belfast degli anni Settanta alla San Paolo della dittatura militare mostra come la discriminazione linguistica e la segregazione urbana riattualizzino i temi alla luce delle disuguaglianze di classe, razza e genere, favorendo una ricezione politicamente impegnata.

Abstract II: Through a comparative reading of Owen McCafferty's *Mojo Mickybo* and my Brazilian rewriting, this article examines, from a self-reflexive autobiographical perspective, how the translator's affective responses may turn translation into socio-political action. Drawing on theories of affect (Damasio; Tomkins), affective translation (Koskinen; Robinson), and translation as rewriting and activism (Lefevere; Tymoczko), it considers how embodiment and positionality influence choices concerning language, space, and characterisation. Relocating the play from 1970s Belfast to São Paulo under military dictatorship reveals how linguistic discrimination and urban segregation reactivate its themes amid inequalities of class, race, and gender, thereby fostering politically engaged reception.

Keywords: Theatre, translation, rewriting, affect, activism.

> Machines, and machines alone, were to be trusted to produce "good" translations, always and everywhere. History has turned out to be the ghost in that machine, and as the ghost has grown, the machine has crumbled (Bassnett & Lefevere 1998: 1).

In defining translation as rewriting, André Lefevere states that it inevitably operates under or pushes against the constraints of aesthetic norms and ideological beliefs inherent in the

receiving culture and society, either maintaining the status quo or challenging it: "rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society" (1995: ix). Once the translator is understood as a rewriter rather than a mediator or neutral conduit, it becomes not only possible but necessary to acknowledge the authority they hold, the responsibilities they bear, and the freedom they are due. From that position, the translator is equipped and legitimised to navigate complex cultural, social, and political environments, shaping meaning according to situated priorities and perspectives.

Such an understanding allows for the emergence of translation as a socio-political instrument. If translation is rewriting, it can be harnessed to enact change that goes beyond culture. This is the space occupied by activist translations, as theorised by Maria Tymoczko (2000), who argues that they do not merely describe or replicate the world but act within it, galvanising tangible social and political change. Activist translations are not merely ideological but performative, carrying intentions and producing effects upon readers and audiences:

> I am primarily concerned with translation as a sort of speech act: translation that rouses, inspires, witnesses, mobilises, incites to rebellion, and so forth […] The subject, then, is translation that has illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions, that actually participates in social movements (Tymoczko 2000: 26).

The effectiveness of a politically charged translation is contingent upon creative manipulation. By deploying "pragmatic, hybrid, adventitious, and improvised" strategies (Tymoczko 2010: 251), the translator does not retreat behind invisibility but marches into the world with a cause. Translator agency and decision-making, however, emerge not only from ideological commitments and performative intentions but also from emotional investments, for beneath conscious reasoning lies something more elusive and difficult to account for: affect. Drawing on definitions from neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences, affect may be broadly understood as a dynamic and interdependent set of processes that occur bodily and cognitively as well as individually and socially, operating beneath conscious awareness to guide how we understand and interact with ourselves, others, and the environment. Affect underpins human activity and is structured around personal and interpersonal transformation, as first proposed by Spinoza and later revived by Deleuze and others:

> Affect is a body-mind complex that directs a person towards a desired state of affairs through a process of change [in the body and in the mind]. Affect, in Spinoza's often quoted phrase, is all about "affecting and being affected" (Koskinen 2020: 13).

Kaisa Koskinen highlights that in this process of acting and being acted upon, "language still remains one central vehicle for transmitting affects", that is, for "describing, explaining, and interpreting the experiences of affect we and others have" (2020: 25). Affect returns us to the body as a site where emotions are experienced and made available for articulation, while language may render affect radical and powerful, providing a channel through which it can circulate, resonate, and generate transformation (Wetherell 2012: 19).

If affect is as intrinsic to language as language is to translation, then translation is affectively constituted throughout its production and reception (Koskinen 2020: 25). Affect consequently provides translation studies with explanatory mechanisms that purely cognitive accounts of translator decision-making cannot offer:

> I am convinced that a thicker affective layer needs to be added to our descriptions of translational phenomena, functioning as a set of explanatory mechanisms for why translations turn out the way they do, as well as why readers react to them the way they do, and how and why translations circulate and make waves (or not) in a particular cultural context (Koskinen 2020: 25-26).

Bringing these ideas together, this article examines my Brazilian rewriting of Northern Irish playwright Owen McCafferty's two-hander, *Mojo Mickybo*, to ask how the translator's affective responses engender decisions through which translation may become socio-political action. It argues that to translate politically is to translate affectively and that both processes are inseparable from the translator's lived experience. Its contribution lies in bringing affect into accounts of activist translation not simply as a quality produced by the translated text or experienced by its audience, but as an embodied force operating within the translator's decision-making process. From this perspective, activism is not merely tactical or calculated but may emerge as a visceral pull, shaped by trauma, memory, empathy, and the desire for change, extending translation beyond linguistic and cultural mediation towards an embodied and situated mode of being in – and transforming – the world. By revealing the embodied foundations of translator agency, affect helps explain not only why certain decisions are made, but how they take shape: in the skin, in the gut, and in the tension between personal history and socio-political awareness. This is particularly significant in the present case study, where language becomes a battleground on which identity and belonging confront unequal power relations.

Methodologically, the study combines a comparative close reading of extracts from McCafferty's source play and my Brazilian rewriting with autobiographical reflection on decisions concerning language, setting, and characterisation. Positionality is therefore treated not as incidental but as integral to the analysis: as a female Brazilian translator and scholar whose social and political consciousness was formed in the aftermath of the military dictatorship and amid persistent inequalities of class, race, and gender, I neither equate the Troubles with Brazilian historical experience nor approach the play from a position of neutrality.

Throughout the article, *Mojo Mickybo* refers to McCafferty's source play, whereas *Mojo e Mickybo* designates my Brazilian rewriting. Accordingly, "translation" names the overall interlingual and intercultural process, while "rewriting" foregrounds its transformative character. Although the resulting text may be understood broadly as an adaptation for performance, I use "relocation" more precisely to describe its central dramaturgical strategy: the transfer of the action from 1970s Belfast to 1970s São Paulo while respecting the play's fundamental narrative structure, affective texture, and the political undercurrents that quietly sustain it. The analysis traces a movement from source-play features, through embod-

ied response and positionality, to target-play solutions, examining their affective origins and intended political functions.

Mojo Mickybo premiered at Andrews Lane Studio in Dublin on 14 October 1998. Set in Belfast during the summer of 1970, at the height of the Troubles, the play follows two boys aged nine and ten who form an unlikely friendship while remaining largely oblivious to the violence surrounding them. Escaping into fantasies of being Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the boys inhabit a world of play and make-believe until political violence abruptly crosses their path, irreversibly altering their friendship.

1. "What's in a name?" – The Language

The most powerful encounters audiences have with plays are often shaped by language etched on the page or echoed on the stage. When the language of performance captures the rhythms of everyday speech without falling into essentialisation or stereotype, the play acquires a heightened sense of immediacy and its message gains greater expressive intensity.

In *Mojo Mickybo*, language articulates identity and belonging. Although the protagonists are initially drawn together by a shared social standing, reflecting the Troubles as a predominantly working-class conflict, they are ultimately torn apart by the hostility separating the two communities along colonially inherited lines. In 1970s Northern Ireland, being Catholic or Protestant meant carrying distinct linguistic ancestries while also living, working, and studying within segregated spaces. McCafferty effectively illustrates this linguistic divide in *The Waiting List*, where a child interrogated in enemy territory is asked to "say the alphabet" (2002: 56), exposing differences such as the pronunciation of the letter H as either *haitch* or *aitch* and the letter A as either *aah* or *aay*.

Crafted to be set and staged in São Paulo, my rewriting incorporates traits of colloquial Brazilian Portuguese, particularly those associated with the Paulista variety. Unlike Paulistano, Paulista speech is less closely associated with the norms reinforced through mass media and formal education, offering resources in rhythm, intonation, and vocabulary that lend themselves effectively to my representation of working-class experience[1]. This is especially fitting given that McCafferty himself employs Belfast working-class vernacular.

The use of regional varieties is not new in Brazilian theatre. As early as the 1930s, Oswald de Andrade incorporated elements of Paulistano into standard Brazilian Portuguese to break with erudite language and foreground Brazilian cultural and linguistic diversity. In the following decades, Nelson Rodrigues drew on Carioca, Ariano Suassuna on Pernambucano, and Plínio Marcos on an increasingly pronounced Paulistano. This growing use of regional varieties accompanied both the consolidation of standard Brazilian Portuguese and efforts to codify a linguistic identity distinct from the European norm. Such an approach, for which there should now be greater scope in Brazilian theatre (Hanes 2018), encourages performers to draw on their linguistic identities rather than conform to standardised speech. Likewise, my embodied familiarity with Paulista's rhythms and social meanings

[1] Paulistano refers specifically to the metropolitan variety spoken in the city of São Paulo, whereas Paulista encompasses varieties spoken across the wider state.

informed my affective response to McCafferty's vernacular and my decision to recreate its social and performative force. Other McCaffertian stylistic features that I preserve – such as non-standard spelling, capitalisation, and punctuation – allow performers greater freedom in delivering lines.

There is, however, a point of concern. National plays are afforded more leeway than imported ones: playwrights are encouraged to experiment, while translators remain constrained by the publishing houses or theatre companies for which they work. This disparity recalls Lawrence Venuti's (1995) argument that domestication – the adaptation of a foreign text to make it fluent, natural, and familiar – reinforces the economic and ideological dominance of hegemonic cultures. It also reflects Itamar Even-Zohar's (2010) account of how central literatures guide aesthetic norms and definitions of literary value, whereas peripheral literatures are often sites of resistance and experimentation, particularly during periods of cultural or political change.

The Brazilian case complicates any straightforward association between domestication, conformity, and hegemonic power. Monteiro Lobato – a writer, translator, and publisher whose work helped move children's literature from the margins towards the centre of the Brazilian literary polysystem – provides a significant example of the distinct implications domestication may acquire within an import-reliant, non-hegemonic literary culture. As John Milton's (2010) analysis demonstrates[2], Lobato's retranslations are infused with folklore, oral storytelling, and regionally marked language. Although not unproblematic, his work functioned as a vehicle for social critique, challenging established cultural and literary conventions while resisting both Vargas-era nationalism (1937-1945) and the linguistic hierarchies inherited from Portuguese colonial rule. His choices were informed by dissatisfaction with the status quo and enthusiasm for advancing his own social, educational, and political ideals. In this context, domestication emerges not as submission to hegemonic norms described by Venuti but as a potential form of cultural resistance – a reversal that demonstrates the relevance of an affective, self-reflexive methodology for examining how translators' situated responses inform their negotiation of and potential resistance to the norms governing translation.

Building on these ideas, my motivation for departing from conventional language is threefold. Firstly, the language on stage evokes that of the streets in the city where my rewriting is set and meant to be staged, producing either familiarity or estrangement and compelling spectators to attend to voices they might otherwise dismiss. Secondly, it re-engages translation with a largely marginalised practice of resistance: the use of non-standard linguistic features, phonetic spelling, and markers of orality. Thirdly, employing a linguistic variety associated with working-class, rural, or racialised communities within a literary tradition that has historically legitimised the standard highlights entrenched linguistic hierarchies that sustain social inequality[3] and segregation.

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[2] Milton discusses Lobato's adaptations of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, which recast the source narratives through Brazilian orality and political commentary. These works illustrate how rewriting in a non-hegemonic culture can operate as social and political resistance rather than assimilation.

[3] Inequality indices in Brazil rose steadily throughout the 1960s and worsened significantly during the military regime; see Fundação Getulio Vargas (2023).

In my rewriting, characterisation is also informed by three intersecting dimensions: class, race, and gender. Mojo is now rich, while Mickybo is poor, Black, and female. To mark this contrast linguistically, Mojo speaks colloquial Brazilian Portuguese, whereas Mickybo's speech incorporates Paulista patterns that follow the ebb and flow of orality. The narrator, by contrast, speaks standard Brazilian Portuguese, highlighting the divide between lived experience and mediated storytelling.

Specifically, the phonological features of Mickybo's Paulista include rhotacism in consonant clusters, consonantal reduction and vocalisation, diphthong simplification, deletion of final *-r* in infinitives, and de-nasalisation of final *-m*. Morphosyntactic features are also present, such as the restriction of plural marking to the first element of a noun phrase and the use of the object pronoun *mim* rather than the subject pronoun *eu* before infinitives. Other phenomena – the use of second-person pronouns in place of third-person pronouns, contractions, and vowel insertions – occur more variably, preserving the natural fluctuations of oral speech. Read through Tymoczko, rewriting here acquires a performative ambition: Mickybo's speech does not merely bring to the fore the linguistic prejudice experienced by speakers of marginalised varieties but subverts the terms under which inequality is voiced and heard, disrupting the linguistic hierarchy through which it is normally reproduced.

McCafferty deliberately omits the identities of Mojo and Mickybo so that audiences focus on the affective rather than the political dimensions of the story, remaining innocent for as long as the protagonists do. This is made possible by the subtlety of their linguistic differences in the source text. Although traces of the conflict appear throughout the play – bullets flying, buses burning, soldiers searching – when Mickybo unexpectedly calls Mojo "ya dirty fuckin' orange bastard", the audience is jolted out of their imaginative absorption much as Mickybo is upon learning of his father's death (McCafferty 2002: 49). The unlikelihood of their friendship thus becomes apparent only towards the end of the play, when it comes undone through a sectarian act of violence that remains unaddressed as the curtain falls. In my rewriting, however, because language and external markers immediately signal differences of class, race, and gender, it is not possible to withhold their backgrounds from the outset. As a result, while the duo wander around in a constant daze, audiences stay alert and are prompted to interpret the violence surrounding them through the lens of Brazilian social inequality: a lethal police operation, a punishment killing ordered by a drug lord, a forced disappearance carried out by the regime – anything is possible. Narrative ambiguity is thus maintained, inviting audiences to fill its gaps through their own understanding of how inequality may have bred violence then and may continue to breed it now.

To illustrate how linguistic variation and affective decision-making recast the source play's social relations within the receiving culture, I turn to a joke Mickybo tells Mojo, supplemented by a clarifying intervention from the narrator (McCafferty 2002: 11):

Source play	Target play	Standard EN back-translation
Mickybo: how d'ya stop a biafran from drownin'	**Mickybo:** com'é que faz pro betinho num se afogá	**Mickybo:** how do you make it so Betinho won't drown?
Narrator: throw him a polo mint	**Narrador:** (*sussurrando*) o irmão do henfil	**Narrator:** (*whispering*) Henfil's brother
Mickybo: throw him a polo mint	**Mickybo:** joga uma balagil	**Mickybo:** throw him a Balagil
Mojo: polo mints are catmalogion	**Mojo:** ha ha ha que pesado	**Mojo:** ha ha ha that's heavy! (as in "that's harsh")

The gallows humour so characteristic of Belfast is brutally simple: the stereotypically emaciated Biafran body, widely circulated during and immediately after the Biafran War (1967-1970), is imagined as thin enough to pass through the hole of a Polo mint. The joke illustrates how collective violence enters children's everyday language detached from its socio-political context: Biafra becomes a cultural marker, while the history underpinning the joke remains unspoken. In my rewriting, by contrast, the narrator does not deliver the punchline but whispers the clarification "Henfil's brother" in standard, and therefore culturally authoritative, language. This leaves the marginalised character to deliver the punchline. Henfil (Henrique de Souza Filho) and his famously thin brother Betinho (Herbert de Souza), both known for opposing the military dictatorship and defending human rights, in turn lend the joke its political charge. The linguistic differentiation intensifies distinctions less pronounced in the source play, making the social hierarchy separating the protagonists readable and audible: Mickybo's contractions (*com'é*, *pro*) and phonetic markers of orality (*num*, *afogá*) index her marginalised position, whereas Mojo's colloquial speech remains closer to standard Brazilian Portuguese, signalling his relative privilege. Domestication thus gives way to rewriting: the joke is not merely rendered fluent and culturally familiar but politically reactivated.

Importantly, the rewriting of this joke arose from my resistance to reproducing humour premised on Black suffering. This response reflects an anti-racist consciousness formed within – and in opposition to – a culture marked by a history of brutal violence against Black people. Mickybo's re-characterisation intensified this dissonance, leading me to Betinho as a solution that preserved the joke's bodily mechanics without its racialised victimisation. Here, affective response, ideologically inflected characterisation, and activist commitment converged in a single translational choice.

2. "With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls, for stony limits cannot hold love out" – The Setting

The fantasy world Mojo and Mickybo create for themselves shields them from the conflict: while the real world supplies the props that feed their imagination, these are not enough to keep them anchored in reality. This spatial and temporal detachment foregrounds the play's more universal themes – childhood friendship, the loss of innocence, and the lure of escapism. Yet, having grown up in Brazil and being attuned to its persistent social inequalities, I found that more pressing themes immediately took precedence.

The complex nature of Northern Irish sectarianism cannot be reproduced within the Brazilian context; it remains specific to its own socio-political landscape. Although it can be represented on the Brazilian stage, doing so might position audiences as observers of a distant, almost imagined society rather than activating the play's political tensions within their own context. My rewriting therefore relocates *Mojo Mickybo* to 1970s Brazil at the height of the military regime, "rollin' down the hill" in the city of São Paulo and "throwin' skimmers" across the River Pinheiros (McCafferty 2002: 33, 43). Doing so involved recontextualising it across geographic, cultural, and socio-political boundaries, not as a betrayal of the source play but in response to its political undercurrents, with the aim of enabling my rewriting to function not merely as a cautionary tale but as a catalyst for critical engagement and change.

The friendship between Mojo, from "up the road", and Mickybo, from "across the bridge", begins with a chance meeting in "a park" (McCafferty 2002: 12). These references point to the Ormeau Road, the Ormeau Bridge, and the Ormeau Park in south Belfast. Divided into Upper and Lower, the Ormeau Road functioned as an interface area during the Troubles, separating predominantly Protestant and Catholic housing respectively. The Ormeau Bridge, a symbolic dividing line between the two communities, crosses the River Lagan onto Ormeau Park on the Upper Ormeau side. In the Lower Ormeau, just steps from the bridge, stand two landmarks of sectarian violence: the Rose and Crown bar, where an Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) bombing killed six Catholic civilians in 1974 – including, by implication, Mickybo's father – and the Sean Graham bookmaker's shop, where an Ulster Defence Association (UDA) shooting killed five and injured seven more in 1992 (Northern Ireland Troubles Archive 2026; BBC News 2022).

In my rewriting, the spatial organisation that draws the two protagonists together reflects the tensions of a similarly charged urban landscape: Mojo is from Morumbi and Mickybo from Paraisópolis, two adjacent areas in south São Paulo. Morumbi is one of the wealthiest districts in the city, whereas Paraisópolis is a favela where eighty-five per cent of residents are migrants from Brazil's Northeast region (G1 2021; Melo & Fusco 2019). Nordestino migrants in Paulista favelas often face intersecting forms of economic hardship and sociocultural discrimination, including labour exploitation and limited access to education and public services.

Despite the socioeconomic chasm between the two neighbourhoods, interaction between residents is more common than one might expect (Almeida *et al.* 2008). Those who live in Paraisópolis helped build Morumbi and often work there as plumbers, gardeners,



Figures 1-2. In both pictures, Paraisópolis (left) and Morumbi (right), photographed by Tuca Vieira in 2004 and 2020, respectively.

maids, cleaners, and babysitters. Although both communities mostly coexist peacefully, tensions intensify around issues of safety: Morumbi is a primary target for armed burglaries that often trigger deadly police raids in Paraisópolis[4]. The wealthier the victims, the more aggressive the operations and the greater the danger for innocent bystanders. Both communities are also deeply affected by drug trafficking, though favela residents bear the brunt of it: dealers from Paraisópolis supply consumers from Morumbi, further intensifying the precarious conditions in which residents live.

Favelas are often portrayed in mainstream discourse as spaces defined by criminality and insecurity (Henriques *et al.* 2012). While informed by certain realities, this framing is reductive as it depoliticises the discussion by obscuring structural conditions and downplaying the role of state institutions in perpetuating cycles of violence. A more adequate understanding must move beyond the pathologisation of favelas and approach them as heterogeneous and complex social spaces also shaped by cultural production, civic engagement, and social cohesion. These negative portrayals are politically consequential: they legitimise the organisation of urban space in ways that preserve existing hierarchies and power relations. Henri Lefebvre (2009) identifies space as both a political and social construct. Politically, space functions as an instrument of control, segregating and hierarchically organising the urban fabric to preserve social divisions and reproduce the dominant social order. Socially, it reflects the values, structures, and modes of production of the society that occupies it. The organisation of cities, neighbourhoods, public spaces, and even buildings is therefore never neutral: it reflects and reinforces who belongs where, who does what, and who holds power. Space thus emerges not as a passive backdrop but as an active force shaping cultural production and reception.

These spatial divisions are not only mapped onto the city but lived through bodies and expressed through language. If space both organises and is organised by power, the

[4] Recent headlines read: "Morumbi is the area of São Paulo with the most home robberies", Estadão (2025), and "The second largest favela in São Paulo faces a surge in police violence", O Globo (2024) (my translations).

body and its means of expression become the most immediate "spaces" Mojo and Mickybo can control as they resist the constraints of an oppressive environment. Where environment threatens the self, safety shifts inward, the body becomes a refuge, and language articulates and preserves the conditions necessary for that refuge to endure. This is evident throughout the source play. At one point, Mickybo responds to a madman's shouted warning, "we're all gonna get murdered in our beds", by proposing that they live in the hut he and Mojo will build over the timbers (McCafferty 2002: 30). Their refuge, as imaginary as it is physical, cannot escape the conflict, since it already contains a rubber bullet fired by British soldiers during rioting. Yet language allows them to rework the hut into a space they can inhabit on their own terms.

Australia and America extend this imaginative geography beyond Northern Ireland, as Mojo and Mickybo conceive of these distant places – one of which "ya could dig yer way to" – in terms of the familiar spatial coordinates of their own neighbourhoods: "up the road" and "across the bridge" (McCafferty 2002: 12). Superman, in turn, stretches it beyond Earth itself: he can detect bombs with his super hearing, remove them, and carry them far away into outer space. Mickybo concludes that "Batman couldn't do that" and Mojo adds, "Batman be useless in Belfast" (McCafferty 2002: 34). These fantasies neither deny the surrounding violence nor remove the children from the space it pervades. Rather, its material traces are metabolised through language so that fear can be contained and the illusion of safety sustained.

Even when violence enters the body and can no longer be spatially distanced, it is drawn into the same imaginative reworking. A boy's leg severed by a bomb becomes an object of play, a third limb with which they might "keep the ball up forever" (McCafferty 2002: 33).

Source Play	Target Play	Standard EN back-translation
Mojo: a wee lad in our school was in town with his ma an' a bomb went off – an' it blew one of his legs off	**Mickybo:** hoje um menino lá da escola ficô preso num tiroteio c'a mãe e uma rajada arrancô a perna dele	**Mickybo:** today, a boy from our school was caught in a shootout with his mother and a burst of gunfire tore his leg off
Mickybo: right off in one go like	**Mojo:** arrancou de uma vez só – assim	**Mojo:** it tore it off all at once, like that?
Mojo: aye - but his trousers was still on him. **Mickybo:** if ya foun' his leg ya could sew it on to ye – three legs – keep the ball up forever.	**Mickybo:** isso – mas a calça dele ficô no lugar – se 'cê achasse a perna podia costurá ela nocê – três perna – dava pra ficá fazeno embaxadinha pra sempre	**Mickybo:** yes, but his trousers stayed in place. If you found the leg, you could sew it onto yourself. Three legs… you could keep doing kick-ups forever!

Although racial and class disparities intensified during the 1970s, reading the event primarily through the military dictatorship would eclipse the longer history of inequality governing exposure to violence in São Paulo. The relocation makes visible Lefebvre's understanding of space as politically and socially produced by rendering the spatially unspecific "in town" as Paraisópolis, where exposure to violence contrasts with the relative protection of Morumbi. Here, the lines are likewise reassigned – Mickybo introduces the shooting and articulates its grotesque resolution, while Mojo, relatively distanced from the event, incredulously seeks confirmation – centring the marginalised character as both the one who knows violence intimately enough to narrate it and the one who has the power to imaginatively rework it. The relocation preserves the interplay of bodily vulnerability, childhood imagination, and urban space in McCafferty's play while also reactivating these relations temporally through the addition of "today". In doing so, armed violence is brought into the immediate present, underscoring its everyday proximity to racialised, working-class childhood in Paraisópolis.

3. "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" – Affect

In theatre, language is embodied performance, whether enacted by actors onstage or conjured by readers in solitude. As George Steiner reminds us, words mean nothing when we cannot feel them, and we certainly cannot feel words we do not know (1998: 313). The affective power of language is a sensitive issue in translation studies, yet essential to any playwright seeking to move an audience.

Words and feelings stand in equally close connection for Douglas Robinson, who argues that translators should not retreat into pure intellection, but "boldly flesh out the contradictory and conflicting body of [their] response" in order to produce translations that feel "physically tangible or emotionally alive" (1991: 17, 21). For Robinson, translators are guided both by ideosomatic programming – socially conditioned responses informed by ideology – and idiosomatic expression rooted in individual lived experience. Yet dominant notions of textual authority and translator invisibility have historically delegitimised such responses. Once we recognise, however, that what is expected of us is in fact beyond the bounds of reality, we can begin to notice our somatic responses and accept them as legitimate tools, arguably the best ones we have (Robinson 1991: 34).

Koskinen accordingly urges translators to "*strive for* affectability" (2012: 20, emphasis added). Theatre depends on the interplay between body and word, between physical and linguistic expression. While other elements enrich theatrical meaning, they remain in service of this fundamental duo. Having agency over language, theatre translators must approach it as embodied performance both in undertaking their task and in anticipating audience reception:

> In translating, affect regulation can be defined as a process by which the translator influences which emotions the translation conveys and triggers, how they are expressed and, as much as the translator can, how these emotions are experienced. This regulation can be achieved at different phases and by different means: by selecting a suitable source text, by deploying attention, by modifying the cognitive appraisal of

> the translation, by reframing the source text and by modulating the textual features to affect the translation's reception (Koskinen 2020: 56).

The somatics of translation is deeply influenced by neuroscientific findings, particularly Antonio Damasio's demonstration that reason and emotion are inseparable from one another and from the body. He maintains that our neocortex, which processes rationality, was built not only on top of the subcortex, which processes biological regulation and whose central aspects are emotions and feeling, but also *from* it and *with* it (Damasio 1994: 128). Rather than relying solely on drives and instincts to survive, humans developed mechanisms that optimise decision-making. These mechanisms operate through a cyclical process in which mind and body continually respond to and affect one another (Damasio 1994: 224-225). Damasio further demonstrates that "few if any perceptions of any object or event, actually present or recalled from memory, are ever neutral in emotional terms. Through either innate design or by learning, we react to most, perhaps all, objects with emotions, however weak, and subsequent feelings, however feeble" (2003: 93).

From a translational perspective, our emotions and feelings consciously and unconsciously inform our decisions at all times, making it possible to understand gut feeling and intuition as active participants in thought (Damasio 1994: 187-188). Somatic markers – bodily emotional signals – support reasoning, which would otherwise be too slow and inefficient, by guiding focus and attention, anticipating outcomes, and steering action. This is particularly relevant to intuitive and creative decisions combining personal, social, and abstract considerations (Damasio 1994: 165-201), as is likely the case with translation undertaken as a form of activism.

Psychology has also contributed significantly to understanding the relationship between reason and emotion, supporting the view that affect is physically manifest across human functions. Silvan Tomkins (2008), one of the foundational thinkers in modern affect theory, distinguishes between affect, feeling, emotion, scene, and script. Affect is a biological response to neural stimulation originating inside or outside the body. When affect enters awareness, it becomes feeling. As present feeling connects with the memory of a prior similar feeling, it acquires emotional significance and forms part of a scene. Scripts emerge through the organisation of such scenes, guiding responses towards more positive and away from more negative outcomes. Affect therefore becomes inseparable from the accumulated experience through which individuals perceive and respond to the world.

Returning to my Brazilian rewriting of *Mojo Mickybo*, my ideosomatic and idiosomatic responses to the source play – informed by my upbringing, education, lived experience, environment, and belief in theatre's potential to promote social change – led me to infuse the target play with an activist dimension. A fellow translator, guided by different interests and experiences, might be more or less attuned to the potential of addressing linguistic discrimination, social segregation, and inequality in Brazil through McCafferty's work. Mine is therefore not the only possible translation of *Mojo Mickybo*: there may be as many as there are translators because each act of translation is necessarily situated and embodied. Following Koskinen's call to treat affect as a crucial framework in translation studies – capable of illuminating translators' choices, readers' and audiences' responses, and the circulation

of translations – I present two personal accounts of affect at work in translational decision-making to challenge the ready dismissal of visceral responses as non-cognitive.

The first example concerns my decision to replace the 12th of July bonfire with a rubbish dump. In the source culture, the bonfire is not a neutral element but a culturally and politically charged symbol of sectarian identity and territorial belonging. After deciding to set *Mojo e Mickybo* in Brazil, I travelled from Belfast to Paraisópolis. The train took us only as far as Morumbi, and only after considerable persuasion did a taxi driver agree to take us farther, leaving us at the foot of the hill after repeatedly warning us of the danger ahead. As we climbed in the scorching heat, acutely aware of being watched, I felt caught between the voices urging vigilance – echoing everything I had read – and the recognition that mainstream portrayals of marginalised communities are often biased and unjust. At one point, our guide introduced us to artists who transformed discarded materials into sculptures, including one known as the Brazilian Gaudí. Alongside this inventive beauty, however, we encountered scenes of deprivation and distress: precarious houses stacked one above another, a woman under the influence of drugs shouting abuse, two boys tormenting a kitten, and dirty water running through piles of rubbish along a narrow dirt path. Grief registered bodily: my stomach knotted and my chest tightened. I was filled with an uncomfortable mixture of empathy for those who lived there and relief that I would soon be able to leave. That relief also exposed the privilege of my gaze: I could leave, while those whose lives I was observing could not.

The decision to turn the bonfire into a rubbish dump did not arise simply from knowing that many favelas lack basic sanitation. While both symbols transform socio-political divisions into material features of the environments the children must navigate, the bonfire is inscribed with sectarian affiliation, whereas the rubbish dump redirects that dramaturgical function towards urban segregation and social inequality. In Damasio's terms, my knotted stomach and tightened chest – arising as I witnessed the structural neglect that marked the racial and class divide between Paraisópolis and the world I knew – functioned as somatic markers, alongside the ordeal of reaching Paraisópolis, the unease at being watched, and even the oppressive heat as we walked through extremely narrow, concrete-lined passageways. Together, these responses activated my memory, focused my attention, and steered my intuitive and creative decision-making towards a symbol capable of materialising social and political divisions without reproducing the bonfire's culturally specific meaning.

A similar example is my decision to replace the battle cry "mcmanus luigi riva - don del a vista - flamenco - bingo" (McCafferty 2002: 18) with "jairzão tostão pelezão - macacos me mordam - santos - corinthians". McManus and Luigi Riva are famous footballers, hence my choice of Santos and Corinthians: the teams supported by my father and brother as I was growing up and the clubs at the heart of São Paulo's oldest football rivalry. Mickybo's story also reminds me of my own. At twelve, I lost my father to cancer, a loss that transformed my life not only through grief but also by bringing an end to my sheltered existence as a minister's daughter. My mother's attempts to protect me left me living a sanitised version of that loss and, together with my young age, prevented me from processing it. That process began almost twenty years later, while I was undertaking my doctorate. I fell ill, and through that illness made the choices that shaped *Mojo e Mickybo*, draft after draft,

each more personal than the last. When I asked McCafferty what the battle cries meant, he replied that they had been chosen randomly and were not supposed to make sense. But because my goal was to seize every opportunity to engage audiences affectively, I felt compelled not only to preserve their nonsensical form but also to imbue them with meaning. Part of that process involved drawing on personal material. Looking back, my whole childhood is in *Mojo e Mickybo*: the comics I read, the cartoons I watched, the nursery rhymes I sang, and the lullabies sung to me.

From a Tomkinsian perspective, my affective response to Mickybo's story manifested somatically and entered my awareness as feeling. As it resonated with memories of my father and the childhood loss I had been unable to process, present and remembered feelings formed a scene that acquired emotional significance and activated an existing script. In translation, this script informed the activist rewriting of the source battle cry as an affectively charged constellation. Santos and Corinthians do more than fill positions within its apparently random sequence: they materialise my remembered relationship with my father and brother, with whom I played football in the neighbourhood square and button football at home. "Macacos me mordam" was the Brazilian Portuguese rendering of Popeye's "Well, blow me down!", popular in 1970s Brazil and beyond, while Jairzinho, Tostão, and Pelé, arranged as a sequence of augmentatives, playfully magnify three key members of the legendary Brazilian attack that won the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. These references belong to the personal, cultural, and historical world my father inhabited as a twelve-year-old in 1970s Brazil – the same age I was when he died – and create an affective convergence between his childhood, my own, and Mickybo's. Although the rewriting preserves the apparent nonsense of the original battle cry, it allows its constituent elements to carry an affective charge that is simultaneously personal, culturally recognisable, and anchored in the historical moment in which the play is set.

Even if my rewriting had not been relocated, these processes would still have been in motion, since what we assume to be carried out exclusively by the mind – long glorified as though it existed in extracorporeal form – is inseparable from the body's chemical and physiological processes. The examples discussed here demonstrate how Robinson's idiosomatic and ideosomatic responses converge in practice: social conditioning and personal history oriented my engagement with the source play and the translational decisions that ensued. By embracing rather than suppressing these responses, I engaged in what Koskinen describes as affect regulation, orienting my rewriting towards audience affectability. To strive for affectability is not to prescribe what audiences should feel, but first and foremost to acknowledge and mobilise the translator's embodied responses in ways that may foster affective recognition – and potentially lead to socio-political mobilisation – within the receiving culture. Translation is therefore somatic in the encounter with the source material, in the process of decision-making, and in the event of reception; it cannot be adequately described in purely objective terms.

Conclusion

This article asked how the translator's affective response to a source play figures in the decisions through which translation becomes socio-political action. It suggests that situated,

embodied responses interact with linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and political commitment to inform appraisal, focus attention, and ultimately help determine which elements of a play demand rewriting and what form that rewriting might take.

Taken together, the examples locate affective rewriting at the intersection of language, space, and embodiment. Socially marked speech recasts discursive authority, amplifying the marginalised character's voice and foregrounding the socio-political dimension of the target play. Spatial relocation likewise redistributes exposure to violence along the racialised, classed, and gendered divisions of the receiving culture, giving dramaturgical form to social inequality and urban segregation while preserving the children's ability to transform their surroundings imaginatively. The translator is also implicated in this nexus, apprehending language and space from within their body, mobilising their situatedness, experience, and positionality in ways that may affect audiences and foster change.

Lefevere's concept of rewriting and Tymoczko's account of activist translation provide a framework for recognising this process as both an exercise of translator agency and a form of socio-political intervention. Damasio's somatic markers and Tomkins's scripts illuminate how lived and remembered experience participates in translational decision-making, while Robinson and Koskinen allow this involvement to be understood as integral to translation rather than as subjective residue surrounding it. Affect here constitutes an analytically traceable dimension of translation, bringing the two socio-political contexts into relation without claiming equivalence between sectarian Belfast and segregated São Paulo.

Finally, this article advances an understanding of activist translation as an embodied process in which affective decision-making becomes linguistic and dramaturgical rewriting. Translator agency is neither neutral nor arbitrary but situated in the affected translator's negotiation between the source play and the socio-political context of the receiving culture. The decisions arising from this negotiation help determine which speech is audible, how bodies are seen, and who belongs where, thereby reworking historical and socio-political tensions and making them available for affective recognition. To translate affectively is to reconfigure the conditions under which the source play's political undercurrents may be felt – and potentially acted upon – elsewhere.

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The Language of the Land: The Memorial at Portella della Ginestra

Abstract I: Il memoriale di Portella della Ginestra ridefinisce la commemorazione pubblica unendo territorio, linguaggio, attivismo politico e memoria collettiva. Realizzato nel 1980 da Ettore de Conciliis, Rocco Falciano e Giorgio Stockel nei pressi di Piana degli Albanesi, a sud di Palermo, in Sicilia, commemora le vittime di una strage avvenuta il Primo Maggio del 1947. Il saggio ricostruisce gli eventi legati al massacro e mostra come attraverso l'arte quel territorio si sia trasformato in un luogo di memoria civica permanente, anticipando come prima opera di Land Art in Italia la moderna arte ambientale.

Abstract II: The memorial at Portella della Ginestra redefines public commemoration by uniting land, language, political activism, and collective memory. The memorial, created in 1980 by Ettore de Conciliis, Rocco Falciano, and Giorgio Stockel near Piana degli Albanesi, south of Palermo, Sicily, is a commemoration of the victims of a massacre that occurred on May Day of 1947. This essay recounts the story of the events surrounding this massacre and reveals how, through the agency of art, the land on which these events took place came to function as an ongoing site of civic remembrance, Italy's first work of Land Art, and a precursor to today's environmental art movement.

Keywords: Language, Collective Memory, Earth Art, Activism.

HUMBLE [L. humilis, low, small, slight, akin to humus, soil, earth (see HUMUS)]
1. Not proud, not self-assertive; modest.
HUMUS [L. earth, ground, soil; see HOMAGE] A brown or black substance resulting from the partial decay of plant and animal matter; the organic part of the soil.
HOMAGE [L. homo, a man; earth, ground, whence L. humus] Anything given or done to show reverence, honour or respect
(*Webster's New World* 1972: s.vv.).

The landscape and the language are the same.
And we ourselves are language and are the land
(Aiken 1961: 254).

On the stony plateau of Portella della Ginestra, language, land, and memory converge. Conceived between 1979 and 1980 by the artists and activists Ettore de Conciliis (b.1941) and

Rocco Falciano (1933-2012) in collaboration with the architect Giorgio Stockel (b.1938), the memorial to the victims of the May Day massacre of 1947 stands near Piana degli Albanesi, south of Palermo, Sicily. It is at once Italy's first work of Land Art and a radical experiment in civic remembrance: a monument without ostentation, built not of imported marble or triumphant bronze, but of the very stones that witnessed the violence it commemorates. Arranged in a low, archaic circle reminiscent of Mediterranean ritual spaces and prehistoric menhirs, these calcareous boulders serve as both sculpture and testimony, leading the visitor through the site of the massacre. They transform the landscape into a text – one inscribed not only with the names of those who died there and the dates of the massacre, but with the enduring language of resistance, one that resounds to this day as workers and their families gather on this site every 1 May to mourn their dead and continue the fight for the cause for which they died. This essay will recount how the story of those events and the land on which they occurred are transformed, through the agency of the artistic object, into a profound expression of collective memory, and how the land, in turn, will influence the role of the artist.

Visitors to the memorial are invited to read the land as an archive, to experience commemoration as pilgrimage, and to understand mourning as a form of political vigilance. As is true of much Land Art, it is in a remote area; the journey to it is akin to a pilgrimage. With no arched entranceway, no monumental marble or steel sculptures, no cross or other religious iconography, the memorial is easy to miss, as it is part of the landscape. It lies in an open field with minimal vegetation, amongst the rocks and the boulders that have always been there. In springtime, some yellow wildflowers called *ginestre* bloom on the hillside.

A small sign by the road announces that you have arrived at Portella della Ginestra. In Giacomo Leopardi's poem "La ginestra", the flower symbolises stoic courage and resilience, clinging to the arid flank of Mount Vesuvius, described as the "formidabil monte / sterminator Vesevo" ("the terrifying mountain / Vesuvius the destroyer"), where "la qual null'altro allegra arbor né fiore" ("which no other tree or flower brightens") (Leopardi 2010: 286, ll.2-4). Yet the *ginestra*, as if in commiseration with those who lost their lives at the site, emits a sweet fragrance and endures in this arid place with the tenacity of plants (and perhaps, by metaphorical extension, people) that are rooted to the land (Figure 1).

La Portella is a doorway that opens onto a long history. The site had long been a place of assembly, protest, and hope – a "portella", a mountain pass or doorway opening onto centuries of struggle for land and dignity. The stories that are told here are of enduring hardships, centuries of injustice, and tragedy, but they are not recitals of despair because, despite all that has happened here, the telling of these stories and this memorial are an assertion of resistance and resilience. Beginning in the 1890s, a May Day workers' procession and festival were held on this site – this celebration continued even during Benito Mussolini's rule, though in a clandestine manner. This is an area where social injustices have provoked many collective acts of resistance, and workers' demonstrations continue to be held to this day.

The memorial at Portella della Ginestra commemorates the events that took place at the celebration on 1 May 1947. On that morning, an estimated two thousand workers and their families from the villages of Piana degli Albanesi, San Cipirello, and San Giuseppe Jato gathered on the rocky plateau at the base of the mountain to enjoy the May Day holiday. They arrived in brightly painted carts, on donkeys, on horses, on bicycles, or on foot, carry-



Figure 1. *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. Photo by Jo Anna Isaak, 2023.

ing flags, banners, and food. According to Serafino Petta, who was there that day and has kindly recounted the story to me, some people in this poverty-stricken area may have come with the hope of getting food that was traditionally shared at the festival[1]. This was an especially joyous Labour Day festival as the people were hopeful that a new social order was about to be born. The *Blocco del Popolo* (The People's Bloc) – an alliance between the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, PSI) – had won a major victory in the regional election of 20 April, and hopes were high for political reforms, chief among them, the redistribution of uncultivated lands. Demands were being made for relief from the taxes Rome levied on the citizens of Sicily; some, associated with a group called EVIS, were even advocating for Sicily to secede from

[1] I interviewed Serafino Petta on 9 May 2023, in the headquarters of the CGIL in Piana degli Albanesi. He was, at that time, the last living survivor of the massacre. He passed away in 2026 at the age of 94.
Petta regularly took part in the demonstrations organised by the CGIL at the site of the massacre, giving his testimony and recalling the names of the victims.

Italy. Amid all these divided factions were the workers, hoping this was the moment when reform might be possible.

Most of those who assembled on the plain that day were from the nearby commune of Piana degli Albanesi (in Albanian *Hora e Arbëreshëvet*), the homeland of the largest and most populous colony of Arbëreshë/Albanians established in Italy in 1488, due to the Turkish conquest of the Balkans. A half-millennium later, this community remains geographically, ethnically, and culturally distinct, maintaining many elements of Albanian culture, including traditional costumes, music, folklore, Orthodox rites that the Roman Catholic Church sought to eliminate, and the Albanian language. When I asked Matteo Mandalà, a professor of Albanian literature and resident of Piana degli Albanesi, how many people in the village still spoke Arbëresh (the Albanian dialect spoken by the Arbëreshë people), he replied, "Everyone!"[2]. These fiercely independent people and the newly elected *Blocco del Popolo* posed a clear threat to the wealthy landowners and to other vested interests in the area.

On that May morning in 1947, sounds first thought to be celebratory fireworks were explosions and gunfire, and a joyous occasion became a scene of massacre. Eleven people, four of them children, were killed on site and more than forty were wounded. Many animals were also killed or wounded. Petta, who was sixteen at the time, hid behind some rocks with his father as all around them their friends and neighbours were being shot. He told me of a boy crying to his father that his horse had been shot, only to realise that his mother had also been killed.

This massacre and several successive attacks on the offices of the labour movement in the area and other murders that followed were led by Salvatore Giuliano (1922-1950) and his gang, notorious bandits who lived in the mountains and committed many crimes – robberies, kidnappings, and murders, including those of several police officers. Gangs such as these were common in western Sicily at the time. Danilo Dolci's book *The Outlaws of Partinico* (1960) is a collection of first-person accounts by gang members, many of whom were driven to join these gangs to feed their families. These men regularly engaged in robbery, extortion, and the kidnapping of wealthy people for ransom; however, firing on unarmed peasants and children, some of whom were their neighbours, was violence of another magnitude. There are many theories about who was behind Giuliano and his gang. Francesco Petrotta's book *Salvatore Giuliano, uomo d'onore: Nuove ipotesi sulla strage di Portella della Ginestra* (2018) links Giuliano directly to the Cosa Nostra, which in turn was connected to wealthy landowners and corrupt local politicians and police. Others point to influences from the government in Rome. The Italian prime minister at the time, Alcide De Gasperi, met with President Harry S. Truman in January 1947, and promised to stamp out communism in exchange for economic aid from the United States. In other accounts, including Giuliano's own account in the letters he attempted to send to Truman, he and his gang were a paramilitary group working on behalf of the anti-communist campaign the United States was promoting in Italy[3].

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[2] I met Matteo Mandalà on 10 May 2023 in Piana degli Albanesi.

[3] Imprisoned for murdering a police officer, Giuliano was freed when American forces liberated Sicily. Although the US Office of Strategic Services had maintained records on him since 1944, any direct contact remains uncertain. American journalist Michael Stern met Giuliano who asked him to carry a letter to President



Figure 2. May Day Manifestation at Portella della Ginestra, 2012[4].

These factions had shared interests, and Giuliano's actions undermining the peasants' and workers' movement directly or indirectly served their agendas. While specific accusations are controversial, there seems to be consensus that Giuliano "was being used as a vanguard in a domestic political battle with the Communists" (Cockayne 2016: 192). People from the surrounding communities gather at the site of the massacre every year on 1 May to commemorate the victims, and they continue to seek answers to questions about the events of over three-quarters of a century ago (Figure 2).

This was the tragic story with all its complications and uncertainties and political interests that the Sicilian regional government in 1979 commissioned de Conciliis and Falciano to commemorate. At this time, both artists were well-known for creating public murals that support workers' movements and the struggle for civil and human rights. In 1965, when he was in his early twenties, de Conciliis, in collaboration with Falciano, made his first mural – *Il murale della pace* (The Mural of Peace) – for the church of San Francesco in his hometown of Avellino. One side of the mural portrays people in carts, on donkeys, and on foot carrying flags, banners, farm implements, and placards for peace, forming a circle around St. Francis of Assisi. The other side depicts the ravages of war. The mural represents people of various nationalities and religions, even atheists, as well as recognisable figures such as Fidel Cas-

Truman, dated twelve days after the massacre. It included Giuliano's cartoon depicting himself severing Sicily's chain to Italy and drawing the island towards America. In *No Innocence Abroad* (1953), Stern portrays him as a handsome, engaging Robin Hood figure whose crimes resulted from police corruption.

[4] https://www.piolatorre.it/public/news/1-maggio-a-portella-della-ginestra-381/ (consulted on 09/09/2026).

tro, John Kennedy, Pier Paolo Pasolini, along with two Popes. Not surprisingly, the mural caused an uproar among religious conservatives and those on the right, but – unlike Diego Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads* (1933) at Rockefeller Center in New York – it survived the censorship attacks, thanks in large part to an audience granted to de Conciliis by Pope Paul VI. Now it has been put forward for UNESCO World Heritage status.

Over the next few years, de Conciliis would undertake several more murals in support of workers' movements and the struggle for equitable land distribution for farmers in other parts of Italy. In 1971, he was in Mexico City, where he studied mural painting techniques with the Mexican muralist and labour activist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974). In 1972, after his return, he worked with Falciano, Carlo Levi, and Ernesto Treccani on the mural *Occupazione delle terre e lotta per lo sviluppo* (Land Occupation and the Struggle for Development) in Fiano Romano. Falciano recalls the impetus for this mural:

> Lentamente era maturata l'idea di ricordare con un murale quelle lotte per i diritti civili e umani, collegandole al movimento locale per l'occupazione delle terre dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, e all'azione contemporanea per lo sviluppo, la solidarietà e la pace in Italia e in altre aree del mondo (Falciano 2007: 136).

Making the memorial for those who lost their lives in the massacre at Portella della Ginestra and envisioning the appropriate form for enshrining the collective memories of a diverse community was a more complex project than commemorating a well-known individual or the labour movement in general. De Conciliis describes this process as a work of art in and of itself[5]. For a time, de Conciliis lived in a monastery in Piana degli Albanesi where he listened to those who had witnessed the event, to those living in the nearby villages, and to those working the land. In his search for how he, a relatively privileged outsider, was to give form to what their stories revealed about the intolerable conditions, flagrant injustice, and endemic violence imposed on them, he became not only an artist fashioning an individual work of art but also a conduit for the community's collective expression. His search for an adequate objective correlative for their collective memories took place over a two-year period and involved many negotiations with the people he came to know, the commune, and the Sicilian regional government.

Meanwhile, de Conciliis was becoming familiar with Land Art – also known as Earth Art or Earthworks – a movement that was expanding both the range of materials used and the possible locations of a work of art, which became inextricably connected to the natural environment. He lived for a time in New York, where he was introduced to the writings and projects of Robert Smithson (1939-1973), a pioneer of the Land Art movement. This movement was changing the American art scene, profoundly altering cultural discourse and practice. A series of exhibitions dealing explicitly with Earthworks was held at the Dwan Gallery in New York beginning in 1968, and in 1969 the exhibition *Earth Art* was held at

[5] In conversation with the author De Conciliis described this process of coming to an understanding of the wishes of the community. In many ways he thought it resembled that of his friend Carlo Levi's process of acculturation while in exile in Lucania, in southern Italy, recounted in his book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945).

Cornell University in Ithaca. Michael Heizer (b.1944) created his monumental *Double Negative* in 1969, and Smithson completed *Spiral Jetty* the following year. Jeffrey Kastner writes that in "questioning the established notions of the artistic object" – in leaving the privileged space of the gallery and in not producing commodities – the movement was anti-authoritarian and anti-commercial, embodying "the dissonance of the contemporary age". He asserts that "the broad range of works executed in the landscape participated in a programmatic challenge to social orthodoxy through the agency of the artistic object virtually unparalleled in the twentieth century" (Kastner 1998: ix). While those aims and ambitions resonated with de Conciliis, he focused on the materials from which these works were made – earth, rocks, stones, and dirt – which, despite the movement's name, "Earthworks," were rarely considered in commentary on it. In Smithson's site and non-site pieces, rocks and soil were the art objects. In some of his works viewers are invited to look at rocks and soil placed on mirrors – that is, they look at themselves looking at rocks and soil. Walter de Maria's (1935-2013) *Earth Room* (1977) is just that – a whole room full of earth. This was perhaps the most anachronistic movement in the history of art – envisioning a way to reconnect art and nature, taking us all the way back, past the *plein air* excursions of the Impressionists, to Stonehenge. The land itself was the subject, the material, and the site. Smithson, in his writings, was radically putting forward an old way of looking at earth, art, and time:

> The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust (Smithson 1968: 89).

Inspired by the Land Art movement and the writings of Smithson, as well as by Francesco Rosi's 1962 film *Salvatore Giuliano* in which the scene of the massacre is filmed on the site of the massacre and the landscape becomes almost a protagonist in the film, de Conciliis decided to make the memorial on the site and out of the materials on the site. He was learning to read the language of the land, as Smithson discovered:

> Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void (Smithson 1968: 87).

However, unlike the monumental interventions of American Earthworks, the Portella memorial is deliberately non-invasive. Unlike Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Heizer's *Double Negative,* which involved extensive manipulations of the land with heavy equipment, de Conciliis worked *with* the land as a kind of curator or interpreter, arranging the stones and boulders so they could tell the story they had witnessed. As he explained:

> Il teatro della strage ha esercitato su di me il fascino di quel luogo naturale dove ho potuto traslare il mio interesse per i paesaggi che ho dipinto tante volte. Ho cercato

> di capire la realtà ambientale nella sua dimensione arcaica, agreste, mitica, e da quel rispetto è nata la consapevolezza di intervenire tramite un'opera di arte ambientale, di Land Art, appunto. Sono quindi intervenuto utilizzando esclusivamente materiali già presenti naturalmente sul luogo, la terra e i massi erratici, cercando di imprimere in quei sassi e dare a quello spazio il senso della tragedia per ricordarla in maniera memoriale e non retorica [6].

> The site of the massacre exerted a fascination over me as a natural place where I could transpose my interest in the landscapes I have painted so many times. I sought to understand the environmental reality in its archaic, rural, and mythical dimension, and from that respect came the awareness that I should intervene through a work of environmental art – Land Art, precisely. I therefore engaged with the land using exclusively materials that were already naturally present on the site: earth and erratic boulders. I sought to imprint upon those stones, and upon that space, the meaning of the tragedy, in order to commemorate it in a commemorative rather than rhetorical manner (my translation).

To some extent, the choice of materials was also a matter of necessity. He recalls that they made the memorial "con mezzi di fortuna" ("with makeshift means") and that there was not enough water for the cement foundations[7]. They cleared the surface of the area and arranged the stones they found in the field to form a low-lying circular wall reminiscent of archaic sacred enclosures found throughout the Mediterranean.

A stone pathway leads to the circle. The pathway takes you toward a raised stone platform dedicated to Girolamo Li Causi (1896-1977). Li Causi was a Sicilian politician who led the Italian Communist Party for many years. He was also a prominent figure in the struggle for land reform and the fight against organised crime in Sicily (Figure 3).

On a large stone, the shape of which echoes that of the mountain behind it, is written the date: *1 Maggio 1947* (Figure 4).

Within the enclosure are stones placed where the men, women, children, and animals fell. Reading the "syntax of splits and ruptures" (Smithson 1968: 87) in the stone, de Conciliis, working with local stone carvers and stonemasons, allowed the shapes to emerge from their inchoate forms and, like sentient beings, express the pain of the people and the animals they represent. He became acutely conscious of the sense of the sacred in this land and he describes his realisation of recognisable forms in the rocks as a kind of intuitive shape-seeking. One stone is cleaved in half as if by some violent act; one resembles a body bent over in pain; some look as if they were heads of animals turned upward, mouths opened wide in a cry; some lie twisted on the ground, while others stand upright as if in protest (Figure 5).

One menhir-like stone is engraved with the names of the victims: Margherita Clesceri, Giorgio Cusenza, Giovanni Megna, Francesco Vicari, Vito Allotta, Serafino Lascari, Filippo

---

[6] Ettore de Conciliis in conversation with Federico Sciurpa (2024: 76-77).

[7] In using large local stones, de Conciliis was unwittingly restoring the Dragon Slabs *(Çapelet e drangoit)*, the monumental group of natural rocks that had stood at the entrance of the town until they were destroyed by developers in the 1970s.



Figure 3. Platform for Girolamo Li Causi, *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. Photo by Aurelio Amendola, 1999.



Figure 4. *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. 2024. Photo courtesy of Alessandro di Blasi.



Figure 5. *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. 2024. Photo courtesy of Alessandro di Blasi.

Di Salvo, Giuseppe Di Maggio, Castrense Intravaia, Giovanni Grifò, and Vincenza La Fata. I have visited the site on two occasions, years apart, and each time there has been a fresh wreath of laurel leaves and flowers at the base of this stone (Figure 6).

A large rock called Barbato's Stone (*Il Sasso di Barbato*) is dedicated to Nicola Barbato (Kola Birbati in Albanese; 1856-1923) who was from Piana degli Albanesi and is one of the great figures of Sicilian socialism. The forefather of the workers' movement in the late nineteenth century, Barbato was instrumental in forging the *Fasci Siciliani dei Lavoratori* (Sicilian Workers Leagues), a revolutionary peasant collective. Legend has it that he had given some of his inspirational speeches in this field, decades earlier, standing on this stone (Figure 7).

One stone recounts the story of the massacre (Figure 8):

> 1 maggio 1947. Qui celebrando la Festa del Lavoro e la vittoria del 20 aprile su uomini donne bambini di Piana S. Cipirello S. Giuseppe si abbatté il piombo della mafia e degli agrari per stroncare la lotta dei contadini contro il feudo.
>
> 1 May 1947. Here celebrating the Labour Day and the victory of 20 April, the men, women, and children of Piana degli Albanesi, San Cipirello, and San Giuseppe were broken by the lead of the mafia and the landowners to end the peasants' struggle against the fiefdom (my translation).

Another stone is engraved with a poem written in dialect by Ignazio Buttitta (1899-1997), the great Sicilian poet who was once a farmworker: "U me cori doppu tantanni è



Figure 6. Carved stone with names of victims, *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. Photo by Jo Anna Isaak, 2023.



Figure 7. Il Sasso di Barbato, *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra* (https://www.visitpiana.com/portella-della-ginestra, consulted on 09/09/2026).

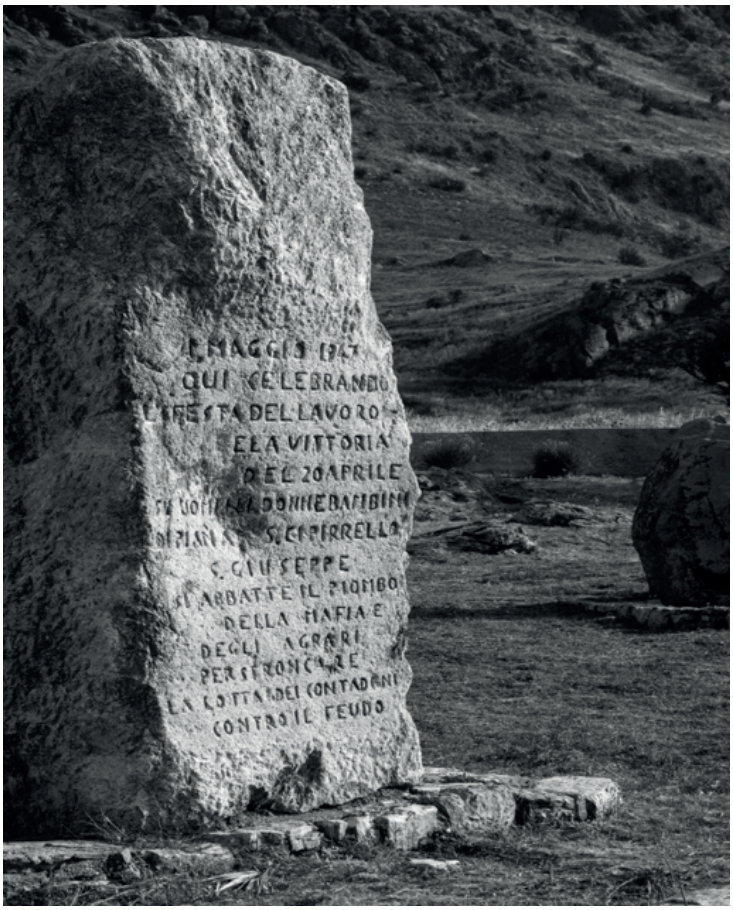

Figure 8. *1 Maggio 1947*. Photo courtesy of Alessandro di Blasi, 2024.

a Purtedda. È 'nta petri e 'nto sangu di cumpagni ammazzati" ("After so many years, my heart is at Portella. It is in the stones and in the blood of the murdered comrades"). Buttitta wrote verses in support of the workers and having once been himself a fieldworker, he understood the political importance of saving the local language. In his poem "Language and Dialect", Buttitta writes:

Un populu
diventa poviru e servu
quannu ci arrubbanu a lingua
addutata di patri:
è persu pi sempre.
(Buttitta 1970: 54).

(A people
becomes poor and servile
when their language is stolen from them
inherited from their forefathers:
it is lost forever)[8].

Creating a memorial that pays respect to the continuity of a language, of memories, of heritage, and of a sacred site is a complex project for an artist, even more so when undertaken with non-traditional materials. Witness the initial negative response to Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, DC, made of two black granite stones, which is now the most beloved and frequently visited memorial in the United States. Many may have wished that the memorial at Portella had been made of a material more precious than the stones found in the field and that it was more imposing. But the memorial does not attempt to make a grand statement, as de Conciliis says, it is "un monumentalismo senza retorica" ("a monument without rhetoric")[9]. No attempt has been made to impose an aesthetic artifice on the site. Instead, the manner in which he invited the community to engage with their land is rooted in verbal expressions and in philosophical traditions dating back to ancient Greek poet Hesiod's *Works and Days* (2008). The poem, in which the Muses take on a propitiatory role in relation to labourers and the fields, suggests that working with and caring for the land sustainably can provide insights into how to live a virtuous and just life. The

[8] Translated by Arthur V. Dieli, http://www.dieli.net/SicilyPage/Poetry/Buttitta.html (consulted on 07/09/2026).

[9] De Conciliis in conversation with the author.

idea that the land itself contains a philosophical message for those capable of reading it has been reiterated throughout the centuries by artists and writers, among them, the American nature essayist John Burroughs (1837-1921):

> The gold of nature does not look like gold at the first glance. It must be smelted and refined in the mind of the observer. And one must crush mountains of quartz and wash hills of sand to get it. To know the indications is the main matter. People who do not know the secret are eager to take a walk with the observer to find where the mine is that contains such nuggets, little knowing that his ore-bed is but a gravel-heap to them. How insignificant appear most of the facts which one sees in his walks, in the life of the birds, the flowers, the animals, or in the phases of the landscape, or the look of the sky! – insignificant until they are put through some mental or emotional process and their true value appears (Burroughs 1875: 218).

The kinship de Conciliis formed with the people of Piana degli Albanesi, San Cipirello, and San Giuseppe Jato, with writers who lived on the land and knew its language, and others living far away in both ancient and modern times is not a coincidence. He has found the gold of nature and chosen land and language for his raw materials and subject matter; and in the repeated affirmation of the organic correspondence among art, language, and land, we experience the vitality of that old tradition.

The Portella della Ginestra memorial has been the subject of numerous articles in newspapers and journals, has been anthologised in several books, and a book about it was published with photographs by Aurelio Amendola and essays by Enrico Crispolti and Marco Falciano (1999). Many photographs of the memorial are displayed in the history museum in Piana degli Albanesi. The memorial is also the subject of Carlo Laurenti's documentary film *Telling Stones* (2015). Photographs of the memorial were included in *Roma Periurbana: Risorse Agricole, Territorio, Realtà Sommerse*, a 2023 exhibition organised by a group working to support farmworkers trying to recuperate unoccupied agricultural land – in short, working for the same causes that inspired the May Day celebration in 1947[10].

Many in the community, both young and old, those on the political left and right, are currently working to maintain and preserve the memorial. On 3 May 2023, the Pier Santi Mattarella Hall of the Palazzo Reale, home of the Sicilian Regional Assembly in Palermo, was filled with people on the occasion of the conference "The Memorial of Portella Ginestra: Civic Need for a Restoration" (Mazza 2023). Plans are being made and funds are being raised for the restoration of the memorial and for the area around the site to be protected as a property of the commune. The memorial had already been included in the Register of Intangible Heritage of Sicily (REIS) of the Department of Cultural Heritage in 2010, and now, as a result of efforts spearheaded by the Comune di Piana degli Albanesi and by Selima Giorgia Giuliano,

[10] Held in the Mattatoio exhibition hall in Rome (23 March - 21 May 2023), the exhibition was organised by Matteo Amati, Carlo Cellamare, Vezio De Lucia, Cristiano Tancredi, and Alessandra Valentinelli. It is part of an ongoing project by the Cooperativa Agricola Nuova e Associazione RomAgricola to valorise farm labour and recuperate unoccupied land for agricultural use.

la soprintendente per i Beni culturali e ambientali di Palermo[11], it has been recognised as a "sito di interesse culturale" ("site of cultural interest") pursuant to the cultural heritage and landscape code. These efforts are ensuring that this memorial and the memories it embodies will endure.

De Conciliis would go on to give expression to nature in his many landscapes painted *en plein air,* in which his affinity with Claude Monet and the Impressionists is apparent. As the writer Tahar Ben Jelloun noted, "the work of Ettore de Conciliis, more than a century after Monet, celebrates nature and restores to its elements its inherent subtle and personal light" (2010: 7). However, the affinity de Conciliis has with the work of Monet goes beyond his paintings. De Conciliis credits Claude Monet as an early environmental artist for the garden and water park Monet created at Giverny[12]. And like Monet, de Conciliis would go on to create a vast nature park – *Il Parco della Pace* (The Park of Peace). In 1997 he undertook the reclamation of a large tract of land on the outskirts of Rome that had been used as a dumpsite and landfill for decades. This involved extensive land and soil remediation, clearing almost thirty acres of degraded land, bringing in tons of topsoil, planting trees and grasses, and rescuing the existing trees and vegetation. Today, this immense work of Land Art is an oasis of nature for recreation, contemplation, and meditation. The theme of peace is reiterated in a walkway of over half a mile through the area guided by large stones on which are engraved poems and words about peace and brotherhood spoken by people of all religions and from all over the world. The chorus of voices ranges from Yitzhak Rabin to Francis of Assisi, from Pope Paul VI to Pablo Neruda, from Nazim Hikmet to Nelson Mandela. As with the memorial at Portella della Ginestra, the Park of Peace brings land and language together in creative harmony, showing how heritage sites and collective memory are linked to environmental sustainability and the stewardship of the land.

The experience of creating the memorial at Portella della Ginestra, which symbolises the link between the sociopolitical issues that had absorbed de Conciliis in his earlier murals and the lyricism of nature expressed in his landscape paintings, was foundational in the realisation of "The Park of Peace". Perhaps more significantly, de Conciliis's noninvasive approach to the land at Portella della Ginestra would also be a precursor to the radical conversion that would take place amongst artists in the Earthworks movement. The early works of American Earthwork artists often used the earth as a foil or backdrop to express a formalist approach to artmaking and gave no hint of a concern for the environment. However, over time, as these artists worked with the land, they began to adopt de Conciliis's reciprocal approach to the land and come, in turn, to understand their role as "stewards of the land". Many would go on to create parks much like "The Park of Peace" from landfills or sites damaged by industry[13]. Today a radical change has taken place in the role of the artists and

[11] The superintendent for Cultural and Environmental Heritage of Palermo.

[12] Perhaps not ironically, Monet posted a sign at the entrance to the park he made at Giverny saying "My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece".

[13] One of Smithson's planned projects – to cover a small island off the coast of British Columbia, Canada, with broken glass – was stopped by a group of environmentalists. However, after this encounter Smithson had a radical conversion and began to rethink the role of the artist and his relation to the land. He began to propose

the function of the work of art as a growing number of artists are becoming environmentalists, collaborating with specialists in other fields – material scientists, botanists, farmers, industrial engineers, and community workers – to design recuperative projects for degraded environments, creating solutions that address specific environmental problems and offering prototypes that can be adapted by individuals, communities, and industry. Art's intrinsic connection to nature, so fully articulated in the memorial at Portella della Ginestra, has proven to be a key component in the evolution of contemporary art, and this connection has played, and continues to play, an important role both in the environmental reform movement and in the trajectory of some of the most progressive practices of art today.

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pragmatic ideas for making the artist an active collaborator between nature and industry and he designed large scale projects for the rehabilitation of land devastated by mining, erosion, and industrial waste. See Isaak (2017: 27-44).

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Raphael d'Abdon

Mapping the American Nightmare: The Hero's Journey in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Abstract I: Questo articolo dimostra come il romanzo *La Ferrovia Sotterranea* di Colson Whitehead utilizzi in modo creativo il modello narrativo del "monomito" teorizzato da Joseph Campbell e sistematizzato da Christopher Vogler, sovvertendolo e ristrutturandolo per porre al centro della narrazione tematiche quali schiavitù, razzismo e trauma. Concentrandosi sulla frammentazione strutturale e sulla funzione simbolica dello spazio, l'articolo illustra come questo innovativo "viaggio dell'eroe" destabilizzi tre narrazioni occidentali basate sul mito: il modello eroico di Campbell radicato nelle tradizioni narrative occidentali, oltre a due miti fondanti dell'America bianca, il "Destino Manifesto" e il "Sogno Americano". Con questa epopea di libertà, Whitehead crea un contro-mito di sopravvivenza che riflette le realtà storiche della resistenza delle donne nere, ampliando al contempo lo spettro narrativo della letteratura americana contemporanea.

Abstract II: This article argues that Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* draws creatively on the "monomyth" story-making model theorised by Joseph Campbell and systematised by Christopher Vogler, and can be read as reworking and subverting it to engage with slavery, racism, and trauma. With a focus on structural fragmentation and the symbolic function of space, it illustrates how this reimagined "hero's journey" destabilises three Western myth-making narratives: Campbell's heroic template embedded in Western storytelling traditions, plus two foundational myths of white America, "Manifest Destiny" and the "American Dream". With this epic of freedom, Whitehead crafts a counter-myth of survival that reflects the historical realities of black women's resistance, while expanding the possibilities of contemporary American fiction.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, The Underground Railroad, monomyth, mythopoetic, resistance.

Imagine a hero
In some muddy compound,
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate
(Heaney 1998: 216).

To end up in a draughty lamplit station
After the trains have gone, the wet track
Bared and tensed as I am, all attention
For your step following and damned if I look back
(Heaney 1998: 218).

Introduction

Blending historical realism with speculative invention, Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, which won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, digs into one of the most brutal periods in American history, revisits the realities of slavery, and interrogates the narrative frameworks through which stories of bondage and liberation have traditionally been told. The underground railroad, a historical network of escape routes for enslaved people and an enduring lore in American cultural memory, is transformed into a literal subterranean train system: historical realities are slightly altered or intensified, and this ingenious defamiliarisation pushes readers to see slavery and racism with fresh clarity, rather than as distant history. At the centre of the story is Cora Randall, a 15-year-old enslaved girl fleeing a Georgia plantation, whose flight from bondage becomes more than a physical escape and evolves into a journey of self-discovery, resistance, and survival.

This article argues that "the hero's journey", or "monomyth", a storytelling model proposed by Joseph Campbell (2004) and systematised by Christopher Vogler (2007), can be read as the spine of Cora's story and the scaffold of its narrative architecture. The rich and growing critical literature has surprisingly overlooked this defining element of the text, especially in the light of the acclaimed TV series based on it[1]; critics have elucidated crucial aspects of this experimental novel from historical, political, cultural, formal, and theoretical perspectives (Fauziah, Ratih & Natawiria 2019; Dischinger 2017; Kelly 2018; Antoszek 2019;

[1] While the monomyth works best with traditional forms of the quest – folk and fairy tales, legends, and other fantasies – it can be found in different genres or types of stories across history: it dates back to epic poems such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1960), *The Odyssey,* Homer (1996) and *The Divine Comedy,* Alighieri (1982), and informs novels like *Don Quixote*, de Cervantes (2003), *Moby Dick,* Melville (2003), *Treasure Island*, Stevenson (2007), *Gulliver's Travels,* Swift (2003) – which will be discussed in this article – and *Life of Pi*, Martel (2001), and sagas like *The Hobbit*, Tolkien (2012), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* Rowling (1997), and *The Hunger Games,* Collins (2008), just to name some of the most popular. More importantly, the monomyth has become a blueprint for cinematic storytelling and has been employed to craft Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, *The Wizard of Oz, Braveheart*, *Rocky, Rambo: First Blood, The Terminator, The Last Samurai*, *The Last of the Mohicans* (also discussed later), *The Lion King*, *Fight Club*, *Avatar*, and *The Matrix*, amongst others. Unsurprisingly, the movie industry noticed the potential of *The Underground Railroad*'s innovative monomyth and produced a television miniseries, created and directed by Barry Jenkins: the series premiered in 2021, highlighted by the outstanding performance of South African actress Thuso Mbedu as Cora Randall.

Broyld 2019; Mellis 2019; Heneks 2020; Motlagh 2020; Friedman 2021; Leise 2021; Ferreira 2022; Klestil 2022; Nocera 2022; Waller 2022; Allen 2023; Gheytasi 2024; Shino 2024; Martinson & Gordon 2026), but four contributions are particularly relevant for the argument developed here, since they explore the theme of the journey (Ward 2017; Groba 2019), the novel's narrative structure (Martín Salván 2020), and the subversion of the traditional heroic mythology of the underground railroad (Dubey 2019). Despite their brilliant insights, these studies gloss over a key narrative feature of the story, and the aim of this article is to fill this critical lacuna and facilitate a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of this compelling novel. In addition, the article argues that Whitehead problematises the monomyth, elaborating a mythopoetic framework that decentres American cultural imperialism by tearing down two of its foundational myths: "Manifest Destiny" and the "American Dream".

Campbell's and Vogler's Monomyth: An Overview

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, mythologist Joseph Campbell investigates a story-making template traceable across time, traditions, and genres; influenced by Jungian theory on the collective unconscious, Campbell draws on recurring archetypes, images, and ideas from dreams and mythologies across various cultures[2], and illustrates how common patterns run through hero myths, no matter what culture the myth is a part of. In hero-quest ancestral stories the protagonist (The Hero) goes through basic stages that are part of a journey and engages with archetypical characters who facilitate his transformative parable: these symbolic figures (The Herald, The Threshold Guardian, The Mentor, The Villain/Shadow, The Allies, The Shapeshifters) represent universal human roles, forces, and psychological energies rather than just individual people. Campbell calls this narrative structure the "monomyth", which, on a deeper level, is a journey into the reader's psyche which reveals a universal story of transformation, growth, and self-affirmation. Divided into 12 steps and three acts, Vogler's "hero's journey" (2007) systematises Campbell's, and is organised along the classic Freytag Pyramid structure (Introduction/Rising Action/Climax/Denouement/Resolution; see Table 1). Despite referring to both models, for clarity this article examines Cora's journey through the prism of Vogler's (Table 1).

The monomyth describes a recurring narrative pattern in which an ordinary protagonist is called to leave the familiar (ordinary) world and enter an unexplored realm of trials that test, transform, and redefine them. Initially reluctant or unprepared, the hero accepts the call, crosses a threshold into the unknown, encounters mentors, allies, enemies, and increasingly difficult ordeals, ultimately facing a central crisis or symbolic death that leads to profound inner change and the attainment of a valuable "boon" or insight. The hero then returns to the ordinary world, bringing back the wisdom, power, or gift acquired through the journey for the benefit of themselves or their community.

In this article, these narrative patterns are critically used as a heuristic lens rather than an intentional modelling scaffold, to illuminate the structure, symbolism, and ideological interventions of *The Underground Railroad*, and to explore how the novel can be scrutinised as

[2] The edition consulted for this article includes a valuable introduction by writer and Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, author of the groundbreaking *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Estés (2004: xxiii-lxv).

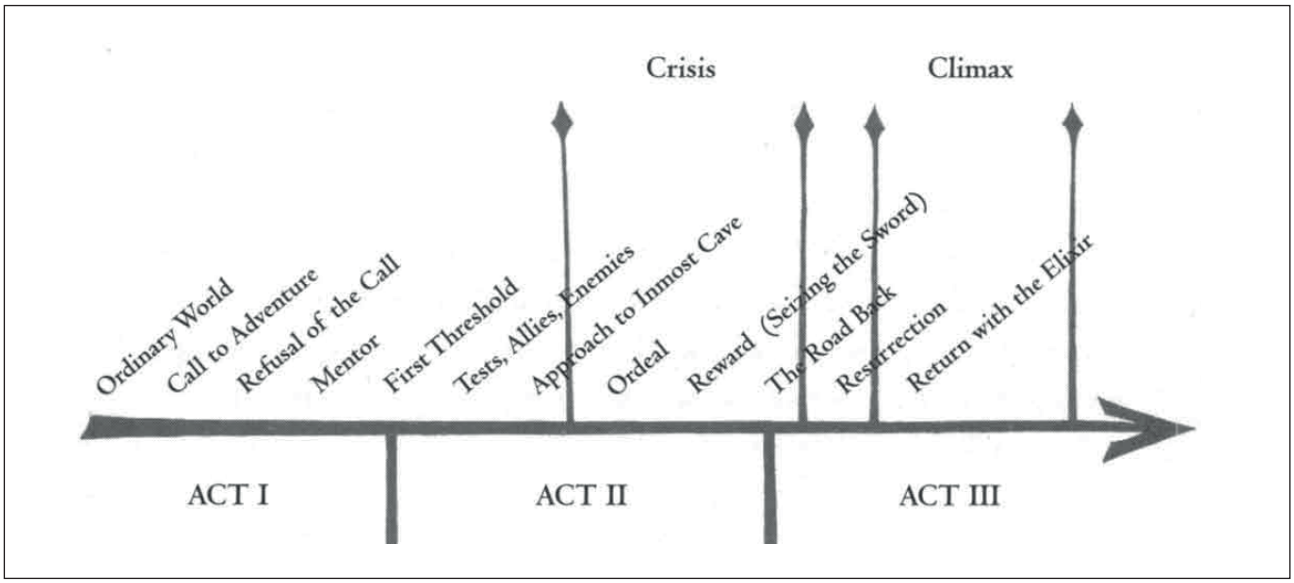

Table 1. The narrative structure of the "monomyth" (Vogler 2007: 8).

reworking and disrupting conventional mythopoetic and heroic narratives. The monomyth model therefore facilitates a close reading of the text, while remaining open to departures, revisions, and resistances that emerge from the novel's engagement with the historical realities of slavery, racism, and historical trauma. Its value lies in providing a conceptual vocabulary through which patterns of departure, transformation, ordeal, and return can be identified and critically investigated in Cora's heroic journey. The following sections examine how Whitehead both reproduces and transforms the principal recurring kernels of the monomyth.

Intertextual Allusions *in The Underground Railroad*

The Hero with a Thousand Faces was first published in 1949, in a cultural context far removed from today's, and the monomyth has been criticised for being overly simplified (Dundes 1984), Western-centric (Hambly 2021), anthropocentric (Akomolafe 2020), and for lacking true universality and promoting individualism and cultural reductivism (Atterbery 2014); feminist scholars deem it patriarchal and hypermasculine, and the embodiment of a warrior culture enforcing phallogocentric dominance with little or no relevance to the journeys of womanhood (Pearson & Pope 1981; Pratt 1982; Edwards 1984; Le Guin 1986; Pearson 1991; Nicholson 2011; Murdock 2020). According to its detractors, the formula is controversial and antiquated, and their considerations are mostly legitimate; nevertheless, abundant empirical evidence shows how, despite its long-identified problems, the monomyth is still pervasive, recognisable and resilient, and remains a narrative blueprint shared by many well-known stories[3]. Using Cora's journey as a case study, this article argues that, aware of

[3] A recent example of monomyth narrative is the vampire horror film *Sinners*, written and directed by Ryan Coogler, winner of four Oscars in 2026, including best original screenplay.

the monomyth's strengths and weaknesses, inventive writers critically reimagine it, while maintaining its multi-stage narrative progression basically intact: the literary framework within which Cora's story is inscribed is a refinement of the monomyth that simultaneously draws upon and fractures it.

The story's engagement with the hero's journey outline can be traced through suggestive textual affiliations: the most obvious intertextual reference is William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, a historical record of enslaved people who escaped to freedom through the underground railroad. Rather than being a single narrative, it is a collection of real testimonies, letters, and case records gathered by the author, who personally helped many fugitives. Whitehead adopts Still's fragmentary narrative structure and opens all the "State chapters" with original fugitive slave notices as epigraphs[4] (Whitehead 2021: 356): the insertion of these primary sources foregrounds Cora's escape from the "American nightmare" but can also be seen as a tribute to the seminal work of the man known in the popular imagination as "The Father of the Underground Railroad" (Still 1872).

Yet, it is by citing two authoritative monomyth narratives that Whitehead subtly uncovers his central narrative strategy: both Jonathan Swift's *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships* – better known as *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 2003), read in secret by Caesar at the Randall plantation (Whitehead 2021: 282) – and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (Cooper 2009) – found accidentally by Cora while she is hiding in North Carolina (Whitehead 2021: 203) – "are hero's journeys"[5] and their presence in the rich tapestry of Cora's journey can support the interpretative direction proposed in this article. In the closing paragraph of the "Caesar" chapter, Swift's text offers a particularly evocatory parallel with the monomythic pattern: "Gulliver […] *moved from peril to peril, each new island a new predicament to solve before he could return home*" (Whitehead 2021: 282, emphasis added). The homage to Cooper's monomyth is even more explicit: Cora's name and characterisation invite comparison with Cora Munro, one of the protagonists of *The Last of the Mohicans*, who challenges nineteenth-century stereotypes and is known for her mixed-race heritage, strong disposition and courage: the resemblance between the two Coras is self-evident.

Campbell presents the monomyth as a universal mythic pattern rooted in comparative mythology, while Vogler streamlines it into a practical twelve-stage model for modern storytelling (fiction and films); in both versions, the essential narrative movement is one of *departure, initiation*, and *return*, where external adventures mirror the protagonist's psychological and moral transformation. While the previous section of the article focused on the structural similarities between Cora's journey and the monomyth, the ones that follow explore its deviations from it. Rather than simply replicating or rejecting the model, the novel *expands* it: Cora's experience of enslavement and search for freedom is narrated by appropriating, transmuting and challenging the monomyth, by inscribing and destabilising its recurring kernels.

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[4] The only exception is the last "State chapter" (The North), which opens with a *fictional* notice for Cora.

[5] The monomyth narrative structure of *The Last of the Mohicans* is even more pronounced in the 1992 Hollywood adaptation, starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Madeleine Stowe.

Whitehead's Innovative Reimagining of the Monomyth

The novel is organised through repeated structural patterns and divided symmetrically into 12 chapters, with "Characters Chapters" (Ajarry, Ridgeway, Stevens, Ethel, Caesar and Mabel) alternating with "State Chapters" (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, The North); the journey unfolds with racist America's landscape as the unifying background and the hero linking separate episodes: each chapter thus functions like a self-contained story with its own setting and conflicts, and distinct landscapes as narrative units[6]. The "Characters Chapters" do not advance Cora's external journey but deepen its meaning by turning her escape into something larger than an individual quest, and by framing it as part of a collective history of oppression, resistance, and survival. They offer insights into the motives, histories and genealogies of archetypical figures in Cora's heroic path and play a different role from the main plot "State chapters" that follow her physical journey. Instead of moving the hero forward geographically, they interrupt the momentum of escape and act like *zoom-outs* that widen the reader's imaginary landscape and broaden the "tests, allies, and enemies" phase. The slowed tempo is intentional since these chapters resemble moments of reflection that indirectly shape the hero's world. Symbolically and structurally, they are key to this disruption and prevent the story from becoming a linear heroic arc.

In the *departure* phase Whitehead simultaneously employs, unsettles, and reimagines the monomyth by presenting Cora's escape from the Randall plantation as both recognisably heroic and historically constrained. Like conventional heroes, Cora receives a call to adventure through an invitation from Caesar to flee (The Herald), initially resists because of fear and attachment to the known world[7] (Refusal of the Call), and eventually crosses the thresholds (the swamp and the first train station) to enter a new land: the train leaves for the "unknown world"[8]. However, Whitehead overturns the assumptions of the traditional monomyth by showing that Cora does not choose adventure in pursuit of self-fulfilment but is compelled to run away from a system of racial terror in which remaining means continued enslavement or death. The departure is therefore not a voluntary embrace of destiny but an act of survival, and the thresholds are not gateways into a magical realm, but something specularly akin to the infamous "Door of No Return", the narrow, ocean-facing exit in the House of Slaves (Maison des Esclaves) on Gorée Island (Île de Gorée), and a symbol of the transatlantic slave trade (Abaka 2012). As a matter of fact, after leaving Georgia, Cora steps into an equally perilous America where slavery's violence persists in muted forms. By grounding the archetypal structure in the historical realities of slavery, Whitehead transforms the heroic departure from an individual quest for glory into a collective

[6] The first station agent Cora and Caesar meet, Lumbly, tells them: "Every State is different […] Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country […] If you want to see what the nation is all about, [...] you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America", Whitehead (2021: 82-83).

[7] "THE first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said No" is the novel's arresting opening, Whitehead (2021: 3).

[8] In Vogler's words: "the wagon train gets rolling" (2007: 12).

struggle for freedom and human dignity, reimagining the monomyth as a narrative that exposes the limits of universal heroic models when confronted with the lived experience of racial oppression.

In the *initiation* phase, the monomyth is adopted and radically transformed by structuring Cora's travels through various States (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana) as a series of trials and ordeals, and encounters with allies and enemies that outwardly resemble Campbell's and Vogler's heroic pattern, while exposing its limitations. Each time Cora leaves a State, she physically descends into the dark alleys of the underground railroad, where she waits for the next train[9]; as she traverses America, she engages all the habitual archetypical figures of the hero's journey: firstly, she is supported by mentors and helpers such as Caesar, Mr Fletcher, Lumbly, Sam, Martin and Ethel Wells, Royal and the people of the Valentine Farm; secondly, she confronts villains including the Randall brothers, Connelly, Blake, Boseman and, above all, her archenemy Ridgeway and his enigmatic aide-de-camp Homer, plus the slave-catching system, a broader antagonist comprising a network of slave catchers, laws, and people who enforce slavery and continually threaten her freedom; thirdly, she is challenged by shapeshifters (Dr Bertram, Dr Stevens, Mr Fields, Miss Handler, Miss Lucy) and repeatedly faces life-threatening tests that deepen her resilience and moral awareness.

Furthermore, Whitehead reinvents the traditional model by denying the expectation of linear progress, stable mentorship, or a single climactic ordeal leading to mastery. Mentorship is decentralised and guidance is fragmented across male and female helpers that appear along the way; plus, Cora escapes slavery and moves from State to State via a literalised railroad in a "litany of painful stories" (Thaler 2019: 608), and her journey is one thread in an interconnected system of stories shaped by slavery, a series of displacements across shifting social regimes, in which each state foregrounds both a narrative episode and an ideological experiment. The "State Chapters" have a fixed narrative structure (arrival in a new place; encounter with its rules and power structures; conflict or tension; departure), but while the pattern repeats, each step in the journey introduces new ideas, preventing monotony: the changing settings work as structural units, which allow the narrative to progress not just through time, but also through shifting environments. The States function as trials (forcing the hero to confront different facets of systemic oppression) and as shapeshifters (changing the rules of the game at each stop to test Cora's resilience and ability to navigate racist America). Each State is a self-contained exploration of a different society and a different "logic" of racial control, a case-study of slavery and racism which reframes real historical practices (medical experimentation, eugenics, forced labour systems, extermination). The parallel structure of these chapters, which relies on juxtaposition, placing different systems side by side, develops Cora's journey against the background of distinct but connected social experiments and makes the critique of America systematic, cumulative and comparative. It also suggests that systems of oppression adapt and justify themselves differently, rather than existing in a single fixed form. From State to State Cora moves "between hope and despair"

[9] According to Campbell, the unknown world is "a kingdom *underground* […] a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds", Campbell (2004: 52, emphasis added).

(Dischinger 2017: 96), but neither sentiment is definitive, and they constantly replace each other to drive the narrative forward: temporary hope (South Carolina, Indiana) is erased by acts of violence that bring Cora back to a condition of despair (North Carolina, Tennessee); yet, despair never develops into complete annihilation thanks to external interventions that offer Cora a new glimpse of hope; each time the hero's tenacity is tested and the journey continues[10]. Each apparent refuge reveals a new manifestation of systemic racism, making the journey cyclical rather than progressive and emphasising survival over triumph. Each State Cora visits after leaving Georgia is a micro-journey, in which the arrival coincides with a symbolic birth and the departure with a symbolic death. The birth-death-rebirth cycles have a palingenetic function in the story and are central in the hero's character-building: from each State Cora emerges renewed, more experienced, more self-conscious and more conscious of the atrocities American society is capable of. Whitehead uses Cora's story as a model for psychological exploration and socio-political critique to expose the flaws of American society in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, and her hero's journey is not a linear progression toward self-realisation but a series of repeated cycles of hope and destruction without a stable "reward" and safe return home. Whitehead rejects a neat ending, emphasises ongoing struggle over resolution and uses the journey to explore different systems of racial control, not just personal growth. The initiation thus becomes not a path to heroic empowerment or individual self-actualisation, but an ongoing confrontation with the shifting structures of racial oppression embedded in American history and institutions.

In the *return* phase Whitehead draws on the monomyth only to overturn its conventional resolution. While Campbell's and Vogler's hero returns to the ordinary world bearing a boon that restores social order and completes the cycle of transformation, Cora is denied such closure. Her escape does not culminate in reconciliation, mastery, or a secure homecoming; instead, the novel ends, in "The North", with Cora continuing westward into an uncertain future, suggesting that freedom is an ongoing process rather than a destination. Whitehead thus invalidates the expectation of a triumphant return by revealing that, for the formerly enslaved, there is no stable "ordinary world" to which one can return, because the nation itself remains structured by racial violence. At the same time, he reimagines the heroic return by redefining the "boon" not as a magical gift or completed quest, but as the hard-won possibility of agency, hope, and self-determination. In doing so, Whitehead transforms the monomyth from a closed narrative of departure, initiation, and return into an open-ended journey that foregrounds historical continuity, collective memory, and the unfinished struggle for freedom.

A Mythopoetic of Resistance and Liberation: Debunking the Myths of the "American Dream" and "Manifest Destiny"

Cora's journey is an "*archetypal* story of a hero completing his/her journey to freedom" (Stanković 2024: 394, emphasis added) that circumvents linear storytelling, exalts black female agency (Moore 2024), reshapes conventional archetypical roles, rejects "the comforting

[10] "What if every state *our hero* went through as he or she ran north was a different state of American possibility?" asks the author in an interview, Dischinger (2017: 83, emphasis added).

outcome *of the hero's journey*" (Li 2019: 20, emphasis added) and decentres American cultural imperialism with a mythopoetic that tears down two of its foundational myths, "Manifest Destiny" (Stephanson 1995; Fresonke 2003; Weinberg 2020) and the "American Dream" (Adams 1931; Cullen 2003; Jillson 2004).

Drawing particularly on Roland Barthes' understanding of myth as a form of ideological naturalisation, this article approaches the "American Dream" and "Manifest Destiny" as culturally powerful narratives that present historically constructed values as immanent or self-evident (Barthes 1972). Operating within this philosophical framework, Whitehead designs Cora's journey as an iconoclastic narrative strategy to deconstruct these sacred myths of white American history and culture. The "American Dream" – i.e. the belief that anyone, regardless of background, class, race, or birth circumstances, can achieve success, freedom, prosperity, and social mobility through hard work, determination, and talent – is linked to ideas such as equality of opportunity, home ownership, wealth, education, personal freedom, and a "better life". This myth hides the social systems that make success much easier for privileged groups than for oppressed ones like African-Americans; as W. E. B. Du Bois aptly put it:

> Here in America rose a nation which declared that all men should have freedom of opportunity, and join in an effort to promote justice for all men; it was a magnificent dream, a dream of universal suffrage, of humanity, of republican government. In its very dawning that dream was choked by the shadow of Negro slavery (Du Bois 1904).

Drawing from this cultural heritage, Whitehead demystifies the "American Dream" by revealing its exclusions, by showing that America's ideals of freedom, opportunity, and progress were historically built alongside racial violence and economic exploitation. Cora's journey serves this purpose and graphically shows that the "American Dream" was never equally available to all, because historical and structural barriers such as slavery, racism, sexism, poverty, inequality, and discrimination prevented oppressed individuals and groups from achieving it: for enslaved black people, America was not a land of opportunity, but a landscape of pursuit, surveillance, and survival.

Like the "American Dream", "Manifest Destiny" – i.e. the belief that the United States was naturally, morally, and even divinely destined to expand westward across North America, spreading its political system, capitalism, Christianity, and ideas of civilisation – is a false national story that celebrates freedom and progress for some, while ignoring the oppression and dispossession of others. Popularised in the era in which the novel is set to justify the colonisation of the continent by white settlers, it presents expansion as heroic, inevitable, and beneficial, while hiding or excusing the idea of racial superiority and the violence behind it, which led to the genocide of Native Americans, wars, land seizure, and the spread of slavery into new territories[11]. Cora's odyssey through various States uncovers the brutal realities produced

[11] Interestingly, the previously noted intertextual reference to James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* resurfaces obliquely in Whitehead's critique of "Manifest Destiny": while it does not celebrate "Manifest Destiny" (a concept popularised 20 years *after* its publication), the novel portrays Native American

by the practical applications of this myth: through it and Ridgeway's ideology, Whitehead exposes it as a justification for white domination rather than a noble national purpose and debunks it by revealing that America's supposed mission to spread freedom and civilisation is actually built on slavery, racial violence, and conquest. In Ridgeway's words:

> We come up with all sorts of fancy talk to hide things. Like in the newspapers nowadays, all the smart men talking about Manifest Destiny. Like it's a new idea […] It means taking what is yours, your property, whatever you deem it to be. And everyone else taking their assigned places to allow you to take it […] the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate. Our destiny by divine prescription – the American imperative (Whitehead 2021: 266).

Through Cora's hero's journey, Whitehead exposes how slavery and racism destroy nations, communities and families as much as individuals, and how memory and systemic violence constantly intrude upon the present, preventing any uncomplicated hope and salvation. *The Underground Railroad* is a politically charged novel which illustrates how racism is embedded within the fabric of American society and culture, rather than confined in the past to individual slave owners. Cora's is a gaze-shifting story that vividly depicts the enduring irrationality of a country in which the fate of the oppressed is determined not by justice, but by racial violence.

Conclusion

Using the monomyth as a narrative backbone, while disestablishing its optimistic substratum, Whitehead has written a story that pushes the boundaries of storytelling and has achieved both critical and commercial success. Rather than tracing the triumphant arc of an individual who masters trials and returns transformed, Cora's journey is a fragmented, perilous and enduring struggle for survival that resists closure. Although the novel is episodic, it is cohesive in purpose and maintains a strong unity that emerges out of Cora's ongoing quest for freedom. Whitehead presents the hero's journey as a never-ending escape from the dangers of an oppressive system: not as a successful adventure, but as an exhausting physical and psychological ordeal. In racist America, freedom is not the destination at the end of a journey, but a fragile, temporary condition constantly threatened by the pervasive reach of white violence and surveillance. As Cora escapes the "American Nightmare" and the tentacles of "Manifest Destiny", punishment and the continual oscillation between hope and danger characterise every step of the journey. Freedom-seekers, symbolised by Cora, learn how the supposed freedom journey is a precarious escape, dependent on the goodwill of others, and constantly threatened by the ubiquitous violence of racism. Even moments of apparent safety involve policing, confinement, danger and alertness, with trauma intruding

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disappearance as inevitable, and its association of white American expansion with the future reflects some of the ideological assumptions that would later underpin the myth.

upon any possibility of rest. By replacing mythic transformation with historical endurance, Whitehead reimagines the monomyth as a narrative in which the hero's growth lies in perseverance, resilience, and the refusal to surrender hope, rather than in achieving decisive victory or transcendent enlightenment. *The Underground Railroad* is therefore a freedom epic with strong mythic echoes, which aligns with Campbell's and Vogler's models, while intentionally blending and reimagining them. The myth-based structure allows for an innovative critique of racism and systemic oppression in the America of yesterday and today, making *The Underground Railroad* a classic of contemporary American literature. By acknowledging the adaptability of the monomyth model, and revealing what becomes visible about race, memory, subjectivity and power when a supposedly universal mythic paradigm encounters African American narratives that have historically been excluded from definitions of the universal human subject, this article aims to enrich scholarship on neo-slave narratives and contemporary African American fiction.

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Discovery Information Systems and Information Literacy (II). Advocating for a More Subject-Based Pedagogy (*Part II*)*

Abstract I: In generale, i cataloghi online delle biblioteche universitarie offrono agli studenti un'interfaccia con un'ampia casella di ricerca. Questo design intende fornire un'esperienza di ricerca simile a quella di Google. Tuttavia, a differenza di Google, i "discovery systems" includono anche la navigazione a faccette, che permette di raffinare i risultati della ricerca. Chi non conosce il dominio d'interesse trova problematico questo approccio, perché necessita di una guida concettuale per comprendere meglio lo spazio informativo prima di eseguire una query. La ricerca esplorativa è un processo aperto caratterizzato da attività cognitive e di apprendimento che possono migliorare le competenze di "information literacy".

Abstract II: University online library catalogues typically provide undergraduate students with a user interface organised around a large search box. This design is clearly intended to mimic a Google-like search experience. However, unlike Google Search, discovery systems also include faceted navigation, which allows users to filter search results according to multiple criteria. This approach is problematic for users who are unfamiliar with the subject domain of interest and need conceptual guidance to consolidate their understanding of the information space they are about to explore in advance of a query. Exploratory search is an open-ended process involving cognitive and learning activities that can improve information literacy skills.

Keywords: Discovery Information Systems, Information Literacy, Search User Interfaces, Faceted Search, Thesauri.

> The brain is hungry not for method but for content,
> especially content which contains generalizations
> that are powerful, precise, and explicit
> (Turner 1991: 123).

Introduction

Extending the discussion initiated in Part I, which examined the treatment of topical terms in current-generation online public access catalogues (OPACs) and discovery systems and

* Continuation of *Part I*, Cuna (2025).

proposed moving beyond the limitations of the search box through a more subject-oriented approach, this second part considers how that approach can be operationalised and how it can promote learning and information literacy. Physically browsing the library stacks is an important means by which many users gain an overview of the library's collections and "serendipitously" find the items that best suit their information needs. However, while serendipitous discovery may truly happen among the stacks, its chance of success depends on what is actually on the shelf at the time of one's browsing (Barclay 2010).

Information resources in high demand are likely to be off the shelf; those in low demand may have been stored offsite to bring relief to overcrowded shelves; some information resources may accidentally be in the wrong place or unidentifiable because of missing labels; others may be missing or remain unaccounted for; information resources encompassing multiple subjects can only be physically shelved in one place; those stored on high or low shelves may be easily missed by the user's eye; some storage areas (e.g., special collections) are off-limits to users (Barclay 2010). Given these limitations, why should the actual physical layout of a library be a useful mental model to bring into the OPAC interface? There are two overriding reasons for this: (1) many users have fully internalised the model, which can be activated in a number of browsing situations; and (2) whenever physical browsing of the stacks is restricted or somewhat jeopardised, browsing in the OPAC in the same way as information resources are actually arranged on the shelves becomes critical (Joudrey & Taylor 2017: 560).

The OPAC and the classified stacks are not two separate things; they complement each other: the OPAC remedies the shortcomings of the classified stacks by grouping together under a single uniform heading like subjects that are scattered across different classes via a network of cross-references and links to that heading or other related subjects placed in different classes; in turn, the classified stacks remedy the shortcomings of the OPAC by providing in-depth recognition access to the full content of the information resources (Mann 2015). Research and practical evidence show that the OPAC-classified stack combination is a powerful device, provided that the semantic network designed to guide end users through the imaginary library on the screen is displayed to them intuitively and meaningfully to avoid the experience of feeling lost and not knowing what to do next.

The exploration of an unfamiliar environment is a complex and dynamic activity that can be very demanding in terms of sensorimotor and cognitive processes. Besides browsing, another spontaneous and ubiquitous activity characteristic of animal exploratory behaviour is *categorisation*. The "ability to categorise and identify environmentally meaningful objects and events accurately is fundamentally important for survival" (Ashby & Lee 1993: 377). For example, in keeping with Bates' berry-picking metaphor (2016), foraging berries in the woods can be fun and a terrific opportunity to incorporate healthy nutrients into one's diet, but also extremely dangerous. Distinguishing poisonous varieties from edible ones is one of the first things that berry foragers must learn when engaging in such activity.

However, since edible and poisonous berries share many prominent features, learning to sort them into the proper category can be a challenging task. Categorisation is the ability to group like things and separate unlike things by selectively abstracting some char-

acteristics and ignoring others (Harnad 2017: 44). "*Categorization is intimately tied to learning*" (Harnad 2017: 22, emphasis in original). It requires successfully exploiting one's background knowledge while quickly acquiring new knowledge. Indeed, it could be fatal for berry foragers to sample all the varieties they encounter in the environment, including the poisonous ones, in order to learn which are edible. Even so, miscategorisation does happen. It occurs when things are assigned to a different category than the correct one, which results in incorrect associations being made between the assigned category and the other categories. Without a mechanism in place to compress the sheer mass of information arriving at our perceptual system, our information-processing capacity would be overloaded and fail. The "task of category systems is to provide maximum information with the least cognitive effort" (Rosch 1978: 28).

In "search interfaces, category systems are the main tool for navigating information structures and organizing search results" (Hearst 2009: 20). In general, category-based information structures have a twofold function: (1) to give an overview of the contents of a collection; and (2) to organise search results (Hearst 2009: 74). Category system structures deployed in search interfaces can be either flat, hierarchical, or faceted (Hearst 2009: 21). Flat or linear category systems with distinct, recognisable categories are probably the easiest for users to understand, but they do not scale well to large content sets as some overlap often occurs between at least some of the categories. Hierarchical category systems are useful when there are too many categories to be shown at one level, but the deeper the hierarchy, the more users are likely to become disoriented. Also, retaining semantic consistency among categories is more difficult when the hierarchy needs to be modified. Faceted category systems offer maximum flexibility with large collections as they allow users to search and browse the content according to multiple categories or facets simultaneously and provide the necessary scaffolding for exploration and discovery (Hearst 2009). However, if "the facets do not reflect a user's mental model of the space, or if items are not assigned facet labels appropriately, the interface will suffer some of the same problems as directory structures" (Hearst 2009: 194-195). A literature review conducted by Jody Condit Fagan (2010) found that, when intelligently designed, faceted navigation is, by and large, well understood by users and preferred over other navigation structures, though it is still unclear to what extent it can improve the users' search performance within present-day library catalogues. Faceted navigation has been used in e-commerce sites for quite some time now, but it is only relatively recently that libraries have given it the attention it warrants.

Revamping Old Catalogues

Driven by increased awareness of end users' general dissatisfaction with traditional library catalogues and challenged by the rise of new information marketplace competitors, in 2006 some American academic libraries took action to revamp their OPACs with the faceted search functionality to better help their patrons accomplish their search and browse tasks (Antelman *et al.* 2006; Breeding 2007). Faceted search has gained momentum and acceptance within the library community ever since, and it is now considered an effective means to overcome the limitations inherent in the so-called query-response paradigm that had underpinned the design and construction of earlier OPACs. Combining direct search with

browsing in a seamless fashion is now increasingly recognised as being more powerful and effective than either searching or browsing alone. In the typical real-world scenario, a faceted search performed on an OPAC begins with the user typing one or more keywords into a search box. Given the query, the system returns a set of matching results alongside a list of relevant facets. These facets represent specific item properties or attributes (e.g., author, format, genre, location, language) extracted from Machine-Readable Cataloguing (MARC) records stored in the library database. By displaying search results alongside facets, users can (1) gain a better understanding of search results; (2) explore results from different dimensions; (3) narrow down the result set according to relevant metadata and associated values; and (4) expand or reformulate a query by dynamic term suggestion (Hearst 2009; Tunkelang 2009; White & Roth 2009).

Experimental evidence suggests that faceted search is especially useful to users with fuzzy needs in mind who require support and guidance in moving towards a more focused search (Mayr *et al.* 2016; Gäde *et al.* 2015; Villa 2013). For users unfamiliar with the complexity of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), subject facets, which contain scattered data mostly extracted from existing headings in MARC 21 field 650, can play a pivotal role in providing effective and meaningful representations of topical structures. The well-known negative attitude of library patrons towards LCSH headings and traditional subject access has spurred a steady stream of research focusing both on how to rethink subject analysis models and on how to best expose subject (meta)data in present-day OPACs (Pre- vs Post-Coordination 2007). Although it is recognised that in some domains browsable lists of subject headings may be a suitable option to systematically collapse large numbers of subdivisions and simultaneously provide users with high-level overviews (Markey Drabenstott & Vizine-Goetz 1994: 309-310; Arsenault *et al.* 2008), a discrete body of literature has grown out of attempts to develop online systems in which LCSH headings are broken up (faceted) to group topics into categories for post-coordinate displays (Anderson & Hofmann 2006; Chan *et al.* 2001; Dean 2004; McGrath 2007; O'Neill & Chan 2003).

In presenting a careful analysis of this approach, Karen McGrath (2007) has called attention to important problems that have long plagued the (de)construction of LCSH headings, suggesting viable solutions for them. However, the notions of facet and facet analysis entertained in much of the literature mentioned above differ substantially from those to be found in classic facet analytical theory, initiated by Ranganathan (1967) and furthered by the UK Classification Research Group (Broughton 2019; Hudon 2019), which has now become firmly established in UK LIS (Library and Information Science) theory and practice (Broughton 2006: 58). This fundamental difference in understanding the two notions signals a major shift away from facet analysis as a formal method for knowledge organisation and representation to a much looser approach in which the Subject (or Topic) facet is treated in exactly the same way as any other descriptive metadata rather than on its own merits. The consequences of this conceptual shift can clearly be seen in present-day discovery systems, where a flat alphabetical list has become the standard way of displaying subjects. On the one hand, the use of a flat format display may have greatly contributed to simplifying the interface design and enhancing usability. On the other hand, it poses serious challenges to novice users who want to perform exploratory tasks as they cannot navigate and exploit the

semantic structure of a subject domain to make sense of it. Indeed, for this to happen, these users first and foremost need to gain an understanding of where things fit in and what they mean in the bigger scheme.

The above considerations may help discovery systems developers tailor the user interface to align with today's novice users' mental models and preferences. Ideally, the user interface should incorporate a browse-and-search approach to provide a browsable, high-level, topical overview of the whole information space covered by the system from the very beginning of the search journey. In this way, users would be provided with the scaffolding necessary to move smoothly across the information space. For example, they might start with an interest in one aspect of a given topic and branch out to others as they discover new information and learn about the topic in ways that foster and support their intellectual skills and information literacy.

Beyond the Basics

Although more time is needed to fully understand the impact that generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) will have on the development of components that may be incorporated into discovery systems, there is evidence that GenAI tools are increasingly being used by younger generations of students to perform knowledge-centric tasks. The question of how effectively these tools can be incorporated into existing information systems is a topic that is currently being investigated from both a purely technical perspective and a system-oriented socio-technical one (Storey *et al.* 2025). As to the forms and effects that these developments may have on future bibliographic information systems, the literature available to date mainly reports advances grounded in human-in-the-loop approaches. The emerging trends and possibilities identified so far do not yet provide a sufficiently comprehensive basis for assessing the long-term implications of these developments for the semantic indexing of content. However, before discussing these concerns, it is useful to consider the current state of information literacy. In academic libraries, information literacy remains something that is conceptually and practically difficult to assess. In this regard, Walsh's words are still relevant today: with so "many definitions for information literacy, it is amazing that anyone is able to apply it to instruction" (2011: 3-4). This conceptual fluidity may be the result of a widespread misunderstanding. According to Johnston and Webber (2006: 120), information literacy is not "just a new term for library user education, research skills, or generic attributes" but a normative concept: "a clearly described discipline of information literacy can offer a powerful intellectual and pedagogical force for coherence and relevance".

To bring about this vision, we need to get information literacy out of the "trap" into which it has stepped. At present, information literacy is stuck between a rock and a hard place: the "rock is the current conceptions of information literacy that represent information literacy as a skill or competency that is confined to information access and use, and associated with tools such as text or technology" (Lloyd 2011: 279). Under this lens, information literacy is simply understood as a skill-based practice that focuses on training students in basic information-seeking methods and technology know-how, a sort of toolbox with which undergraduates can solve their information problems, provided that the cases and examples discussed by their instructors adequately reflect their own informational circumstances and needs.

This brings us to the heart of the matter: information needs analysis. In the learner-centred approach, the primary task of instructors is to create a learning and training environment based on students' core learning needs. This analysis involves gathering insights into the students' perspectives to align educational content and training methods with the context in which information needs arise (Dorner *et al.* 2015). Learners' information needs can generally be conceptualised as a gap between their current state of knowledge and the level of knowledge they need to succeed in their academic pursuits. In the context of information seeking, needs can conceptually be divided into two categories: targeted needs and learning needs. Although they are two extremes of a continuum within which intermediate situations can occur – as Bates' berry-picking model clearly shows (2016) – these two categories are sufficient to introduce another important distinction, that between lookup needs and exploratory needs. Basically, lookup needs arise when learners have a specific and well-defined target in mind. They perform lookup searches to find discrete pieces of information. In a typical lookup scenario, users type a query that represents their information need into the search box, after which the search engine returns all the results that match their query. Then, they browse through the results until they find what they are looking for (Athukorala *et al.* 2016). Lookup needs, however, represent only a fraction of learners' needs, which begs the question: what happens when learners' needs go beyond simple lookup? To address this problem, the first thing we need to consider is query length. According to Dirk Lewandowski

> in some cases, simple queries consisting of only one word may be based on a complex information need. Still, they show only a low degree of specificity and – unless they are about a concrete information need – often leave room for multiple interpretations. In contrast, it can be assumed that adding further words leads to a specification of the query (2023: 71).

Whereas one-word queries submitted to general-purpose web search engines are generic, meaning that they often do not provide enough context to clearly understand the user's intent, the same queries executed on discovery systems take on a slightly different meaning. In this context, queries shorter than three words are considered exploratory queries, that is, queries involving information problems related to general concepts that are open-ended and multi-faceted (Athukorala *et al.* 2016). Coming to search with a broader information need in mind, exploratory searchers "issue search queries that are imprecise at first" and "browse through the search results and iteratively reformulate their queries using new keywords they discover" (Athukorala *et al.* 2016: 2645). One of the drawbacks associated with this scenario is that searchers often feel lost in the information space because of information overload. This happens because these searchers have a subject information need in mind, that is, a need associated with subject content.

Speaking from a knowledge organisation perspective, terms like "broader" or "generic" can only refer to relationships between classes and entities. Thus, what an information system should ideally do by default is to provide exploratory searchers (aka subject searchers) with a navigable, classified representation of the domain relevant to their query, where subject terms are organised according to their semantic relationships.

In this way, exploratory searchers would be provided with the scaffolding necessary to build confidence and efficacy in traversing a domain and eventually move to more focused searches. This browsing functionality is consistent with the tenets of exploratory search, which place strong emphasis on learning and investigation activities (Marchionini 2006: 42; White & Roth 2009: 13). Unfortunately, hierarchical subject browsing is not a standard functionality built into current discovery systems. By default, subject terms are grouped into a Topic facet and displayed in a flat list ordered by decreasing number of occurrences. While this approach may be effective for known subject searches, it falls short of expectations when it comes to exploratory subject searches.

To recapitulate, the lack of topical browsing functionalities that can effectively support exploratory search tasks means that current discovery systems are neglecting to address the information-seeking needs of undergraduate students, many of whom are exploratory users, at least at some point in their interaction with the system. What, then, can be done to address this gap? Generally speaking, a careful analysis of students' information-seeking behaviour and needs is an essential starting point. If the analysis emphasises the presence of exploratory needs (searching for general topics), it would be helpful to begin with an information literacy instruction session on how controlled vocabularies, especially thesauruses, work. A thesaurus can be described as a controlled set of terms derived from natural language arranged in a known order and structured in such a way that equivalence, homographic, hierarchical, and associative relationships among terms are displayed clearly and identified by standardised relationship indicators that are employed reciprocally (National Information Standards Organization 2010: 166).

Besides promoting semantic consistency in how subject content is represented by indexers, it facilitates browsing of a domain's topical hierarchy by providing exploratory users with a conceptual map which shows how concepts and ideas are related to one another (Foskett 1980: 419). In a nutshell, although a thesaurus does not convey factual knowledge like a textbook or an encyclopaedia, it is a valuable resource for expanding one's understanding of a domain's language and usage.

The Role of GenAI and Large Language Models (LLMs): Conclusions and Outlook

Research into the application of GenAI in cataloguing, classification, and indexing remains in its early stages, and significant obstacles must be overcome before fully automated bibliographic processing becomes feasible. According to Alireza Noruzi, the incorporation of GenAI capabilities into current bibliographic systems holds several potential advantages, but "much of the conversation about [GenAI] use in book cataloguing, classification, and subject indexing is speculative" (2024: 3). Noruzi's study provides a useful snapshot of the developments achieved by early 2024 in AI-assisted knowledge organisation and subject indexing: ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini can support semi-automated cataloguing tasks, but the resulting subject indexing and classification outputs remain highly inconsistent when compared with established human-assigned records. In this sense, the paper reinforces the idea that AI tools do not provide a robust basis for semantic indexing yet. Variations in output across platforms and the lack of alignment with controlled vocabularies and classifi-

cation schemes limit their reliability, necessitating rigorous professional validation prior to integration into bibliographic processes.

On the one hand, these experimental findings underscore the limitations of the early exploratory use of GenAI through browser-based interfaces, largely due to the absence of dedicated infrastructure at the time. On the other hand, the same findings confirm that, despite ongoing technological advances, human oversight, intervention, and feedback remain essential for managing process complexity and ensuring data quality. Far from being supplanted by automation, human involvement remains a key component of AI-driven processes. Recent developments in both research and practice continue to underscore the enduring relevance of the human-in-the-loop approach, whereby human expertise remains essential for guiding, validating, and refining AI-generated outputs. The examples that follow illustrate the diverse ways in which this approach has been operationalised across a broad range of contexts and applications.

Kwok Leong Tang and Yi Jiang's study on the validation of AI-generated subject terms through the Library of Congress Linked Data Service presents a hybrid workflow in which LLMs generate candidate LCSH terms that are subsequently checked against controlled vocabularies and validated by cataloguers. While this approach may improve efficiency and support metadata enrichment, it also indicates that semantic indexing remains far from being fully automated: AI-generated subject headings still show significant accuracy limitations, especially in relation to specificity, authorised terminology, complex subdivisions, and nuanced subject representation, thus requiring external validation and sustained human oversight (Tang & Jiang 2025). Eric Feikert's recent discussion of using Microsoft Copilot to enhance MARC field 505 (Formatted Contents Note) suggests that generative AI can support limited metadata enrichment tasks. However, current applications remain a long way from achieving reliable semantic indexing, as outputs can be inconsistent, may omit or modify relevant content, and often require iterative prompt refinement and human verification (Feikert 2026).

Eric H. C. Chow's study presents a skill-based agentic pipeline for Library of Congress Subject Indexing. The paper proposes a modular workflow in which an AI agent decomposes subject indexing into sequential stages – conceptual analysis, quantitative filtering, authority validation, and MARC field synthesis – rather than treating it as a single prompt-based task. While the results suggest closer alignment with professional LCSH practice than earlier single-step methods, the study also highlights the continuing limitations of automated semantic indexing. Tested on a small corpus, the pipeline showed weaknesses in subdivision completeness and synonym handling, and its outputs were presented as draft recommendations requiring review and refinement by a subject cataloguer (Chow 2026). Notable applications in this area include OCLC WorldShare Record Manager and OCLC Connexion.

Recent enhancements to OCLC WorldShare Record Manager include AI-assisted metadata enrichment features for cataloguing workflows: the bibliographic record is processed by OCLC artificial intelligence to generate suggestions based on WorldCat data. According to the documentation, the service is designed to support the assignment of call numbers and subject headings, with the cataloguer retaining responsibility for reviewing, refining, and validating each suggestion before final inclusion in the bibliographic record (OCLC Support

2026a). Used for bibliographic cataloguing and WorldCat record management, OCLC Connexion is supported by AI-assisted features provided through dedicated cataloguing toolkits and macros. Unlike the native web integration of OCLC WorldShare Record Manager, OCLC Connexion implements artificial intelligence via these external tools, which provide classification and subject suggestions directly editable by the cataloguer, reflecting its nature as a professional client oriented toward automation (OCLC Support 2026b).

Taken together, these examples point to two key issues: first, that short-term consistency could be improved through feedback from experienced professional indexers; and second, that GenAI systems may benefit from different forms of adaptation to domain-specific bibliographic data, including continued pretraining, fine-tuning, and retrieval-augmented approaches. In particular, continued pretraining could allow models to internalise domain-specific statistical and linguistic patterns from large-scale bibliographic corpora; fine-tuning could adapt general-purpose language models to established indexing conventions and controlled vocabularies, while retrieval-augmented approaches could enable the dynamic integration of external bibliographic knowledge during inference, reducing the need for full parametric memorisation.

The prospect of leveraging domain-specific bibliographic datasets through these complementary strategies appears promising. However, realising this potential requires more than advances in algorithmic development alone. It also depends on enhancing the structure, functionality, and semantic richness of bibliographic data, both in terms of semantic representation and content modelling. These improvements are necessary to support a tighter integration between knowledge representation, data modelling, and AI-based processing.

From this perspective, the originality of the approach appears to lie in the interaction of three interconnected layers:

- A human layer, represented by feedback from professional indexers;
- A model layer, corresponding to the adaptation of GenAI systems; and
- A data layer, involving the restructuring of bibliographic metadata to enhance its semantic richness and machine interpretability.

Adopting a data-layer perspective invites a reconsideration of some long-standing assumptions in subject indexing.

The principle of coextension and related approaches to subject string construction may need to be revisited in light of the requirements of AI-driven information processing and multi-level knowledge representation. Specifically, it may no longer be appropriate to constrain the representation of "aboutness" to a single coextensive string reflecting the subject content of an information resource, as such representations may be insufficient for supporting computational approaches such as LLMs and retrieval-augmented systems. Instead, a more flexible framework for semantic representation could be developed, one that accommodates multiple levels of topical granularity – including both primary and subordinate topics – while supporting structured machine interpretation and interoperability.

To improve the accuracy and efficiency of automated parsing, the construction of subject strings should ideally be grounded in paradigmatic relationships and transparent facets.

Lastly, to provide GenAI tools with a richer and more robust foundation for self-training, bibliographic record fields for textual data should be semantically expressive and robust enough to clearly define domain concepts and relationships.

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Acoustic Encounters: The *Ezan* in Nineteenth-Century Constantinople through Anglophone Travel Writing

Abstract I: Questo articolo esamina l'*ezan* (il richiamo islamico alla preghiera) come dispositivo acustico urbano che organizza spazio, tempo e relazioni sensoriali a Costantinopoli. Attraverso la teoria del paesaggio sonoro e il concetto di territorio acustico, il saggio analizza resoconti di viaggio anglofoni nella Istanbul dell'Ottocento. Piuttosto che avvicinarsi all'*ezan* come segnale religioso esotico, l'articolo propone il concetto di incontro acustico per descrivere come la differenza culturale venga negoziata attraverso l'ascolto.

Abstract II: This article examines the *ezan* (the Islamic call to prayer) as an urban acoustic device that organises space, time, and sensory relations in Constantinople. Drawing on soundscape theory and the concept of acoustic territory, it analyses Anglophone travel narratives in nineteenth-century Istanbul. Rather than approaching the *ezan* as an exotic religious signal, the article proposes the concept of *acoustic encounter* to describe how cultural difference is negotiated through listening.

Keywords: *Ezan*, soundscape, acoustic encounter, travel writing, Constantinople.

1. Introduction

For centuries, the muezzin's call to prayer, *ezan* in Turkish, has permeated both urban and rural spaces, weaving sound into the fabric of collective life and producing soundscapes that are at once cultural, social, and political[1]. In these acoustic territories (LaBelle 2010), listening itself becomes a practice of belonging and, as contemporary debates over religious sounds in European public space reveal, a site of cultural and political contestation. Particularly over the past two decades, several European countries – including the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France, and the United Kingdom – have been negotiating whether, when, and at what volume the *ezan* may be broadcast from mosque loudspeakers (Allievi 2010; Becker 2020; Elger 2020). As a culturally marked sound external to dominant Western European soundscapes, its diffusion into public space is often perceived as an alien or

[1] In terms of terminology, *adhan* is the standard Arabic transliteration commonly used in Islamic Studies, while *azan* is a variant widely used in Persianate and South Asian contexts. Since this article focuses on Istanbul and the specificities of the Turkish urban soundscape, the Turkish form *ezan* is adopted throughout.

intrusive presence, evoking anxieties about Islamic visibility. This tension was temporarily reversed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when over a hundred mosques in Germany and the Netherlands broadcast the call to prayer into public space, in some cases alongside church bells, in what Elizabeth Becker (2020) described as "an unfamiliar and evocative symphony" of societal support. Nor are such debates confined to Europe: similar tensions have also emerged in Türkiye itself, where the verses of the Turkish national anthem, *İstiklâl Marşı*, reaffirm the significance of the prayer: "Bu ezanlar-ki şehâdetleri dînin temeli / Ebedî yurdumun üstünde benim inlemeli" ("These calls to prayer, whose testimony forms the foundation of the faith, / must forever resound above my eternal homeland") (Ersoy 1921)[2].

The call to prayer, described as the "pulse of the city" (Karayigit 2026), is not merely a sound[3]; it is simultaneously a text, a vocal performance, a ritual, a temporal marker, and a spatial practice. As a religiously and culturally situated sonic act, it helps to organise collective life. Yet the same call that functions as protected cultural heritage in one context, or for some listeners, may be perceived as a source of potential noise disturbance by others. It is this asymmetry – i.e., the fact that the same sound may be heard differently across bodies, cultures, and histories – that the present article sets out to investigate. Ottoman Istanbul offers a privileged vantage point for this inquiry. Straddling Europe and Asia, the city has functioned for centuries as a contact zone among multiple cultural and religious traditions[4]. This proximity has generated extensive representations of intercultural encounters, even through sound[5]. To inhabit Istanbul is, in Tim Ingold's terms (2000), to dwell within a living network of relations between the sacred and the secular, the local and the foreign ear.

Building on the sensorial turn, which foregrounds embodied experience and perception, scholars have increasingly explored listening practices, sound, and soundscapes as productive lines of inquiry. This shift has prompted scholars to focus on aurality in modern and postcolonial contexts (Jouili & Moors 2014: 980). Drawing from Carl Thompson's definition of travel writing as a record of the encounter and negotiation between self and other (2011: 10), this article argues that such negotiation also unfolds acoustically.

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[2] The *ezan*'s presence in the national anthem reflects its political and cultural dimensions. Historically, it becomes the voice of the Turkish nation through its mosques and a foundational element of both religious faith and national belonging, Aydar (2016: 24). Debates about the public audibility of the *ezan* have also reached the Turkish courts: on 30 June 2016, the Constitutional Court considered an application by an İzmir resident who complained that the amplified early-morning call to prayer disturbed their sleep. The Court declared the application inadmissible as manifestly ill-founded, finding that the domestic authorities had adequately considered the competing individual and public interests. See Turkish Constitutional Court, *D.Ö. application*, no. 2014/3977 (2016).

[3] Hakki Ozan Karayigit (2026) defines "the pulse of the city" as the space-time moment produced when religious sound is atmospherically and auditorily materialised in everyday urban life. These rhythmic, recurring moments are not merely acoustic events but sites where the politics of national identity and nation-building become tangible in embodied, contested, and negotiated experience.

[4] In the middle of the seventeenth century, European explorers were familiar with Constantinople. See Moussa (1995) and Mahjoub (2017) for travels from the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries.

[5] The theoretical complexity of applying Edward W. Said's orientalist framework to Ottoman contexts has been noted by Bryce (2013: 99), who observes that the Ottoman Empire occupied an ambiguous position, simultaneously European and exteriorised Oriental space, that Said's critique does not fully theorise.

Historically, from the fifteenth century onward, the Ottoman Empire structured daily life around the *ezan* and the times of prayer. These were initially embedded within a traditional, prayer-based temporal structure, which became increasingly synchronised with the adoption of standardised Western-style timekeeping following technological and administrative changes (Karayigit 2026: 2). The call to prayer can be understood both as a Schaferian signal and as a soundmark. As a signal, it functions as a sound whose primary purpose is to elicit an immediate behavioural response from a group (Schafer 1977: 10); as a soundmark, it operates as a recurrent sonic marker that contributes to a specific acoustic identity and a shared experience of time (1977: 23). Complementarily, it can also be understood as an instance of acoustemology, as sound is not solely perceived but constitutes a culturally situated means of knowing place, time, and social relations (Feld 2015). The acoustic alterity, evident in contemporary debates over its public audibility, recurs in the writings of European travellers to Constantinople, a city that occupied a central place in Western cultural imagination. Although travel writing has traditionally privileged sight over sound, auditory traces remain embedded, albeit often marginally, in these narratives, shaping travellers' sensory experience of place.

In this article, "acoustic encounter" refers to the relational and interpretative process through which a culturally situated listener perceives and narratively interprets a culturally marked sound. The concept is particularly useful for travel writing because the process does not end with perception: the traveller translates the sonic experience into narrative, thereby attributing meaning to the selected sound. Three dimensions are to be taken into account: the sonic event and its spatial-temporal setting; the traveller's response to and interpretation of the sound; and its subsequent narrative representation. While soundscape theory draws attention to the organisation and perception of the sonic environment (Schafer 1977), acoustemology examines the forms of knowledge produced through listening (Feld 2015). Acoustic territory foregrounds the spatial and political dimensions of sound (LaBelle 2010), while the contact zone emphasises the asymmetrical negotiation of intercultural relations (Pratt 1992). Acoustic encounter, in turn, focuses on the moment and process through which these dimensions converge in the listener's experience and narrative mediation of cultural difference.

The primary corpus comprises five Anglophone travel accounts of Constantinople by four writers, selected for their descriptions of, or responses to, the *ezan* and other culturally marked sounds, as well as for the ways in which these sounds are represented narratively. The corpus ranges chronologically from Julia Pardoe's *The City of the Sultan* (1837) and *The Beauties of the Bosphorus* (1838), through Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* (1844) and Lady Emelia Bithynia Maceroni Hornby's *Constantinople during the Crimean War* (1863), to Edwin Augustus Grosvenor's *Constantinople* (1895)[6]. These accounts register the acoustic persistence of the *ezan* across shifting geopolitical frameworks: Pardoe visited Constantinople in 1836, three years before the Tanzimat reforms; Hornby wrote during the Crimean War; Kinglake travelled at the height of British imperial confidence; and Grosvenor wrote during the final

[6] All quotations from the primary corpus are taken from the editions listed in the bibliography; subsequent parenthetical references give page numbers only.

decades of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman soundscape encountered by these writers was therefore not static. Across accounts, the *ezan* emerges as a form of acoustic continuity that persisted through political, economic, and social transformations[7].

The analysis adopts a purposive sampling approach and examines passages in which the call to prayer is heard, described, evaluated, or situated within the urban and social environment. Each occurrence is examined through the three dimensions outlined above, allowing acoustic encounters to function as an analytical category rather than simply as a descriptive label. This approach also includes cases such as Kinglake's, in which the sonic event is registered through the traveller's refusal to describe the sound itself.

2. Acoustic Encounters in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth-century fascination with Constantinople needs to be contextualised within a longer European history of representation of the Ottoman culture. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, *turquerie* – the European fashion for imitating and appropriating aspects of Ottoman art, dress, and culture – had already contributed to establishing an enduring interest in the Ottoman world in Western Europe. This influence continued to shape the cultural landscape of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Girinon 2017), although its forms and modes of engagement changed significantly. In nineteenth-century travel writing, the city on the Bosphorus occupied a prominent place, represented variously as an aesthetic and exotic urban space and as a site through which travellers negotiated Ottoman society and culture. The city was frequently depicted by British travellers as picturesque and labyrinthine (Schiffer 1999: 136, 151-152), while its increasing accessibility transformed the conditions under which visitors could experience it.

The first steamer reached Constantinople in 1840 (Hastaoglou Martindis 2004: 47), and the expansion of steamship connections and railway networks gradually transformed travel to the Ottoman capital. Safer and faster means of transport made such journeys considerably easier (Acar 2017: 668). Likewise, guidebooks became instrumental in facilitating travel and shaping visitors' practical experience of the city. Described as a "novel form of travel literature", Murray's *Turkey*, for instance, helped determine how visitors navigated Constantinople and how they were encouraged to perceive and interpret its urban landscape (Hastaoglou Martindis 2004: 48-52).

Among British travellers, Julia Sophia H. Pardoe visited Constantinople in 1836, three years before the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876), conventionally initiated with the Edict of Gülhane, which marked the beginning of a process of modernisation and administrative reorganisation within the Ottoman Empire. During this period, legal, bureaucratic, and urban life were reshaped according to increasingly Western-oriented models (Gürpinar 2012: 349)[8]. Miss Pardoe draws on her literary skills to recount the city's countless mosques in

[7] This study also acknowledges the gendered dimension of acoustic perception in Ottoman and early Republic urban space. Access to specific environments, patterns of mobility, and practices of sonic presence could differ according to gender. The *ezan*, however, could traverse some of the spatial boundaries that structure urban life along gendered lines.

[8] During the early Tanzimat period, British observers often viewed the Ottoman Empire positively as a modernising state aligned with European models. By the late nineteenth century, however, growing

The Beauties of the Bosphorus (1838). Describing Santa Sophia, the English traveller and poet writes that "the slender minarets stood out like silver wands from an atmosphere of brass" (1838: 100). The image combines visual description with a potentially acoustic association: "brass" evokes both a warm metallic colour and the material of wind instruments. This synaesthetic resonance allows the passage to be read across visual and auditory registers, although the scene itself remains primarily visual.

In *The City of the Sultan, and, Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1836* (1837), Pardoe provides a more direct account of the call to prayer. During an *iftar* dinner in Ramadan, the *ezan* functions as a Schaferian signal, that is, as a sound whose primary purpose is to trigger an immediate collective behavioural response (Schafer 1977: 10): "The cry of the muezzin from the minarets proclaimed that one of the out watchers [...] had caught a glimpse of the moon. Instantly all were in motion" (21). Pardoe does not describe the acoustic qualities of the call; instead, and most importantly, she conveys what it does, showing how it reorganises bodies, space, and time in an instant. Yet what makes this passage theoretically rich is not the signal function alone but the position of the listener. Pardoe notes that she and her companions have chosen to fast "according to their own fashion" (21), suggesting a degree of participation in the temporal rhythm activated by the *ezan*. The call to prayer does not appear simply as an external religious marker: within this particular scene, it also becomes part of a shared temporal experience that crosses, or at least complicates, the boundary between the traveller and the local community.

Pardoe records another scene at the same event that crystallises the differential nature of listening within a single domestic space. As the call to prayer rings out from a neighbouring mosque – "a cry from the minarets announced the hour of prayer" – the master of the house withdraws into devotion, while his guests continue to "laugh, chat, and smoke quite unconcernedly" (27). Again, Pardoe does not describe the acoustic qualities of the sound itself. Instead, the generic term "cry" captures the moment in which listening becomes an encounter with alterity. The same sound, heard in the same room, at the same moment, prompts radically different responses: an immediate embodied reorientation towards the sacred for the host, an unremarkable background event for the Western visitors. The attentive traveller's account reveals an acoustic encounter in its most compressed form. Her attempt "to prove an honest chronicler" (x) allows her to register not a confrontation between cultures at a distance, but a contact zone as a space of asymmetrical relation (Pratt 1992). The scene may therefore be read as suggesting two culturally situated responses to the same sound, which coexist without necessarily converging.

If Pardoe's acoustic encounter unfolds in miniature, Hornby, writing almost three decades later, expands the frame. Her account of a Ramadan evening in *Constantinople during the Crimean War* (1863) immerses the listener in a multi-layered soundscape[9]. Hornby's narrative belongs to a different historical context, shaped by Ottoman-British rapproche-

disillusionment with the reforms contributed to increasingly critical representations shaped by imperial and Christian moral assumptions. See Gürpinar (2012).

[9] Hornby resided in Constantinople between 1855 and 1858, accompanying her husband, appointed British financial commissioner to the Ottoman government during the Tanzimat reforms, Çapar İleri & Mat (2024).

ment consolidated during the Crimean War (1853-1856), and by the Turcophile current that gained momentum from the 1850s onwards (Gürpinar 2012: 349). Neither a tourist nor a literary traveller, Hornby remarks on the inability of language to convey the atmospheric experience of the mosque: "the simple grandeur of some of these masterpieces of Eastern architecture is only to be felt, not to be described" (344). What follows, however, is precisely an attempt to render that excess in words. The prayer itself is described not through its sounds but through its effects on the worshippers: "[…] that solemn abstraction from all surrounding earthly objects […] rises to a kind of stern enthusiasm which strikes even the most sceptical with awe" (334). Although the *ezan* is not named, its temporal function is structurally present. The unfolding soundscape is dense: "Everywhere you hear chanting, singing, and music"; the voices of vendors, "a thousand 'Buyouroun' invite the passer-by to the shops", mix with "the hum of the busy crowd" (344). Lamps in various shapes (flowers, animals, birds, and ships) swing between minarets, transforming the visual field just as sound transforms the acoustic one. This is the Ottoman city as a total *sensorium*: not a single dominant sound, but a layered assemblage of human voices, commercial calls, music, and ambient noise[10]. Yet this multivocal soundscape does not produce cacophony: "And all this host, without anybody to direct its movement, is orderly and quiet; no pressing or jostling, no acute noise or excess" (344). The coexistence of multiple sounds instead contributes to a form of collective self-organisation that Hornby seems almost to find uncanny. Nevertheless, the passage closes with a retreat into the Orientalist imaginary: "an air of mystery, which impresses you almost with the belief that you are witnessing the thousand and second of the Arabian Nights" (334). This latter reference translates the unfamiliar into a culturally legible frame of Oriental fantasy. Hornby occupies an intermediate position between etic and emic perspectives[11]. This passage, however, reveals the limits of her etic listening. Whereas Pardoe's contact zone stayed unresolved, Hornby's listening ultimately gives way to pre-existing cultural conventions.

During a visit to a harem, Hornby notes: "The plaintive chant from a neighbouring minaret announced the hour for prayer" and "Hasan Bey rose, and with elaborate parting salutations, departed off to his devotions" (353). The bodily response is automatic and almost socially choreographed. As in the episode observed in Miss Pardoe's *iftar* account, the *ezan* elicits a visible reorientation of the body; here, however, it also acquires a distinct spatial dimension. The sound traverses public and private spaces alike without recognising the social cartography that organises space along lines of gender; it dwells everywhere bodies are.

If Miss Pardoe and Hornby register these acoustic encounters marginally, without fully elaborating or resolving their cultural significance, Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* (1908) of-

[10] What Ingold (2000) calls the meshwork of relations between human voices, commercial calls, ambient noise, and the architectural forms that carry and transform them, is here rendered visible through sound.

[11] The terms etic and emic derive from linguistic anthropology, Pike (1967), where they designate, respectively, the external observer's analytical framework and the internal perspective of cultural participants. In travel writing studies, the etic/emic distinction maps onto the traveller's outsider gaze and the host culture's self-understanding; Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone (1992) offers a related but distinct model, foregrounding the relational and asymmetrical dimension of cross-cultural encounter rather than the epistemological position of the observer alone.

fers a case of acoustic silence. "Even if we don't take a part in the chant about mosques and minarets", Kinglake writes, "we can still yield praises to Stamboul" (23). As "indispensable accessories" to mosques[12], minarets are architectural landmarks that also implicitly conjure the sonic practice associated with them. They can therefore be considered infrastructures of acoustic mediation. Travellers' fascination with the Ottoman landscape frequently extended to these tall, slender towers, whose elevated position offers not only access to the spatial locus of the muezzin's call but also a privileged panoramic viewpoint. The elevated position of minarets inspired both the practice of ascent recorded by Lady Mary Montagu (1861: 325) and the panoramic imagination of Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-1824)[13]. Applied to Kinglake's refusal, the three levels of analysis outlined above yield an inverted result: the sonic event is textually absent; the traveller's position as an etic listener is registered precisely through withdrawal rather than through interpretation or affect; and the narrative mediation consists in naming the convention only to decline it. Kinglake's meta-textual remark can therefore be interpreted as a negative imprint of acoustic encounter; it testifies to the cultural construction of listening (Erlmann 2010), which becomes visible precisely through the choice not to recall, or not to write about, the sound.

Where Kinglake's silence stages the acoustic encounter as a refusal, Edwin Augustus Grosvenor's *Constantinople* (1895) offers its structural opposite: cumulative documentation. Published in 1895, after several decades of European-inspired technical, administrative, judicial, and educational reforms, Grosvenor's account belongs to the broader period of transformation that preceded the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923 (Çelik 1992: 6). In the work, the *ezan* is a systemic sonic presence that organises the Ottoman landscape: "Cities with mosques dotted the wide expanse, and from every direction muezzins with melodious voices called to prayer" (61)[14]. The American historian's distribution of sound maps the city as an acoustic territory, where "the voice of its muezzin, as he calls from its minaret to prayer, is unusually sonorous, and his accents float over the hills like organ-music" (151)[15]. This

[12] "Three accessories are indispensable to a mosque — a clock, a fountain, and a minaret; the clock determines the hour of prayer — the fountain enables the Faithful to perform their ablutions — and the minaret supplies the gallery whence the muezzin warns the pious to the temple of Allah", Pardoe (1837: 403).

[13] "Giant's Grave": "'T is a grand sight from off 'the Giant's grave' / To watch the progress of those rolling seas / Between the Bosphorus, as they lash and lave / Europe and Asia […]", Byron (1859: 144). In the analysed corpus, this quote can be found in Pardoe (1838: frontispiece) and Grosvenor (1895: 213). Byron's *Don Juan* constitutes an influential pre-formation of Constantinople as a site of sublime liminality in the Anglophone literary imagination, supported also by the author's early readings, which may be the source of his oriental romanticism and revelries. See Umunç (2012).

[14] Grosvenor's account occupies an intermediary position within the etic-emic perspective on Istanbul because the professor had lived in Constantinople as a tutor at Robert College, an experience that granted him an unusually prolonged and direct acquaintance with the city.

[15] A comparable acoustic encounter appears in Italian writer Edmondo De Amicis's *Costantinopoli* (1878), where the muezzin's voice, intoned "in a high, tremulous voice, and very slowly, with a solemn and lamenting accent", connects a peripheral Constantinopolitan quarter to vast, synchronised sacred geography spanning Africa, Asia, and Europe (1896: 63-64); its emotional immediacy – "no tolling bell has ever touched my heart like this" (64) – frames the prayer as an affective, collective mode of inhabiting urban space beyond religious affiliation. In French Pierre Loti's *Aziyadé* (1879), by contrast, *ezan* is experienced as atmospheric immersion, the voice assembling with animal calls, sacred time, and architectural resonance to saturate the air of Istanbul

sonic event is constructed through a strong aesthetic and metaphorical transfiguration. The muezzin's voice is framed as musically organised and harmonious, perceived as possessing an unexpectedly ("unusually") rich acoustic quality, which draws particular attention to it and prompts its metaphorical elevation into musical terms. The human call is assimilated to the timbre of an organ, a Western liturgical instrument capable of filling space and expanding sound. This merging of images and sounds results in a hybrid soundscape in which the Islamic religious voice is perceived through European musical categories in an act of intercultural acoustic negotiation. This processing of unfamiliar sounds through known cultural forms is not unique to Western listening, but in this instance, it produces a specific effect: the Islamic religious voice is rendered legible through a European sacred register, the organ, which shares with the prayer both its spatial resonance and its liturgical function. The translation is not one of distancing but of analogical recognition that bridges cultural boundaries. Grosvenor's listening contrasts with Hornby's earlier reference to the *Arabian Nights*: both writers convert an unfamiliar sound into a culturally recognisable form, but where Hornby reaches for a *topos* of Orientalist literary fantasy, Grosvenor draws on a Western liturgical instrument – exoticisation in one case, acoustic domestication by musical analogy in the other.

Across the accounts examined, the *ezan*, both signal and soundmark (Schafer 1977), is an acoustic event that each traveller negotiates. The variation lies not in the encounter itself but in the cultural resources brought to interpret and describe it: a form of auditory habitus[16], acquired through socially and culturally situated experience, shapes how the prayer is heard and represented. From Pardoe's partial participation in its temporal rhythm to Grosvenor's musical analogy, the travellers render the same recurring sound into different forms of cultural meaning.

3. Conclusion

The Anglophone travel accounts examined trace a varied yet consistent pattern of acoustic encounter with the *ezan* in Ottoman Constantinople. Given the small and heterogeneous corpus, these findings should be understood as text-specific tendencies rather than as a comprehensive account of Western listening practices or of the historical Ottoman soundscape. The call to prayer crosses cultural and spatial boundaries, demanding some form of negotiation. It is not ignored; it is reported, interpreted, aestheticised, or, in Kinglake's case, deliberately left undescribed. It functions, as this article has argued, as an acoustic encounter – a moment in which cultural difference is not merely perceived but actively experienced and mediated through the act of listening. As a Schaferian soundmark, the chant does more than identify a place acoustically. It organises collective and private spaces into an acoustic territory, orienting bodies, structuring time, and producing forms of shared experience that are simultaneously spatial, temporal, and relational.

(1895: 207). French writer Théophile Gautier's muezzins, described as ghost-like figures, "jetant, avec leur voix d'une tonalité étrange, la formule sacramentelle de l'islam", stage a triple sensory negation of the surrounding "maisons muettes, aveugles et sourdes" (1853: 220). The verse seems to descend from the sky, producing what Voegelin (2010) calls charged silence.

[16] In Pierre Bourdieu's sense, a set of durable, socially acquired dispositions that structure perception (1977: 72-95).

The authors examined here register this encounter with varying degrees of awareness and resolution: Pardoe's precise registration of the signal captures the reorganisation of a single domestic space; Hornby's layered, multivocal post-prayer soundscape enacts an Orientalist domestication via the *Arabian Nights*; Grosvenor's systematic distribution of muezzin voices across urban space is translated into the register of Western liturgical music; Kinglake, by contrast, refuses the encounter altogether, invoking its conventional representation only to decline it. Taken together, these strategies constitute an inadvertent archive of the *ezan*'s role as urban soundmark, not simply as an exotic sound but as a recurring element of Ottoman urban life. Similarly, they show that acoustic encounter is shaped by the cultural categories through which unfamiliar sounds are interpreted.

Beyond this corpus, treating the acoustic encounter as a distinct analytical unit offers Sound Studies a finer-grained and more explicitly transcultural category than either soundscape or acoustemology. For travel writing, it offers a means of tracing cultural difference through the ear rather than sight alone. For intercultural literary criticism more broadly, it provides a method for reading listening as narrative mediation, where perception, affect, and cultural translation intersect within a single textual moment.

This dichotomy between auditory formation and acoustic encounter also speaks to the contemporary debates surveyed in this article's introduction: ultimately, it concerns the cultural construction of listening and which sounds are deemed to belong to a shared acoustic environment. The nineteenth-century travel writers examined did not resolve this tension; they inhabited it, each in their own way, leaving behind fragments of acoustic encounter that remain, in their unresolved negotiation between familiarity and alterity, surprisingly contemporary.

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Liminal Geographies: Displacement, Healing and Belonging in the Works of Silko and Malouf

Abstract I: Questo articolo esamina come le letterature anglofone contemporanee articolino esperienze precarie di appartenenza e sradicamento attraverso la rappresentazione di geografie liminali complesse. Focalizzandosi su *Ceremony* di Leslie Marmon Silko e *Remembering Babylon* di David Malouf, l'articolo sviluppa un'analisi comparativa transculturale fondata sulla teoria decoloniale ed ecocritica, sull'antropologia culturale e sul paradigma della partnership di Riane Eisler, sostenendo che lo sradicamento sia negoziato tramite il rituale, la narrazione e il coinvolgimento simbolico con la terra, che emerge come agente trasformativo primario nella ricostruzione identitaria. In entrambi i romanzi, l'ambiente naturale funziona come spazio iniziatico liminale, favorendo guarigione e radicamento in tradizioni culturalmente distinte ma comparabili.

Abstract II: This paper investigates how contemporary anglophone literatures articulate precarious experiences of belonging and displacement through the representation of complex liminal geographies. Focusing on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, it develops a comparative transcultural analysis informed by decolonial and ecocritical theory, cultural anthropology, and Riane Eisler's partnership paradigm. It argues that displacement is negotiated through ritual, narrative, and symbolic engagement with the land, which emerges as a primary transformative agent of identity reconstruction. In both novels, the natural environment functions as a liminal initiatory space, enabling healing and re-rooting within culturally distinct yet comparable traditions.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Epistemology, Liminality, Displacement, Comparative Literature.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how contemporary anglophone literatures mobilise liminal geographies to articulate experiences of displacement and identity fracture, exploring the conditions under which such experiences can be transformed into new forms of belonging and rootedness. My argument is that, within such representations, the land undergoes a process of resemantisation through culturally shared symbolic practices, often structured as initiatory or ritual processes. Crucially, however, this reconstruction depends on the availabili-

ty of an epistemic system capable of sustaining a relational engagement with the land, as opposed to an exploitative and extractive one. Where such a framework persists, Nature becomes legible as a medium of transformation, enabling identity reconstruction; where it is absent, fractures remain unresolved.

Focusing on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), the paper develops a comparative analysis of two structurally opposed models. While both novels identify the natural environment as foundational to identity transformation, they diverge in their outcomes. Silko stages a process of delinking grounded in the Laguna Pueblo cosmology that enables communal reintegration, whereas Malouf explores a condition of open-ended liminality that, in the absence of a receptive community, leads not to reintegration but to the dissolution of the social subject. These two novels, while emerging from distinct cultural contexts, have been selected as case studies because they articulate remarkably similar concerns with identity, liminality, and the relationship between humans and the natural world, while arriving at fundamentally different narrative resolutions. Their juxtaposition therefore provides a productive comparative framework for examining how different cultural paradigms shape the possibilities of identity reconstruction and belonging.

Drawing on decolonial and ecocritical theory, cultural anthropology, and Riane Eisler's partnership paradigm, the paper traces how shifts in epistemic orientation correspond to different modes of inhabiting both land and community. By placing *Ceremony* and *Remembering Babylon* in dialogue through this framework, this article argues that liminality does not possess an inherently transformative potential. Rather, its outcome depends on the narrative, epistemological, and cosmological structures through which subjects negotiate their place in the world. In doing so, the comparison contributes to postcolonial ecocritical discourse by foregrounding how responses to internal displacement, identity fracture, and the historical legacy of settler colonialism can be understood as relational configurations that either enable or inhibit cultural survival and individual renewal.

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyse how liminal geographies become sites where displacement and belonging are negotiated through competing epistemic frameworks, I draw primarily on decolonial theory and its conceptualisation of the global hierarchy established by European colonialism that still operates today. Walter Mignolo defines this system as the "colonial matrix of power" (2007: 478), which is composed of four interrelated domains: control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. Within this framework, I apply the concept of "delinking": a deliberate detachment from hegemonic Western-European and Northern Atlantic rationality, producing a "de-colonial epistemic shift [that] brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo 2007: 453). In *Ceremony*, this framework illuminates Tayo's restorative journey back to Laguna Pueblo, which can be understood as a progressive reorientation away from the hegemonic system towards a relational worldview, culminating in the successful restoration of his ancestral roots. In *Remembering Babylon*, by contrast, the protagonist is expelled from his original com-

munity and partially absorbed into an alternative knowledge system, that of the Aboriginal tribe that rescues him. Yet, he is never fully recognised by either social order and remains in a suspended interstitial condition. His return to the colonial settlement further destabilises existing social and epistemological boundaries, resulting not in reintegration but in an unresolved state of liminality.

While decolonial theory enables the mapping of alternative knowledge systems, the concepts of ritual process and liminality provide a framework for the psychological, spiritual, social, and physical transformations depicted in these novels, as well as for their dependence on communal "reaggregation" (Turner 1991: 94). Drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and Bjørn Thomassen, the journeys of Tayo and Gemmy can be read as complex rites of passage, foregrounding the liminal phase of the ritual: a transitional period "during which the characteristics of the ritual subject […] are ambiguous [as] he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1991: 94). Central to this process is the role of the natural landscape, which functions as a liminal sacred space and a key agent in the ritual. This framing strongly echoes the wide range of ritual practices described by Van Gennep and Turner, in which neophytes or initiands are typically brought "into close connection with deity or superhuman power, with what is, in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless" (Turner 1977: 98). Mirroring the structure of the ritual process, the spatial displacement facilitates the characters' metamorphosis by placing them in direct relation to the land, whose agency shapes the transformation. The nature of this network of relationships linking initiands, ritual space, and the wider community ultimately determines the divergent fates of Tayo and Gemmy.

To evaluate the character of the opposing objectivist and relational epistemic frameworks in this analysis, I will apply the formulations of the socio-anthropologist Riane Eisler, which highlight two main distinctive ways of structuring social configurations:

> The first, which I call dominator model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the ranking of one half of humanity over the other. The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking, may best be described as partnership model (1987: xvii).

In this analysis, the domination-partnership model is employed as a heuristic framework rather than as an exhaustive or fixed classification of the culturally distinct epistemologies represented in the two novels. Although Eisler's work primarily addresses gender and social hierarchies, her dominator model can be readily mapped onto the Colonial Matrix of Power, a system structured around hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and culture. By contrast, when applied to the relationships between the human and the natural world, the partnership model aligns with Indigenous eco-cosmologies, "relating the human intrinsically with the non-human, the cosmos and the other-than-human sphere such as the earth, trees, animals, rivers, mountains" (Guzy 2021: 282), ultimately translating to relational epistemologies (Bird-David 1999)[1]. In this sense, Eisler's partnership model is also closely connected to ecocritical appro-

[1] My reference to Bird-David should not be taken as an uncritical categorisation of all Indigenous cosmolo-

aches in their articulation of the relationship between the material and discursive dimensions of experience "in a non-dualistic system of thought" (Iovino & Oppermann 2012: 76). This framework echoes Eisler's opposition between domination and partnership, while also opening new avenues of inquiry into other-than-human agency and "the interplay between the human and the nonhuman" (Iovino & Oppermann 2012: 79), thus supporting a more precise reading of Indigenous epistemology. Each of these theoretical perspectives performs a distinct analytical function. Decolonial theory frames the opposition between dominant and subaltern epistemologies; relational epistemologies and Indigenous eco-cosmologies define the alternative worldviews the novels are evoking; liminality and rites of passage delineate the protagonists' transformative trajectories, whether fulfilled or frustrated; and ecocriticism foregrounds the agency of the land and its other-than-human subjectivities. Eisler's partnership paradigm, by contrast, provides the integrative framework that connects these perspectives by showing how different epistemological orientations are expressed in individual action and enduring social configurations. Her distinction between domination and partnership therefore allows the comparison to move beyond contrasting ways of knowing towards contrasting modes of inhabiting the world, providing the analytical vocabulary through which these contrasting modes can be interpreted.

3. *Ceremony*: Delinking and Identity Recovery

Published in 1977 and deeply informed by the Laguna Pueblo heritage of its author, as well as the oral and ceremonial traditions of the Pueblo and Navajo peoples, the novel follows Tayo, a mixed-race Native American war veteran struggling to recover from the psychological trauma of World War II. Haunted by the deaths of his cousin Rocky, who was killed in the war, and his uncle Josiah, a father figure who died during his deployment, Tayo embarks on the journey of healing that lies at the heart of the novel.

3.1. Illness, Coloniality and Loss

At the opening of the novel, Tayo is suffering from PTSD for which Western medicine offers no effective cure. He occupies a paradoxical position within the dominator structure, marginalised by it and yet still oriented toward it in search of stability and legitimacy: "he wanted to tell [old Grandma] they had to take him back to the hospital" (Silko 2020: 30)[2]. At the same time, he is unable to invest fully in traditional epistemologies, despite his desire for communal belonging: "the other guys, they're still messed up too. That ceremony didn't help them" (98). This condition can be situated within what decolonial theorists describe as "a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people" (Grosfoguel 2010: 68), a constitutive feature of the colonial matrix of power. By privileging Western epistemol-

gies as animist. Rather, my aim is to highlight her description of a relational epistemology: "this epistemology is about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer. The knowing grows from and is the knower's skills of maintaining relatedness with the known", Bird-David (1999: 69).

[2] All subsequent quotations from *Ceremony* refer to this edition. Hereafter, only page numbers are given in the text.

ogy, this structure delegitimises subaltern forms of knowledge and produces subjects whose worldviews are internally split. Tayo's trauma is therefore not only clinically unaddressed but also culturally reinforced, as he has been shaped to displace trust away from Laguna Pueblo knowledge systems. *Ceremony* presents this assimilation process, driven by wider American society, as a sustained encouragement to abandon Laguna Pueblo culture. The pull away from traditional society is embodied by Tayo's cousin Rocky, who is urged by teachers, coaches, and military recruiters not to let the old ways constrain him. As a result, Rocky comes to express disdain for his own tradition: "he was embarrassed by what [the natives] did" (47). This outlook is strongly supported by Auntie, Rocky's mother, who takes pride in Rocky's perceived potential to move off the reservation. As Aníbal Quijano states: "cultural Europeanisation was transformed into an aspiration. It was a way of participating and later to reach the same material benefits and the same power as the Europeans" (2007: 169). This narrative of progress is sharply contrasted with the derelict conditions of many Native people who left the reservation. Because "they were educated only enough to know they wanted to leave the reservation" (106), many descend into poverty, alcoholism, violence, and prostitution: "they were hungry and dirty and broke; […] and by the time they realized what had happened to them, they must have believed it was too late to go home" (106).

Like Rocky, many of the secondary characters are seduced by the "rhetoric of modernity" which obscures the "logic of coloniality" (Mignolo 2007: 456). More specifically, they are drafted through the promise that even Native men will be welcomed into wider society by serving in the war effort: "they had the uniform and they didn't look different no more. They got respect" (38). Tragically, Rocky's death in the war exposes the collapse of this promise, leaving the surviving soldiers traumatised and unable to reintegrate, while their sense of belonging is displaced onto military experience itself, where "belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies born in Cleveland, Ohio" (39). These trajectories function as instances of internalised colonial identification, against which Tayo's process of delinking becomes legible: "they never saw that it was white people who gave them that feeling and it was white people who took it away again when the war was over" (39).

Despite his profound sense of alienation, Tayo discovers that the reservation community remains an active presence that responds decisively to his return. His military trauma renders his healing journey not merely personal but collectively required, as the community itself "didn't want him at Laguna the way he was" (109). Tayo's renewed engagement with Indigenous cultural tools, healing practices, and cosmology therefore unfolds at the intersection of communal obligation and individual survival, grounded in a shared commitment to reintegrate "the Other" into the social structure. As the narrative moves from the desolation of the dominator model to the expansive nature of the partnership model's centres of care (Mercanti 2015), the Indigenous community emerges not as a passive backdrop but as a key stakeholder in Tayo's transformation.

3.2. Ritual and Communal Healing

If Tayo's illness is inseparable from the backdrop of the colonial matrix of power, his healing process can be framed as a delinking project grounded in the re-centring of the Laguna

Pueblo worldview. Within this framework, the gradual reactivation of ritual and narrative systems becomes the primary means through which the land becomes legible as a key relational nexus of his identity. The novel articulates this shift through a sequence of ritual and geographically situated threshold crossings that reaffirm the constitutive link between identity and place, in line with the observation that "Laguna is both a place and a people" (Ludwig 2024: 27).

Following van Gennep's model of rites of passage, Tayo's phase of separation[3] can be located in his war mission in the Pacific. It is there that he loses his cousin Rocky and curses the relentless tropical rain: "he damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud" (11). This ritual-like chant severs his relationship with the natural world and is mirrored by the subsequent drought at the Laguna reservation: "so he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry" (13). This rupture in the "web of life" (Capra 1997) is first revisited during his encounter with the elder Ku'oosh, who is able to recontextualise Tayo's trauma into an intergenerational, mythical narrative, speaking to Tayo "as if nothing [he] said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it" (31). This encounter marks Tayo's first significant threshold crossing. Taking place in a liminal space equally shared by the living and the dead (Auntie's darkened house, permeated by Rocky's memory), the interview with Ku'oosh unfolds like a negotiation between his ancestral knowledge and Tayo's experience of modernity: "Maybe you don't know some of these things […] But you know, grandson, this world is fragile" (32). In this context, Ku'oosh functions symbolically as a medium, guiding the young veteran toward an alternative worldview grounded not in empiricism, but in symbolic, narrative, and relational modes of understanding, and thereby initiating Tayo's re-entry into a traditional system of knowledge: "the old man only made him certain of something he feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away at the delicate strands of the web […] and the fragile world would be injured" (35).

After the phase of separation, Tayo fully enters the liminal period, marked by his roaming of the marginal space of the reservation lands, until he is brought to see the elder Betonie. If Ku'oosh functions as a mediator of narratives, able to retain and transmit "transgenerational memory thereby ensuring the survival of Indigenous epistemic traditions" (Saidero 2022: 71), Betonie radically expands the healing process as the ritual specialist of a living culture, working between inherited ritual forms and the historical realities of colonial modernity. He embodies a form of ceremonial knowledge that is adaptive rather than conservative, insisting that "the ceremonies have always been changing" (126). In this sense, Betonie does not simply guide Tayo back into tradition; he teaches him how tradition survives displacement by re-signifying elements of colonial domination, for example by incorporating the discarded debris of Western society into his paraphernalia: shopping bags, telephone books, Coke bottles, etc. As the elder explains: "in the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things. But nowadays …" (111).

[3] "The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both", Turner (1991: 94).

After the liminal rite[4] is completed, Tayo is instructed to search for "the pattern of stars the old man drew on the ground that night" (165). This pattern functions as a map for navigating the country, guiding his movement through the landscape and re-establishing a relational continuity between human action and sacred geography. As the text clarifies, "the pattern of the ceremony was in the stars, and the constellation formed a map of the mountains in the direction he had gone for the ceremony. For each star there was a night and a place" (229). Within this framework, Tayo's subsequent actions are not merely episodic but ritualistically structured forms of re-engagement with the environment. As he follows the celestial map, Tayo is able to reclaim his family's rights, confront the colonial exploitation of the land, and discover unprecedented feelings of love and intimacy. As his quest unfolds, Tayo's connection to the land and its other-than-human subjectivities grows to become both practical and immediate. A particularly significant moment occurs during the search for the family's lost cattle, when Tayo encounters a mountain lion. Rather than registering the animal as an external threat, he engages it as a relational presence, articulated in the invocation: "mountain lion, becoming who you are with each breath, your substance changing with the earth and the sky" (182).

The subsequent episode further consolidates this relational orientation. After the mountain lion withdraws, Tayo performs a ritual offering using his uncle Josiah's tools, thereby reactivating intergenerational knowledge embedded in material practice:

> He went into the clearing where the mountain lion had stood; he knelt and touched the footprints […] and poured yellow pollen from Josiah's tobacco sack into the cup of his hand. He leaned close to the earth and sprinkled pinches of yellow pollen into the four footprints. Mountain lion, the hunter. Mountain lion, the hunter's helper (182).

The gesture configures the encounter as a mediated dialogue rather than confrontation: the mountain lion's dual identification as both "hunter" and "hunter's helper" mirrors Tayo's own position as hunter of the lost cattle, establishing a non-anthropocentric structure of relational roles between human and other-than-human agents. As Tayo applies his restored ancestral knowledge, the encounter stages a temporary alignment of human, animal, ancestral tools, and land within a shared ritual economy in which subjectivities are not opposed but mutually constituted.

The mountain lion episode appears as a key pivot in the narrative, with a twofold significance. Firstly, it shows that Tayo's delinking process has reached a decisive stage, as he is now able to draw independently on the ritual practices and knowledge systems of Laguna Pueblo. Secondly, the episode makes visible the relational configuration emerging from this decisive stage in Tayo's process of delinking. As he moves away from the dominator paradigm, Tayo increasingly inhabits a partnership model, demonstrating that healing consists not merely in adopting an alternative epistemology, but in reconstructing a different mode

[4] "Consequently, I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*", Van Gennep (1960: 21).

of relation, grounded in reciprocity. Furthermore, this process allows Tayo to understand the narrative pattern linking his story to the collective story of his people, in both historical and mythical terms: "he cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together – the old stories, the war stories, their stories – to become the story that was still being told" (229).

Ultimately, Tayo's healing does not consist in a return to an uncontaminated past, but in the reactivation of narrative and ritual systems capable of re-signifying both land and memory as essential foundations of his identity. Such recognition is possible because a relational epistemic framework remains available to receive the subject's story as part of an overarching narrative linking the individual, the community, and the land, as exemplified by Tayo's recognition by Laguna's elders' council, which ultimately welcomes him back into the reservation community. Conversely, it is precisely the absence of such epistemic resources that determines the radically different outcome staged in *Remembering Babylon*.

4. *Remembering Babylon*: Alterity without Reintegration

Published in 1993, *Remembering Babylon* is set on the colonial frontier of nineteenth-century Australia and follows Gemmy Fairley, a white man who, after living for years among Aboriginal people, finds his way back to a British settlement. Appearing as a figure caught between two worlds, he is viewed with suspicion by the colonial community, as his presence exposes deep anxieties surrounding identity, belonging, and the boundaries between cultures.

Whereas in *Ceremony* a relational epistemology enables the re-signification of the land as a complex liminal space oriented towards ritual transformation and reintegration, *Remembering Babylon* presents nature as a frontier of epistemic rupture, and liminality as an unresolved condition. This interstitial state is shared by both Gemmy and the settlers, who, like initiands, experience a profound separation from the rest of the world: "the sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong" (Malouf 2007: 7). Despite their shared condition, Gemmy's return introduces an epistemic and cosmological framework that the settlers struggle to interpret. Unable to accommodate this alterity within their own system of knowledge, they assign him to a position of absolute otherness. This response, far from the notion of liminality as "moments of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up" (Thomassen 2009: 14), shows how, in the absence of a relational epistemic framework, liminality pushes the subject further into disintegration, for, as Thomassen observes, "without reintegration liminality is pure danger" (2009: 22).

This epistemic gap supports the settlers' identification of Gemmy with the unknown land that surrounds them. In this way, he becomes the embodiment of both the "land-as-other" (Riem 2017: 32) and its Indigenous inhabitants. While *Ceremony* presents Laguna's landscape as culturally legible and integrated within a relational system, *Remembering Babylon* characterises nature as Wilderness: an unreadable and threatening domain, the proximity of which can profoundly destabilise the settlers' culture, community, language, and humanity itself. Consequently, the space beyond the settlement is perceived as hostile territory, intensifying the settlers' sense of existential precariousness: "the presence of the

Aboriginal world is subtle and pressing, especially when it embodies in the Earth, mother and alien, nourisher and funereal, enchanting and ghostly" (Riem 2024: 120). Gemmy's body itself reflects this instability, being perceived by the settlers as a hybrid figure, subject to the invasive action of natural forces that erode the boundaries between humanity and animality:

> The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that […] had been *changed* into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark (Malouf 2007: 2).

Thus, Gemmy's presence not only brings forth an alternative epistemology but also exposes an immediate, non-dualistic relation to the land that the settlers struggle to process. His physicality becomes the site of this epistemic conflict, highlighting the Country's own capacity for meaning production, if, as Serpil Oppermann states, "all life is semiotic" (2019: 109). Ecocriticism's notion of material agency is particularly prominent in the minds of the settlers, who do not conceive of it expressly, but can nevertheless feel its overwhelming presence: "you lay listening to the crash of animals through [the land's] underbrush […]; or some other, unidentifiable sound, louder, further off, that was an event in the land's history, no part of yours" (Malouf 2007: 7). What emerges, then, is not a lack of meaning on the part of the land, but an inability or unwillingness to interpret it in its anchoring and transformative capacities.

In contrast to Silko's ceremonial framework, where liminality is structured and guided, *Remembering Babylon* presents an unmediated and therefore destabilising form of transition. The settler community lacks both the epistemic tools and the ritual structures necessary to process alterity. Its relationship to the land is not mutual but grounded in control and categorisation. Read through the distinction between dominator and partnership paradigms, the settler community consistently enacts the former: the land, Indigenous peoples, and Gemmy himself are approached as objects to be classified, controlled, or excluded, rather than as participants in reciprocal relationships. Consequently, no pathway exists for the reintegration of the liminal subject, with liminality itself becoming a permanent, detrimental state. Transformation then becomes degradation, leading not to a new social identity but to fragmentation and instability. In this context, Gemmy's trajectory both mirrors and fundamentally diverges from Tayo's. This divergence becomes most apparent in the absence of mediating figures capable of translating experience into shared meaning. Even more supportive figures such as Mr Frazer remain confined within a domination paradigm that reduces the land and the Indigenous peoples to objects of observation. Driven by a superficial scientific curiosity, Mr Frazer is guided by Gemmy into the bush to observe the native flora, oblivious to the forces at play outside the settlement: "it was out of a kind of reverence, as well as concern for the danger he might put them in, that he concealed from Mr Frazer, who

he knew would not notice, a great deal of what he himself could see" (Malouf 2007: 60). In this instance, it is Gemmy who is forced to mediate between the settler and the Country. This is a sharp inversion of "traditional" liminality, showcasing an unstructured condition with no clear outcome.

As a result, the transitional stage remains open-ended. As Thomassen notes, in anthropological terms liminality presupposes both beginning and end, while "members of the society are themselves aware of the liminal state: they know that they will leave it sooner or later and have 'ceremony masters' to guide them through the rituals" (2009: 21). In Malouf's novel, these conditions are absent. What emerges instead is a state of permanent suspension affecting both the individual and the community. Read through the lens of liminality, Malouf's critique of colonial society takes on an even greater scope, if we accept that "it is modernity itself that is permanently liminal" (Thomassen 2009: 21). Unable to account for alterity and a different relational model, colonial modernity forecloses any chance for reintegration, identity reconstruction, and a shared sense of belonging.

Ultimately, Gemmy's trajectory reveals that, in the absence of "some kind of 'background' in which individual action can be understood and measured" (Thomassen 2009: 25), liminality cannot function as a process of reintegration, instead becoming a chronic condition of instability. Without such a background, Gemmy's story cannot be received, translated, or incorporated into a collective structure of meaning. As a result, storytelling loses its restorative function and fails to operate as a medium of relational repair. Furthermore, without the cultural resources necessary to re-signify both land and identity, nature cannot become a partner agent in the web of life but remains an opaque and destabilising presence. In this context, displacement does not evolve into belonging but persists as fracture, leaving both the individual and the community locked in a state of unresolved uprootedness.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary anglophone literatures can articulate experiences of displacement and identity fracture through liminal geographies, and that such experiences may be reconfigured into forms of belonging only where ritual and narrative structures enable a relational engagement between land, community, and subject. Through a comparative analysis of *Ceremony* and *Remembering Babylon*, it has shown that liminality does not in itself guarantee transformation: its outcome depends on whether it is supported by a shared epistemological framework capable of sustaining collective recognition of the subject's experience.

In Silko's novel, liminality is embedded within a ceremonial process that recovers relationality, allowing the land to function as a medium of healing and reintegration within a living communal framework. In contrast, Malouf's text presents liminality as a permanent crisis condition, in which the absence of shared interpretative structures prevents both the recognition of alterity and the reconstitution of belonging, rendering the land a destabilising rather than transformative presence.

Ultimately, these two models reveal that identity reconstruction unfolds through a series of liminal passages that are inherently unstable and potentially traumatic, requiring an

anchoring structure if they are not to collapse into disintegration. The reconstruction of belonging thus emerges as a process of healing capable of transforming the trauma of separation into a relational configuration linking subject, community, and land. If Silko demonstrates that such reconstruction is possible through the collective reactivation of an autonomous epistemology, Malouf exposes the limits of a colonial society entrenched in a domination paradigm. Its difficulty in accommodating alterity constrains the possibility of transformation and risks alienating it from the land it occupies. In this sense, the dialogue between the two novels suggests that the possibility of identity recovery depends on the recovery of relational modes of knowledge capable of sustaining meaningful connections between human communities and the other-than-human. Where such modes persist, estrangement may be reconfigured into belonging; where they are absent, displacement remains a permanent condition of never-ending liminality. At the same time, this comparative analysis contributes to ongoing dialogues between North American and Australian literatures, particularly within Native studies and postcolonial scholarship, by identifying resonances between autonomous literary responses to distinct settler-colonial histories and their representations of Indigenous relational ecologies.

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Adriana Marinelli

"Take a look at our world": from Minoan Roots to Ecotopia in Robert Graves' *Seven Days in New Crete*

Abstract I: Questo articolo analizza *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949) di Robert Graves attraverso una prospettiva ecocritica, integrata con gli island studies e la ricezione classica. Lo spazio immaginario di "New Crete" costituisce l'agente ecocentrico attivo della narrazione, intersecando la riscrittura delle fonti minoiche, l'esperienza biografica dell'autore e la radicale critica alla modernità tecnologica. Attraverso una struttura triplice, che considera la Maiorca biografica, la fittizia Nuova Creta e la Creta storica, l'articolo propone una lettura del romanzo quale ecotopia *ante litteram*, in cui il rapporto simbiotico con la terra costituisce l'essenza della società.

Abstract II: This article examines Robert Graves' *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949) by integrating ecocriticism, island studies, and classical reception. Rather than a static utopian backdrop, the fictional space of New Crete emerges as an active, eco-centric agent where the rewriting of Minoan myth, the author's biographical experience, and a radical critique of technological modernity converge. By exploring the intersection of fictional space, biographical experience, and classical antiquity, the article proposes a reading of the novel as an ecotopia *ante litteram*, in which a symbiotic relationship with the land constitutes the very foundation of human society.

Keywords: Robert Graves, Ecocriticism, Island Studies, Classical Reception, Ecotopia.

1. Introduction: A Utopia Out of Time

Published in 1949, *Seven Days in New Crete* remains one of the least studied works in Graves' fiction, overshadowed by the success of his major prose works like *I, Claudius* (1998), his influential war memoir *Good-Bye to All That* (2018), and his masterpiece *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1999). In his introduction to the novel, Martin Seymour-Smith argues that *Seven Days in New Crete* may now be seen as a book in every way as important as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), though "when it was first published in 1949 it was at least thirty years ahead of its time" (Seymour-Smith 1983: vii). Notwithstanding such high critical relevance, the novel's prophetic quality accounts for its relative neglect both within Graves' own corpus and within the broader critical debate on twentieth-century utopian fiction. Yet, largely neglected as it

has been, *Seven Days in New Crete* offers a uniquely sophisticated renegotiation of temporal and spatial boundaries. Where Huxley and Orwell project the anxieties of the present into technological futures, Graves imagines a future built on the past in a civilisation that has not progressed but returned.

The novel follows Edward Venn-Thomas, a twentieth-century British poet who is magically summoned into a far-future society called New Crete. Its civilisation traces its origins back to the pre-patriarchal Minoan roots of Western culture. Venn-Thomas spends seven days in this world, watching, questioning, and gradually being unsettled by what he finds. The novel opens onto several levels simultaneously: it is utopian fiction, autobiography, myth, and an ecocritical text of unusual depth and contemporary relevance.

To this end, my reading of *Seven Days in New Crete* considers the novel as an island text situated within Graves' literary macrocosm. Specifically, the argument unfolds across three distinct dimensions. The first concerns the fictional space itself: New Crete is not a generic utopian nowhere but a specifically insular world, shaped by the logic and psychology of island existence as theorised in the field of island studies. The second is biographical, for the fictional island is grounded in Mallorca, where Graves had lived since 1929. In his essay "Why I live in Majorca 1953" he identified the island as the enabling condition of his work as a poet. The third layer is mythological: the novel's engagement with the Minoan past, with Crete as the historical origin of a pre-patriarchal, goddess-centred civilisation, transforms the island from biographical fact and fictional setting into a mythological resource and an ecological argument. These three islands, fictional New Crete, biographical Mallorca, and historical Crete, are superimposed throughout the text and reading them together produces a richer account of the novel's meaning.

2. Theoretical Framework

The existing scholarship on *Seven Days in New Crete* has highlighted the biographical and cultural-historical context of the novel with great precision. Cathy Gere's reading of the text within Minoan modernism remains essential; yet her focus on Arthur Evans' archaeology and Graves' muses leaves the novel's ecological and insular dimensions largely unexplored (Gere 2009: 195-207). To this end, the article addresses that gap by integrating ecocriticism, island studies, and classical reception into a single interpretive lens.

To investigate "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii), this study draws upon two foundational concepts from ecocriticism. The first is Lawrence Buell's notion of "place-consciousness", in terms of "the consciousness of the nonhuman environment as a network enfolding human inhabitants", which he identifies as "a utopian project that realizes itself, in its more instructive forms, not as a *fait accompli* but as an incompletion undertaken in awareness that place is something we are always in the process of finding" (Buell 1995: 260). The second is Greg Garrard's concept of "dwelling", which is "not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work" (Garrard 2012: 117). As Garrard argues, drawing on the classical model of Virgil's *Georgics*, this ecological mode emphasises the crucial relationship between "agricultural productivity [and] ritual observance" (Garrard 2012: 118).

Simultaneously, the article applies Godfrey Baldacchino's theory of insularity to explore how island isolation fosters a heightened awareness of place. Specifically, the condition of "boundedness" produces "the island effect", whereby life is "intense, distilled, exaggerated" precisely because it is contained (Royle & Brinklow 2018: 9). Moreover, Stephen A. Royle and Laurie Brinklow also note that "everyone on an island today would have an ancestor who has moved to that island" (Royle & Brinklow 2018: 12). New Crete draws its identity from the deep classical memory of the Minoan world, whose insularity had already, in Graves' mythographic imagination, protected it from the patriarchal contamination of the mainland. It is precisely this capacity of the island to function as a protected space of cultural memory and alternative social organisation that connects island studies to the utopian tradition: "the isolated island notion has also been used to set out utopias, most notably in the original *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More" (Royle & Brinklow 2018: 17).

The title of the novel itself acknowledges its debt to classical antiquity, which is the engine of Graves' entire macrocosm. To this end, Lorna Hardwick's model of active classical reception (Hardwick 2003: 1-10) helps to examine how Graves reappropriates ancient sources in response to his own historical crisis. The practice revolves around two classical tropes: Minoan Crete as the historical instance of a pre-patriarchal, goddess-centred civilisation, and Plato's *Republic* (1969) as the foundational text of the Western utopian tradition that the novel explicitly targets and inverts. The reading is supported by archival evidence, specifically Graves' correspondence while writing from a Barcelona hospital. Isolated from his library, Graves was forced to reconstruct the fictional world entirely from memory, as he wrote to John Auerbach, "I felt lonely too" (Graves 1957). The circumstances mirror the novel's central message: true civilisation relies on living myth, rather than on technological tools. The letters written before, during, and after the novel's composition are therefore treated here as documents that illuminate the relationship between displacement, mythic memory, and fictional imagination.

The analysis moves through several physical places that lead directly to the space of New Crete. The first one is Mallorca, the biographical terrain that grounded Graves' environmental sensibility and nurtured his insular imagination. It then turns to Ancient Crete, whose pre-patriarchal, goddess-centred civilisation supplied the mythographic blueprint for a non-industrial social order. Finally, it culminates in New Crete itself, the imaginative space where lived experience and classical memory converge into a dynamic, living landscape. Because each island conceptually enables the next, tracing this progression is essential to uncovering the coherence of Graves' ecological argument.

3. Mallorca: The Biographical Island

The biographical island underlying Graves' imagination is Mallorca. Notably, the Balearic Islands occupy a distinctive place in the cultural geography of literary modernism. In 1929, following a personal crisis in London, Graves settled in the remote mountain village of Deià on the recommendation of Gertrude Stein, who described Mallorca as "paradise – if you can stand it" (Jessop 2016: 124). There, Graves and Laura Riding built their main home Canellún, continued the work of the Seizin Press, and created an intellectual community that attracted

poets, critics, and artists from across Europe. As Anett Jessop has shown, it was in Mallorca that Graves developed his distinctive practice of imaginatively inhabiting history rather than reconstructing it through scholarship (Jessop 2016: 138). This practice reaches its most radical expression in *Seven Days in New Crete*, where the Minoan past is not cited but lived.

In "Why I Live in Majorca 1953" Graves offers a practical account of his reasons for choosing the island. But the deeper reasons emerge as the essay proceeds. What he was fleeing, above all, was the growing mechanisation of England: "the growing mechanization of agriculture. I wanted to go where town was still town; and country, country" (Graves 1965: 7). The Mallorcan environment nurtures Graves' imagination, foreshadowing the landscape of New Crete**.** Mallorca is chosen because it has not yet been subjected to the logic of industrial modernity. What Graves found in Deià anticipates with remarkable precision the landscape of New Crete: an agricultural and seasonal rhythm, an economy based on olives and figs, and a sense of the sacred embedded in the physical environment. The church at Deià, he notes, "is said to be built on the site of an Iberian shrine of the Moon-goddess" (Graves 1965: 13). Therefore, the island embodies the same feminine sacred that will organise New Cretan society.

Graves further describes Mallorca as uniquely suited to the poet's work. Unlike the distracting chaos of London, the island offers "absolute quiet [...] admirable for people whose minds already teem with ideas that need recording in absolute quiet: poets, mathematicians, musicians, sculptors and such" (Graves 1965: 9). Notably, in the society of New Crete, poets occupy a central social role precisely because the island's conditions make genuine poetic work possible. The biographical experience and the fictional vision are continuous and reciprocal, for the island produces the poet, and the poet produces the island.

In Royle and Brinklow's terms, Graves earned his Mallorcan islandness through decades of chosen exile: "those who choose to live on an island must learn and 'earn' their islandness" (Royle & Brinklow 2018: 12). The earned quality is what distinguishes Graves' relationship with Mallorca from that of modernist visitors who passed through the Balearics without making the island their condition of existence. For Graves, the island was not a creative episode but a permanent commitment that shaped the very mode of his imagination.

Graves' correspondence confirms that the insular imagination was the direct source of *Seven Days in New Crete*. Before the novel received its final title, Graves referred to it in his letters simply as "my crazy Utopia" (Graves 1948c). The designation registers his awareness of the project's position within, and against, the dominant literary trends of his moment. The mid-twentieth century was the golden age of the dystopia: Huxley's *Brave New World* (2017) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2021) had established the technological nightmare as the period's most culturally resonant imaginative form. Yet, as Lyman Tower Sargent observes, "utopias were published throughout the period that the dystopia dominated" but "went unnoticed until the upsurge in utopianism in the so-called 'Sixties'" (Sargent 2010: 30). *Seven Days in New Crete* belongs to this invisible counter-current, and what distinguishes Graves' contribution is the direction of the utopian impulse: not towards rational social organisation but towards the recovery of an ecologically grounded relationship between human communities and the natural world. As Chang Hui-chuan notes, "the rise of ecological utopia [...] testifies to the emergence of a new sub-genre in the sphere of utopian literature and a rad-

ical departure from the path of canonical utopia" (Chang 2005: 252). Sargent identifies this sub-genre as the ecological reorientation of the utopian tradition (Sargent 2010: 31), crystallised in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (2004). While the term did not yet exist, Graves' novel anticipates several features that would later come to characterise the ecotopian tradition.

As Seymour-Smith recognised, Graves was "a cyclical rather than a linear thinker" and his novel's insistence that human communities should organise themselves around organic rather than mechanical principles "might have seemed odd in 1949 but now does not" (Seymour-Smith 1983: xv); indeed, he adds that "in these days when everyone should be an ecologist – and more – it gives food for thought" (Seymour-Smith 1983: xxii). It is in this precise sense that *Seven Days in New Crete* is read here as an ecotopia *ante litteram*: the novel anticipates the defining features of this sub-genre through the bounded, cyclical, ecologically alive island whose logic is also the logic of the ecological alternative.

Crucially, Graves' visionary impulse was intimately tied to the material circumstances of its creation, as the novel was composed under conditions that mirror its central argument. When Graves was forced to leave Mallorca in 1947 to accompany his son William to a Barcelona clinic, he began writing the novel. Writing in displacement, stripped of his library, Graves reconstructed an entire civilisation from memory alone. Graves' correspondence from 1948 allows us to reconstruct the novel's development with considerable precision. Writing to Seppl Campalans on 2 May 1948, Graves described the project's central diagnostic impulse: "it's a utopia which like all utopias is a criticism of the present and tries to point out where the train of civilisation jumped the rails" (Graves 1948a). A letter to James Reeves dated 13 May 1948 reveals the speed of composition and Graves' organic writing process: the novel was "in the 5th day and four chapters or so from the end: a damned queer affair. I have had only the vaguest idea what was going to happen and left the logic of events to surprise me, chapter by chapter. It concerns the problem of evil: how much evil is needed to sustain 'the good life'" (Graves 1948b). Writing to Federico de la Iglesia on 13 December 1948, Graves described the work as set "about 4000 A.D. and in the post-scientific neo-primitive age" (Graves 1948d). The phrase "neo-primitive" encapsulates the retro-utopian logic of the entire text: a future constructed from archaic materials, in which progress is replaced by deliberate recovery. The biographical and fictional islands can thus be understood as imaginative extensions of one another. As Graves made explicit in a letter to Margot Nichols in October 1960: "How to get to New Crete? We are there already" (Graves 1960). The present tense is definitive: not "it was based on Mallorca" but "we are there". Mallorca is New Crete transfigured; or rather, New Crete is Mallorca extended backward in time to its Minoan origins and forward into a post-technological future. The identification lays the ground for the third island: ancient Crete, whose pre-patriarchal, goddess-centred civilisation provides both the mythographic foundation and the ecological blueprint for the world Graves imagined from a Barcelona clinic in 1947.

4. Ancient Crete: The Mythological Island

While Mallorca provided the immediate biographical and environmental blueprint for Graves' utopia, the conceptual foundation of New Crete rests on a third, historical island: ancient Crete. A letter to Basil Liddell Hart from November 1944 shows Graves already

thinking of Minoan Crete in civilisational terms: "you should have a look at the fashions of Minoan Crete, the most civilised society of antiquity and the most pacific" (Graves 1944a). A letter to Beryl Graves dated 29 December 1944 outlines the core matriarchal structures that would later define New Cretan society: "the historical fact to be preserved was that 'all families in Crete were descended from the mother until the fall of Cnossos [...] and that the girls had free sexual relations before marriage in honour of the Mother Goddess'" (Graves 1944b). The Minoan Island, the matrilineal family, the Goddess: these are the materials Graves was assembling three years before the Barcelona clinic.

Graves' idealised vision was deeply indebted to Arthur Evans' excavations at Knossos, which provided archaeological legitimacy for his mythographic vision. Indeed, Evans had been one of Graves' neighbours at Boar's Hill, near Oxford, in the years following the First World War (Momigliano 2020: 124). It was Evans who constructed the modern myth of Minoan Civilisation, interpreting its palaces as evidence of a peaceful, artistic, goddess-worshipping matriarchy. As Gere has argued, Evans' importance for modernism lay in an epistemological paradox: "by denying its own florid subjectivity, archaeology seemed to provide objective confirmation of some of the most irrationalist strains of modernist thought" (Gere 2009: 6-7), allowing modernist writers to use his findings as empirical validation for visions that were, at their core, mythographic. Graves "created Minoan Crete as the goddess-worshipping Atlantis that must surely have existed before humans invented war" (Gere 2009: 207), producing a work "explicitly prophetic and prescriptive in tone, exhorting the reader to learn the great lessons of the twentieth century and to return to the way of Cretan peace" (Gere 2009: 207).

However, subsequent scholarship has substantially revised Evans' account, challenging both the matriarchal hypothesis and the characterisation of Minoan society as uniquely peaceful. From this perspective, his reconstruction of Minoan civilisation proves to be as much an act of imagination as of scholarly research. As Joseph Alexander MacGillivray has shown, the world Evans created at Knossos was "exactly to his taste", "set in a beautiful Mediterranean country, aristocratic and humane in feeling [...] a world which served to isolate him from a present in which he had found no real place" (MacGillivray 2000: 3), explicitly conceived as "the perfect antidote to industrialized Europe and America" (MacGillivray 2000: 3). According to MacGillivray, "Evans' Minoans are an example of how an archaeological discovery occurs first in the mind, born of the thinker's need to prove something of vital importance to himself" (MacGillivray 2000: 3). Kenneth D. S. Lapatin further confirms this hypothesis. He argues that those who have engaged with the Minoan material have consistently "painted their preconceptions, desires, and preoccupations for an idealized past" (Lapatin 2002: 184), producing "valuable lessons in the subjectivity of historical reconstruction" (Lapatin 2002: 184). As Lapatin observes, "the greater the certainty with which moderns explain ancient belief systems, the more we must suspect that their convictions reflect present desires rather than past realities" (Lapatin 2002: 90).

The critical perspective does not diminish the significance of Evans' work; rather, it clarifies Graves' use of Evans. Graves was aware of the speculative nature of his Minoan sources: the self-deprecating "crazy utopia" of his correspondence signals precisely the awareness. But where Evans projected Victorian ideals onto the Bronze Age, Graves project-

ed an ecological argument: he used the same uncertain, reconstructed, mythographically charged material not to escape the present but to challenge it. The Minoan past, however dubious as history, was entirely usable as myth, and it is as myth, not as scholarship, that it enters *Seven Days in New Crete*.

Graves' engagement with the ancient world is not only creative but also contentious. While ancient Crete represents the historical instance of a pre-patriarchal, goddess-centred society ruled by a symbiotic relationship between human community and the natural world, its reappropriation must be understood in direct opposition to the dominant philosophical paradigm of the classical tradition: Plato's *Republic*. Within Graves' reading of the classical tradition, the Platonic *Kallipolis* comes to represent a rupture in which logos is privileged over mythos and the poets are excluded from the ideal city. In Chapter IV, Ben-Yeshu's Critique of Utopias analyses "some seventy utopias, including Plato's Timaeus and Republic", concluding that "no writer of a Utopia had ever applied himself to make good the damage done by Plato, when he banished poets from his Republic and preached a scornful indifference to poetic myth"[1]. However, Graves' reading must be situated within its historical moment. *When Seven Days in New Crete* was composed in 1947, the *Republic* was not merely a philosophical text but a politically charged one: Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1994) had recently identified Plato as the intellectual father of totalitarianism, an argument that resonated powerfully in the aftermath of the Second World War. As Seymour-Smith noted, Graves shared Popper's hostility towards the *Republic*, which he "always loathed, both as totalitarian and over-solemn" (Seymour-Smith 1983: xiv). In this context, the expulsion of the poets from the ideal city becomes the founding gesture of a rationalist tradition which Graves associated with the technological devastation of the twentieth century. This idea aptly echoes the same "growing mechanization" from which he had fled to Mallorca (Graves 1965: 7). By using ancient Crete to invert that gesture, Graves frames the Minoan past as an active philosophical counter-model to the Western rationalism that, according to his viewpoint, had severed the relationship between human society and the natural world.

The mythographic reappropriation finds its most sustained theoretical elaboration in *The White Goddess* (1948), published one year before the novel. Here, Graves argues that Minoan Crete represents the last intact instance of a pre-patriarchal civilisation organised around the Goddess rather than a Father God. According to this account, "there was no Father God", and the Goddess remains "the mother of all things; her sons and lovers partake of the sacred essence only by her grace" (Graves 1999: 388), not a deity among others but the cosmological principle organising the entire social and ecological order. The distinction between a "Mother Country" and a "Father Land" (Graves 1999: 408) maps directly onto the novel's ecological argument: the former is a landscape inhabited in a relation of care and reciprocity; the latter a territory claimed, owned, and exploited. New Crete is the fictional realisation of the former, and Minoan Crete its historical legitimation. The insularity of Crete was precisely what allowed it to develop a balanced, peaceful social order shielded from mainland expansion, just as the sea surrounding New Crete protects the recovered civilisa-

[1] Graves (1983: 42). All subsequent quotations from the novel are from this edition; page numbers will hereafter be given parenthetically in the text.

tion from the rational world that preceded it. Graves outlined "the Cretan Novel" and the "historical fact to be preserved" that "all families in Crete were descended from the mother until the fall of Cnossos [...] and that the girls had free sexual relations before marriage in honour of the Mother Goddess" (Graves 1944b).

Seven Days in New Crete is not a fictional illustration of *The White Goddess* but its imaginative complement. Where the mythographic work reconstructs the mythic past as scholarly argument through a dense apparatus of sources, the novel projects it into a speculative future as lived reality and does so without access to any of those sources. The Minoan world of New Crete is therefore not derived from scholarship but produced independently from the same internalised mythic substrate.

5. New Crete: The Fictional Island

In *Seven Days in New Crete*, the three islands converge, for New Crete is Mallorca transfigured and Minoan Crete reborn. The fictional space draws simultaneously on the biographical rhythms of Deià and the mythographic structures of the pre-patriarchal past. New Crete presents the ecological alternative to modern decline as a lived reality, embedded in landscape, character, and ritual. From the moment Venn-Thomas arrives, it emerges as a world with its own logic, its own demands, and its own capacity to unsettle the visitor who enters it. The textual evidence traces three dimensions of this agency: the island as an ecological landscape, the island as a mirror of Venn-Thomas' displacement, and the island as a ritual body.

From the very beginning, New Crete asserts itself as an ecological landscape. Venn-Thomas' first perception of New Crete is, significantly, an ecological one. Looking out at the familiar Mediterranean coastline, he notices an immediate transformation:

> As for your whereabouts, if you look out of the window you will perhaps recognize this district. Yes, the district was familiar. That rocky headland, the low hill, with the church of Sainte Véronique on the top – except that it was not the same church, and perhaps not a church at all. The Mediterranean had retreated a mile or more, a broad belt of farmland stretched nearly to the horizon, and the bare hills were now covered with trees. I thought they looked much better this way (2).

The recognition encoded in that last sentence is crucial. The hills are better wooded, not merely aesthetically, but ecologically. The transformation is the result of centuries of patient stewardship: the island has been worked with rather than subdued. This is not the landscape of colonial conquest but of organic collaboration. In Buell's terms, the opening passage establishes a "place-consciousness" that will deepen as the narrative progresses: the island is already making claims on Venn-Thomas' imagination that his rational, modern consciousness is not equipped to process.

The chapter entitled "Take a Look at Our World" extends the ecological logic into daily life. The magicians' garden is paved with "flags of moss-covered sandstone", the paths run "not quite straight" through "slightly undulating" lawns, and a brook runs over slate pebbles into a fish-pool. When Venn-Thomas asks about the design, Sally explains that "straight lines, level surfaces and a large variety of flowers fatigued the eye, and that the garden was

intended for relaxation" (34). The rejection of the straight line is simultaneously an aesthetic, an ecological, and a philosophical position. To impose geometric order on a living landscape is to misunderstand what a landscape is for. Garrard's concept of 'dwelling' enacts the design principle in the very shape of the garden paths.

The herb garden extends the logic into the domain of knowledge. A polygonal enclosure in which plants are arranged "in thirteen divisions according to their seasonal virtues", it follows the thirteen-month lunar calendar, where herbs are picked "according to the age of the moon and the day of the week" (49). The garden operates as a living library organised by natural time rather than scientific classification. The knowledge it embodies is ecological: it maps seasonal interdependencies and the ways in which plants, the moon, and the people who tend them are part of the same living system. The alternative epistemology is only possible because of the island's boundedness: what Baldacchino identifies as the island community's capacity to sustain cyclical time against the linear time of the mainland (Royle & Brinklow 2018: 9). The boundedness that isolates New Crete is what makes a different way of knowing possible.

Even the most apparently mundane detail of New Cretan agriculture encodes this regenerative principle. In the parkland, animals wear wide leather shoes to protect the turf, and "the manure is returned to the land once a year, sprayed over the whole surface, so that the grass grows evenly" (51). The closed cycle of returning waste to the earth that produced it embodies the society's governing logic: nothing is extracted without restitution; nothing is taken without being given back. Coupled with the cultural law that "it is part of our religion never to waste food or any other product of the soil" (112), farming practices become a radical philosophical defence of environmental sustainability, transforming New Crete into a functional ecotopia. Taken together, these details construct New Crete as a functioning ecological system, whose logic, however, can only be perceived by a visitor willing to abandon the habits of the world he comes from.

If New Crete is the novel's protagonist, Venn-Thomas is its reluctant antagonist, because he cannot fully inhabit the values he intellectually recognises as superior. His trajectory across the seven days is one of progressive exposure: the island holds up a mirror to his modernity, and what he sees is both attractive and intolerable. Touring the garden with Sally, Venn-Thomas registers a characteristic ambivalence: "When Sally was about I felt the temptation to criticize all I saw, almost to the extent of feeling a loyalty to my own obviously inferior epoch" (50). He knows his epoch is inferior (as he himself puts it) yet he cannot relinquish his loyalty to it. Venn-Thomas embodies a rational acknowledgement of ecological failure combined with an emotional inability to imagine a genuinely non-extractive relationship with the natural world.

That distance transforms into outright revulsion. Witnessing one of the island's ritual procedures, Venn-Thomas records: "I felt a sudden intense disgust; why did I ever consent to visit this place? Curiosity had borne down my commonsense. I didn't belong, and I dislike Utopias" (88). In Royle and Brinklow's terms, Venn-Thomas has been summoned to New Crete but has not earned his islandness, for he has not undergone the long process of learning and internalising the island's values that would make genuine belonging possible. The island's strict geographical and social boundedness, which makes it an ecological lab-

oratory, also renders it expulsive: a man from mechanical modernity cannot inhabit an ecological civilisation in seven days. However, the island does not leave Venn-Thomas entirely untouched. Recalling a supernatural experience "in the Balearics on a lonely coast road, near a village where a temple of Diana had once stood", he describes: "On each occasion it was dusk with a waxing moon, and I felt that sudden inexplicable dread that makes the hair of one's scalp rise" (91-92).

Not only does this serve as the novel's most explicit biographical bridge in which the biographical island and the fictional island converge, but it also aligns with Buell's concept of "place-consciousness" in its most intense, bodily form. Indeed, it is an involuntary response to a landscape saturated with pre-Christian sacred presence. The Balearics are a direct invocation of Mallorca, and the temple of Diana is the same feminine sacred that Graves located at Deià. Venn-Thomas carries the sensory memory into New Crete, and it is what allows him, at his best moments, to perceive the island not merely intellectually but viscerally. New Crete's most powerful claim to agency lies in its ritual structure. Its system of practices embodies the island's innermost logic and the mechanism by which its ecological philosophy is continuously reproduced. The abolition of linear time is the foundation:

> We observe the phases of the moon; we distinguish morning from afternoon and afternoon from evening; we keep the days of the week; we mark the passage of the seasons; and the two parts of our double year end with the first full moon after the longest day and the first full moon after the shortest day. But time in an absolute sense was abolished on the same occasion on which it was agreed to abolish money (63).

The equation of linear time with money and the simultaneous abolition of both is the novel's most condensed ecocritical argument. Within the logic of the novel, linear time can be read as the temporal form of capitalism: the time of accumulation, progress, and extraction. Conversely, cyclical time (lunar, seasonal, agricultural) represents the temporal form of ecological existence: the time of return, restoration, and the closed cycle. The temporal reorganisation is only possible because of the island's function as what Royle and Brinklow identify as a laboratory. In this bounded space, alternative forms of social organisation can be sustained because they are protected from mainland contamination. The abolition of linear time emerges as a practical consequence of insularity. On the mainland, where exchange with the outside world is continuous and the logic of accumulation inescapable, such an abolition would be structurally impossible. It is the sea that makes the ecological experiment thinkable.

The social reorganisation of time finds its concentrated expression in the ritual verse recited during one of the island's ceremonies: "Respect the fertile spaciousness of earth / As you respect Her who here reigns" (87). The identification of the earth with the Goddess collapses the distinction between ecology and religion that modern Western thought has maintained as a structural axiom. To care for the land is to honour the divine, while to exploit it is sacrilege. This mirrors Graves' conception that religion and poetry are expressions of the same impulse: the attentiveness to the sacred that the natural world demands and that only the poet is equipped to sustain.

The same logic governs New Cretan production: "It is part of our religion never to

waste food or any other product of the soil" (112). This reaches its most radical formulation in the principle of "nothing without the hand of love": "no product turned out by a machine, however harmless it might appear, whether a jam-pot, a screw-driver or a box of chocolates, had love in it" (44). Within New Crete's value system, the machine is excluded not because it is inefficient but because it is conceived as incapable of care, for it has no relationship with the earth from which its materials were extracted.

Within this context, the poet is the figure who gives institutional expression to this ethic of care. Ben-Yeshu's founding argument makes it explicit: "If we strengthen the poets and let them become the acknowledged legislators of the new world, magic will come into its own again, bringing peace and fertility in its train" (44). The lexeme "fertility" must be read in literal and ecological terms, meaning the repair of a world where "the train of civilisation jumped the rails" (Graves 1948a). In doing so, poets are the ecological guardians of New Crete itself. They maintain the ritual knowledge that connects human community to the cycle of the natural world. Where Plato's philosopher-kings govern through rational detachment from the material world, Graves' poet-magicians sustain the island's fertility through their attentiveness to the earth as a living, sacred presence. Not only do they inhabit the island, but they are also responsible for it, mediating its demands on the community and the community's obligations to it. The island emerges as a bounded space where the experiment of living in genuine ecological relationship with the land has been conducted for centuries, protected from mainland contamination by the surrounding sea. The poet as ecological intermediary is the novel's most radical inversion of the Platonic tradition and its most direct connection to the Minoan past, where the poet's function was the perpetuation of the Goddess' sacred mysteries. That a new religion and a new ecology "could spring only from primitive soil" (41) remains the novel's deepest conviction. The soil is not merely a medium but a source; the primitive is not a lack but a resource. New Crete is a deliberate retrieval of a way of inhabiting the earth that existed before patriarchy replaced the Goddess and industry replaced the hand of love. The island is what makes the recovery thinkable: bounded, cyclical, and alive.

6. Conclusions

By reading *Seven Days in New Crete* through ecocriticism, island studies, and classical reception, the article has demonstrated that Graves' speculative world operates as an active, eco-centric agent. The three dimensions do not merely map onto distinct geographical spaces. They enact a radical temporal collapse: ancient Crete represents the mythic past, Mallorca the lived present, and New Crete the speculative future. Yet, within Graves' cyclical imagination, these temporalities are not arranged linearly. Graves bends the far future (AD 4000) back towards the pre-patriarchal memory of the past, anchored firmly in the insular sanctuary of the biographical present. In doing so, he articulates a radical critique of mid-twentieth-century industrial modernity that is simultaneously environmental, mythographic, and rooted in lived displacement. The archival evidence on the novel's genesis in a Barcelona clinic confirms that Graves' vision was enacted through practice: isolated from his library, Graves generated an entire civilisation from internalised mythic memory, embodying the novel's central thesis that cultural and ecological survival relies on living, embodied lore.

This approach offers a necessary repositioning of *Seven Days in New Crete* within the author's broader canon. Long overshadowed by other major historical narratives, the novel has frequently been relegated to the status of an eccentric, minor fantasy. Reassessing the text and its archival coordinates reveals it instead as the imaginative culmination of Graves' philosophical project. Here, the mythographic argument of the Goddess is transformed into a speculative, ecological reality. To do so, Graves actively reclaimed the classical past as malleable, mythographic raw material rather than a rigid historical archive. Furthermore, across his historical fiction, essays, and mythographic texts, Graves consistently grounds memory and poetic authority in the physical realities of place. In *Seven Days in New Crete*, Graves' persistent spatial sensibility is elevated into a fully realised ecocritical model, transforming geographical insularity into an active philosophical argument.

Written at the height of post-war industrial reconstruction by a writer who had already chosen to live outside the logic of the mainland, the novel emerges as an ecotopia *ante litteram*, composed a quarter of a century before Callenbach coined the term, at the precise moment of its greatest cultural invisibility. The most radical act of ecological thinking, Graves demonstrates, is not technological innovation but the recovery of a way of inhabiting the earth that existed before industry replaced the hand of love. As Seymour-Smith observed, "the novel as a whole is a self-fulfilling prophecy" whose "importance as a key to Graves' personality cannot be overestimated" (Seymour-Smith 1995: 411). Read through the combined lens of ecocriticism, island studies, and classical reception, however, it emerges as something more than a key to a personality: it is a key to a civilisational argument, whose urgency, in an age of ecological crisis, has only increased with time.

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Atmospheres of Contamination: Pollution, Embodiment, and Urban Alienation in T. S. Eliot

Abstract I: Questo articolo rilegge la poesia urbana di T. S. Eliot alla luce del "*material ecocriticism*" (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), interpretando la metropoli moderna come un'ecologia materiale nella quale atmosfera, corporeità ed esperienza collettiva si costituiscono reciprocamente. Attraverso l'analisi di alcune poesie della raccolta *Inventions of the March Hare* (1909-1917), unitamente a "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) e *The Waste Land* (1922), il saggio ripercorre l'evoluzione dell'immaginario atmosferico eliotiano, mostrando come nebbia, fumo, fuliggine, polvere e siccità operino non soltanto quali emblemi della crisi moderna, ma anche come presenze materiali capaci di modellare la percezione, orientare le relazioni sociali e configurare l'alienazione urbana quale esperienza incarnata. L'approdo conclusivo di *The Waste Land* dischiude infine una possibilità di rigenerazione fondata sulla riattivazione dei processi ecologici e relazionali.

Abstract II: This article re-examines T. S. Eliot's urban poetry through the lens of "material ecocriticism" (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), interpreting the modern metropolis as a material ecology in which atmosphere, corporeality, and collective experience are mutually constituted. Through an analysis of selected poems from the collection *Inventions of the March Hare* (1909-1917), together with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922), the essay traces the evolution of Eliot's atmospheric imagination, showing that fog, smoke, soot, dust, and drought function not only as emblems of modern crisis but also as material presences that shape perception, orient social relations, and configure urban alienation as an embodied experience. The concluding movement of *The Waste Land* ultimately discloses the possibility of renewal grounded in the reactivation of ecological and relational processes.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, material ecocriticism, atmospheric pollution, embodiment, urban alienation.

1. Introduction

The modern metropolis occupies a pivotal place within T. S. Eliot's early poetic imagination. Far from functioning merely as a geographical setting, the city is conceived as a dynam-

ic ecology through which the contradictions of twentieth-century modernity are enacted, embodied, and made perceptible. In poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922), metropolitan space is persistently associated with atmospheric opacity, social atomisation, corporeal vulnerability, and spiritual exhaustion. Urban landscapes therefore operate not as passive backdrops against which human existence unfolds, but as active milieus that orient perception, shape social relations, and mediate the subject's engagement with the material world.

Critical studies of Eliot's early poetry have traditionally foregrounded cultural fragmentation, existential disorientation, and religious crisis (Drew 1949; Gardner 1949; Kenner 1959; Brooker & Bentley 1990; Brooker 1994). Such approaches have yielded fundamental insights into his representation of modern subjectivity and the erosion of shared structures of meaning. More recently, scholars have directed increasing attention to Eliot's engagement with environmental modernity, exploring the intersections between ecological degradation, industrial pollution, and metropolitan life (McIntire 2015; Terblanche 2016; Black 2018; Rubenstein & Neuman 2020). While recent ecocritical scholarship has significantly expanded our understanding of Eliot's poetry, less emphasis has been placed on the material agency of polluted atmospheres and on the ways they mediate embodied experience and participate in the formation of urban subjectivity. While recognising fog, smoke, soot, dust, and urban waste as emblems of psychological paralysis or civilisational decline, this article also examines them as material presences that actively structure sensory apprehension and corporeality and organise the rhythms of everyday life.

Such a perspective proves especially fruitful because polluted air occupies an intermediate position between surroundings and body. Neither wholly external nor entirely internal, fog, smoke, and industrial residues traverse the boundaries separating city and organism, physical milieu and subjective consciousness. The aerial dimension of the metropolis thus becomes a privileged site from which the entanglement of environment, corporeality and perception may be reconsidered.

To investigate these dynamics, this article draws on "material ecocriticism" (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), whose emphasis on the agency of matter and the intra-actions between human and nonhuman forms challenges conventional subject/object epistemologies in favour of a relational ontology. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue, within this framework, material forms – including bodies, objects, landscapes, atmospheric phenomena, toxic substances, and organic and inorganic matter – "intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meaning and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (2014: 7). Accordingly, this perspective reconceives literary spaces not as passive symbolic settings but as material ecologies actively participating in the production of meaning.

The analysis is further informed by Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" (2010), which foregrounds the porous exchanges between bodies and their material surroundings. Read through these coordinates, Eliot's metropolitan landscapes cease to function as static representations of modern crisis and instead appear as dynamic ecologies in which corporeality, atmosphere, and the built environment continually co-constitute one

another[1]. From this standpoint, fog, smoke, dust, and other airborne residues permeating Eliot's poetry invite interpretation not simply as figurative devices or symbolic projections but as material elements constituting metropolitan experience.

Through close readings of selected poems from the collection *Inventions of the March Hare*, together with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, this study examines the emergence of polluted urban environments in Eliot's early poetry, the relationship between contaminated space, fragmented embodiment, and metropolitan alienation in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and the collective dimension of aerial degradation in *The Waste Land*, where environmental, corporeal, and spiritual forms of dislocation converge within Eliot's delineation of the modern city. It further proposes that Eliot's early poetry never reduces modernity to irreversible decline. Instead, recurring images of rain, thunder, and metamorphosis disclose the possibility of ecological and relational renewal emerging from the very conditions of environmental and existential exhaustion. These dynamics simultaneously establish interpretative trajectories that continue to inform Eliot's later poetic production, where questions of atmosphere, embodiment, and material interdependence assume increasingly ethical and spiritual significance.

2. Material Agency and the Making of Perception: *Inventions of the March Hare*

Eliot's earliest poetry registers the material transformations brought about by industrial modernity through an atmospheric imaginary that develops from the poems collected in *Inventions of the March Hare* to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, London had become almost synonymous with dense fog, coal smoke, soot, and noxious emissions: phenomena that altered not only the physical appearance of the metropolis, but also the sensory texture of everyday life. As Michael Rubenstein and Justin Neuman observe, the city was increasingly enveloped in sulphurous smog and toxic pollutants, conditions that reconfigured ordinary encounters with urban space and fostered new expressions of environmental awareness (2020: 65-66). Modernist writers were thus confronted with an atmosphere whose opacity, density, and material intrusiveness demanded new modes of literary representation.

Recent ecocritical scholarship has emphasised Eliot's acute responsiveness to these transformations. Elizabeth Black argues that his poetry repeatedly registers "the environmental impact of modernity as seen in the dust on the trees and the industrial pollution" (2018: 100), while Rubenstein and Neuman identify him as "modernism's principal poet of urban pollution" (2020: 67). Yet the significance of these atmospheric phenomena exceeds the limits of documentary realism, as their material presence points towards a more active role in the constitution of metropolitan experience.

This environmental imagination is already discernible in the collection *Inventions of the March Hare*, "the only direct […] record of [Eliot's] private experience during these years" (i.e., 1909-17) (Ackroyd 1984: 37). Several poems anticipate concerns that will later receive fuller articulation in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*. The "Capric-

[1] See also Terblanche (2016: 4).

es" (1909-10)[2], for instance, repeatedly evoke scenes marked by ash, grime, rain, and visual obscurity. The first two poems juxtapose the "ashes" of the "helpless fields" with grim urban imagery – "The yellow evening flung against the panes / Of dirty windows" (Eliot 1996: 13-15) – while the third, set in Montparnasse, similarly portrays a bleak "landscape grey with rain / On black umbrellas, waterproofs, / And dashing from the slated roofs", a degraded environment marked by "blackened trees" and "plastered houses" (Eliot 1996: 14).

Taken together, these images of smoke, dirt, moisture, and suspended particulates do more than delineate an urban setting: they establish the atmospheric conditions through which Eliot's metropolitan spaces are imagined and experienced.

A comparable dynamic informs "First Debate between the Body and Soul" (composed in January 1910)[3] and the untitled 1911 urban-interior poem beginning "The smoke that gathers blue and sinks", where corporeal existence appears increasingly conditioned by the physical properties of its surroundings. Dust-laden trees, acrid odours, smoke-filled rooms, and stagnant air generate a sensory milieu that, both visually and olfactorily, acts directly upon the body. Particularly revealing is the recurrent image of torpid smoke:

> The smoke that gathers blue and sinks
> The torpid smoke of rich cigars
> The torpid after-dinner drinks
> After dinner insolence
> Of matter "going by itself"
> Existence just about to die
> Stifled with glutinous liqueurs
> Till hardly a sensation stirs
> The overoiled machinery … (Eliot 1996: 70).

The atmosphere evoked here cannot be reduced to a symbolic projection of psychological malaise. Smoke, alcohol, odours, and enclosed interiors converge to produce a perceptual field characterised by lethargy, diminished responsiveness, and corporeal inertia. Eliot thus anticipates one of the central concerns of his later urban poetry: the extent to which material surroundings participate in shaping bodily awareness, so that consciousness itself emerges as inseparable from the environments through which it moves.

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[2] The three short poems entitled "Caprices" were composed between 1909 and 1910 and belong to Eliot's earliest experiments with the modern city. The first two are set in Cambridge, whereas the third, written during the poet's Parisian stay, was subsequently retitled "Caprice in Montparnasse", replacing its original Cambridge setting with the Parisian district. Beyond reflecting Eliot's biographical trajectory, this revision already anticipates his tendency to dissolve the specificity of individual cities into a broader metropolitan imaginary, a tendency that reaches its fullest expression in *The Waste Land*, where ancient and modern urban spaces converge within the collapse of cultural and historical boundaries.

[3] Composed in January 1910 and originally entitled "Reflections in a Square", Eliot (1996: 228), this composition is an early dialogic poem centred on the opposition between body and soul. Its refrain structure reflects Eliot's engagement with Jules Laforgue's "debate-poems", while its representation of the divided self anticipates the lyric subject later developed in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". The poem has also been read as reflecting Eliot's early engagement with Baudelaire, particularly in its juxtaposition of ordinary and uncanny imagery within the representation of modern urban experience.

3. Polluted Atmospheres, Subjectivity and Embodiment: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Eliot's understanding of material surroundings as active participants in embodied experience reaches one of its most accomplished formulations in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", where the metropolis is encountered through the pervasive presence of fog, smoke, soot, and stagnant water:

> The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
> Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
> Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
> Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
> Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
> And seeing that it was a soft October night,
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep (13)[4].

The yellow fog occupies a far more complex role than that of a conventional urban detail. Through a sequence of distinctly feline movements – "rubs", "licked", "lingered", "curled" – Eliot endows the atmosphere with an autonomous mobility that enables it to traverse surfaces, thresholds, and architectural boundaries. It glides across windowpanes, settles upon stagnant pools, gathers soot from chimneys, and ultimately infiltrates the domestic interior, circulating through the metropolis with an agency that exceeds any merely decorative or symbolic function. The city is thus presented not as a static landscape but as a dynamic ecology animated by material forces that continually permeate and reconfigure the spaces they inhabit.

By dissolving the distinction between exterior and interior, between the built world and individual consciousness, the fog actively structures urban perception, becoming the medium through which metropolitan reality is encountered. The city is never apprehended independently of its polluted air; visibility, sensory awareness, and spatial orientation are constantly mediated by an atmosphere that intervenes between observer and surroundings. Rather than serving as an inert backdrop, polluted air becomes the material condition through which urban life acquires form.

Particularly revealing in this respect is the recurrent image of the windowpane. Instead of marking a stable division between private and public space, the window assumes the character of a porous threshold across which matter incessantly circulates. Smoke, soot, moisture, and atmospheric residue traverse its apparent solidity, unsettling any rigid separation between body and environment and thereby enacting the trans-corporeal entanglement described by Alaimo (2010). Eliot's imagery consequently foregrounds the permeability of embodied existence, suggesting that metropolitan life unfolds through continuous exchanges between human subjects and the material conditions that simultaneously sustain and constrain them.

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[4] All page references for quotations from the poem included in this study refer to Eliot (1969).

The fog's languid suspension further contributes to the formation of a perceptual field characterised by hesitation, sensory attenuation, and diminished responsiveness. These qualities are not projected onto the surrounding haze by Prufrock's consciousness; rather, they arise from his immersion within a polluted urban ecology in which atmosphere and subjectivity are mutually constitutive. Alienation consequently ceases to appear as a purely psychological condition and instead assumes the form of an entrenched mode of dwelling within a materially compromised world.

This dynamic becomes even more apparent as Prufrock moves through the "half-deserted streets" and notices "the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" (15). The inhabitants of the metropolis appear simultaneously isolated and interconnected, enclosed within domestic interiors that nevertheless remain permeable to the polluted air circulating beyond them. Smoke therefore performs a paradoxical function: it establishes a shared atmospheric condition while reinforcing separation, anonymity, and emotional detachment.

Traditional criticism has generally interpreted the yellow fog either as an expression of "numbing spiritual torpor" comparable to Baudelairean *ennui* and the Christian tradition of *acedia* (Hargrove 1978: 51), or as a pervasive "spiritual miasma" (Drew 1949: 33). While these readings remain illuminating, Eliot's imagery equally invites attention to its sensory and material dimensions. The haze does not merely signify paralysis; it actively produces the perceptual conditions through which paralysis becomes imaginable and experientially tangible, turning pollution into an agent that participates in the formation of modern subjectivity rather than simply reflecting it.

Eliot's polluted metropolis consequently exceeds the logic of metaphor. Fog, smoke, and soot function simultaneously as atmospheric realities and material agencies, contributing to the creation of a consciousness marked by uncertainty, hesitation, and estrangement. Rather than mirroring Prufrock's condition, they actively shape it, revealing metropolitan alienation as an ecological phenomenon arising from the unstable reciprocity between bodies and the environments through which they move. In this respect, the poem anticipates the broader urban vision of *The Waste Land*, where a polluted atmosphere ceases to define the experience of an isolated individual and instead comes to articulate the collective condition of an entire civilisation.

3.1. From Metropolitan Perception to Corporeal Vulnerability

If Eliot's early urban poetry demonstrates that polluted atmospheres actively shape metropolitan perception, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reveals their most profound consequences at the level of embodiment. Alienation no longer appears merely as the effect of a degraded urban milieu, but becomes inscribed upon the body itself, reshaping the individual's relationship with physical presence, social interaction, and material existence. The metropolis does not simply surround Prufrock; it determines the very conditions through which he inhabits both himself and the world.

The protagonist's surname has long attracted critical attention. Although Eliot most likely encountered the name through advertisements for the Prufrock-Littau furniture company in St. Louis, scholars have frequently noted its suggestive resonance with terms such

as "proof", "rock", and "frock", associations evoking solidity, permanence, and social decorum (Terblanche 2016: 31). Whether intentional or accidental, these echoes illuminate one of the poem's central tensions: the aspiration towards stability and belonging coexists with an inability to establish any enduring relation with the surrounding world.

As Terblanche notes, Prufrock inhabits a reality in which objects, gestures, and ordinary encounters no longer provide reliable points of orientation (2016: 32-35). Rather than participating directly in lived experience, he remains suspended within repetitive cycles of anticipation, self-surveillance, and deferred action. His estrangement therefore exceeds the boundaries of psychological uncertainty, disclosing a progressive detachment from immediacy, relationality, and lived presence. Prufrock consequently emerges as a paradigmatic figure of metropolitan modernity, incapable of inhabiting either place or self with any genuine sense of belonging.

This fracture first manifests itself through the body's continuous exposure to the material conditions of metropolitan life. Eliot situates corporeality within "half-deserted streets", the "yellow fog" (13) and enclosed urban interiors, suggesting that embodied existence is never insulated from its atmospheric surroundings. Physical presence consequently ceases to function as a stable foundation of identity and instead appears fragile, exposed and constantly subject to external scrutiny. Prufrock repeatedly imagines himself subjected to the gaze of others, dwelling obsessively upon the visible signs of ageing and inadequacy. His thinning hair, physical self-consciousness and anticipation of judgement reveal a subject unable to occupy his own bodily existence with ease. The body thus becomes a site of apprehension rather than belonging, of instability rather than continuity.

Such vulnerability is anticipated in the poem's celebrated opening image of the evening spread out "like a patient etherized upon a table" (13). Far more than a provocative modernist simile, this comparison establishes a pervasive state of corporeal suspension. By likening the evening itself to an anaesthetised patient, Eliot endows the metropolitan atmosphere with pathological qualities, transforming it from passive backdrop into an active medium through which perception and embodiment are mediated. Sensation is dulled, agency interrupted, and physical presence reduced to a state of passivity and exposure. As Frances Dickey and Bradford Barnhardt have argued, the image participates in broader cultural anxieties surrounding illness, contamination, and bodily fragility in the early twentieth century (2018: 16). The poem consequently presents the self not as autonomous or self-contained but as inherently precarious, its very mode of inhabiting the world shaped by an urban environment permeated by decay. Read within the historical context of early twentieth-century St. Louis, where concerns surrounding venereal disease, prostitution, and public sanitation informed everyday metropolitan life (Dickey & Barnhardt 2018), this imagery acquires an additional dimension, allowing fears of contagion and corporeal precarity to permeate even the prospect of human intimacy.

Prufrock's persistent hesitation before intimacy further intensifies this condition. The recurring question, "Do I dare?", signifies far more than indecision or social awkwardness: it articulates an anxiety grounded in exposure, contact and vulnerability. In Alaimo's formulation of trans-corporeality (2010), bodies never exist in isolation but remain continuously

implicated in exchanges with other bodies and with the environments they inhabit. What unsettles Prufrock is therefore not simply the possibility of rejection but the vulnerability inherent in relational existence itself.

This unease permeates the poem's rendition of metropolitan life. From the "half-deserted streets" to the "one-night cheap hotels", desire and apprehension become inseparable, while human contact is endlessly anticipated yet perpetually deferred. Awareness of bodily decline transforms intimacy into a source of anxiety rather than fulfilment, so that proximity generates exposure instead of communion. The city consequently emerges as a space where the longing for connection is continually frustrated by the ecological, social, and psychological conditions that govern urban existence.

Rachel Potter's observation that "[b]odies, in Eliot's poetry, carry the seed and the shape of their future deterioration" (2015: 139) proves especially illuminating in this regard. The corporeal precarity already evident in "Prufrock" anticipates the more radically fragmented figures that populate *The Waste Land*, where human beings appear increasingly spectral, disarticulated, and absorbed into landscapes marked by exhaustion and decay. The poem therefore constitutes a decisive stage in Eliot's metropolitan imagination, revealing the convergence of atmospheric degradation, bodily vulnerability, and urban alienation in the formation of a profoundly dislocated modern subjectivity.

4. Ecologies of Collective Alienation in *The Waste Land*

The corporeal estrangement that defines "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" does not remain confined to individual consciousness. In *The Waste Land*, it expands beyond the solitary subject to become the shared condition of metropolitan existence, permeating the collective rhythms of urban life and transforming London into a space where perception, movement, and human relations are governed by opacity, repetition, and exhaustion. "Unreal City" consequently designates less a geographical location than a distinctive mode of inhabiting modernity (Yang 2011):

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet (62).

From its opening movement, *The Waste Land* presents London as a landscape in which visibility, orientation, and reciprocity have progressively deteriorated. Beneath the recurring "brown fog", the metropolis relinquishes the solidity traditionally associated with civic life and instead assumes the unstable contours of an ecology traversed by anonymous bodies deprived of destination, encounter, and mutual recognition.

The procession across London Bridge vividly exemplifies this diminished vitality. Although the crowd advances as a continuous current, its apparent unity conceals profound fragmentation: lowered gazes evoke bodies governed by routine rather than intention,

movement without agency, proximity without relation. Yet the "Sighs, short and infrequent" that are "exhaled" lend this collective exhaustion a distinctly material dimension, as breath passes from individual bodies into the surrounding haze. Corporeality and atmosphere consequently emerge as mutually permeable rather than discrete domains, their continuous interchange giving concrete expression to the trans-corporeal entanglement of urban life (Alaimo 2010).

Within this configuration, the "brown fog" performs a function that exceeds documentary realism. While unmistakably recalling the coal smoke and industrial pollution of early twentieth-century London[5], it simultaneously acquires a form of material agency, actively conditioning the perceptual field through which collective life unfolds (Iovino & Oppermann 2014). The haze condenses the drabness, anonymity, and spiritual exhaustion of the modern city, while its pervasive presence envelops the crowd in a symbolic "burial of the dead" (Hargrove 1978: 66-67). By compressing visibility and dissolving spatial contours, it reshapes the possibilities of encounter and orientation, producing an urban experience marked by sensory attenuation, uncertainty, and perpetual suspension.

This suspended atmosphere also reconfigures Eliot's dialogue with literary tradition. The procession crossing London Bridge inevitably recalls the souls wandering through Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, yet Eliot relocates that infernal vision within the ordinary routines of modern civic life. His anonymous pedestrians are condemned neither by divine judgement nor by mythical destiny, but by the repetitive logic of industrial modernity itself. Estrangement consequently relinquishes its exceptional or metaphysical character and instead becomes the habitual cadence of metropolitan existence, exposing a civilisation in which circulation has supplanted community and routine has displaced participation.

The persistence of the "brown fog" acquires further significance in the third section of the poem:

> Unreal City
> Under the brown fog of a winter noon
> Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
> Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
> C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
> Asked me in demotic French
> To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
> Followed by a weekend at the Metropole (68).

The transition from dawn to noon leaves the atmosphere fundamentally unchanged, suggesting that pollution has ceased to constitute an episodic phenomenon and has instead become the enduring climate of urban life. The same haze that enveloped the anonymous

[5] "Americans should remember that 'brown fog' and 'winter dawn' at, say, 8:45 A. M. are in no sense surrealistic for a Londoner. The short winter day of England is far more apt than ours to inspire nocturnals upon St. Lucy's day, and the office worker in winter may see the sun (if at all) only on weekends or through his office windows; the proverbial London fog was (and still is, despite smoke-abatement programs) often laden with soft-coal fumes", Day (1965: 287).

multitude now frames commercial negotiation, interpersonal exchange, and corporeal desire, extending its influence across the social and material fabric of the city and dissolving any distinction between economic and affective relations.

Mr Eugenides exemplifies this transformation with particular clarity. As Alessandro Serpieri suggests, he recalls the merchants and sailors traditionally associated with travel, fertility, and cultural transmission (1985: 109); yet Eliot systematically deprives these figures of their regenerative potential. His language is dominated by contracts, commodities, and financial procedures – "C.i.f. London", "documents at sight" – while even the invitation to luncheon and the proposed weekend at the Metropole are articulated according to the logic of transaction rather than reciprocity. Exchange survives only in its commercial mode, emptied of the relational dimension that once sustained communal life.

Within such an economy, bodies themselves become objects of circulation, mobility, and consumption. Desire is progressively detached from intimacy, social interaction from solidarity, and movement from genuine encounter (Drew 1949: 80).

The "brown fog" thus signals a decisive expansion of Eliot's urban imagination, transforming atmospheric contamination into a shared material condition of collective existence. What unsettled the relationship between perception and embodiment in "Prufrock" here comes to shape the metropolitan community as a whole, producing crowds deprived of orientation, interactions governed by exchange value, and identities increasingly absorbed into anonymous networks of circulation. From this exhausted civic ecology emerges one of the poem's most powerful apocalyptic visions, where corporeal depletion, social fragmentation and environmental desolation converge beneath the ominous atmosphere of the "violet hour".

4.1. Impure Apocalypses under a Viole(n)t Sky

No figure in *The Waste Land* epitomises the instability of modern existence more completely than Tiresias. Simultaneously male and female, young and old, participant and observer, he occupies a liminal position from which individual experience opens onto collective diagnosis. Through his gaze, Eliot reveals a world in which bodily life, social relations, and metropolitan routines are governed by the same processes of depletion already traced across the poem:

> I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
> Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
> At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
> Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
> The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
> Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
> […]
> I too awaited the expected guest.
> He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
> […]
> The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
> The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
> Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence (68).

The episode opens with one of Eliot's most forceful images of corporeal exhaustion. Workers leave their desks not as autonomous subjects but as components of what the poem itself calls a "human engine" (68), bodies synchronised with the repetitive rhythms of industrial labour. The typist returns home bearing the imprint of the working day upon her body; the young clerk approaches desire through movements emptied of attentiveness, reciprocity and affective presence.

What follows is therefore more than a scene of moral desolation. Sexuality itself becomes subject to automation, reduced to a sequence of habitual actions that persist despite the disappearance of genuine encounter. Eliot condenses this condition in the famous conclusion of the episode: "His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference" (68). Physical proximity endures, yet mutual recognition has largely vanished; the relation between the typist and the clerk is sustained not by reciprocal desire but by repetition, inertia, and indifference.

The "violet hour" further intensifies this atmosphere of suspension. As Sarah Cole states, it occupies a threshold between anticipation and loss, activity and dissolution (2012: 74). Eliot's chromatic choice, however, performs a function that extends beyond symbolic association. Violet envelops bodies, interiors and urban space within a unified perceptual field, dissolving the boundary between private experience and the broader material reality in which it unfolds.

This suspended tonality gradually radiates beyond the private scene to define the poem's apocalyptic vision:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (73).

The anonymous encounter observed by Tiresias now assumes planetary proportions. Isolated bodies become "hooded hordes", while the typist's confined room gives way to cracked earth, empty cisterns, exhausted wells, and collapsing cities. Ecological depletion and collective disintegration emerge as parallel expressions of the same historical condition. The sequence linking Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London dissolves geographical and temporal boundaries, presenting urban civilisation itself as a precarious formation exposed to recurring processes of rupture, disintegration, and renewal.

Cole's remark that "violet" almost becomes "violent" (2012: 74-75) illuminates this transformation with particular force. Throughout the poem, beauty and catastrophe coexist within the same atmospheric register: the colour accompanying exhausted desire gradually comes to foreshadow civilisational collapse. Yet Eliot does not allow destruction to constitute the poem's final horizon.

The movement towards renewal begins almost imperceptibly within the ruined chapel:

> In this decayed hole among the mountains
> In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
> Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
> There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
> […]
> Only a cock stood on the rooftree
> Co co rico co co rico
> In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
> Bringing rain (73-74).

The cock, the lightning, and the arrival of moisture interrupt the prolonged logic of sterility that has governed the poem from its opening pages. After dust, drought, stagnant air, and exhausted bodies, circulation returns to the landscape. Rain matters not simply because it symbolises redemption[6], but because it reactivates the material processes upon which regeneration depends: the movement between sky and earth, fertility succeeding desiccation, and exchange overcoming paralysis.

The closing movement of *The Waste Land* consequently remains suspended between catastrophe and possibility. Eliot neither resolves the fractures of modernity nor offers an unequivocal vision of salvation. Instead, he imagines renewal as an ecological process emerging from exhaustion itself, one that unfolds alongside an ethical and spiritual reorientation, suggesting that even landscapes marked by pollution, corporeal depletion and fractured communal life may still retain the potential for reciprocity, change and material renewal.

5. Concluding Remarks

While earlier criticism has predominantly approached Eliot's metropolis through the paradigms of cultural fragmentation, spiritual crisis, and modern alienation, the close reading undertaken in this article has sought to demonstrate not only that these elements are inseparable from the material conditions within which they emerge, but also that polluted atmospheres participate actively in the formation of embodied subjectivity.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, in fact, reveal the modern city as far more than the backdrop to social, cultural, or spiritual decline: they configure it as a dynamic ecology in which atmospheric pollution, corporeal existence, and collective life

[6] As Carmen Gallo suggests, the violet atmosphere that precedes it may also evoke the liturgical symbolism of both Lent and baptism – rites associated respectively with suffering, death, purification, and resurrection, Eliot (2021: 159).

continually shape one another. From this perspective, fog, smoke, soot, dust, and drought consequently function not merely as symbolic emblems of modernity, but as material forces that condition perception, affect, and human relations.

Read through these eco-material and trans-corporeal frameworks (Barad 2007; Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), corporeal fragility, depleted intimacy, anonymous crowds, and ecological exhaustion emerge not as isolated motifs but as interconnected manifestations of a shared metropolitan ecology. Bodies, buildings, weather, and atmospheric residues participate in the same web of relations, continually reshaping perception, movement and social interaction. Alienation consequently appears not as a purely psychological or philosophical condition, but as an embodied mode of existence generated through the unstable reciprocity between human subjects and the worlds they inhabit.

Yet Eliot refuses to allow exhaustion to define the final horizon of modernity. The arrival of rain after prolonged drought introduces an alternative logic grounded not in transcendence but in circulation, reciprocity, and renewal. These configurations do not disappear with "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, but continue to inform Eliot's later poetry[7], where questions of atmosphere, embodiment, and environmental interdependence acquire increasingly ethical and spiritual dimensions. The possibility of inhabiting modernity differently therefore depends upon recovering those fragile forms of interdependence that bind bodies to one another and to the more-than-human world of which they are part.

Eliot's metropolis consequently emerges neither as a purely symbolic landscape of decline nor as a passive backdrop to human experience, but as an active ecology endowed with material agency, where atmosphere acquires historical force and polluted matter participates in the formation of subjectivity itself. From the yellow fog of "Prufrock" to the long-awaited rain of *The Waste Land*, Eliot ultimately imagines modernity as suspended between depletion and regeneration, thereby suggesting that even the most exhausted landscapes retain the latent possibility of renewed perception, reconfigured relationality, and revitalised forms of collective life.

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[7] These lines of inquiry are pursued further in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and attain their most sustained elaboration in *Four Quartets* (1943), where Eliot broadens his investigation of the relationship between human experience and material reality beyond the metropolitan framework that defines his earlier poetry.

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Eco-Poetics, Fragility, and Motion in P. B. Shelley's *The Sensitive Plant*

Abstract I: Nel contesto degli studi ecocritici, *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), il primo componimento pisano di Percy Bysshe Shelley, occupa uno spazio liminale tra immaginazione poetica e speculazione scientifico-filosofica. La *Mimosa pudica* è una curiosità botanica del tempo che il poeta fa propria come modello comportamentale umano. Dotata di sensorialità e vestita di moralità, la pianta incarna concezioni di singolarità e reattività vegetale. Attraverso la lente dell'ecologia profonda, l'articolo esamina come Shelley, quale pensatore protoecologico consapevole, trasformi l'oggetto del poema in un fulcro romantico di eco-sensibilità, alterità e autoidentificazione.

Abstract II: In the context of ecocritical studies, Shelley's first Pisan poem, *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), occupies a liminal space between poetic imagination and philosophical and scientific speculation. Grounded in sensoriality and endowed with moral significance, *Mimosa pudica* – a botanical curiosity and a sensation of its day that the poet seizes upon as a model for human behaviour – embodies conceptions of vegetal responsiveness and singularity. By examining the poem through the lens of deep ecology, this article investigates how Shelley, as a proto-ecological thinker, transforms the titular object into a Romantic locus of eco-sensitivity, alterity, and self-identification.

Keywords: Deep ecology, plant sensitivity, Romanticism, botany, P. B. Shelley.

A Sensitive Plant in a garden grew,
And the young winds fed it with silver dew,
And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light.
And closed them beneath the kisses of Night.
(P. B. Shelley, *The Sensitive Plant* I, 1-4)[1].

Eton, 1804. A young, eccentric Percy Bysshe Shelley enters the prestigious college and spends his junior years under the banner of chaos and nonconformity, taunted by bullies.

[1] All quotations from Shelley's poem, hereafter abbreviated as *SP*, refer to the text available at: https://kalliope.org/en/text/shelley2003060601 (consulted on 22/08/2026). Among the more extended discussions of *The Sensitive Plant* see: Bloom (1959); Wasserman (1971); Keach (1984); O'Neill (1997); O'Neill, Howe & Callaghan (2013); Weinberg & Webb (2015).

He refuses fagging[2] and withdraws from sporting and social life, finding some comfort in chemistry books, solitary study, and reading Pliny, William Godwin, Joseph Priestley, and Humphry Davy. His interests are Faustian: while his poetic vein lies dormant, he pursues ethical philosophy, amateur occult investigations, and experimental science, losing himself in the marvels of electricity and galvanism. He toys with burning glasses, charged Leyden jars, gases, and chemical mixtures, earning the nickname "Mad Shelley"[3]. At Oxford, Thomas Jefferson Hogg portrays him as "the chemist in his laboratory, the alchemist in his study, the wizard in his cave" (1858: 65).

The attitude of this young Prometheus – this fire-raiser – towards science and natural history, though, "was never to be 'scientific' in the empirical sense, but speculative and imaginative" (Holmes 1974: 16). Shelley was naturally much more inclined towards meta- and paraphysical inquiry than the hard sciences, as evidenced in major visionary poems such as *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1817), *Epipsychidion* (1821), and *The Witch of Atlas* (1824), all informed by philosophical abstraction and all articulating mystical conceptions of consciousness, cosmology, and incorporeality. Even his interest in botany was never primarily practical, though he was curious about Mediterranean flora, as evidenced in his letters from the Continent and in his poetic imagery. *The Sensitive Plant* (1820) is more imagistic than scientific in orientation[4], as it translates human and poetic sensibility into sensitivity and extends human experience into the vegetable world. It is Shelley's first Pisan poem and comprises no fewer than three hundred and eleven lines. The formal organisation of the text "is the same as *The Love of the Plants*, divided like Erasmus Darwin's poems into four parts, with the first describing beautiful 'good' plants and the third, poisonous plants" (Gallant 1989: 132).

Shelley thus transposes the complex spectrum of human disposition into the plant kingdom, with the garden becoming a symbolic moral landscape where innocence, desire, beauty, and corruption take root. Amid this *varietas*, the Sensitive Plant grows apart from the redolent blossoms that perfume the air. It stands as an emotionally receptive and solitary figure, embodying modesty, vulnerability, and fragility. Drawing principally on deep ecology, this article reflects on the boundaries between human and more-than-human sensibilities and on how the poem's pervasive imagery of vegetal motion informs these relations. The mimosa's physiological activity, responsiveness, and cycles become manifestations of universal and material mutability, giving poetic form to Shelley's philosophical inclination while reflecting his engagement with contemporary plant science. In this respect, the poem contributes to an ecocritical understanding of vegetal agency, poetic self-identification, and interspecies relationality by reconfiguring motion as emotion, revealing the mimosa not merely as an anthropomorphic symbol but as an agent within an interconnected biosphere. As the principal theoretical framework, deep ecology enables a close reading of Shelley's poem that brings its philosophical and empirical dimensions into dialogue, while foregrounding the seemingly humble and simple living being as worthy of literary, cultural, and critical consideration.

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[2] In British boarding school tradition, "fags" would typically run errands for senior pupils.

[3] He would go thereafter by Shelley "the Atheist" following his expulsion from Oxford and the circulation of the anonymously published pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), co-authored with Hogg.

[4] Elisa Cozzi sheds light on William Tighe's influence on Shelley's intellectual life and agricultural knowledge during the Pisan period, as well as on his links to the Lunar Society of Birmingham. See Cozzi (2024).

In botanical taxonomy, *Mimosa pudica*, a member of the legume family *Fabaceae*, is also known as the "touch-me-not", "shame plant", "humble plant", and "shy mimosa". When stimulated by touch or thermal variation, it immediately folds its leaflets inward and lets its footstalks droop, thereby taking on the appearance of a delicate, bashful maiden. A freak of the vegetable world, it fascinated Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Aristotle, all of whom wondered whether its tropism and thigmonasty (that is, its response to touch) might constitute a physical manifestation of volition. The science behind its shrinking was also discussed in Enlightenment literature, where the mimosa became a curious borderline case between the animal and plant kingdoms. With advances in nineteenth-century plant physiology, the Sensitive Plant and the Venus Flytrap became the subjects of case studies that delineated plant sensitivity or irritability in mechanistic terms, challenging – though never fully refuting – longstanding analogies to animal nervous systems.

Within three years of the appearance of Shelley's poem in *Prometheus Unbound and Other Poems*, Bess Kent – associated with the Cockney milieu and Leigh Hunt's sister-in-law – published *Flora Domestica, Or, The Portable Flower-Garden* (1823). Although she did not explicitly acknowledge Shelley in the entry on "mimosa", she described the late, lone poet in the preface as a man with a "strong and powerful intellect" whose manners were "gentle as a summer evening" and who would stroll in the fields with "his hands filled with bunches of wild-flowers plucked from the edges as he passed, and his eyes […] beaming with the benevolence of his heart" (Kent 2017: xix). Her description of the shy mimosa conforms to contemporary anthropomorphisms, its nervous sensibility resembling that of "human beings [who] are more sensitive in proportion to the tenderness of their nursing" (2017: 282).

While poetic treatments of the mimosa outside Shelley are rare[5], the nurturing presence of the Lady tending the paradisial garden is steeped in classical and medieval imagery. The archetype of Proserpine gathering flowers on the plain of Enna – to which Shelley dedicated a separate fragment, later published by his wife – recurs powerfully. The abduction in the Ovidian myth coincides with the Lady's untimely death in Shelley's poem – the epitome of the breakdown of human authority – and both calamities are tied to the cyclical alternation of the seasons, with the cold and harsh ones corresponding to the absence of the women gardeners. The episode of Matilda gathering flowers in Dante's *Purgatorio* – which Shelley translated in part (Alighieri 2007: *Purgatorio* XXVIII, 1-51) – is a further source of inspiration. Together, these archetypes give body to a shy, graceful, muse-like figure whom Shelley defines as a "power", an "Eve", a "ruling Grace", and a goddess of a sublunar heaven of her own, an image he likely drew from John Donne's metaphysical poetry[6]. Like the

[5] The seventeenth-century English pastoral poet William Browne (1590-1645) alludes to the sensitive plant in a few verses: "Look how the feeling-plant […] / Shrinks up his dainty leaves if any sand / You throw thereon, or touch it with your hand" (1894: 309). Matthew Prior (1664-1721) instead mentions the scientific uncertainty around the phenomenon: "Whence does it happen that the plant, which well / We name the 'sensitive,' should move and feel? / Whence know her leaves to answer her command, / And with quick horror fly the neighbouring hand?" (1860: 96).

[6] See *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* (c. 1611), where Donne's "dull sublunary lovers" cannot cope with physical distance.

companionless mimosa, the Lady has "no companion of mortal race" (*SP* II, 127). Her death particularly affects the plant, which Shelley imbues with human characteristics:

> The Sensitive Plant, like one forbid,
> Wept, and the tears within each lid
> Of its folded leaves, which together grew,
> Were changed to a blight of frozen glue.
>
> For the leaves soon fell, and the branches soon
> By the heavy axe of the blast[7] were hewn;
> The sap shrank to the root through every pore
> As blood to a heart that will beat no more (*SP* III, 252-259).

The sudden death of the attendant Lady[8] is announced with stark abruptness in the closing line of Part II: "And ere the first leaf looked brown – she died!" (*SP* II, 174). This narrative compression recalls the Mariner's equally terse confession – "With my cross-bow / I shot the ALBATROSS" (Coleridge 2017: I, 81-82). The Lady's death precipitates the decay of the virtuous flowers, allowing weeds and parasitic growths to overrun the garden's ecosystem. The compassionate nature of the species emerges first through its singular sensorial receptivity, and subsequently through poetic characterisation. The philosophical bent of the concluding section underscores the poet's gnoseological uncertainty, as he refrains from speculating whether, and to what extent, a natural automaton such as the Sensitive Plant possesses any awareness of its surroundings. The closing verses blur the distinctly Shelleyan principle of universal mutability with motion, the composition's threading conceit. The mimosa becomes a visible embodiment and sensory manifestation of change in both matter and being. As a perceptive and receptive body at once, its mechanical movements signal, or rather posit, two levels of consciousness: one organic and the other cognitive. "It is said" – writes Shelley in his *Speculations on Metaphysics* – "that mind produces motion; and it might as well have been said, that motion produces mind"[9].

The specimen's sensibility is also indicative of its sensitivity, that is to say, its ability to detect alterations in its environment through chemical signals. Its leaf-folding is at once the product of physiological and emotional sentience. Like Darwin's, Shelley's portrayal of the mimosa becomes increasingly anatomical. The plant is endowed with a lymphatic and circulatory system, which accommodates the poet's tendency to humanise natural processes.

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[7] A Coleridgean image. Indeed, the Gothic sublime of Shelley's poem is deeply indebted to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, particularly with regard to its decaying, cataclysmic imagery.

[8] In a letter to Leigh Hunt written at Lerici on 19 June 1822, Shelley identified Margaret King, Countess of Mount Cashell, known in Italy as Mrs Mason, as the antitype of the unnamed Lady. A central figure within the Pisan circle, the Irish expatriate had been a protégée of Mary Wollstonecraft. Shelley's cousin Thomas Medwin later reported that the poem "was laid in her Garden, as unpoetical a place as could be well imagined – but a true poet can turn everything into beauty" (1913: 265).

[9] The Literature Network: https://www.online-literature.com/shelley_percy/defence-of-poetry/5/ (consulted on 22/08/2026).

Similarly, agarics and fungi are pale and fleshy, recalling a putrefying body. Overall, Shelley's vocabulary is replete with scientific terminology, which he most probably drew from Darwin and from Richard and George Knight's *Catalogue of Chemical Apparatus* (Worthen 2019: 25). Capitalising on contemporary poetic trends of pathetic fallacy and feminisation, Darwin describes the Sensitive Plant as a shy maiden recoiling from human touch:

> Weak with nice sense, the chaste MIMOSA stands,
> From each rude touch withdraws her timid hands;
> Oft as light clouds o'er-pass the summer-glade,
> Alarm'd she trembles at moving shade;
> And feels, alive through all her tender form,
> The whisper'd murmurs of the gathering storm (2021: 30, 301-306).

If kinetic language is to be expected in scientific and poetic descriptions of the mimosa, Shelley's own is a signature trait. The nature he poetises is always in transit; it is a flux that denotes physical and philosophical movements. The Sensitive Plant trembles and pants. Earth lilies shake their tremulous bells, while water lilies lie tremulously; vapours quiver, meteors flit, and the nursing Lady – whose breath is likewise "tremulous" – treads delicately upon the turf. In this context, the Sensitive Plant acquires a significance that exceeds its biological singularity: while retaining its exceptional status as a responsive and emotionally sensitive organism, it thrives and ultimately withers in a garden where everything else is in motion. The mimosa is therefore an emblem of an all-encompassing universality, a reading reinforced by Shelley's use of the neuter pronoun where the plant is otherwise gendered and serves as a figure of feminised sensibility[10].

Such universality is reflected in the general atmosphere of stagnation and vegetal marcescence pervading the third section. As weeds begin to grow, their leaves appear speckled like toads' backs, their knotted roots resembling water-snakes. The Coleridgean influence is, at this point, undeniable; though the Ancient Mariner ultimately blesses the water-snakes after admiring their "rich attire", "Blue, glossy green, and velvet black" (Coleridge 2017: IV, 278-279), here the image evokes a lurid, leprous vision that engages multiple human senses. Roots creep through the "monstrous undergrowth" (*SP* III, 233) with tiny movements, rivulets trickle, and stinking vapours stifle the still air. In *The Witch of Atlas*, Shelley resorts again to the oneiric vision of "naked boys bridling tame water-snakes, / Or charioteering ghastly alligators" (Shelley 2025b: 34), thus reconciling humans and queer nature. The theme of androgyny that Shelley hints at in this latter poem points to an ideal of Neoplatonic perfection; however, his choice to de-gender and de-eroticise the Sensitive Plant may have been driven by an attempt to classify it within a distinct order of existence, which is that of a natural, universal whole rather than that of anthropomorphised femininity. From a scien-

[10] Erasmus Darwin was not the only writer to turn the mimosa into a symbol of female demureness. In *Epitalamio Botanico. Gli Amori delle Piante* (1835), the anti-Austrian Giuseppe Barbieri compared the plant to a bashful maiden who recoils reluctantly from the perils of physical contact: "O verginella fra le piante umili, / Fior d'innocenza, che profano aborri / Contatto insidioso, e ne rifuggi, / E tremi […]" (64-67), cited in Favaro (2016: 94).

tific perspective, "The companionlessness of the Sensitive-plant is […] primarily a reference to a botanical fact, namely that the particular species of mimosa Shelley was describing is a hermaphroditic plant, it needs no other plant to reproduce" (Barcsák 2013: 37).

"For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower; / Radiance and odour are not its dower" (*SP* I, 74-75). Its biological anomaly sets it apart from other specimens, from those bright, short-lived blooms that in mythological lore evoke transience and the fleeting side of human passions[11]: the pied windflower, the fair narcissus, the hyacinth[12], the violet, and the jessamine. Though these bloom and fade swiftly, "Like young lovers, [they are] / Wrapped and filled by their mutual atmosphere" (*SP* I, 68-69). The flowers of the garden – all smiling at the sky and lulled by their caretaker like infants – share a sense of kinship from which the feeling plant is excluded. Shrouded in melancholy and marked by fragility, it emerges once more as aesthetically and biologically deviant, enabling Shelley to thematise shame, reticence, and alienation as central concerns across both his literary works and correspondence[13].

Calling himself "Exotic" in a letter to his sister-in-law Claire Clairmont[14], Shelley wrote that he felt "unfortunately belonging to the order of mimosa, thriv[ing] ill in so large a society" and unable to "endure the company of many persons" and that "the society of one is either great pleasure or great pain" (1914: 924). In Pisa, Lord Byron, his lover Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, the Irish poet John Taaffe, Thomas Medwin, and Leigh Hunt – who would join the group in the summer of 1822 to launch the periodical *The Liberal* – figured as flowers united by a shared political vision, a cosmopolitan garden of British exiles. Still affected by the death of John Keats, much like the Sensitive Plant mourns the tending Lady, Shelley had no desire for sociability: "The Exotic as you please to call me droops in this frost – a frost both moral and physical – a solitude of the heart. These last days I have been unable to ride, the cold towards sunset is so excessive and my side reminding me that I am mortal" (924). The contrast between exoticism and a wintry atmosphere, framed as cultural and ecological displacement, is further developed in the flowery poem through references to Indian plants losing their foliage in autumn and to the basket of Indian woof carried by the Lady.

The same winter frost kills the mimosa, causing it to droop. If the "young winds" feed it "with silver dew" (*SP* I, 2) in the opening lines, their chains lash it by the end, so the fragile plant withdraws, bends, and freezes; beneath its roots, moles and dormice perish from want. Images of "thawing rain" and "freezing dew" (*SP* III, 276, 278) construct a paradox of thermal dynamics, a natural anomaly that parallels the "wondrous cold" spreading through Coleridge's *Rime*, further echoed in the reference to "the tenfold blasts of the Arctic zone" (*SP* III, 267). The poem's convergence of winter frost, displacement, and vegetal distress may evoke Shelley's experience of the hostile weather and social climate of Tuscany – briefly

[11] The image of meteors fading and traversing the sky, which recurs strikingly throughout Shelley's corpus, reinforces this idea.

[12] This floral triad also appears in *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821).

[13] For further insight, see Roberts (2020).

[14] Pisa, 11 December 1821. Clairmont, Mary Shelley's stepsister and Lord Byron's lover, maintained a suspiciously intimate relationship with Shelley.

relieved by his encounter with the Florentine *contessina* Teresa "Emilia" Viviani – which caused distress in an atheist, radical ecologist, and unconventional lover who appeared exotic even within his own circle.

Overall, the mimosa's drooping remains first and foremost a botanical response, while parallels between Shelley and the mimosa are not to be reduced to a purely autobiographical reading; rather, they provide one context for the poem's metaphorical layers, particularly in light of the succession of tragedies that marked his short life. By the time of its composition, Shelley had already lost three children, the last two, Clara Everina and William, within the span of a single year. As Mary Shelley writes in her editorial note to Shelley's poems, "His heart, attuned to every kindly affection, was full of burning love for his offspring. No words can express the anguish he felt when his elder children were torn from him" (2025a: 990). The companionless plant, whose life is punctuated by loss and grief, "give[s] small fruit", "has no bright flower", and feels love "from the leaf to the root" (*SP* I, 70-74). Its stunted generative power and blighted blossoming may therefore recall the poet's own experience of bereavement, once more casting the mimosa as a vegetal embodiment of vulnerability and resilience without thereby reducing it to a mere reflection of the poet's experience. The poem envisions an unbroken, sympathetic bond between human and plant life, one in which mutuality is grounded in shared fragility rather than in simple anthropomorphic projection. The plant, which dreams and awakens with the light of a new day, carries out its vital processes, transforming light energy and releasing oxygen as pure love. Along the lines of contemporary observations on plant respiration, in fact, "the image of this plant respiring and providing love in the blissful sunlight coincides, in botanical terms, with the function of photosynthesis which plants perform to produce oxygen" (Kitani 2011: 201).

Drawing on Darwin's poetic natural history, Shelley merges scientific knowledge with Neoplatonism, expressing his fascination with invisible laws and unseen forces. The love the mimosa gives forth is an endless, aggregating energy that reconciles apparent divisions between *animalia* and *vegetalia* within a living (and dying) whole. This sense of interpenetration is reiterated through the shared atmosphere that holds the flowerets together as an indivisible, erotic Platonic unit, with the exception that the "exotic" plant is excluded from their rejoicing. It receives love from the ministering winds that blow upon it and, since "its deep heart is full" (*SP* I, 76), directs and proffers it outward. Its isolation transcends the divine law of sorority Shelley invokes in *Love's Philosophy* (1819), according to which "nothing in the world is single" and "no sister-flower would be forgiven / If it disdain'd its brother"[15].

Shelley's philosophical foundation and idealism are the key to reading the poem, with interspecies love and its semantic derivatives articulating an ontological and ecological continuum. "The Spirit of Love" (*SP* I, 6) invests anything, from the flowers in their "dear loveliness" (*SP* I, 20) to the Lady's "lovely mind" (*SP* II, 120); love operates simultaneously at individual and collective levels, binding the particular into a larger relational whole. Such a pantheistic effusion is cognate with Arne Næss's formulation of deep ecology and environmentalism understood in terms of an ultimate, encompassing Self:

[15] Poetry Foundation: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50262/loves-philosophy (consulted on 22/08/2026).

> Organisms and milieux are not two things […] Organisms presuppose milieux. Similarly, a person is a part of nature to the extent that he or she is a relational junction within the total field. The process of identification is a process in which the relations which define the junction expand to comprise more and more. The "self" grows toward the "Self" (1989: 56).

In a poem affirming the specimen's intrinsic dignity and advocating non-anthropocentric and biospheric egalitarianism, the Sensitive Plant exercises its own agency, shrinking, responding, and existing for itself. The Lady's airy footstep[16] "seem[s] to pity the grass it presse[s]" (*SP* II, 135). With the utmost delicacy, she treads upon the turf and gently relieves the flowers of the rainwater that weighs down their heads and revitalises those scorched by the sun. Having no desire to harm them, she removes insects, worms, and "*things*[17] of obscene and unlovely forms" (*SP* II, 156) from the garden, keeping them apart in a "basket of Indian woof" (*SP* II, 157) filled with grass and wildflowers to sustain them. The image parallels Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1995: 5.2. 237-256), where a countryman brings Cleopatra an asp concealed in a basket of figs; Cleopatra calls it the "pretty worm of Nilus" (243), while the countryman later describes it as an "odd worm" (256). It also recalls the "slimy *things*" crawling upon the putrid sea in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge 2017: II, 125-126), creatures that the Mariner later recognises as "happy living *things*" whose beauty "no tongue" can declare (IV, 282-283). This emphasis on living beings finds an ethical counterpart in *Prometheus Unbound*, when Prometheus declares, "I wish no living *thing* to suffer pain" (Shelley 1898: I, 304-305). Mary Shelley's creature, by contrast, begins as the "lifeless *thing*" lying at Victor's feet (2003: 58), occupying a liminal state between the animate and the inanimate. Synesthetic images sustain the poem's sensorial texture. The fragrance of the flowers is likened to "the voice and the instrument" (*SP* I, 16). Music is "felt like an odour within the sense" (*SP* I, 28), while the Sensitive Plant "fe[els] the sound of the funeral chant" (*SP* III, 180). Streams around waterlilies "glide and dance / With a motion of sweet sound and radiance" (*SP* I, 47-48), compressing our scientific understanding of the propagation of sound and light into a single poetic image. The ceaseless movement of leaves, streams, and clouds mirrors the Sensitive Plant's distinctive responsiveness on both physiological and poetic levels, where motion turns into emotion. The natural world is animated by continuous currents of air and water. Leaves quiver, plants decay, and worms tunnel through the soil, creating a choral vibration that echoes the subtle mechanical tremors the mimosa produces when it is startled. But the writing is also "evocative of interchange and alive to what it is doing, unravelling until it yields a sense of discovery, a movement enacted in stanza after stanza" (O'Neill 1996: 110). Overall, Shelley's interest extends beyond thigmonasty as a manifestation of vegetal vitality to include senescence and abscission, the natural shedding of foliage. These botanical processes are recast as profoundly emotional (and functional) Romantic images. As winter and frost take hold, the Sensitive Plant succumbs to seasonal change, standing apart like a stripped, leafless wreck.

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[16] By contrast, the "steps of the [coffin] bearers" are "heavy and slow" (*SP* III, 181).

[17] Emphasis added; further emphases follow.

Beyond his poetic reinterpretations, Shelley was fully aware of the importance of established science. In the conclusion, which Michael O'Neill defines as a metatext that "stands in a deftly ambivalent relationship to the rest of the poem" (1996: 107), summing it up yet holding itself apart from it, the poet appears to adopt a more sceptical stance. At this point, the poem's eco-poetics brings fragility and motion into a productive relationship, as both become means through which the poem envisions vegetal agency, even as Shelley preserves uncertainty about the nature of plant sentience. He cannot tell whether the Sensitive Plant truly perceives changes in its surroundings. To some extent, this unresolvedness reflects the limitations of contemporary debates over whether the mimosa's movements were mechanical or sentient. For instance, James Tupper's 1811 *Essay on the Probability of Sensation in Vegetables* supported the theory of plant sensitivity, whereas other botanists favoured explanations based on mechanical and chemical responses. Likewise, Shelley refrains from speaking in terms of absolute truth. "I dare not guess" (*SP* Conc., 296), he writes, suggesting that certainty remains elusive in a world where error and ignorance are commonplace, while love and mutability endure as the only constant forces.

The plant's sentience is itself a form of empirical discovery that, like man's "modest creed" (*SP* Conc., 300), makes it a receptacle of patterns and impressions and gives it the illusion of grasping meaning in a world of shadows. "I read books", writes Shelley to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, "and, though I am ignorant enough, they seem to teach me nothing" (1914: 831). Yet the poet had consistently advocated for the right to knowledge and the duty of intellectual participation in his seditious *Declaration of Rights* (1812); he maintained the point in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in which poetry is presented as a vehicle of education that "awakens and enlarges the mind" and "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world"[18], as well as from the shadows and mockeries to which *The Sensitive Plant* plainly alludes.

The poem's animated vegetables, the spared parasites, and the "living grass" (*SP* I, 85) stand as affirmations of the inherent worth of all life forms by virtue of their participation in the chain of being, an ethical outlook that accords with Mary Shelley's description of the poet as "looking on all human beings as inheriting an equal right to possess the dearest privileges of our nature, the necessaries of life, when fairly earned by labour, and intellectual instruction" (Shelley 2025a: 988). Shelley, whose commitment to vegetarianism appears to have become less consistent after his move to Italy in 1818, had passionately articulated a defence of a plant-based regimen in *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, first published in 1813, holding that man is naturally frugivorous. The poem reaffirms his ethical views beyond human concerns and expresses a profound respect for non-human life, even in its humblest forms. Having no bright flower, nor radiance or odour, the Sensitive Plant seems to provide little benefit to humans. Its apparent uselessness, however, does not diminish its value within the hortus, nor does its singularity exclude it from the garden's larger community of life. In a poem ostensibly devoted to it, in fact, Shelley expresses no doubt that the flowers "felt the spirit that came / From [the lady's] glowing fingers" (*SP* II, 145-146), yet he cannot determine "Whether the Sensitive Plant […] / Now felt this change" (*SP* Conc., 288, 291).

[18] Poetry Foundation: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry (consulted on 22/08/2026).

The flowers are all sensitive in their way, though the mimosa stands apart in its humility, fragility, and self-awareness. Impressed by the beauty of a fragment of *Hyperion* that John Keats had recently published, Shelley reflected on his own poor reception and his status as a misunderstood human being in a letter to Peacock, probably written in Pisa on 8 November 1820: "I have great designs, and feeble hopes of ever accomplishing them"; he added that "the reception the public have given me might go far enough to damp any man's enthusiasm" (1914: 831).

The mimosa's slow, vulnerable movements contrast with the feverish activity of the contemporary publishing world. By 1819, Byron had published the first two cantos of *Don Juan* (Byron 1986), while Keats's final volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* was published in 1820 (Keats 1978). That same year, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, with Other Poems* (including *The Sensitive Plant*) was published after Shelley had twice abandoned the project during a period of grief and mourning. In this qualified sense, the image of the plant recoiling and curling in on itself might be read as recalling the author's own sense of isolation among the more conspicuous "flowers" of the second generation.

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Vito Lentini

Paesaggi della mente e corporeità in *The Dante Project* di Wayne McGregor

Abstract I: Lo sguardo di Dante trova una delle più recenti reinterpretazioni coreografiche a lui dedicate in *The Dante Project* di Wayne McGregor creato nel 2021 per il Royal Ballet di Londra in occasione del settecentesimo anniversario della morte del Sommo Poeta. Articolato in tre atti, lo spettacolo traduce l'itinerario della *Commedia* in una scena contemporanea in cui avventura, introspezione e relazioni si intrecciano, dando forma a un viaggio attraverso lo spazio ultraterreno e i paesaggi della mente. Il contributo analizza le scelte musicali di Thomas Adès, la drammaturgia di Uzma Hameed e il linguaggio coreografico di Wayne McGregor, evidenziando come la loro interazione restituisca le dimensioni della trascendenza, della corporeità e della trasformazione.

Abstract II: Dante's vision finds one of its most recent choreographic reinterpretations in Wayne McGregor's *The Dante Project*, created in 2021 for London's Royal Ballet to mark the seven-hundredth anniversary of the poet's death. Structured in three acts, the work translates the journey of the *Commedia* onto the contemporary stage, where adventure, introspection, and human relationships intertwine, shaping a passage through both the otherworldly realm and the landscapes of the mind. This article examines Thomas Adès's musical choices, Uzma Hameed's dramaturgy, and Wayne McGregor's choreographic language, highlighting how their interplay conveys the dimensions of transcendence, corporeality, and transformation.

Keywords: McGregor, Dante, *Divina Commedia*, danza, corporeità.

The Dante Project: genesi e prospettiva intertestuale

Sperimentazione, commistione, novità ed evoluzione sono alcuni dei tratti che si possono ravvisare nella produzione artistica di Sir Wayne McGregor, Resident Choreographer del Royal Ballet di Londra. Una voce, la sua, permeata di esperienze e approfondimenti tematici che oggi consegnano un repertorio diversificato ed eterogeneo attraversato continuamente dall'auspicato intento di continuare a rendere la danza una forma d'arte rilevante per il pubblico odierno (Butterworth & McGregor 2021: 107-125). Nei vari filoni in cui è possibile rubricare la sua produzione un ruolo determinante è assunto dalla scelta di coreografare nell'alveo della narrazione con spettacoli dedicati a temi, autori, soggetti e "modern fairy tales" mai banali e non del tutto lontani da quei nuovi paradigmi narrativi e critici che oggi

ridefiniscono identità, ambienti e percezioni del mondo. Questo è il contesto in cui si inserisce il suo lavoro sul triplice regno della *Divina Commedia.*

La scelta compiuta da McGregor emerge innanzitutto nella definizione del titolo dello spettacolo dedicato al massimo poeta fiorentino, frutto del suo analitico accostamento al testo dantesco. L'idea di non assegnare alla creazione la denominazione di *Divina Commedia* si inscrive nell'intenzione di non considerare l'opera come un "balletto illustrativo o narrativo in tre atti" (McGregor 2023: 29)[1] dettando, nel contempo, le linee programmatiche di un lavoro ascrivibile nel novero degli spettacoli di danza che prediligono, di converso, un autentico e personale approccio artistico alla creazione che ha anche il merito di recepire un autonomo e singolare processo traduttivo e identitario. "Non ho chiamato questo balletto *La Divina Commedia* – precisa, quindi, il coreografo – dal momento che non faccio un adattamento letterale di Dante" (Crompton 2023: 50): si tratta, invece, di un avvicinamento al testo dantesco da parte di McGregor animato dalla curiosità di esplorare le molteplici direzioni interpretative che il poema può assumere, aprendosi a prospettive e letture differenti e affrancandosi, al contempo, da una mera riproposizione pedissequa dei contenuti già noti dell'opera di Dante.

La scelta è coerente con una caratteristica distintiva della poetica del coreografo: l'interesse per ambiti di conoscenza che travalicano i confini della danza e che contribuiscono ad ampliare e arricchire la sua ricerca coreutica. Come osserva Judith Mackrell, nelle creazioni di McGregor emerge, infatti, "la volontà di esplorare ambiti di conoscenza ben al di fuori della sala di danza, al fine di arricchire la sua arte coreografica" (2021: 50). La *Commedia* rappresenta, in questo senso, un caso particolarmente significativo: la sua complessità narrativa, filosofica e visionaria offre al coreografo McGregor un materiale capace di alimentare una traduzione coreografica che si confronta con un universo poetico e concettuale ben più ampio dei confini tradizionali della danza. Un'inclinazione per la ricerca e per le indagini intorno ai nuovi paradigmi narrativi dell'arte di Tersicore che lo ha altresì portato ad assumere responsabilità di prim'ordine surclassando, talvolta, il mero atto creativo, come sottolinea ancora Mackrell, riferendosi alla sua esperienza e ai suoi ingaggi in seno al Royal Ballet:

> Questo spirito di ricerca è stato una delle qualità per cui è stato assunto e, nell'ultimo decennio, il suo impatto si è fatto sentire in tutta la compagnia. I danzatori hanno apprezzato le sfide intellettuali e fisiche che pone loro in sala prove, mentre i giovani coreografi emergenti hanno tratto grande beneficio dal suo ruolo di mentore e catalizzatore creativo (2021: 55).

Un'apertura verso nuovi ambiti di ricerca e un prezioso contributo alla pratica coreografica sembrano trovare, quindi, un esempio particolarmente significativo nella materia scelta per questo *progetto dantesco*. La *Commedia* offre a McGregor la possibilità di confrontare la propria immaginazione con il mondo poetico e visionario di Dante, trasformando il testo letterario in un nuovo dispositivo di senso attraverso il linguaggio della danza. In questa prospettiva il rapporto tra l'opera dantesca e la sua trasposizione coreografica può essere

[1] Mia è la traduzione, così pure dove non indicato.

letto anche alla luce della nozione di intertestualità elaborata da Janet Adshead-Lansdale, per la quale la danza si costituisce e viene interpretata attraverso il rapporto dinamico con altri testi, forme artistiche e sistemi di significazione (Adshead-Lansdale 1999). La *Commedia* diviene così non tanto un testo da tradurre fedelmente sulla scena quanto un universo di immagini, temi e suggestioni dal quale il coreografo attinge per costruire una nuova esperienza coreografica[2]. È all'interno di questo processo di trasformazione e di interazione tra testi che prendono forma quelli che possiamo definire 'paesaggi della mente': spazi immaginativi nei quali il mondo narrato da Dante si sovrappone alla sensibilità del coreografo e, attraverso il corpo in movimento, viene nuovamente percepito e ricostruito dallo spettatore.

The Dante Project è, quindi, il massimo omaggio che il coreografo britannico tributa al poeta italiano in occasione del settecentesimo anniversario della sua morte dando vita ad uno spettacolo composito creato per il Royal Ballet alla Royal Opera House di Londra nel mese di ottobre del 2021 in co-produzione con l'Opéra national de Paris.

Muovendo da una prospettiva intertestuale e intermediale, il contributo ricostruisce dapprima la genesi di *The Dante Project* e il dialogo creativo instaurato da McGregor con il compositore Thomas Adès, la drammaturga Uzma Hameed e la scenografa e costumista Tacita Dean. L'analisi si concentra, quindi, sulla traduzione musicale dei tre regni della *Commedia* cui segue l'approfondimento sull'assetto visivo e coreografico dei tre atti del lavoro, osservando la progressiva trasformazione del movimento, dello spazio scenico e della relazione fra i corpi. L'ultima parte approfondisce, infine, la nozione di paesaggi della mente, mostrando come l'interazione fra corporeità, musica e immagini trasformi il viaggio dantesco in un'esperienza percettiva contemporanea.

La partitura di Adès e la traduzione musicale della *Commedia*

Un progetto, quello di McGregor, condiviso fin dalle fasi embrionali con il compositore e direttore d'orchestra Adès. Vale la pena precisare che il rapporto con l'artista londinese instauratosi in occasione di questo lavoro non segna il debutto della loro collaborazione dal momento che McGregor aveva già maneggiato le note di Adès in due occasioni pregresse. Nel mese di maggio del 2010 prese avvio, infatti, la loro collaborazione artistica con la creazione coreografica *Outlier* – il primo lavoro per una compagnia americana – modellata sul *Concerto for Violin – Concentric Paths, for violin and chamber orchestra, Op. 23* e proseguita nel mese di luglio del 2019 con *Living Archive: An AI Performance Experiment* presentata a Los Angeles e che in questo caso giovò della composizione musicale *In Seven Days: Concerto for Piano with Moving Image.*

Due occasioni, queste, che furono intervallate dalle prime interlocuzioni intorno al lavoro su Dante. Un incontro con la scrittura dantesca che, dopotutto, aveva già accattivato l'adolescenza di Adès visto che, interrogato sul tema, egli confessò che la *Divina Commedia* provocò in lui "un effetto inquietante. Ne ho amato la geografia fisica, la profondità fisica dell'Inferno e l'altezza del Paradiso, il Purgatorio come una montagna magica nell'emisfero australe, […] tutto mi ha tolto il fiato" (Quantrill 2021: 36).

[2] Sul tema dell'immaginazione e della rappresentazione si veda Palmieri (2023: 5-6).

Questa sensibilità e prossimità al viaggio dantesco possono essere ricondotte alla più ampia tendenza di Adès a tradurre musicalmente le opposizioni, le visioni divergenti e le fascinazioni per il magico e il soprannaturale che attraversano gran parte della sua produzione. Si tratta di elementi che assumono particolare rilevanza anche nel contesto contemporaneo poiché consentono di esplorare il complesso rapporto tra l'umano e l'ambiente circostante. In questa prospettiva la musica di Adès si configura come uno spazio nel quale l'immaginario letterario e culturale viene rielaborato attraverso una pluralità di prospettive percettive e simboliche, dando luogo a una dimensione che può essere ricondotta, per l'appunto, ai paesaggi della mente: configurazioni immaginative nelle quali esperienza, percezione e ambiente si intrecciano e si trasformano reciprocamente. Un interesse per l'oltremondano che, come ricorda Hélène Cao, ha attraversato numerosi segmenti dell'attività artistica del compositore londinese: *Powder Her Face, Arcadiana, Totentanz, The Tempest, The Exterminating Angel* sono solo alcuni esempi che testimoniano l'inclinazione di parte della sua produzione artistica per i temi dell'*Inferno* "sia fisico che mentale" (Cao 2023: 39).

Il percorso che ha avvicinato Adès alla scrittura della musica per lo spettacolo coreografico di McGregor ha inizialmente preso spunto dai noti disegni di Sandro Botticelli e dalle illustrazioni di Gustave Doré dedicate al viaggio dantesco sollecitando "l'assoluta necessità di comporre un'opera sulla *Divina Commedia*" (Cao 2023: 39). Dichiarati sono anche i suoi riferimenti primari della storia della musica, due nomi di prima grandezza nel panorama musicale dell'Ottocento: Pëtr Il'ič Čajkovskij e Franz Liszt[3]. Se nel primo caso la citazione riguarda un paragone metaforico tra il *divertissement* del secondo atto dello *Schiaccianoci* con la dantesca visione dell'*Inferno*[4], nel caso del compositore ungherese l'analogia assume un rilievo cardinale considerando la nota rilevanza che il viaggio dantesco ha assunto nella produzione di Liszt: l'aderenza è tale che Adès arriverà a considerarlo un "analogo musicale di Virgilio" (Quantrill 2021: 40) nelle fasi di scrittura musicale del suo *Dante Project*.

Tornando alle analisi di Cao sulla partitura composta da Adès per il viaggio dantesco, emergono numerosi riferimenti alla produzione di Liszt, da lui definito "il maestro degli inferi e del demoniaco" (2023: 40): alcuni brani pianistici sono inseriti integralmente nella composizione cucendo un'orchestrazione che ammicca alla musica sinfonica del XIX secolo quantunque ornata con quel tocco che rende inconfondibile l'apporto del compositore inglese e della sua visione multiculturale e interculturale. Laddove le citazioni inserite non prevedano un'interpolazione integrale, Adès seleziona frammenti come nel caso di alcuni movimenti della *Dante-Symphonie* oppure di estratti da *Mosonyis Grabgeleit* per la marcia di Satana (Cao 2023: 40). La vicinanza con l'autore della *Dante-Symphonie* è evidente, in particolare, nel segmento dedicato alle anime dei dannati. È affascinante la sensibilità e l'analitico approfondimento che Adès traduce in musica immaginando "i colori armonici e inventando nuove combinazioni di suoni"[5] (Cao 2023: 40) per l'essenza diabolica e il senso del demonia-

[3] Per approfondimenti sulla stagione musicale ottocentesca dedicata al poema dantesco si veda Rostagno (2023: 79-89).

[4] Si veda Cao (2023: 40) e Peter Quantrill (2021: 40).

[5] Si rimanda al saggio qui citato per gli approfondimenti sulle tangenze tra la partitura di Adès e i medesimi temi trattati nelle composizioni di Liszt. Sulla questione si veda anche: Albano (2023: 62).

co quali autentici paesaggi della mente. Il male è così reso percettibile e concreto ricorrendo a dissonanze, tensioni armoniche e combinazioni orchestrali tali da manifestare stati interiori di turbamento e alterità.

Il componimento prosegue con melodie liturgiche per il *Purgatorio* e reiterati movimenti che aspirano alla trascendenza nel *Paradiso* (Quantrill 2021: 40-41). Se nel secondo segmento del viaggio di Dante troviamo canti abitualmente eseguiti presso la Sinagoga Ades di Gerusalemme[6]; per *Paradiso: Poema Sacro* Adès prese ispirazione dalle notissime illustrazioni di Doré con la sua miriade di angeli che attornia i numerosi anelli bianchi come a evocare una "foule sainte"[7]. L'esito è un motivo che richiama "una spirale che si dispiega in cerchi concentrici e si allarga pur tornando al suo asse di partenza" (Cao 2023: 42) dando sostanza ad una sorta di rotazione gravitazionale che accompagna il più luminoso stadio della *Commedia* trasmettendo una visione musicale dell'ambiente evocato da Dante contribuendo a costruire un singolare rapporto con il mondo della mente e della relazionalità ad essa connessa.

Per quanto riguarda il rapporto tra Adès, la danza e il Sommo Poeta, è significativo ricordare, come osserva Quantrill, che il compositore non aveva mai scritto musica appositamente per una coreografia prima di dedicarsi a quest'opera sul viaggio dantesco. Va tuttavia sottolineato come la musica di Adès abbia attirato l'attenzione di numerosi coreografi, tra cui Cathy Marston, Mark Baldwin, Karole Armitage, Crystal Pite, Alexander Whitley e, non da ultimo, McGregor (Quantrill 2021: 36).

Se nell'ambito del repertorio coreutico, Adès ricorda in particolare l'incontro con i balletti di Igor Stravinskij e George Balanchine, nel ripensare alla *Commedia* il compositore si confronta con l'architettura e con la dimensione del movimento proprie dell'opera dantesca, condividendo fin da subito un assunto fondamentale, che costituisce un punto nodale di ogni lavoro coreografico: "la musica deve rispettare il movimento dei ballerini; altrimenti essi si schianteranno tutto il tempo contro un muro" (Quantrill 2021: 36). Un esempio, questo, che testimonia ancora una volta l'inclinazione a sposare, condividere e agguantare il crescente bisogno di prospettive inclusive, inter- e transdisciplinari abili nel sostanziare e dare concretezza a quei paesaggi della mente che permangono, anche in questo caso, quali riferimenti cruciali per costruire, definire e armonizzare musica, scena e coreografia.

Il processo creativo tra collaborazione e contemporaneità

Fra gli aspetti più significativi emersi nelle diverse fasi creative di questo contributo alla rappresentazione scenica dell'opera dantesca rientrano certamente la condivisione e la col-

[6] Sempre nel saggio di Quantrill si rintracciano i nodi tematici e le ragioni che hanno indotto Adès a prediligere per il secondo atto della sua composizione questi canti liturgici eseguiti presso la Sinagoga Ades di Gerusalemme: "È uno dei pochissimi luoghi in cui si conserva un'antica forma di preghiera cantata nota come *baqashot*, intonata dall'*hazzan* (il cantore) e dalla congregazione nelle prime ore del mattino, concludendosi all'alba. Adès illustra il parallelismo: 'anche il viaggio di Dante nel Purgatorio inizia in questo momento della giornata, con puntuali descrizioni della luce dell'alba man mano che il sole sorge. In un senso più ampio anche il Purgatorio è una sorta di pre-alba, prima del sole del Paradiso'", Quantrill (2021: 40-41).

[7] L'illustrazione qui citata è altresì inserita tra le pagine sia del programma di sala della Royal Opera House di Londra pubblicato in occasione della *première* del 2021 sia del programma di sala dell'Opéra national de Paris dedicato al balletto e pubblicato per le rappresentazioni del 2023. Si veda: *The Dante Project* (2021: 31) e (2023: 35).

laborazione, presenti in ogni momento della gestazione dell'opera. Dopotutto è ormai assodato che "la danza è un'arte della collaborazione" (Crompton 2023: 45)[8].

Nel caso di *The Dante Project* il più prossimo rapporto artistico di McGregor non poteva che avvenire, oltre che con la drammaturga Hameed, con il compositore e con la scenografa e costumista Dean. Un rapporto con i due artisti certamente determinante ma mai del tutto aggomitolato, anzi: il coreografo amò sottolineare come gli incontri con Adès e Dean hanno sempre tratteggiato una relazione artistica ariosa, autonoma, senza direttive stringenti o prescrittive (Crompton 2023: 46). È con questo tassello della sua vasta produzione coreografica che McGregor corrobora, pertanto, il tratto decisivo della necessità della condivisione e della collaborazione in ogni momento della creazione; sotto questo rispetto è impossibile non condividere il pensiero di Mackrell sul tema: "la collaborazione è l'elemento naturale di McGregor. Come coreografo prospera nella dinamica dello scambio, della provocazione e della scoperta, coinvolgendo il suo team in tutte le fasi del processo di creazione di un'opera" (2021: 50)[9].

Un lavoro sinergico che ha condotto il coreografo britannico a immaginare i tre mondi danteschi e i relativi paesaggi della mente evocati come sostanza dei tre atti della creazione garantendo un'autonomia ai tre segmenti capace di riflettere la medesima gestazione del lavoro qui analizzato. Vale la pena precisare, infatti, che il primo avvicinamento del coreografo con il progetto dantesco avvenne con quella che diventò successivamente la prima parte del lavoro definitivo. Un'iniziale analisi, questa, che approdò in scena in autonomia e svincolata, almeno *in illo tempore*, dal progetto complessivo dal momento che quel primo segmento debuttò con il titolo *Inferno: Pilgrim* nel mese di luglio del 2019 al Music Center di Los Angeles con gli artisti del Royal Ballet in occasione di una *tournée* internazionale della massima compagnia di danza e balletto d'oltremanica. È opportuno precisare, tuttavia, che la partitura di questo primo atto fu eseguita per la prima volta, due mesi prima, in forma concertistica alla Walt Disney Concert Hall dalla Los Angeles Philharmonic diretta da Gustavo Dudamel. Prime esecuzioni, queste, che è bene richiamare dal momento che a partire dalle iniziali fasi creative il lavoro ha subito un'evoluzione fortemente influenzata dalle ricadute ascrivibili al triste periodo del 2020. Come lo stesso coreografo dichiarò a suo tempo:

> Da quando abbiamo creato *Inferno* nel 2019, molte persone hanno intrapreso un viaggio molto personale e doloroso attraverso l'inferno. Quando abbiamo iniziato a lavorare al *Purgatorio* e al *Paradiso*, ero consapevole che tutti avvertivano un'enorme necessità di guarigione. Era una forte motivazione ma anche una sfida: come trasmettere il sentimento di speranza che Dante mostra nel *Paradiso*? (Hameed 2023: 34).

Ed è anche lo stesso coreografo a tornare sul medesimo argomento definendo i tratti di un lavoro innervato di contemporaneità:

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[8] Sul tema qui richiamato si veda: Butterworth & McGregor (2021: 111).

[9] Sul coinvolgimento degli artisti che a vario titolo firmano lo spettacolo si veda Albano (2023: 58). È peraltro interessante porre in evidenza non unicamente la necessaria relazione tra i vari contributi artistici per la messinscena del lavoro dantesco analizzato ma anche l'esito che è frutto di tale ineludibile relazionalità: sul tema si veda l'imprescindibile lavoro di Andrea Simone dedicato alle molteplici rappresentazioni della *Commedia* e alla sua "dimensione orale-aurale […] e a quella diegetico-rappresentativa", Simone (2024: 28-35).

> In un certo senso è come se avessimo attraversato una versione dell'inferno e del purgatorio nella nostra vita. Tornando a riprendere le prove ho come avuto l'impressione di trovarmi in paradiso. Vedere le persone e sentire lo sforzo del gruppo, la gioia e l'amore. Si inizia a dimenticare ciò che si prova quando non si pratica la danza (Crompton 2023: 45).

Un lavoro che traduce in danza i turbamenti e i sentimenti che attraversano la *Commedia* senza tuttavia trascurare gli sconvolgimenti, l'incertezza e la paura che caratterizzano la nostra epoca e che hanno avuto un ruolo determinante nella creazione di McGregor. Il confronto tra il mondo dantesco e la contemporaneità apre così a interrogativi urgenti sulla possibilità di tradurre scenicamente la relazione tra corpo e corporeità, elementi naturali e ambiente circostante. È proprio in questa intersezione tra esperienza corporea, percezione e immaginazione che si configurano nuovamente i paesaggi della mente: spazi non necessariamente riconducibili a una dimensione fisica ma capaci di dare forma scenica a stati interiori, percezioni e relazioni. La danza diviene così il luogo nel quale ciò che appartiene alla dimensione interiore e ciò che proviene dall'ambiente trovano una forma visibile e concreta attraverso il corpo in movimento.

Come precisa Hameed – colei che nel lavoro qui presentato cura l'impegnativa sezione della drammaturgia – alcune delle ragioni che hanno determinato la costruzione delle fondamenta del lavoro non sono da rintracciare unicamente nelle sfortunate vicissitudini del 2019 ma c'è di più: si tratta addirittura di riconoscere come talune riflessioni del tempo di Dante siano sorprendentemente prossime alla nostra contemporaneità:

> L'*escalation* della crisi climatica, il divario che continua a crescere tra i più ricchi e i più poveri, le rivelazioni che non sembrano finire mai sul clientelismo e l'interesse personale negli ambienti del potere hanno portato a reiterati appelli affinché si possa vivere diversamente rendendoci migliori e lasciando ai nostri figli una società più giusta e morale. Come Dante, anche noi aspiriamo ad una rinascita (Hameed 2023: 34).

Un richiamo costante, quindi, alla prossimità di vissuto della contemporaneità che ha condizionato le fasi di creazione dello spettacolo dedicato al viaggio dantesco e all'aspirazione alla rinascita richiamata più volte dalla drammaturga del balletto: scenario, anch'esso, fortemente radicato in quella esplorazione e percezione del paesaggio antropologico contemporaneo.

La vicinanza tra i nefasti accadimenti che hanno segnato le fasi creative del lavoro coreografico e il viaggio immaginato dal poeta fiorentino è, peraltro, calzante dal momento che anche l'itinerario dantesco mostra l'intento di assemblare, unificare e armonizzare il destino personale del vissuto quotidiano con le relazioni sociali. Anzi, è proprio in questa commistione che si ravvisa il senso più profondo della *Commedia* e, di rimando, anche nel lavoro coreografico qui considerato:

> Per Dante i due messaggi del poema – la salvezza personale e la società umana e il governo del mondo – sono inseparabili. La realizzazione umana è unicamente possibile

> in una società in pace. La pace è possibile unicamente in un mondo ordinato secondo la volontà di Dio (Shaw 2021: 32).

Ma c'è anche di più se consideriamo che le vicissitudini faticose che hanno accompagnato i creatori del balletto sono non del tutto dissimili dalle medesime questioni affrontate da Dante nella scrittura del suo capolavoro. Ricorda ancora Prue Shaw che:

> Le domande di Dante sono le nostre domande. Cosa significa essere un essere umano? Come dovremmo giudicare il comportamento umano? Cosa conta nella vita e nella morte? Come possiamo comprendere le nozioni di giustizia e amore? Come si può raggiungere la pace nel nostro mondo? Queste domande senza tempo interessano lettori di ogni fede come pure coloro che non ne hanno alcuna (2021: 35).

Inferno, *Purgatorio* e *Paradiso*: la costruzione coreografica dei tre atti

Come evidenziato sopra, tra i temi che è possibile associare all'originale spettacolo di McGregor rientra l'auspicio della rinascita. Un risveglio e un rinnovamento che si ravvisano anche nello sviluppo tematico presente nei tre atti della creazione prendendo avvio proprio da quel primo segmento intitolato *Inferno: Pilgrim* richiamato poco sopra e che svela, ad un'analisi più puntuale, un'abbondanza di citazioni e riferimenti che rendono di enorme interesse questo primo paesaggio della mente.

È proprio nell'atto dedicato alle anime dei dannati che il coreografo britannico opta per una sequenza articolata di episodi autonomi capaci di aprire affondi tematici e numerosi richiami che lo portano ad accostare con libera ispirazione alcuni dei più noti e significativi passaggi della *Commedia* mai affrancati da scambi culturali, sincretismi e identità molteplici. È ancora la drammaturga Hameed a precisare come il primo atto sia pennellato intorno alla serie di "immagini musicali viventi composte da Adès" rendendo possibile l'incontro con numerose "storie infernali" capaci di evocare fertili legami e parallelismi come, a titolo di esempio, il canto di Ulisse, il raggiungimento del monte del Purgatorio e l'analogia con la dolorosa ascesa al Calvario (2023: 34-37). Si tratta di uno sviluppo musicale e coreografico strutturato in una suddivisione in tredici sezioni come di seguito riportate:

I Abandon Hope
II The Selfish – stung by wasps
III The Ferryman
IV Pavan of the Souls in Limbo
V Paolo and Francesca – the endless whirlwind
VI The Gluttons – in slime
VII The Suicides – the bleeding trees
VIII The Deviants – on burning sand
IX The Fortune-tellers – facing both ways
X The Pope's Adagio – heads first
XI The Hypocrites – in coats of lead
XII The Thieves – devoured by snakes

> XIII Satan
> (The Dante Project 2021: 38)[10].

Tredici segmenti pregni di immagini suggestive che giovano di un supporto musicale di rilievo nel tratteggiare le oscure vicissitudini dei dannati e non di rado riecheggiando alcuni tratti dei riferimenti musicali che il compositore ha esplicitamente dichiarato. Sotto questo rispetto è interessante una delle linee interpretative che Roberta Albano presenta nel suo saggio dedicato allo spettacolo qui presentato allorquando si sofferma sulla sezione numero dodici:

> Un'attenzione particolare va data alla 12ª sezione, quella dei ladri, che presenta una ridda musicale circense che evoca Nino Rota ed ambientazioni felliniane. In quanto italiani non possiamo non considerare che il compositore anglosassone abbia così voluto riprodurre il luogo comune sui conterranei di Dante, abili nel mistificare, ingannare, rubare, considerazione che riflette, anche se superficialmente, la visione politica che il poeta stesso aveva di molti suoi concittadini (2023: 64).

La coreografia risponde con incisività a tale intento modulando le fosche dinamiche dell'*Inferno* attraverso l'alternanza fra episodi di forte tensione individuale e interventi corali nei quali la molteplicità dei corpi restituisce la dimensione collettiva e ineluttabile della condizione dei dannati. Il corpo non appare infatti soltanto come strumento di rappresentazione del singolo peccatore ma diviene il luogo nel quale si manifesta una condizione condivisa, una sorta di destino corporeo che accomuna le diverse anime. La coralità assume così una funzione drammaturgica precisa: la ripetizione e la simultaneità dei movimenti sembrano produrre l'impressione di un'architettura coreografica nella quale il gruppo diviene una sorta di organismo collettivo sottoposto a un medesimo destino. A questa dimensione corale si contrappongono momenti nei quali McGregor non dimentica il corpo individuale, sottoponendolo a torsioni, estensioni, cadute e improvvise variazioni di dinamica. Mutamenti e contrasti che testimoniano l'intento di evitare una traduzione didascalica della *Divina Commedia* trasformando l'immaginario dantesco in un'esperienza fisica e nel contempo affettiva.

Alcuni dei temi della *Commedia* qui godono delle tetre pennellate delle scene di Dean che opta per la stilizzazione di una montagna rovesciata rielaborando immagini al negativo: di fatto è come se si ravvisasse in questa scelta una sorta di richiamo al "ghiaccio nero"[11].

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[10] I. Abbandonate ogni speranza; II. Gli egoisti – punti dalle vespe; III. Il traghettatore; IV. Pavana delle anime nel Limbo; V. Paolo e Francesca – il turbine incessante; VI. I golosi – nella melma; VII. I suicidi – gli alberi sanguinanti; VIII. I devianti – sulla sabbia infuocata; IX. Gli indovini – rivolti in entrambe le direzioni; X. L'Adagio del Papa – a testa in giù; XI. Gli ipocriti – nelle cappe di piombo; XII. I ladri – divorati dai serpenti; XIII. Satana.

[11] Si veda Searle (2021: 42-47). Interessante è l'espediente trovato per l'allestimento di questo atto alla Royal Opera House di Londra e riportato nel saggio menzionato sopra: "Il disegno di Dean per *Inferno* è il più lungo che lei abbia mai realizzato. Si estende per tutta la lunghezza del palco […] in diagonale. In realtà, il disegno è financo più lungo della scenografia. C'è un cerchio nero inclinato su un pavimento a specchio, come un cerchio dell'Inferno, con un altro specchio sul soffitto nero, e si vedono le montagne riflesse, dritte, dando la

Pari coerenza cromatica è adottata anche nei costumi alternando al nero alcune tinte rossastre unitamente al verde per il nostro protagonista.

È il tema del pentimento, del mutuo aiuto e della condivisione autentica a costituire il nucleo attraverso cui McGregor tratteggia la propria visione dantesca del *Purgatorio*, accanto al noto e imprescindibile tema dell'amore che innerva questa fase del viaggio di Dante. A distinguere nettamente, seppur in modo armonico, questo segmento del lavoro dal primo è la scelta di affrancare l'incedere coreografico dalla successione di episodi autonomi, privilegiando, al contrario, il senso dell'unità e dell'armonia complessiva del pentimento. Un'unità da leggere non soltanto come espressione dello sforzo collettivo delle anime penitenti, ma anche come consapevolezza e impegno affinché "ogni anima sia responsabile della riscrittura del suo passato individuale, assimilandolo, grazie ad un processo di penitenza rituale, di riflessione e di preghiera, alla storia di una purezza riconquistata" (Hameed 2023: 36).

Un percorso in cui guadagna spazio anche la memoria dantesca della dolorosa relazione con Beatrice e in cui torna, come si diceva sopra, il tema dell'amore – l'atto è per l'appunto denominato *Purgatorio: Love* – ampiamente narrato dal poeta fiorentino, com'è noto, nella *Vita Nuova.* In questa prospettiva sono da leggere, infatti, gli incontri evocati e rarefatti tra Dante e Beatrice qui immaginati in un fluire di tempi ed episodi nell'incedere della vita e della sua evoluzione impiegando un organico complessivo inferiore rispetto al passaggio precedente. A garantire unità e coesione alla costruzione coreografica contribuisce una presenza del protagonista progressivamente più incisiva e drammaturgicamente impegnata, affidata a una gestualità densa di implicazioni ma deliberatamente sottratta a qualsiasi forma di esplicitazione didascalica. Il protagonista secondo McGregor non è unicamente fulcro narrativo chiamato a guidare lo spettatore attraverso le diverse stazioni del viaggio ma diviene progressivamente il centro percettivo e corporeo dell'esperienza proposta. È attraverso il suo corpo che il viaggio acquista una dimensione soggettiva: esitazioni, tensioni, aperture e cambiamenti di dinamica traducono infatti stati di trasformazione interiore e autentici paesaggi della mente. Sotto questo rispetto è degno di menzione il segmento che segna la separazione tra Dante e Virgilio dando spazio, conseguentemente, al passo a due tra il protagonista e Beatrice: vettori di comunicazione coreica che parlano di appartenenza e visione relazionale del mondo. La funzione di Virgilio e quella di Beatrice sembrano infatti tradursi in due differenti modalità di relazione corporea: se il rapporto con Virgilio è inscritto nella logica dell'accompagnamento e della guida, quello con Beatrice introduce una dimensione maggiormente reciproca, nella quale il corpo dell'uno non si limita a orientare quello dell'altro ma diviene elemento di risposta, risonanza e trasformazione. La relazione fra i due corpi qui può essere interpretata come una forma di comunicazione nella quale il senso e il significato scaturiscono dalla prossimità, dalla distanza, dal contatto e dalla capacità di modulare reciprocamente il movimento. Lo sviluppo musicale e coreografico qui adottato è ridotto a sette sezioni:

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sensazione che il mondo sia sopra di te, il mondo raddrizzato". Un assetto scenografico, questo, che in taluni segmenti dell'atto svela potenzialità di prim'ordine come nel caso della scena affidata a Paolo e Francesca: "Quando danzano, il cerchio nero inclinato che ho creato sul palco diventa un disegno di gesso. Poiché tutto è in negativo, il peccato è bianco".

I Dawn
II The Mountain
III The Valley of Flowers
IV The Healing Fire
V The Earthly Paradise
VI The Heavenly Procession
VII The Ascent
(*The Dante Project* 2021: 38)[12].

Per le scene, la scelta di Dean è quella di dare rilievo al tema del cambiamento simboleggiato per l'artista da un albero di jacaranda collocato in una strada della città in cui ella vive, Los Angeles[13]; per i costumi si evoca una medietà che richiama, anche cromaticamente, l'evoluzione verso lo stadio conclusivo.

Da ultimo il terzo atto intitolato *Paradiso: Poema Sacro* conduce il coreografo ad attraversare le trascendenti gioie immaginate da Dante rispolverando, in particolare, l'ineludibile tema della Trinità definendo una creazione che è possibile considerare come "risposta coreografica alla molteplicità a spirale, all'astrazione e al valore linguistico della terza *cantica* della *Commedia*, e al suo tema della novità che non cessa di dispiegarsi" (Hameed 2023: 37).

Coreograficamente la scelta è di optare per virtuosismi, fluidità e quelle nivee *nuances* che diffusamente attraversano i segmenti previsti per questo terzo e ultimo atto dello spettacolo in cui si ravvisano paesaggi multisensoriali diffusi e a tratti finanche pervasivi. Rispetto alla fisicità più aspra e conflittuale che caratterizza l'*Inferno* e alla progressiva trasformazione del movimento sperimentata nel *Purgatorio*, il *Paradiso* introduce una diversa concezione della materia coreografica: il gesto tende a perdere la propria funzione eminentemente narrativa per acquisire una dimensione maggiormente percettiva, astratta e sensoriale. La fluidità che caratterizza il movimento non sembra essere esclusivamente sinonimo di leggerezza o di grazia ma il risultato di una trasformazione della relazione fra il corpo e lo spazio garantendo al movimento stesso un flusso ininterrotto nel quale il termine di un gesto coincide quasi immediatamente con l'origine di quello successivo. La continuità diviene quindi una qualità semantica: suggerisce una condizione di permanenza, di espansione e di superamento dei limiti corporei.

I richiamati cerchi concentrici e la spirale sembrano qui assumere i tratti di un principio cardine del contributo coreografico: ai danzatori è infatti affidato un movimento che

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[12] I. L'alba; II. La montagna; III. La valle dei fiori; IV. Il fuoco risanatore; V. Il paradiso terrestre; VI. La processione celeste; VII. L'ascesa.

[13] Si veda Pini (2021). In proposito Adrian Searle svela nel suo saggio dedicato alle scene e ai costumi dello spettacolo l'origine della scelta qui adottata da Dean: "'Mi trovavo a Los Angeles tra aprile e maggio del 2015 e, all'improvviso, l'intera città è stata ricoperta dai fiori viola-blu degli alberi di Jacaranda. Il colore è quasi simile a quello dei campanellini blu […] Ho trascorso molto tempo a Los Angeles cercando il Jacaranda 'perfetto' e ho scattato una fotografia'. Il figlio adolescente di Dean, Rufus, le ha mostrato un'app sul suo iPhone che inverte tutti i colori, trasformando il Jacaranda in fiore in un verde ultraterreno. Ha poi rielaborato lo sfondo della città di Los Angeles nella fotografia con una matita bianca, disegnando attorno a ogni singola foglia dell'albero" (2021: 46).

predilige la circolarità e la continuità dinamica, attraverso un gesto che amplia ed esalta gli sviluppi dei *port de bras*, restituendo allo spettatore la percezione di un moto perpetuo, apparentemente senza fine. La circolarità sembra farsi spirale proprio nella sua capacità di coniugare il ritorno e l'avanzamento, la ripetizione e l'ascesa. In questo modo il movimento torna su se stesso senza mai coincidere pienamente con il punto di partenza.

Coreografia, scena e musica guadagnano così un'auspicata simbiosi nella restituzione visiva e sonora dell'ascesa, in cui i danzatori diventano materia luminosa in movimento, capace di evocare un mondo altro, trasfigurato e ormai sottratto alla dimensione propriamente terrena. Un lavoro che interconnette corpo e spazio richiamando, seppur sotto diversi rispetti, la riflessione di Erin Manning sul movimento e sulla possibilità di considerarlo non unicamente come mero spostamento del corpo ma capace di conquistare forma ed espressione solo a partire da un'intensità che precede il movimento percepibile e che ne orienta gli sviluppi successivi (Manning 2009).

Un regno, questo, in cui la diretta visione di Dio e della luce giova degli espedienti di Lucy Carter e Simon Bennison impegnati con il *lighting design* dello spettacolo: grazie al loro contributo in questa terza cantica si ravvisa un convincente equilibrio tra materialità, astrazione e rappresentazione scenica. In questo caso le sezioni musicali e coreografiche sono le seguenti:

> Awakening
> Moon
> Mercury
> Venus
> Sun
> Mars
> Jupiter – the eagle
> Saturn – the golden ladder
> Fixed Stars
> Empyrean
> (*The Dante Project* 2021: 38)[14].

Le scene qui condividono l'idea di evocare le anime dei puri con un richiamo filmico accostato ad una precisa scelta cromatica: "Usando colori complementari in contrasto, così da ottenerne di spuri, molto carichi, mettendo un filtro giallo sul viola, l'arancione sul blu, il rosso sul verde" (Pini 2021). Immaginando una sala cinematografica Dean ha qui proiettato scene di pura astrazione sopra la testa dei danzatori prendendo spunto dai motivi circolari utilizzati da Botticelli per i noti disegni dedicati al poema dantesco e dai cromatismi adottati da William Blake per le illustrazioni dedicate a Dante[15]. Al nostro

[14] Il risveglio; La Luna; Mercurio; Venere; Il Sole; Marte; Giove – l'aquila; Saturno – la scala d'oro; Le stelle fisse; L'Empireo.

[15] Si veda Searle (2021: 46-47). Nella sezione dedicata al *Paradiso* nel saggio si menziona, inoltre, il legame che Wayne McGregor ha messo in evidenza tra la creazione qui analizzata e le fasi storiche che ne hanno accompagnato lo sviluppo nel corso delle note difficoltà del 2020 con ripercussioni sia nell'impianto scenico

protagonista non manca l'iconica tunica di colore rosso che rende riconoscibile la sua rappresentazione[16].

Si tratta, quindi, di ravvisare in questa cantica quell'auspicata progressione condivisa dalla scenografa e costumista, orientata a una traduzione interculturale e diffusa del testo dantesco. Attraverso l'uso del disegno, della fotografia e del supporto filmico, si riconosce, infatti, una progressione "dal negativo al positivo" anche nell'immagine scenica elaborata per questo lavoro (Searle 2021: 42) che non si affranca, nelle battute finali, dalla condivisione dell'inattingibilità del tema qui evocato[17]: una "condizione di assolutezza"[18] se volessimo attingere alle illuminanti analisi di Guardini per questo ultimo segmento del viaggio dantesco.

Una coreografia, quella di McGregor, che sembra aver accolto l'invito offerto dallo sguardo di Dante di ripudiare staticità e immobilità dal momento che, com'è noto, l'itinerario nell'oltremondano vive di quella ineludibile dinamica incardinata su azione, dialettica, incisività, paesaggio multisensoriale e perenne movimento (Shaw 2021: 35). Un movimento, quello che lo stesso sommo poeta vive e attraversa fisicamente nei tre momenti che inanellano il suo viaggio e che non esclude, esattamente come in una coreografia, anche l'investimento emotivo e intellettuale che il protagonista trentacinquenne del viaggio pasquale compie: "quello di Dante" è dopotutto "lavoro di vero e proprio drammaturgo, perché concentrato sullo spazio teatrale del movimento e delle azioni" (Tomassini 2021: 572). Da qui McGregor palesa l'intento di mostrare in scena quella molteplice e ricca varietà dell'esperienza umana in perfetta corrispondenza con la primigenia fonte dantesca nella quale, come noto, c'è spazio per "tutta la vita umana, espressa attraverso l'attributo esclusivamente umano: il linguaggio" (Shaw 2021: 30).

Un lavoro, *The Dante Project*, che si incardina nel filone narrativo della produzione dell'attuale direttore della Biennale Danza[19] ma capace di intercettare alcuni dei pregi sperimentati dal coreografo in altre creazioni e che risentono della sua inclinazione a osservare e produrre attingendo ad uno degli interessi più validi nella creazione: "l'interesse per le molteplici forme di danza [nella convinzione] che la danza possa esprimersi in molteplici modi" (Crompton 2023: 46). È una molteplicità che consente allo sguardo creativo di analiz-

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che nella drammaturgia, come richiamato nella seconda sezione del presente saggio: "È importante che non ci sia una correlazione diretta tra la musica e il film. Ciò che la pandemia ci ha portato è il tempo per sviluppare un rapporto più stretto tra musica e immagine, nulla di illustrativo o letterale".

[16] Per l'evoluzione cromatica adottata da Dean nel concepimento dei costumi per i protagonisti del lavoro si veda Searle (2021: 47). Sul tema del corpo e della sua valorizzazione nello sviluppo scenico previsto in questo lavoro mediante le luci disegnate da Lucy Carter si veda Hameed (2023: 37). Sulla tematica della luce e della sua essenzialità nel testo dantesco si veda Romano Guardini (1967: 227-287).

[17] Nel suo saggio dal titolo *I "genieri scelti" di Carmelo Bene e la "Lectura Dantis" di Bologna (1981)* Leonardo Mancini menziona l'invocazione dell'oltremondano e "l'inattingibilità della verità trascendente" nella rappresentazione scenica del poema dantesco. Si rimanda al suo intervento per approfondimenti sul tema quantunque l'analisi sia rivolta a un filone della rappresentazione teatrale distinto rispetto all'atto coreografico qui preso in esame (2023: 145-152).

[18] "Il *Paradiso* al contrario rappresenta una condizione di assolutezza, che si sottrae ad ogni tentativo di espressione: esso impone così al poeta il compito di dar forma a ciò che è aldilà della parola, quella santa Unità che tutto a sé fa ritornare", Guardini (1967: 71).

[19] Sul tema del narrativo nella produzione di McGregor si veda Mackrell (2021: 52).

zare alternative e possibilità eterogenee, mantenendosi al contempo vigile e sensibile verso la fruizione dell'opera e il coinvolgimento con un vissuto che non può mai dirsi scevro dalla contemporaneità e dalle esigenze più prossime dell'umano. È in questa prospettiva che vanno lette, quindi, le scelte adottate nel suo lavoro che a ragione può essere ricondotto all'ambito di studi e indagini sui paesaggi cognitivi ed emotivi costruiti e tradotti attraverso l'efficace impiego del corpo, del movimento, del suono e della pluralità degli spazi scenici.

Si tratta di riconoscere in McGregor, quindi, uno dei coreografi che ha sempre accolto con entusiasmo nuove sfide radicando le creazioni su fonti molteplici rimanendo sempre aperto alle svariate "dance cultures" (Mackrell 2021: 49) e da quando ha assunto il suo ruolo di Resident Choreographer al Royal Ballet ha sempre tenuto viva la sua *verve* creativa e sperimentale in simbiosi con le tradizioni accademiche della massima compagnia britannica garantendo un fertile miscuglio di stili e vocabolari in coerenza con il suo "more fractured, urban style" (Mackrell 2021: 49)[20]. È proprio in virtù di tale molteplice approccio all'arte coreografica che seguita a coreografare per la cinematografia, il teatro e la musica combinando la danza, le *Visual Arts* come pure i numerosi *creative projects* di cui è promotore (Mackrell 2021: 55): un'incessante fiducia nelle svariate possibilità e potenzialità della danza come pure delle nuove e inedite sperimentazioni in essa ravvisabili (Crompton 2023).

Corporeità e paesaggi della mente

Il tema scelto da McGregor per questo lavoro, oltre a richiamare l'ineludibile rapporto tra danza, corporeità e declamazione dantesca, sembra condividere pienamente quella centralità del dato empirico e della presenza umana che attraversa ogni passaggio dell'esperienza di Dante. Si tratta, infatti, di tornare ancora una volta a Guardini e alla sua convinzione secondo cui:

> Gli esseri da Dante incontrati non sono allegorie, ma uomini reali, personalità vive. In essi egli incontra la storia e per mezzo di essi prende posizione di fronte ad avvenimenti e situazioni terrene. Tutto perciò è saturo di realtà terrena. Di realtà che è passata certo attraverso la morte e che è stata ormai posta sotto norme eterne, ma non cancellata[21] (1967: 225).

Dimensione incancellabile nell'opera di Dante, la profondità dell'esperienza umana costituisce un elemento altrettanto essenziale nel lavoro di McGregor che assume e rielabora il radicamento terreno, l'immagine del mondo e dell'umanità delineata dall'Alighieri, restituendoli attraverso una visione nella quale vissuto, trascendenza, corpo e corporeità risultano profondamente interconnessi. In questa prospettiva la rappresentazione coreografica si configura come uno spazio privilegiato di comunicazione dell'esperienza umana nel quale la relazione tra corpo e interiorità non viene semplicemente rappresentata ma prende forma attraverso il movimento, la musica, lo spazio e le dinamiche percettive dello spettacolo. È proprio da questa interazione che emergono i paesaggi della mente intesi non come

[20] Ovvero un linguaggio coreografico più frammentato e urbano. Sul tema si veda anche Albano (2023: 59).

[21] Sul tema della presenza umana nel poema dantesco e dell'unità dell'esistere si veda Pirovano (2019: 13).

semplici rappresentazioni di luoghi interiori, ma come spazi dinamici nei quali memoria, percezione, immaginazione ed esperienza corporea si incontrano e si trasformano reciprocamente. La scena di McGregor costruisce questi paesaggi attraverso il dialogo tra il corpo in movimento e gli elementi visivi, musicali e spaziali che lo circondano, rendendo visibile la dimensione interiore e il suo rapporto con il mondo esterno.

Il viaggio dantesco diviene così un processo di attraversamento di spazi fisici e mentali, nel quale le immagini della *Commedia* vengono continuamente ricomposte attraverso una pluralità di forme sensoriali e narrative. In questo processo, i paesaggi della mente si configurano come luoghi di sovrapposizione e trasformazione, nei quali confluiscono differenti immaginari, memorie culturali, esperienze corporee e stratificazioni storiche e antropologiche. La loro natura dinamica riflette il carattere intertestuale dell'opera e la sua capacità di mettere in relazione il patrimonio dantesco con sensibilità, inquietudini e interrogativi del presente. Tra appartenenza e alterità, memoria e reinvenzione, *The Dante Project* apre così una pluralità di prospettive interpretative sulle modalità attraverso cui l'identità storica e antropologica di Dante viene nuovamente immaginata e percepita. In questa continua riscrittura del mondo attraverso il corpo, McGregor non si limita, dunque, a trasporre la *Commedia* sulla scena: ne riattiva la capacità di generare immagini, relazioni e spazi mentali, trasformando il viaggio dantesco in un'esperienza contemporanea di percezione e di conoscenza.

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Maria Grazia Dongu

Una riflessione letteraria lunga cinquanta anni

Franco Marucci, Scritti 1975-2025, Peter Lang Group AG, International Academic Publishers, 2025, vol. 1, 2, 3, € 60.13, ISBN-13: 978-3034352598, 978-3034352628, 978-3034352659.



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Gli *Scritti 1975-2025* di Franco Marucci, editi da Peter Lang in tre volumi[1], offrono un'importante testimonianza del percorso compiuto dalle varie scuole di anglistica italiana negli ultimi cinquant'anni, con particolare riferimento a quelle che hanno avuto una influenza formatrice per l'autore. L'approccio che Marucci si forgia è rigorosamente analitico, come quello del suo maestro Marcello Pagnini, ma anche contestualizzante. La ricostruzione storica, anche nel sacrificio delle parti introduttive della *Storia della Letteratura Inglese*, pubblicata

[1] Per una presentazione dei tre volumi da parte dell'autore, si veda: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s-K5nR4EGw (consultato il 17/09/2026).

da Le Lettere negli anni 2003-2018, appare combinare sempre uno sguardo retrospettivo e prospettivo, che certo deriva all'autore dalle riflessioni lotmaniane sulla necessità di ricostruire la cultura in cui il testo analizzato è stato elaborato, ma senza dimenticare che, come storici e critici, si è al crocevia di più passati e protesi verso il futuro.

È Lotman che permette a Marucci di operare una sintesi fra i metodi della critica stilistica, quelli dello strutturalismo, della narratologia e della semiotica, che rivitalizzavano a partire dagli anni Settanta del secolo scorso l'insegnamento universitario, e la storiografia letteraria. Nei saggi è ripresa, infatti, la lezione degli ultimi scritti di Lotman – *Universe of the Mind* (1990) e *Culture and Explosion* (2004) – la elaborazione cioè di una *semiotics of history*, che non solo individua sistemi segnici predominanti o interagenti in sincronia, ma anche, diacronicamente, l'irrompere di nuovi sistemi segnici, che sottolineano quelle che noi chiamiamo rivoluzioni. Nel Foucault di *The Order of Things* (1970)[2] e *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), citato negli *Scritti*, queste corrispondono a discontinuità nell'episteme.

La parte memorialistica della raccolta, inserita nel volume terzo degli *Scritti*, oltre che a segnalarsi per la godibilità della narrazione, ripercorre il cammino del giovane studioso verso una sua proposta matura. Si tratta, infatti, di brevi biografie relazionali, in cui l'io plasma la propria identità di scrittore e critico nell'imitazione ma anche nella resistenza al fascino dei maestri e colleghi. Non è un caso che le brevi biografie cedano poco all'aneddoto, ma più si soffermino sulle tappe della produzione critica di personaggi quali il germanista Ladislao Mittner, gli anglisti Marcello Pagnini e Alessandro Serpieri. Il primo rappresenta un esempio di storiografia letteraria non cursoria, ma attentamente costruita sulla materia che sostanzia la letteratura, vale a dire i livelli semantici, fonologici, ritmici della parola, che, come spiega Jakobson, attirano riflessivamente su sé stessi l'attenzione del lettore. I secondi, pur non inserendo la loro minuziosa attenzione al testo in una architettura di esteso respiro storiografico, studiarono poesia e teatro collegando strutture di vario tipo a culturemi, ricostruendo l'episteme di un'epoca in un dialogo vivo fra opere letterarie, pittura e musica. Questa lezione è colta e fatta propria da Marucci. Ne abbiamo esempi nelle trattazioni dei singoli autori nei primi due volumi, nella sezione "Comparatistica", nel percorso parallelo fra i monumenti fiorentini e gli episodi di *Romola* di George Eliot, o ancora nelle parti dedicate al cinema.

La traiettoria critica di questi illustri nomi, e di Marucci, ben descrive il loro sforzo di offrire una definizione di letteratura che si svincolasse da una classificazione crociana che procedeva per opposizioni (a partire da poesia *vs* non poesia), ed era valutativa più che descrittiva. Una scuola di anglisti si formò attorno alla lezione convincente di Pagnini e Serpieri, e, affiancandosi ad esperti in altre discipline (Marucci ricorda Stefano Agosti e Umberto Eco, fra gli altri), concorse ad una democratizzazione della cultura, fornendo a generazioni di studenti gli strumenti per comprendere quelli che, ancora con Lotman, chiamiamo testi di cultura. Se un limite vi fu in taluna critica di quegli anni fu l'uso di un linguaggio a tratti involuto e criptico, che, però, è compiutamente superato nella prosa godibile e chiara di Franco Marucci, come anche in alcuni scritti di Serpieri e Pagnini, ed altri insigni protagonisti delle aule universitarie di quella appassionante stagione dell'anglistica italiana.

[2] I testi di Foucault vennero pubblicati in Francia nel 1966 e 1969. Le date indicate sono quelle delle prime traduzioni inglesi.

La dimensione storiografica, patrimonio della generazione crociana e postcrociana, parve però sparire, anche a causa di una progressiva insoddisfazione di studenti e docenti per le Storie della Letteratura allora inserite nelle *reading lists* e affidate allo studente senza alcuna mediazione. Praz e Daiches, per terminologia, dichiarati o sottesi paradigmi classificatori, erano poco comprensibili in un mutato quadro delle conoscenze e ideologie, e, spesso, confliggenti con la pratica di analisi testuale che i professori seguivano durante le loro lezioni. La necessità di un recupero dell'operazione storiografica è, oggi, sentita da molti, ma Marucci, nella sua opera monumentale, ci mostra come essa possa radicarsi in una tradizione, innovandola alla luce del profondo ripensamento critico degli ultimi cinquant'anni. Tale rinnovamento si sente in un'impostazione narrativa, ma anche analiticamente precisa nella discussione della forma (che è contenuto), nella scelta del linguaggio del nostro tempo. Il modello dichiarato di Marucci è Ladislao Mittner, ma si comprende che egli arriva a questa forma e a questo contenuto dopo aver affinato i suoi strumenti di indagine, nella convinzione che colmare lo iato fra uno sguardo d'insieme datato e la pratica dell'analisi testuale fosse necessario.

Mentre si scorrono le varie sezioni degli *Scritti*, si avverte, come in Praz, come in Mittner, l'intensa lettura personale che Marucci compie dei testi di cui parla in un arco lungo di tempo. Rispetto a Praz, però, egli non cede all'impressionismo e alla autoreferenzialità, né all'asserzione non dimostrata. Piuttosto, accanto alla descrizione d'insieme e analitica della produzione letteraria degli autori esaminati, inserisce note per una storia della critica, che rivelano i temi dibattuti dai critici in epoche diverse, le diverse domande alle quali cercarono risposta e che, talvolta, ai loro successori non parvero così essenziali. Penso, ma sono solo esempi, alla trattazione dedicata alla letteratura in antico inglese, a Tommaso Moro, ai sonetti di Shakespeare, su cui tanto si esercitarono studiosi inglesi ed anche italiani, a Gray, a Sterne, a Tennyson. Si crea così un effetto di lettura collettiva, sempre presente anche quando prevale la personale, puntuale indagine interpretativa, come, ed anche questi sono solo esempi, nei saggi dedicati alla drammaturgia shakespeariana, a Donne, Dickens, Hopkins, Browning, Joyce, Eliot, Woolf.

Chiudono il volume terzo degli *Scritti* traduzioni ed estratti dalla produzione letteraria di Franco Marucci, autore di *Ciurma con Frac*, *Altomare*, *Calendario Liturgico*, *Cronache di Tantalo*. L'autore, infatti, è poliedrico, anche più di Pagnini, che fu, come il suo allievo dice, teoreta, ermeneuta, traduttore e manualista.

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Giuseppe Serpillo

WHEN ENGLISH IS NOT ENOUGH: Bilingual Poetry and Fidelity to the Mother Tongue

Menna Elfyn. 2025. Parch. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, pp. 128, £12.99, ISBN: 9781780377544



https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/ecs/product/parch-1382

Menna Elfyn is one of the most distinguished Welsh poets on the contemporary literary scene; her work has been translated into eighteen languages. She has published plays, libretti and books for children and was Wales's National Children's Laureate in 2002. In the 1970s and 1980s she was involved in the movement to defend the Welsh language, and was even imprisoned for civil disobedience. Until very recently she has written exclusively in Welsh, entrusting the English translations to fellow contemporary poets. This was a courageous choice: an affirmation of the dignity of a language long relegated to insignificance by the dominance of English, a choice paid for even with imprisonment in the face of repeated attempts to hinder its diffusion.

Unlike her previous dual language publications, *Parch*, her latest collection, contains only two poems accompanied by the original texts on the facing page. As the author herself explains in the preface, the reason for this decision is that "the Welsh language is now accepted and respected as an official language in Wales" (11). In Welsh, the poet notes, *Parch*

literally means "respect", but it is also used to refer to a Reverend of the Anglican Church. These two meanings converge in a poem bearing the same title, which revolves around the concepts of charity, respect, and unassuming sacrifice for others. It is certainly one of the most significant poems in the collection, as it concentrates the work's fundamental orientation and meaning in a single statement: the respect due to the individual, both as such and as an integral part of the universe of a shared humanity.

This collection differs from the previous ones, not only because Welsh is no longer predominant, but also due to the reduced emphasis on the internal and external conflicts surrounding the preservation and use of so-called minority languages. Yet, at a deeper level, there remains a sense of an indistinct threat, of a silent violence, which finds expression now in elegy, now in irony, the latter turning into sarcasm at moments of greatest indignation. "Song of a Voiceless Person to BT (British Telecom)" is an example of this: the poem opens with a question, in Welsh. The speaker is asking for a telephone number in Cardiff, but the operator does not understand and asks to repeat it in clear British English – "Speak up". At this point, a reflection begins on the marginalisation of Welsh in Great Britain – "We are mutes, Trappists, conspirators" (89). The tone, initially light, almost playful, gradually becomes more bitter, ultimately giving way to indignation – "Our civility must give ground" (89). How is this possible? "A people in counterpoint / to the leitmotif"! (90). The outburst has given the speaker an awareness of the injustice suffered by their language, and of its dignity, which must be asserted. The final stanza takes up again the Welsh words from the beginning, translated in parentheses for the benefit of the non-Welsh reader: "And now may / I have that number in Cardiff please?" (90). The challenge to the English telephone operator is clear: let him make the effort to understand a language older than his own, alive and well, despite him, on British soil.

For those who have had to struggle for centuries against attempts by dominant powers to silence a language and an identity – and, with the language, the identity itself – only a few signs are enough to trigger a sense of unease and alarm. One example is "In Solus and Out", a brief piece of rhythmic prose. While visiting an arts centre in Ukraine, the visitors, including the poetic voice itself, suddenly feel lost, suffocated, held hostage within an opaque, artificial atmosphere, like a premonition of imminent war, a premonition that becomes certainty in "Marbled Men" – "All may thaw to war any second" (45) – a poem, again, in which violence does not yet cry out, but hisses, and cruelty and cynicism act as its forerunners. Menna Elfyn has been to Ukraine, has seen those places, has spoken with the people: hers is experience, not an abstract reflection on war. In "Nine for Peace" the nine referred to are pacifist activists who exposed themselves in a protest against war, particularly the Vietnam War. The memory of these individuals becomes the occasion for a monologue, all the more dramatic for being less reliant on rhetorical language. The monologue unfolds in 33 lines distributed across five stanzas of unequal length – mostly sestets – and a final couplet which, as in the Elizabethan sonnet, gives the entire poem a strong assertive force.

For Elfyn every form of cruelty or abuse, and the suffering of every individual, becomes a political act, even when the lexical choices and tones of a poem grow tender or elegiac. Solidarity, charity, and compassion all fall within the broad semantic field of Peace,

understood as harmony and balance in opposition to the disorder and brutality of war and oppression. In "A Ukrainian Mother", a woman whose son has been killed abandons herself, from a television screen, to thoughts of revenge against the Russian soldier who caused his death, only to yield immediately afterwards to a troubled awareness that such a reaction would result in further suffering – namely, that of the Russian soldier's mother, whose son she would like to strangle. This capacity to put herself in the other's place, to share in her pain, resolves itself into a disturbance that robs her of speech, casting her back into what the poet defines as "the in-between-ness of motherhood's lowly state" (45).

The entire collection seems to move between two poles: on the one hand, the denunciation of violence, oppression, and injustice; on the other, a persistent search for forms – however minimal – of harmony, compassion, and mutual recognition. With regard to this, "The Gift of Giving Way" assumes particular significance. After the tensions, fractures, and conflicts that run through the collection, this poem offers a minimal scene: a drive along secondary roads; someone travelling the same path in the opposite direction, the silent language of flashing signals, the discreet presence of another human being. Within these almost imperceptible everyday gestures, a concrete form of peace is realised, one that elsewhere seems denied or under threat. "Giving way" thus becomes far more than a simple traffic rule: it emerges as an ethical and relational metaphor, a model of coexistence grounded in reciprocity, attentiveness to others, and a quiet, unspoken solidarity. In contrast to the brutality of the "wider lane", a symbolic space of power, competition, and indifference, the poem suggests that the possibility of human balance resides precisely in such minimal gestures. It lies in this willingness to yield, to acknowledge, and to share space. In its apparent simplicity, "The Gift of Giving Way" perhaps offers the clearest synthesis of this tension: not an escape from reality, but the suggestion of a possible ethics of the everyday, in which peace is not proclaimed, but enacted.

"Three Poems to İlhan Sami Çomak" continues and deepens this trajectory, transporting it into a more explicitly political dimension without relinquishing its tenderness. The Kurdish poet, imprisoned for thirty years in a Turkish prison, becomes the focal point of a meditation on resistance, hope, and silent communication: from the dialogue with the bird in the first poem, "The Piper", to the presence of the wild ponies in "Wild Ponies", and finally to the almost ritual delicacy of "Rowan". The rowan tree, in Celtic tradition, is a protective tree, believed to ward off evil and therefore also known as the "tree of life". The poet's address to the prisoner is marked by a tone of intimate, almost restrained tenderness: the speaker expresses regret at her inability to send tangible elements of her homeland – its air, its abundant Welsh rain, concrete signs of nearness and support. In the end, she sends him a rowan leaf together with a poem, as a gesture of goodwill and blessing:

> "I send you a leaf, / from a rowan tree / beautiful for you to hold / in both hands. In its veins a secret message in Welsh: *criafolen,* / *criaf-o-len*: a cry behind a veil, / and a song's murmur / as you walk one day / towards her and gaze / under her branches / at the sky unveiled with a gift of *awer* (muse)" (103).

In this context, the earlier satirical inflections and more overtly polemical tones recede, though they do not entirely disappear. Rather, they persist in a subdued form, as a quiet but

unmistakable indignation that inhabits what remains unspoken: the implicit denunciation of a system capable of incarcerating a man – a poet – for three decades on account of his beliefs. This sensibility is accompanied by a pervasive compassion for suffering, together with frequent invocations of peace and a contemplation of beauty not only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also in its cognitive and ethical dimensions. It is within this horizon that many of the poems in the collection find their deepest coherence: the tension between violence and harmony, oppression and mutual recognition, is not resolved but continually rearticulated through gestures that are often minimal, almost imperceptible, yet charged with ethical significance. In this way, poetry emerges as a space in which solidarity can be enacted and shared humanity reaffirmed, even under the most restrictive conditions.

In both her prose and verse Menna Elfyn has consistently been anti-conformist, courageous, and openly critical of power in its many forms. She furnishes an instance of this in the present collection, translating from the Welsh a poem by Gwerful Mechain, a remarkable poet of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, renowned for her openly erotic poetry from a female perspective; the poem, provocatively entitled "Female Genitals", uses a language at once explicit and revelatory of a sexual pleasure for which man serves as a mere instrument. This choice reveals something of her own character and poetics: poetry can say anything; it must not, and cannot, be constrained by barriers or prohibitions. In "Stones", for instance, stones become a metaphor for poetry, which builds, yet at the same time cannot be confined by the very walls it shapes and constructs; poetry, in fact, is not something immobile or static, but "wants to be on the move" (39).

In *Parch* there is a greater focus on feelings and memories, in a recovery of values that were always present but not foregrounded, emphasised, or brought to the fore in her earlier work. Some of these values are recovered by Elfyn in figures, gestures, and sensations rooted in past experience. Two poems in particular are grounded in the memory of her brother and sister. Transcending the death that claimed them both, she rediscovers their presence in a sound, a voice, a gesture. "The Pear Tree, The Manse, Pontardawe" was composed in Welsh in memory of her brother, who died on 13 February 2022. The English version is by Menna Elfyn herself. It is a brief elegy in three stanzas; it gathers tender, finely shaded memories of childhood that seem to hold grief in suspension, opening instead onto a vision of serenity: an afterlife imagined as no less fair than the earthly garden he was compelled to leave:

> "My big brother, nobody climbed / branches better or further than you. / In our orchard, high above, there you were / in the midst of pears, feet on a plank / in the arms of the boughs, looking / through a canopy to the sky above" (75).

In another poem, "Wedi'r glaw" ("After the Rain"), written in memory of her sister, emotion is conveyed rather than declared through the evocation of a scent: "I open a vial – / her daily perfume // a dab on skin / from nape to pulse // the fragrance of roses – / lime sandalwood" (29). One more poem, "Horse Chestnut Tree in Uppsala", is a celebration of the horse chestnut and its glossy fruits, which remind the poet of her childhood, when children would go out to gather them and everything was imbued with a spirit of innocence. It is a language closer to speech, though still highly controlled in the rhythm of the lines and stanzas.

Some of the poems were written in Welsh, while others were composed directly in English. In the acknowledgements, Menna Elfyn thanks five translators, including R. S. Thomas, perhaps the greatest Welsh poet of the twentieth century, who died in 2000, a friend of the author and a strong advocate of the Welsh language and its literary tradition. The poems translated by Elfyn herself, together with those written directly in English, display a directness that is less evident in those translated by other collaborators, such as Joseph Clancy, Gillian Clarke, Robert Minhinnick – whose contribution, however, is limited to one or two poems. A different case is represented by the two other translators, Emma Baines and R. S. Thomas. Emma Baines translated twenty-two poems from the collection, almost as many as those handled by Elfyn herself. She is, however, a poet quite distinct from Menna Elfyn, and this difference is perceptible in her translations. R. S. Thomas, undoubtedly "one of the greatest Welsh poets of the twentieth century" and "a fellow campaigner and international travel companion" (9), contributed only one translation, "Song of a voiceless person to BT", which, as previously noted, refers to an arrogant stance against which the two poets had fought together. His translation is splendid, revealing a particularly acute sensitivity to the phonic quality of the verse. Since attention to the sonic substance of the line is also one of Menna Elfyn's defining qualities, the correspondence between the two poets is especially convincing.

For a long time, the undervaluation of literatures in less widely spoken languages has been sustained by a prejudice about their supposed marginality – the assumption that they cannot extend their scope beyond the confines of a limited horizon. The body of poetry by Menna Elfyn, like that of many Irish and Scottish writers – if we confine ourselves to the context of the British Isles – demonstrates precisely the contrary: her work is deeply engaged with the issues and events of the contemporary world. It observes them, enters into them with a lucid and critical awareness, and establishes a dialectical relationship so that any attentive reader can easily understand and connect with it.

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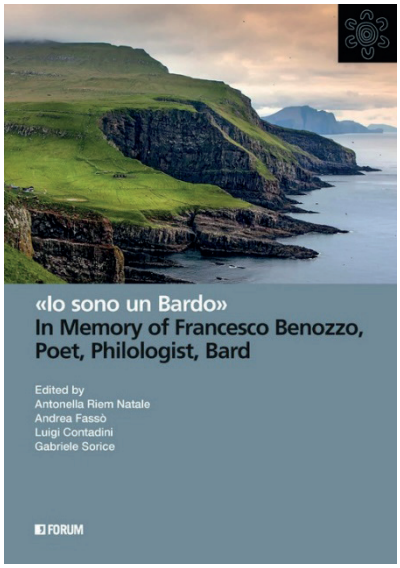
Rebecca McGuire-Snieckus

Io sono un Bardo: In Memory of Francesco Benozzo, Poet, Philologist, Bard

Io sono un Bardo: In Memory of Francesco Benozzo, Poet, Philologist, Bard. 2026. Antonella Riem Natale, Andrea Fassò, Luigi Contadini e Gabriele Sorice (a cura di). Udine: Forum, Collana ALL, pp. 448, € 28.00, ISBN: 978-88-3283-593-9



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Io sono un Bardo: In Memory of Francesco Benozzo, Poet, Philologist, Bard, edited by Antonella Riem Natale, Andrea Fassò, Luigi Contadini, and Gabriele Sorice, is a substantial commemorative volume devoted to the work and intellectual legacy of Francesco Benozzo, poet, singer, harpist, and philologist. Published by Forum Editrice in the ALL series of the Department of Languages and Literatures, Communication, Education and Society at the University of Udine, the 448-page volume brings together scholarly essays, bibliographical materials, documentary sources, poetry, personal recollections, and photographic material.

Its multilingual character reflects the international and interdisciplinary contexts in which Benozzo's work developed[1].

The title, *Io sono un Bardo*, derives from the bardic identity that was central to Benozzo's understanding of his own work. As the editors explain in the preface, the volume is dedicated to the memory of a beloved friend and esteemed colleague whose activities encompassed poetry, song, the harp, and philology. The collection consequently does not attempt to separate these practices into discrete categories. Rather, its organisation reflects the connections between language, history, territory, oral tradition, performance, and memory that recur throughout Benozzo's scholarly and creative work.

The volume is divided into two principal sections. The first, "Re-Sounding Landscapes", approaches Benozzo's work through critical and scholarly perspectives, with particular attention to the relationship between language, history, and territory. The second, "Echoing the Bard", moves from critical analysis towards personal and experiential forms of remembrance. It gathers poems, memories, anecdotes, and stories by colleagues, collaborators, friends, and family members. The distinction between the two sections is useful, although their juxtaposition also reveals how closely scholarly inquiry and lived experience were connected within Benozzo's practice.

The first section situates Benozzo's work within a range of intellectual fields associated with ethnophilology, oral traditions, landscape, and the study of language and place. One of the important implications of the volume is that Benozzo's philology cannot be understood solely through the conventional image of philology as the textual study of historical documents. His engagement with oral performance, music, landscape, and vernacular traditions forms an integral part of his intellectual practice. The volume therefore provides an opportunity to consider the ways in which philological research can intersect with performance and with forms of knowledge transmitted through voice and place.

Antonella Riem opens the volume with a poetic essay on Benozzo's places of the heart: the Apennines, Galicia, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, the Faroes and Friuli. Contributors to this section include Andrea Fassò, emeritus professor at the University of Bologna and Benozzo's mentor in the study of the *jeu-parti*, and John T. Koch, who was professor of a young Benozzo in Wales and whose research on Celtic origins and landscape linguistics intersects with his work. An essay on music and song by Benozzo and Elena Lamberti is republished for the occasion. Other contributions include an essay by the medievalist Paolo Galloni; Augusto Ponzio's study of Benozzo's critical work on Giosuè Carducci; Paolo Scartezzini's reflections on shamanic sleep and dreams; and Luca Marini's account of his shared dissent with Benozzo during the pandemic. Luigi Contadini discusses Benozzo's aspiration for freedom as a man, poet and scholar, while Naiem Abdulrazaq draws parallels between his dissent and that of the Azerbaijani mystical poet Imadeddin Nasimi (late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries). Gabriel Dunsmith explores Benozzo's poetry of nature and landscape;

[1] *Io sono un Bardo* (2026) continues Benozzo's long-standing publishing relationship with Forum Editrice's ALL series, spanning philology, poetry, translation and landscape studies. Previous titles include *Poeti della marea* (2022), *The Ridge and the Song* (2022) and *Sciamanica* (2023). See the ALL series: https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/?text=all-english (consulted on 30/09/2026).

Mattia Mantellato offers a moving tribute to Benozzo as "Poet from the Frontier"; and Isabel Alonso-Breto discusses *Poeti della marea* and its accompanying CD, in which Benozzo reinterprets and sings the bardic poetry of ancient Welsh bards.

This relationship between scholarship and performance is particularly evident in the material concerning Benozzo's work at the University of Udine. The concert-lectures organised through the Department of Languages and Literatures, Communication, Education and Society brought together academic discussion and musical performance. In this setting, subjects associated with medieval and Celtic oral traditions, balladry, and landscape poetry could be approached not only through textual analysis but also through sound and performance. The documentation of these activities contributes to the volume's broader account of Benozzo's approach to teaching and research.

A further dimension of the book is its attention to Benozzo's international collaborations. The material relating to his Visiting Professorship at Bath Spa University in 2023, as well as the concert-lecture *The Ridge and the Song* at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, illustrates the geographical breadth of his scholarly and artistic engagements[2]. The latter work is especially relevant to the volume's recurring concern with landscape and song, bringing together topography, memory, oral tradition, and poetic expression. The inclusion of this material also helps to document the movement of Benozzo's ideas between different academic and cultural contexts.

The volume's discussion of the Master MaPS project provides another example of this interdisciplinary orientation. Benozzo's contribution to an initiative concerned with poetry and wisdom, anthropology, sociology, pedagogy, neuroscience, shamanism, and community-building is presented in relation to his interest in oral poetry, toponymy, and the ways in which human beings experience and interpret place. Here again, the emphasis is less on a single disciplinary method than on the connections among language, environment, memory, and cultural practice.

The second section, "Echoing the Bard", changes the register of the volume. The contributions are not primarily attempts to analyse Benozzo's work from a critical distance; instead, they preserve particular memories of the person, his relationships, collaborations, and activities. The section opens with a posthumous letter from Benozzo's sons, Diego and Jacopo, and includes contributions concerning his musical collaborations, friendships, scholarly relationships, and connections with Wales, Galicia, the Faroe Islands, and other cultural contexts. Other contributions include a touching farewell letter from Benozzo's luthier, Michele Sangineto; Franco Cardini's portrayal of Benozzo as an errant knight; a recollection by his musical partner and friend Fabio Bonvicini; and a poetic farewell by the Mancuso Brothers. Gabriele Sorice recounts the considerable undertaking of transferring the library of Benozzo's mentor, Mario Alinei, to the University of Bologna, while Gianni Braglia recalls their adolescent circle of friends in the Apennines. Cesare Cevolani discusses the completion of the *Dizionario del dialetto di San Cesario sul Panaro*. Three commemorative poems by Paul Kane, John Strachan and Alan Wildeman follow. Pino Serpillo remembers Benozzo's

[2] The Ridge and the Song – Harp Concert at Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-rmXVCmVdw (consulted on 30/09/2026).

stoic example of freedom; Kristian Blak reflects on their collaboration through his record company TUTL in the Faroe Islands; and Sue Ballyn recalls Benozzo's connections with Wales. The Galician scholars of the *Desperta do Teu Sono* group – J. M. Barbosa, M. Dovigo, R. Palomera and X. M. Paredes – remember their long-standing collaboration and shared commitment to Atlantic and Celtic culture, oral heritage and landscape poetry. Gonzalo Navaza Blanco closes the second section with recollections and photographs of Benozzo's many visits to Galicia.

The photographs accompanying these accounts (and also the critical essays) add another documentary layer, preserving moments and relationships that cannot be conveyed through scholarly analysis alone. The inclusion of such personal material is significant for a volume concerned with the figure of the bard. Memory here operates not simply as biographical evidence but as a form of transmission. Anecdote, poem, recollection, photograph, and story become ways of preserving a cultural and intellectual legacy. In this respect, the second section complements rather than merely follows the scholarly essays: it demonstrates how a person's intellectual influence may continue through the memories and practices of those with whom he worked.

The volume was presented on 1 July 2026 in the gardens of Palazzo Antonini at the University of Udine, where Benozzo performed on so many significant occasions. The event celebrated Benozzo's creative and scholarly work through speeches, poetry readings and live music, with contributions from the editors Antonella Riem, Andrea Fassò, Luigi Contadini and Gabriele Sorice, alongside Mattia Mantellato. It also featured a poetic tribute by John Strachan, a *requiem laico* by the Fratelli Mancuso and *Di legno e di pelle* performed by Trio Ciocaia[3].

Among the volume's most useful scholarly resources is the primary bibliography of Benozzo's writings compiled by Gabriele Sorice and Stefano Themel. Given the breadth of Benozzo's activities across philology, poetry, translation, music, and related forms of cultural production, such a bibliography provides an important means of tracing the development and range of his work. It also offers a foundation for future research by bringing together publications that might otherwise remain dispersed across different disciplinary and literary contexts.

The volume also documents the international campaign for Benozzo's nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The campaign, initiated in 2015 by Gonzalo Navaza with the Spanish PEN Club and subsequently supported by academic and international networks, such as the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) and the Global Academy of Liberal Arts (GALA), based at Bath SPA University[4], forms part of the historical record presented in the book. The inclusion of this material is valuable not because it settles questions of literary

[3] See both videos of the presentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfcAncEFB3A, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXkAruh-wp4 (consulted on 30/09/2026).

[4] Following its first nomination of Francesco Benozzo for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024, the Partnership Studies Group renewed his nomination for 2025. See both the PSG and GALA websites: https://partnership-studiesgroup.uniud.it/?page_id=1359, https://gala.network/members/rebeccams/buddyblog/my-posts/5739/ (consulted on 30/09/2026).

evaluation, but because it documents the international networks of scholars, writers, and institutions that formed around Benozzo's work and the conception of him as a contemporary representative of oral and landscape-based poetic traditions.

Taken as a whole, *Io sono un Bardo* occupies an interesting position between memorial volume, scholarly collection, documentary record, and bibliographical resource. Its significance lies partly in the range of materials it assembles. The critical essays provide contexts for understanding Benozzo's intellectual work; the personal contributions preserve the perspectives of those who knew and collaborated with him; and the bibliographical and documentary materials establish a record of his extensive activity across several fields. The volume also raises broader questions about the place of the bard in contemporary scholarship. In Benozzo's work, the bard is not presented simply as a historical figure associated with an earlier oral culture. Rather, the term describes a mode of intellectual and artistic practice in which scholarship, poetry, music, landscape, and communal memory remain connected. *Io sono un Bardo* explores this conception from different perspectives without reducing Benozzo's work to a single disciplinary category.

For readers interested in Francesco Benozzo, the volume provides an unusually broad collection of materials through which his scholarly, poetic, musical, and collaborative activities can be approached. For scholars of philology, oral traditions, landscape studies, and contemporary poetry, it also offers a record of a particular approach to the humanities, one in which textual scholarship exists alongside voice, performance, place, and memory. Its lasting value will therefore depend not only on its function as a memorial to Benozzo, but also on the extent to which the materials gathered here encourage further study of the intellectual and cultural questions to which his work was devoted.

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