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*Bodies, Ecology and Moving Identities:
Towards a Partnership Paradigm*

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***Bodies, Ecology and Moving Identities:
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Antonella Riem & Stefano Mercanti

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Antonella Riem Natale

In memoria di Francesco Benozzo. Amato amico, poeta e bardo

“Io sono una barriera frangivento/la vela lacerata di una nave”
(Benozzo 2023: 177)¹.

Sono passati ormai diversi mesi dalla devastante notizia della morte improvvisa per infarto del nostro amato amico Francesco Benozzo, poeta, cantante, musicista e bardo, nonché nostro candidato al premio Nobel per la letteratura. Ma il nostro cuore è ancora profondamente addolorato per questa perdita immensa per tutti noi amici, colleghi, e il più ampio mondo di erudizione, poesia, musica e canzone.

Nato il 22 febbraio 1969, Francesco è un poeta epico-lirico italiano di fama, arpista, compositore, cantante e bardo, etnofilologo (disciplina da lui fondata), dialettologo, etnografo e antropologo apprezzato a livello internazionale. La sua opera poetica e musicale è straordinaria, profonda e vasta, incentrata su un'intensa e diffusa esplorazione dei luoghi, con una mappatura poetica transculturale del sé e del mondo, attraverso gli Appennini, la Galizia, il Galles, il Lake District e le Isole Faroe. Sin dal 2015 è stato nominato ufficialmente candidato al Premio Nobel in Letteratura dal Pen Club Internazionale². Nel 2024 e 2025 è stato nominato ufficialmente candidato al Premio Nobel in Letteratura dal *Partnership Studies Group* (PSG)³ e dalla Global Academy of the Liberal Arts (GALA)⁴.

La collana internazionale ALL (Forum Editrice universitaria) ha pubblicato una edizione bilingue dei suoi poemi, *Sciamanica. Poemi dai confini dei mondi/Poems from the borders of the worlds* (2023); una “defense of poetry”, *The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry* (2022); e una originalissima e intensa traduzione poetica e musicale degli antichi Bardi gallesi, *Poeti della Marea. Canti bardici gallesi dal VI al X Secolo* (2022), accompagnata da

¹ Questo verso è stato anche il titolo del primo evento in memoria di Francesco Benozzo, tenutosi a Palazzo Antonini, Università di Udine, il 17 maggio 2025, con Antonella Riem, Liviana Pitt e il fisarmonicista ucraino Liubomyr Bogslavets; il secondo evento del 21 settembre 2025 a Palazzo Garzolini di Toppo Wassermann, Università di Udine “Francesco Benozzo Homo poeta” con Antonella Riem, Alan Wildeman, Liviana Pitt, Giuliana Venuti, il cantautore friulano Lino Straulino con il coro dell’Università di Udine, diretto dal Maestro Fabio Alessi; il terzo evento, il 19 ottobre 2025, intitolato “L’altro da me è un altro di me”, Chiesa della Natività della Beata Vergine Maria (Pignano di Ragogna), con Don Romano, Antonella Riem, Liviana Pitt, Giuliana Venuti e il coro di Villanova, Corâl Vôs di Vilegnove. Inoltre, il Comune di Udine ha organizzato un quarto evento l’11 novembre 2025, anniversario del primo concerto di Francesco Benozzo tenutosi in Sala Ajace l’11 novembre 2022, durante la cerimonia per il Premio Poeti dalla Frontiera. Si vedano inoltre gli eventi organizzati dall’Associazione Laureati/e in Lingue e Letterature Straniere (ALL): <https://all.uniud.it/2025-it/> (consultato il 13/06/2025).

² https://web.archive.org/web/20170509144935/http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/who-deserves.html (consultato il 13/06/2025).

³ <https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it> (consultato il 13/06/2025)

⁴ <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/about-us/networks/gala/> (consultato il 13/06/2025).

un magnifico CD dove Benozzo riprende in modo intenso e originale alcuni di questi canti, accompagnandosi all'arpa celtica e bardica.

Benozzo è stato membro di prestigiose accademie scientifiche internazionali, tra cui il *Partnership Studies Group* (PSG) e il comitato scientifico internazionale del Master *Poetry and Wisdom. Partnership Studies and Native Traditions* del dipartimento DILL dell'Università di Udine⁵. Francesco Benozzo ispirerà sempre persone di ogni età attraverso la sua poesia, la musica e le sue lezioni concerto, dove intreccia le tradizioni orali, la poesia e i canti di molti popoli 'nativi' con l'impegno civile⁶.

L'aspetto più distintivo e originale della sua produzione è il recupero e la valorizzazione delle tradizioni native del mondo, presenti nella sua ricerca scientifica, nella sua poesia e nei suoi poemi performativi con l'arpa. Le sue esecuzioni cantate dal vivo, molto celebrate, diventano così una forma creativa di espressione e attuazione del suo acuto lavoro etnofilologico sul campo. Molti eminenti colleghi, poeti e studiosi di tutto il mondo nutrono una profonda stima per la personalità e l'opera artistica, poliedrica e complessa, di Benozzo.

Il suo approccio alla vita e alla letteratura è sempre stato caratterizzato da un impegno attivo nel dibattito intellettuale e nella vita pubblica, da una pratica artistica di pensiero critico e di dissidenza civile che considerava un ruolo e una missione fondamentali per l'artista, come testimonia il suo ultimo libro pubblicato, *Piccolo manuale di diserzione quotidiana* (2025) e anche *Memorie di un filologo complottista* del 2020 che è stata l'incantevole e incantata occasione del nostro incontro. Come dice in una intervista⁷ pubblicata in coda alla prima edizione del poema *Onirico geologico*: "Il poeta, gioiello dei diademi del cielo, ha il compito di restituire la libertà a chi ne è stato defraudato. La sua parola, prefigurata nei rituali di incubazione delle civiltà preistoriche, è pulsazione pre-verbale e acquatica. La sua lingua, generata dal crepuscolo d'alba, è la lingua del fanciullo-albero" (2014: 78).

Benozzo, il *fanciullo-albero*, attraversa con straordinaria bellezza e originalità diversi generi, bilanciando la sua forza visionaria con una lettura profonda dei paesaggi, vissuti attraverso e nel corpo fisico che li attraversa, come una 'adesione spontanea' al loro ritmo, come voce ed esperienza lirica della magnificenza del mondo naturale. Nominato *Bardo Honorário* del Portogallo e *Honorary Fellow* della *Poetry Foundation* di Chicago, insignito del titolo di *Genius Loci* per la sua dissidenza poetica, nel 2022 ha ricevuto il Premio Internazionale di Poesia *Poets from the Frontier*, conferito dal *Partnership Studies Group Committee* (USA,

⁵ <https://www.uniud.it/it/didattica/formazione-post-laurea/master/alta-formazione/Area-umanistica-comunicazione-formazione/partnership-sciamanesimo> (consultato il 13/06/2025).

⁶ Si veda: lezione/concerto *The Ridge and the Song*, registrata presso la Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-rmXVCmVdw> (consultato il 13/06/2025); TEDxBologna intitolato *Dallo sciamano al poeta. La poesia che salverà il mondo*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ-bjz6L-L48&t=80s> (consultato il 13/06/2025); lezione/concerto *Mutina Boica* 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcBzBUQvblA> (consultato il 13/06/2025); lezione/concerto *L'altro da me come altro di me* 28/01/2023 Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere La Colombaria, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZMa3_M6fqI&t=780s (consultato il 13/06/2025). Per il ciclo di lezioni/concerti presso il *Partnership Studies Group* (PSG), University of Udine, si veda: <https://all.uniud.it/premio-poeti-dalla-frontiera/> and <https://all.uniud.it/2022-2024/> (consultati il 13/06/2025).

⁷ Archeologia della parola poetica, [frammenti di un'intervista rilasciata nell'aprile del 2013 a "Passagem sem guarda" in occasione del Festival Literário da Madeira] citato in Andreotti (2018: 29).

Australia, Regno Unito, Francia e Italia). Sempre nel 2022, Benozzo è stato il candidato italiano al *Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture*. Nel 2023 è stato nominato *Visiting Research Fellow* alla Bath Spa University. È autore di poemi epico-orali tradotti nelle principali lingue, tra cui *Autoktonia. Poem of the suicide* (2021), *Máelvarstal. Poema della creazione dei mondi / Poem of the Creation of the Worlds* (2020), *Poema dal limite del mondo / Poem from the Edge of the World* (2019). La più recente edizione bilingue di tutti i suoi poemi è *Sciamanica. Poemi dai confini dei mondi / Poems from the Borders of the Worlds* (2023). Alan Wildeman, Presidente Emerito all'Università di Windsor, considera *Sciamanica* come un corpus epico di opere scritto per ogni epoca e per il nostro tempo (Wilderman 2024). Paul Kane, eminente poeta e critico, sottolinea come leggere la sua poesia, e ascoltare i suoi recital all'arpa, significhi rendersi conto che egli è, autenticamente e profondamente, umano (Kane 2024).

Nel 2024 ha pubblicato *Homo Poeta*, di cui abbiamo parlato con Alan Wildeman, Livia Pitt e Giuliana Venuti il 21 settembre 2025 per il secondo ricordo di Francesco. *Homo Poeta* è un breve libro poetico che mette in evidenza la magistrale capacità di Benozzo di dare voce e forma a mondi immaginari attraverso le parole, la musica e il canto – più spesso attraverso le sue parole cantate. In relazione a questo libro, *Lo Sciamanesimo* (2024)⁸ esplora anch'esso la capacità della parola poetica di ricreare il nostro rapporto ancestrale con il mondo della bellezza. Benozzo descrive le meraviglie naturali con un linguaggio che spesso dà l'impressione che le sue osservazioni e le sue frasi precedano le regole e le norme della civiltà; eppure, allo stesso tempo, mette a nudo le trappole della civiltà moderna e l'imperfezione e la transitorietà delle nostre vite.

Tra le oltre 800 pubblicazioni scientifiche e poetiche di Benozzo, figura anche l'intensa e preziosa traduzione e curatela dei Bardi gallesi in *Poeti della marea. Canti bardici gallesi dal VI al X secolo* (2022), accompagnata come dicevo da un bellissimo CD. Il celebre critico Lope Estrada descrive così Benozzo: "Visionario, inquietante, epico, Benozzo possiede l'inimitabile capacità di ritrovare la parola originaria, quella che per prima ha dato nome al mondo. Poema dopo poema, con costanza e meraviglia, questo poeta mette in atto una rivoluzione della stessa idea di poesia: con la sua dimensione atemporale e universale, è l'Omero della postmodernità"⁹. Nel suo lavoro poetico e performativo, pone un'attenzione forte e costante al valore delle tradizioni orali, mettendo in particolare risalto le creazioni poetico-artistiche transculturali delle comunità native. Attraverso l'etnofilologia e il suo impegno sociale, culturale e civile, è riuscito a far rivivere antichi saperi folklorici e a dare voce ai paesaggi ancestrali dei margini e dei crinali, che esplora come camminatore itinerante, muovendosi su un crinale sottile, nello spazio intermedio tra mitologia, lirismo e canto.

Significativa è la sua co-creazione dell'interessante e notevole teoria e pratica della continuità paleolitica *The Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm for the Origins of Indo-European Language*¹⁰. All'interno di questo significativo impianto teorico si colloca anche la sua ricerca poetica, come dimostra uno dei suoi libri più recenti, *The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archi-*

⁸ Si veda la mia recensione: Riem (2025).

⁹ In Memory of Francesco Benozzo: Beloved Friend, Shaman, Poet, and Bard, <https://gala.network/members/rebeccams/buddyblog/my-posts/6051/> (consultato il 30/06/2025).

¹⁰ <http://www.continuitas.org/> (consultato il 13/06/2025).

pelago of Poetry (2022), incentrato sull'idea, profondamente significativa, che "eravamo poeti prima ancora di saper parlare" (2022: 17).

Tutti noi che lo abbiamo conosciuto da vicino, lo ricorderemo sempre per l'energia intensa della sua vita e del suo lavoro. Sempre fervido di nuovi progetti creativi e di idee stimolanti, Francesco è stato un professore, mentore e studioso ispiratore ed entusiasta, molto amato dai suoi studenti, un uomo appassionato e dotato di un solido senso dell'ironia, che amava le sue camminate creative e attive lungo le alture degli Appennini, della Galizia o del Galles, spesso accompagnato dalla sua arpa. Ci ha insegnato a studiare le cose in profondità, mettendo sempre in discussione credenze, forme e norme consolidate, condividendo la finezza e la profondità della sua nuova *indisciplina*: l'etnofilologia, uno strumento per indagare i paesaggi – interiori ed esteriori – attraverso paesi e secoli, sempre alla ricerca dell'*Homo Poeta*.

Sciamanica. Poemi dai confini dei mondi. Poems from the Borders of the Worlds (2023) è la terza pubblicazione della nostra serie ALL di un libro di Francesco Benozzo, che completa un'importante triangolazione. La prima pubblicazione dei canti dei Bardi gallesi¹¹ è la base di questo triangolo equilatero creativo, dove Benozzo recupera e presenta quello che pensa sia il fondamento della nostra poesia del mondo, cioè i canti/poemi dei bardi nelle antiche tradizioni celtiche. Benozzo li immagina come uomini costantemente esposti all'inclemenza del tempo, con caviglie appiccate di alghe, dopo che hanno camminato lungo i tavolati e le scogliere che ritmicamente e pericolosamente sono sommerse dall'alta marea e ritornano in superficie con la bassa. In movimento costante sugli estuari dei fiumi e nei piccoli villaggi dell'interno, figure classiche di dissidenza poetica combatterono attraverso la poesia e il canto, cercando di mostrare ciò che aveva davvero importanza, gli elementi permanenti e fondamentali della natura e della vita, lontani da vuote abitudini e costumi sociali.

Benozzo è convinto che una rinascita possa aver luogo grazie alla parola poetica e al canto espressi attraverso una dissidenza poetica legata agli antichi grandi paesaggi, piuttosto che connessi ai rami umani di *Homo Sapiens*, con le sue appropriazioni distruttive della Terra per i suoi propri vili scopi. Benozzo parla di alcune sparse voci solitarie che continuano a dirci dei venti e delle maree e di uomini e donne che non si possono rassegnare alle ingiustizie del mondo. Questo è anche il ruolo della sua stessa voce poetica, nella poesia, nel canto, nel lavoro accademico e nella dissidenza. Continua a ispirare giovani e vecchi che si incontrano con il suo lavoro e con lui stesso nelle sue lezioni/concerto nel mondo che hanno avuto origine in bellezza, anche grazie alla sua vittoria nel 2022 della prima edizione del Premio internazionale Poeti dalla Frontiera. Il premio è stato consegnato il primo di luglio 2022 nei Giardini di Palazzo Antonini, dell'Università di Udine con la seguente *Laudatio*:

Francesco Benozzo attraversa in modo incantevole e originale diversi generi poetici, mettendo in equilibrio il potere visionario con una lettura profonda dei paesaggi esperiti e attraversati in una 'aderenza spontanea' al loro ritmo, come ci fa sperimentare con la sua voce e il ritmo dell'arpa in un'esperienza lirica del mondo naturale.

¹¹ Al libro è allegato un CD in cui l'autore esegue e reinterpreta all'arpa bardica alcuni dei componimenti tradotti.

Grazie al suo prezioso lavoro etnofilologico, sociale, culturale e al suo impegno civile è riuscito a ravvivare le antiche tradizioni native, dando voce a paesaggi ancestrali ai margini e sui crinali esplorati come camminatore che si muove lungo una linea sottile, come un acrobata, al limitare della mitologia, della lirica e del canto. Significativa e originale la sua idea di poesia che costruisce 'dimore insolite', che si 'manifesta sottraendosi', sempre attuata sulle alte scogliere e ai limiti delle terre emerse, in una dimensione atemporale e universale, che scandisce, al ritmo del passo camminato, una inquietudine positiva, erratica e nomadica, aperta al dialogo con i luoghi e con il canto degli antichi Bardi¹².

Il secondo lato di questo triangolo è un manifesto poetico, denso, stimolante e penetrante sull'idea che Benozzo ha della poesia, nelle sue molteplici connessioni ed echi col mondo naturale e il canto. *The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry* (2022) indica un sentiero per l'amante/fruitore della poesia, in particolare per chi pensa che la poesia possa ancora salvare il mondo. Ci porta nel fulcro segreto/sacro della poesia e dei suoi poemi, con la loro misteriosa energia creativa, piena di improvvise rivelazioni, altezze incredibili e abissi terribili di magnificenza e verità. Benozzo esplora i modi in cui *Homo Poeta* compone e canta il cosmo e dà voce ad un dialogo poetico e a un rispecchiamento fra mondo interiore ed esterno, il Paesaggio e l'Anima. Così, il poeta è l'ancestrale sciamano che, come i bardi gallesi, mentre ritualmente cammina nel paesaggio, ne esprime l'integrità e la grazia, per coloro che possono ascoltare a cuore aperto.

Il terzo lato di questo triangolo equilatero, benvenuto e applaudito, è la pubblicazione *Sciamanica. Poemi dai confini dei mondi. Poems from the Borders of the Worlds* (2023). Per merito della graziosa collaborazione fra Chiara De Luca, con la sua preziosa casa editrice *Kolibris*, e la nostra serie ALL, Forum Editrice Universitaria, abbiamo messo insieme i sette principali Poemi di Francesco Benozzo, pubblicati negli ultimi dieci anni, con una traduzione in inglese del poeta canadese Gray Sutherland.

Sono testi epici e mitologici composti principalmente in una modalità orale, *en plein air*, e poi trascritti nei taccuini di Benozzo. Il poeta si muove dentro un contatto fisico assoluto con i paesaggi naturali e crea poemi che sono "in bilico tra canto sciamanico e cosmogonia del cuore umano" come ha scritto di lui il poeta statunitense Barry Wallenstein¹³. Così, i suoi Poemi appaiono elegantemente tutti insieme per la prima volta in *Sciamanica* (2023), un volume il cui titolo, collegato allo sciamanesimo, manifesta una connessione profonda e creativa con il Master da me diretto in Partnership Studies e Tradizioni Native, ora Master in Poesia e Sapienza. Studi di Partnership sulla sacralità del mondo naturale nelle tradizioni native, attivo nel mio Dipartimento DILL, dell'Università di Udine, dal 2020-2021. La conoscenza accademica di lunga data di Benozzo e la sua profonda esperienza delle tradizioni sciamaniche native del mondo, è stata l'occasione per invitarlo a partecipare al Comitato Scientifico Internazionale del Master, insieme ad altri esperti internazionali di sciamanesimo. Questo è stato l'inizio di una profonda e proficua collaborazione, e una lunga e sincera

¹² Si veda: <https://all.uniud.it/premio-poeti-dalla-frontiera/> (consultato il 13/06/2025).

¹³ <https://www.francescobenozzo.net/en/poetry> (consultato il 13/06/2025).

amicizia che ha portato e porterà sempre a molti progetti interessanti e preziosi, come queste opere editoriali, concerti, incontri, conferenze e molto altro ancora.

La prima cosa che voglio menzionare dei *poemi* di Benozzo è l'originalità epica, la freschezza e la potente risonanza dei suoi titoli, così lontani da qualunque tendenza poetica di moda, vuota e superficiale, che ha l'obiettivo di stuzzicare il palato di un pubblico abituato a gusti sintetici, pieni di aromi di laboratorio ma privi di qualunque forza nutritiva. Inerti, morti, vuoti. Al contrario, questi suoi titoli, queste parole nobili e antiche, purificate dal loro uso quotidiano e banale, rinnovate e trasformate attraverso il potere poetico dell'osservazione intenta, creano un'allerta potente per la mente, il cuore e per i sensi. Invitano a uno sguardo e a un ascolto saldi e appassionati, che preparano il lettore ad essere pronto a muoversi con i versi e i paesaggi che coprono – o che cercano di *scoprire*.

Questa è sin qui la produzione poetica pubblicata di Benozzo: *Maree del Dyfed* (1999), *Onirico Geologico / Oneiric Geological* (2014), *Felci in rivolta. Un Poema orale in quattro parti / Ferns in Revolt. An Oral Poem in Four Parts* (2015), *La capanna del naufrago / The Castaway's Shack* (2017), *Stóra Dímun. Poema camminato / A Walked Poem / Gonguríma* (2019), *Poema dal limite del mondo / Poem from the Edge of the World* (2019), *Máelvarstal. Poema della creazione dei mondi / Poem of the Creation of the Worlds* (2020) e *Autoktonia. Poema del suicidio / Poem of the Suicide* (2021).

In ogni modo, immaginiamo che migliaia di versi giacciono semi-dormienti e secretati nei suoi taccuini e nelle sue registrazioni. Speriamo presto vedano la luce e siano lanciati nel mondo, a beneficio della bellezza e della poesia, per portare la loro ricchezza di percezioni, vibrazioni, parole, arpa, canto. Un dono di poesia, bellezza e verità deve essere rivelato apertamente, appassionatamente, con tutto il cuore. Deve essere condiviso come benedizione di partnership per il mondo, per prendere il volo e la luce, per illuminare i nostri sentieri.

*

Seguendo il sentiero del poeta. Una piccola cartografia dell'opera poetica

“Io sono una barriera frangivento/la vela lacerata di una nave” (Benozzo 2023: 177). Questo verso ben rappresenta la posizione di Francesco nel mondo come esploratore solitario in viaggio verso la bellezza della parola poetica. La poesia di Benozzo – dall'esordio con *Maree del Dyfed* (1999) fino a *Autoktonia. Poema del suicidio* (2021) – compone un unico, articolato poema cosmologico. Essa esplora il rapporto tra corpo, paesaggio e parola poetica attraverso un'esperienza liminale, visionaria e sciamanica. Il paesaggio non è sfondo, ma soggetto attivo: il poeta *diventa* il paesaggio, non lo contempla.

1. Il viaggio iniziatico di *Maree del Dyfed*

Il primo testo segna un'iniziazione poetica: il paesaggio appenninico si trasfigura in luogo di rivelazione. Non si tratta di un'estasi romantica, ma di una battaglia epica contro l'ego e la lingua codificata. Benozzo è influenzato dai bardi gallesi, in particolare Taliesin, che “diventa ogni cosa” nel paesaggio. Questo apprendimento si traduce in versi in cui il corpo del poeta si dissolve nella natura. L'Appennino emerge come archetipo interiore, anche quando si trova fisicamente nel Galles:

Sul Lido di Trefechan

7 febbraio

Sono stato lontano, oltre la baia. Ho visto i campi, come la pioggia li riduce. Volumi d'erba schiacciati, le rocce lucide e scure, la costa che arretra e la marea che cresce. I miei piedi freddi di onde. Ho camminato e camminato, per miglia. Ho cercato la fine degli scogli, fino a che il buio mi ha ricoperto, poco fa. E adesso sento, senza vederle, le correnti. E torno, silenzioso, ai luoghi abitati, inciampando e scivolando tra le pietre. Dietro di me lascio terre incognite. Le solitudini di vaste piene di mare. (Benozzo 1999: 15).

2. *Onirico Geologico* e l'incorporazione geo-sciamanica

In *Onirico Geologico* (2014), il poeta vive la geologia come destino e identità. Attraverso un'immersione fisica e spirituale nel paesaggio, il corpo si disgrega in rocce, felci e sedimenti. È una metamorfosi inversa: il poeta *non* umanizza il mondo, ma si mineralizza, aderisce alla materia. La sua non è rassegnazione, ma accettazione vitale del cambiamento continuo, fino a fondersi con l'energia ancestrale del mondo:

I.

Sdraiato nel prato guardo la valle muoversi
con il mio orecchio sulle pieghe del terreno
trattengo il lavoro genetico del masso
etimo pre-verbale della poesia.

II.

Settembre: inizio della transumanza
continuità di spostamenti preistorici.
Nei gesti del Neolitico mai estinto
mette radici la parola del poeta
(Benozzo 2023: 53).

3. *Ferns in Revolt* (2015) e la ribellione poetica

Questo poema è un manifesto poetico e politico. Il poeta si oppone all'Homo Sapiens conformista e standardizzato, proclamando l'indipendenza dell'Homo Poeta. La resistenza passa attraverso lo sguardo lento, amorevole, verso il microscopico (licheni, semi). È un'ecologia dello sguardo e del corpo, che richiede nudità fisica e spirituale, come nei cammini compiuti in solitudine sugli Appennini:

Parte Terza. *L'invettiva perenne del corallo*

Il poeta ama i versi che lo uccidono
il marinaio annegato ama il mare
da sempre esiste un cuore tormentato
disposto a tutto per la fiamma che lo annienta

non lascia tracce l'isola del mio corpo
i miei poemi non viaggiano su rotte vaste

e il mio sangue è soltanto una scusa.
[...]

Ma un poeta ama i versi che lo uccidono
e il marinaio annegato ama quel mare
non vivo in quanto uovo fecondato
non mi muovo o sto in piedi in quanto scheletro
non amo o ho nostalgia per via di un cuore

e il mio sangue è soltanto una scusa.
Io sono ancora un poeta in carne ed ossa
che sopravvive a stento tra i suoi simili,
bipedi che leccano vetri sbriciolati
ciclicamente innamorandosi tra loro
condividendo fatue migrazioni.
Da due milioni di anni – uomini-gregge –
si muove in branco *homo* tra gli ominidi
da due milioni di anni – scheletri e voci –
sopravvive lontano dalle stelle.
L'unica cosa che so è la poesia:
grandinata inattesa che devasta
mattanza di balene – mare rosso –
sillabe-fiocine per spiaggiare l'abitudine
felci in rivolta alle frontiere dei villaggi.

Dopo ogni mia parola
vorrei soltanto pioggia
e furie di boscaglie
dopo ogni fuoco di grotta
dopo ogni sogno cattivo
vorrei storie di alghe
e decine di inverni
nel vento dei versanti
(Benozzo 2023: 118-119).

4. *La capanna del naufrago: poetica dell'autoesilio*

Nel poema in 9 parti del 2017, la capanna simboleggia una scelta radicale di marginalità creativa. È un rifugio anti-borghese, anti-gregge, dove il superfluo è veleno. Ogni tappa del poema segna un ulteriore abbandono dell'umano, in favore di una fusione profonda col paesaggio. Il poeta si fa attraversare da vento, silenzio, luna, mare, e nel riflusso del mondo si rigenera. La poesia è sopravvivenza e rivelazione:

II.
Così cambiò, rapidamente, la mia vita
dal giorno in cui, stretto il mio patto col silenzio,
mi decisi a sfidare solitario

la parodia del mondo senza più albe
 e diventai una voce immaginaria
 senza più tempo, senza mutamento,
 per raccogliere i rami – ad uno ad uno –
 con gesti sempre più meticolosi
 nel catrame stantio dei fallimenti.
 Da allora solo vaghe invisibili cose
 mi salvano dai bizzarri occhi sbarrati
 delle creature marine bianche di sale
 che si burlano di erba e di radice.
 Da quando fui piegato a ciò che è infranto
 le vaghe cose invisibili cose sembrano dirmi
«di te rimane questo, nessuno s'impicci»
 (Benozzo 2023: 131).

5. *Stóra Dímun* e la *rêverie* dell'altrove

L'isola faroese diventa metafora e pratica del distacco. Come un naufrago reale, Benozzo è costretto alla permanenza e trasforma l'isolamento in cammino poetico. Toponimi, luoghi e condizioni atmosferiche divengono mappa interiore. L'altrove geografico è chiave per leggere l'altrove interiore, in cui la memoria degli Appennini è sempre presente, come asse centrale e temporale della visione:

III.
 Greivará, Inni, Skálvíksrök, Múlatangi,
 Grønaskor, Sundið, Dreingjannastøð, Múlin.
 Io sono il marinaio che è partito
 sono il poeta che non è tornato
 sono la delusione di chi aspetta
 il rimorso di chi non mi ha accudito
 l'eredità di chi non ho creato,
 sono l'isola rimasta inabitata
 l'alba agognata da ragazze-madri.
 Io sono il marinaio che si è perso
 quando pensava di essersi trovato
 sono il guardiano che è rimasto al faro
 sono il faro che ha perso il suo guardiano,
 – ruggine nelle correnti dell'oceano –
 la brace fioca che balugina al largo
 dove non passano barche da millenni.

*Frullano le ali della mýrusnípa
 mentre risale e si lascia cadere
 dal cielo-mare sopra le brughiere*
 (Benozzo 2023: 185).

6. Poema dal limite del mondo e l'estetica del margine

Qui il "limite" è spazio poetico, spirituale e politico. È un confine che separa e insieme connette mondi perduti, popoli cancellati, lingue minacciate. Il poeta vi si rifugia per rigenerare la parola e far emergere verità oltre il visibile. È una poesia che si colloca al bordo del tempo, dove la civiltà fallisce e solo il canto può ancora rifondare senso:

XIV

Si moltiplicano boschi di pesci insoliti

Dentro di me, confusamente, da sempre,
scorrono fiumi e incendi, migrano stelle
e transumano animali dal muso anomalo
creature di là dai sogni e oltre il dolore
accompagnate da tutta la notte del mondo.

Nella curva dell'aria albeggia una strofa terrosa
che non conosce i parti della penombra
e porta caduche cortecce dopo la nebbia
senza sforzarsi di unire le parole
per simulare di sembrare un canto.

Dentro di me, confusamente, da sempre
sento il fragore delle stelle, e nelle ossa
si moltiplicano banchi di pesci insoliti
come foreste sommerse e dissestate.

E mentre affondo la mano nella sabbia
e mie dita scovano vertebre d'avorio
che hanno l'odore di penisole inquiete,
colonne di polvere sorreggono le stirpi
i deserti si increspano in strane eclissi
mortificate, allucinate, vergini
nell'aria sempre più fredda della sera
nella malinconia di fiamme assenti
nella luna nascente-agonizzante.

Non so che nome dare a queste cose a questa urgenza, all'assurda speranza
all'attesa di argilla e di arenaria
all'opulenza di fiori e precipizi
al diletto occultato dai rimorsi.

Dopo tanti silenzi soggiogati
palpita, senza peso, levigato
come palpebra lieve e incandescente
un rumore diverso, accovacciato
un incanto di sorti sconosciute
come dimora benevola e imprevista
come un riparo indisturbato e quieto
come il rovescio di inutili preghiere
(Benozzo 2023: 253-255).

7. *Máelvarstal*: creazione e dissoluzione dei mondi

Questo poema del 2020 è il compimento del cammino: la dissoluzione totale dell'io. Il poeta, come un sacerdote vedico, scompare nella sua funzione, celebrando la creazione di mondi con parole che vibrano e si dissolvono. È un atto rituale, cosmico, dove l'umanità stessa è un'eco transitoria nella spirale dell'essere:

XXXII

Nostalgia degli inizi

Non c'è radice. Resta solo un vento
di cose morte.

Un refrigerio labile
notturno, quasi calmo, cristallino.

Nostalgia degli inizi. Stelle chiare
(Benozzo 2023: 335).

8. *Autoktonia*. Poema del suicidio

Autoktonia è l'opera in cui l'esperienza della morte – individuale e collettiva – si fonde con la riflessione politica e personale dell'autore. Scritta nel pieno delle restrizioni *p(l)andemiche*, l'opera è al tempo stesso un grido di dissidenza e un'esplorazione poetica dell'anima. La poesia diventa qui corpo, ferita e resistenza. Il poeta rifiuta l'omologazione imposta dalle istituzioni, in nome della libertà interiore e della verità critica. L'eco di Eliot nella *Waste Land* è evidente, ma in Benozzo lo sguardo del Tiresia cieco si fa corporeo, incarnato, etnofilologico: egli "sente" il mondo attraverso i propri nervi, non solo lo osserva. L'opera si confronta con l'inutilità percepita della poesia stessa, denunciata come un'illusione che ritarda lo scontro/incontro finale e definitivo con sé stessi e la morte. Il sacrificio personale di Benozzo – la sospensione dal lavoro, il rifiuto del Green Pass e del vaccino, l'ostracismo accademico – trasforma *Autoktonia* in un documento poetico e politico di altissimo valore, che testimonia il coraggio e la fragilità di chi sceglie di non conformarsi.

PARTE VI

Da sempre preferisco la concava notte
e il grande vento che amplifica il silenzio
intorno al solco tracciato dalla mia fronte.

Riconosco la cadenza di alcuni passi
quando percorro la valle addormentata
che dà consolazione dove nulla attrae.

Non voglio indietro, bianca, tutta la grazia
che ho elargito sui quadranti dei giorni
né il palmo rassegnato alle tante morti
(Benozzo 2023: 351).

XIV

Per quale morte vivo? Solo la mia?

Quale fine mi trae verso di sé?
Di una radura? Di un'isola? Di un faggio?
Di una barca che palpita nell'ombra
a cui né remi occorrono, né vento?
Le creature cresciute dentro i miei sogni
sono ingombranti, non stanno più nelle stanze
cercano un sollievo dallo spazio e dal tempo.
*A poet looks at the world
as a man looks at a woman*
(Benozzo 2023: 367).

XXXIX

L'aquila muore sulle gelide rupi
non malata, non vecchia, non esausta,
ma veterana di sole e di tempeste.

Nessuno può trovare i resti di un'aquila,
nessuno mai potrà trovare i miei:
la mia autopsia sarà eseguita sui miei versi
(Benozzo 2023: 417).

9. La mia arpa si trasforma spesso in una barca

Benozzo ci consegna una poesia radicale, in cui corpo, paesaggio e parola si fondono in un processo di metamorfosi poetico / sciamanica. Il poeta non rappresenta la natura: la incarna. Così dice in "Poema dal limite del mondo":

PARTE XV

Mi sono spinto dentro il cuore del mondo
Meglio tornare: ho ancora appiccicato
un odore di pesce, legno e mare.
Sulle mie tempie un'onda scintillante
segna un sentiero di terra dentro la terra
o, a volte, uno stupore sottomarino
di conchiglie, di gusci, di alghe nomadi.
Venni a riprendermi la forza incontrollata
dentro una notte infinitamente nuda
coi suoi presentimenti, incalcolabili
come uccelli nascosti nel fogliame.
Mi sono spinto dentro al cuore del mondo
rischiando gli occhi, il canto, la vita stessa,
ho visto il fiume scomporsi, sgomentarsi
assecondare lo splendore del cataclisma,
ho visto il mare rinascere, annientarsi
posseduto da una fugace indisciplinazione,
ho visto il continente sbriciolarsi

in brandelli di barbari arcipelaghi.
E in quella notte infinitamente nuda
errando tra i frantumi ho appreso questo:
c'è un amore che ricompone i frammenti
ed è più forte di quello che, in precedenza,
dava per certa l'inezienza di ciò che ama
(Benozzo 2023: 257).

In un tempo che ha dimenticato il sacro del mondo, egli cammina, nudo, lungo i margini e sugli alti crinali, pronunciando ancora una volta il nome segreto delle cose e così ri-creando il mondo nella parola e nel canto con la sua arpa. Come nella foto che abbiamo scelto per questi momenti di ricordo, fatta durante un concerto che abbiamo organizzato a Pordenone, così ci dice Francesco della sua arpa:

La mia arpa si trasforma spesso in una barca e io viaggio tra le maree del mondo grazie alle musiche che mi portano via. A un certo punto le mie dita e le corde si confondono, e più che suonare io sto respirando (agosto 2022).

Come dice ancora Francesco, dell'Anima ben poco conosciamo: qualcuno afferma ch'essa si disseti alle sorgenti d'alba, come brezza. Benozzo pensa a lei, invece, come a una belva: una creatura magnanima e feroce che abbraccia noi umani, di tanto in tanto, come la tigre abbraccia, di tanto in tanto, gli alberi innamorati nella selva.

Leggere i poemi di Benozzo è come essere abbracciati dalla selvaggia, magnanima e feroce tigre innamorata, la nostra Anima selvatica, così appagando la nostra sete di Bellezza e Verità, all'alba, 'bevendo il latte del Paradiso' nei versi dei Poemi di Benozzo, come in quelli del bardo gallese Taliesin:



Io fui tra gli uomini saggi

Io sono il vecchio, sono il nuovo corso
sono la voce, sono l'anima degli uomini.

Io sono un bardo, non compongo per gli altri,
Io sono il principio, sono la vita delle cose (Benozzo 2022: 61).

Francesco, Riposa in Pace e Luce e Bellezza e Verità. Tu sei la Vita delle cose.

Ricordando Francesco Benozzo

Coral Ann Howells

This is a brief celebration of Francesco Benozzo's Creative Word and of his voice as the poet and visionary who walked and sang over the high mountains and ridges in wild places, though as he testifies: "At the centre of my poetic transhumance, as always, there are the places of the Northern Italian Apennines, where I come from, where I return and where I live" (Benozzo 2023: 9). It is with the particular resonances of that home place as the centre of his being that I focus on here. The poems in *Sciamanica* begin in the Apennines: "Here is the longed-for sandstone headland [...] here I am [...] these are the Apennines" (2023: 14), and this astonishing immediacy of perception is even bolder in Italian: "Ecco l'atteso promontiro d'arenaria [...] eccomi qui [...] e l'Appennino" (2023: 15). That close attention to the rocks and mountains, to the "autumn of the ferns, thinner brown blackberry bushes" shifts as his gaze moves upward to see and to hear "the unappealable call of the peaks" in the evening light of the mountains. Already those unsettling shifts in perspective are becoming more vertiginous here in the Apennines – "qui l'Appennino" as he repeats – with its "jumbled ridgeline" and "its webs of roots and branches", while the landscape sweeps back into prehistory. Here are "tides of epochs already passed", here "the void of time, the fullness of space" (2023: 16) in a dissolution created by his poetic imagination. But this is also a body-centred poetics: "here nearby my foot that steps on the ground / here far off my hand while it writes", for "these are the Apennines, at Smerillo, in early March" (2023: 16).

Benozzo's poems move restlessly across the borders of physical sensations and imaginative excursions into other worlds and other times within a dynamic context of place and space. Everyday reality reveals an alternative frame of reference to a wider web of interrelations between humans and nonhumans, between the present and the deep past encoded in rocks and vegetable growth: "the unheard-of truth of stone and stem / the plant-based resonance of the flood" (2023: 22). Always these worlds are coexistent and contiguous: "In all that wine of the lands of Piceni / dreams and visions of sandstone stir and surge" (2023: 32).

The power of the Creative Word has its roots in prehistory, reaching back to the primitive origins of *Homo Poeta*: "I hold on to the genetic work of the boulder / the pre-verbal etymon of poetry" (2023: 52) / ["etimo pre-verbale della poesia" (2023: 53)]. Benozzo's poetry with its far-reaching resonances invites, indeed compels, us to read and feel from a different perspective, one that offers a different model of being in the world. Benozzo has been called 'the Homer of post-modernity', but it seems to me that he belongs in a far more ancient starry company, for he is a modern version of the prehistoric shamans who journeyed in spirit in their walking trances to other worlds hidden within the earth and the human psyche. After all, "the earth knows every hiding place" (2023: 18). They are gift bringers. And what does a shaman bring back to us? The Canadian poet Margaret Atwood offers some suggestions: "It won't be a book of instructions – there isn't one. Perhaps it will be a talisman, to protect us, even a little. Perhaps it will be a list of dangers. Perhaps it will be a charm, to alter the way in which we see. [...] Who knows what forms our metaphors

will take”? (Atwood 2022: 147). Atwood’s suggestions bring us close to Francesco Benozzo’s poetic gift of his Creative Word.

Coral Ann Howells, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Professor Emerita University of Reading, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of English Studies, University of London. Coral Ann Howells, was part of the International Committee for the Prize “Poets from the Frontier” (2022).

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John Strachan

Our friend Francesco was a rare spirit – a scholar of great insight, a gifted poet of subtle feeling, and a musician whose work sang and spoke with passion and soul. As a visiting fellow at Bath Spa University, he greatly enriched us. We’ll miss him.

Professor John Strachan is Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Enterprise, Dean of Graduate College and Director of the Corsham Court Campus Bath Spa University.

John Strachan and The Global Academy of Liberal Arts (GALA) had the pleasure to invite Francesco Benozzo as Visiting Professor at Bath Spa in 2023 and then to officially propose his candidature for the Nobel Prize of Literature.

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Sue Ballyn

The Bard

Words are light,
Gossamer threading
The Bannau Brycheiniog
To the valleys carrying
The message of the
Great Bard’s death.

Y Cymoedd grieve
In autumnal mist.
In death, you become
Taliesin’s true son,
Your voice eternal
singing up the earth,
the rivers, the seas
Of this land, the bards,
songs, stories, mysteries
From the depths of time

Dr. Sue Ballyn, Honorary Professor, Founder of The Centre for Australian and Transnational Studies (CEAT), Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. Sue Ballyn was part of the International Committee for the Prize Poets from the Frontier (2022).

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Paul Kane

Francesco Benozzo's work lives at the intersection of known and unknown worlds, where elemental forces converge. His subject was power: the power of nature and of poetry. What Emerson says of power applies to Benozzo's work: that it "resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim". Benozzo, too, has transitioned; as Auden said of Yeats, he has become his admirers.

Paul Kane is an American scholar and poet, author of twenty books including eight poetry collections, most recently *Earth, Air, Water, Fire* (Farpoint Recordings, 2023), and two volumes in Chinese translation. His work has appeared in leading journals such as *The Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Australian Book Review*. He has served as poetry editor of *Antipodes*, Artistic Director of the Mildura Writers Festival, and is General Editor of the Braziller Series of Australian Poets. His honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the NEH, a Fulbright to Australia, and appointment as Honorary Member of the Order of Australia (AM). Professor Emeritus of English at Vassar College, he divides his time between New York and Victoria, Australia.

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Alan Wildeman

The poetry of Francesco Benozzo pulls us along a trajectory of continual evolution. He describes worlds that are simultaneously both primordial and intricate, and human experiences in which we are both an observer and a participant in those worlds. His is a unique lens through which every human emotion of hope, longing, love, mischief, sadness, joy and more are positioned against a backdrop of the natural world.

Alan Wildeman, PhD, is President Emeritus of the University of Windsor in Canada. His academic degrees in Biology are from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Guelph. His research career focused on molecular genetics and biotechnology, and in addition to Canada he has worked in research institutes in France and Germany. He has released two albums of original songs, *The Apologist* in 2016 and *Unsheltered* in 2020, both available on all major streaming outlets. The albums have been described as prairie surrealism.

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Xaverio Ballester

The cover of Francesco's Terracqueo CD features a spectacular aerial photograph of a small archipelago: air, earth, water, the three primordial elements. The fourth, fire, was himself: his fervent mind, his warm heart, his ever-burning soul.

La portada del disc compacte Terracqueo de Francesco exhibix una espectacular fotografia aérea d'un chicotet archipèlec: aire, terra, mar, els tres primordials elements. El quart, el foc, era ell mateixa: el seu fervent cervell, el seu cor ardent, la seua ànima sempre en flames.

La copertina del CD Terracqueo di Francesco presenta una spettacolare fotografia aerea di un piccolo arcipelago: aria, terra, mare, i tre elementi primordiali. Il quarto, il fuoco, era lui stesso: la sua mente fervente, il suo cuore ardente, la sua anima in perenne fiammeggianza.
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Ludovica Cantarutti

Kraljevic: fra Caterina Percoto e Marguerite Yourcenar

I fatti

Il sedicesimo racconto del volume intitolato *Racconti* di Caterina Percoto, fine scrittrice friulana (Manzano 1812 – Percoto 1887), accanto al titolo “La resurrezione di Marco Craglievich”¹ appare il riferimento ad una nota che a piè di pagina recita:

[...] fu storicamente personaggio insignificante, anzi controproducente: scialbo vassallo turco morto nel 1395. Assurto però abbastanza misteriosamente a eroe nazionale e campione della lotta contro i turchi non solo dai serbi e croati ma anche da bulgari e sloveni fu protagonista di un ciclo di canti popolari².

Kraljevic, chi era costui, si sarebbe lasciato sfuggire il Manzoni e come mai Caterina Percoto, una delle migliori scrittrici dell'Ottocento italiano, secondo il parere di Alberto Spaini, ‘non esita a rompere le barriere della convenzione’ oppure nel definire la sua novella *Un episodio dell'anno della fame* ‘come una delle pagine più singolari della nostra letteratura dello scorso secolo’ – allude all'Ottocento naturalmente – rende Kraljevic protagonista di una delle sue novelle?

Nell'edizione Classici Bompiani del 1986, con introduzione della stessa autrice nel presentare la sua opera completa, Marguerite Yourcenar, una delle più grandi scrittrici del Novecento, alla voce *Novelle orientali* (1968)³, fra le novelle ne pubblica ben due riguardanti Marko Kraljevic con i seguenti titoli: “Il sorriso di Marko” e “La fine di Marko Kralievitch”⁴.

Le circostanze

Risalire alle ispirazioni di queste tre novelle (una di Percoto e due di Yourcenar) non è facile. Nella stessa edizione dell'opera completa di Yourcenar sopra citata c'è la seguente nota redatta dalla stessa autrice:

La fine di Marko, racconto che da anni mi proponevo di scrivere, è stato redatto soltanto nel 1978. Ha per punto di partenza un frammento di una ballata serba che immagina la morte dell'eroe per mano di un misterioso, banale e allegorico passante.

¹ Nome e cognome del protagonista scritto italianizzando l'originale Marko Kraljevic.

² La nota è del curatore del volume, Michele Prisco. Caterina Percoto. 1972. *Racconti*. Vallecchi, 405.

³ Pubblicate per la prima volta nel 1938, editate da Gallimard nella collana *La Renaissance de la nouvelle*, a cura di Paul Morand, e ripubblicate nel 1963 con altre aggiunte, edite poi in Italia da Bompiani nell'opera completa del 1968.

⁴ La seconda novella appare per la prima volta in volume nella terza riedizione di Gallimard del 1978, ma proposta in anteprima ai lettori il primo marzo di quell'anno nella rivista *La Nouvelle Revue française*, n° 302.

Ma dove ho letto e sentito questa storia alla quale poi ho ripensato spesso? Non lo so più, e non la ritrovo in quei pochi testi dello stesso genere che ho a disposizione, e che della morte di Marko Kraljevic offrono parecchie versioni tranne quella⁵.

Tuttavia, una delle possibilità che Yourcenar avrebbe avuto potrebbe essere stata quella di leggere, forse, il libro dell'americano Manning uscito nel 1932 ed intitolato *Marko, figlio del re eroe dei serbi*. Per quanto riguarda invece Percoto, la ricerca ha avuto più successo poiché l'autrice è verosimile che abbia tratto ispirazione da una 'fantasia drammatica' intitolata "La resurrezione di Marko Cralievic" – ancora una volta scritto all'italiana – poemetto teatrale in rima, redatto da Francesco Dall'Ongaro e pubblicato nel 1863 a Firenze dalla Tipografia Garibaldi diretta da L. Ricci, e venduto a beneficio della Polonia e a sua volta ispirato dai "canti serbici" tradotti in italiano da Niccolò Tommaseo al quale la 'fantasia' è dedicata⁶. Non solo, ma Percoto ha imposto alla sua novella lo stesso titolo dell'opera di Dall'Ongaro, il quale, come sappiamo, aveva per primo esortato la friulana Percoto alla scrittura ed alla pubblicazione delle sue novelle nel periodico che Dall'Ongaro stesso dirigeva⁷.

Il personaggio

Marko Mrnjavcevic e Marko Kraljevic (che in serbo significa "figlio del re") sono la stessa persona e diciamo subito che il primo è il personaggio storico, mentre il secondo è la definizione con la quale Marko entra nella leggenda attraverso la poesia serba creata dalla voce popolare per assecondare un'esigenza data dalla mancanza di eroi con i quali nutrire l'immaginario collettivo. E se l'eroe non c'è lo si inventa tramite canti che esaltino le ipotetiche qualità di un soggetto al quale si attribuiscono le virtù desiderate. In altre parole, si tratta di una mitizzazione come risultato di un intreccio di fattori storico-culturali, ideologici e politici.

La Storia fatta di testimonianze scritte nelle cronache del tempo, in alcuni documenti presenti negli archivi parrocchiali, in annotazioni su libri e documenti particolari dimenticati negli archivi, ma anche dalle ricerche di studiosi della materia, insomma da tutte le possibili fonti di apprendimento è tutt'altro che prodiga di notizie sulle azioni ed il pensiero di questo personaggio. Forse il non sapere, il mistero nel quale sono avvolti taluni personaggi minori hanno la capacità di scatenare meglio fantasia e sensibilità. Della sua vita si conoscono pochi passaggi, lasciando il resto, soprattutto per quanto riguarda la sua attività di guerriero e le sue doti personali, alla deduzione dei ricercatori. E proprio per la mancanza di notizie storiche che riguardano questa figura, di contro, è stato possibile il risvolto che attuò il popolo serbo al quale "non restò che sognare", come disse Sladjana Stojkovic, creando un personaggio che "non esisteva nè in cielo, nè in terra"⁸.

⁵ M. Yourcenar. 1986. *Opere, romani, racconti*. Milano: Classici Bompiani, 1288.

⁶ Niccolò Tommaseo. 1992. *Canti popolari serbo-croati*. Milano: Sansoni. Fu il Tommaseo, contemporaneo della Percoto a tradurre per la prima volta in Italia i suddetti canti, dedicati in gran parte a Marko Kraljevic ed il suo vissuto 'eroico' dato per autentico, tanto da apparire al dodicesimo posto nella lista dei serbi più importanti.

⁷ Francesco Dall'Ongaro. 1863. *La resurrezione di Marco Cralievic, fantasia drammatica*. Firenze: Tip. Garibaldi. Dall'Ongaro era direttore de *La favilla*, rivista letteraria triestina nelle cui pagine comparve per la prima volta il nome della scrittrice friulana Caterina Percoto.

⁸ Sladjana Stojkovic. 2015. *1389 Marko Kraljevic...la leggenda*. Amazon Italia Logistica, quarto di copertina.

Questi i presupposti per creare un mito, per soddisfare il desiderio di gloria di tutti coloro che hanno bisogno di un eroe da consegnare prima a se stessi e poi ai posteri, per onorare in qualche modo la loro stessa vita fatta di sofferenze e di privazioni secolari, una sorta di proiezione mitologica come fonte vitale per l'umanità, dedicata al riscatto e soprattutto senza temere la severità postuma dei curatori, come nella raccolta delle novelle di Caterina Percoto.

I pochi tratti della Storia che conosciamo dicono che Marko era nato a Skadar (Scutari) intorno al 1335, nella parte del regno serbo meridionale governato dal re Vukasin, padre di Marko ed appartenente ad una modesta dinastia elevata socialmente dall'imperatore Dusan. Padre e zio di Marko furono vassalli degli Ottomani ed affrontarono le relative guerre a fianco di questi ultimi. In una di esse, precisamente nel 1371 entrambi perirono e Marko successe al padre. Riferimenti del giovane re verranno ritrovati nei resti di una fortezza in territorio macedone, chiamata, appunto, Torre di Marko e situati in una collina a nord di Prilep, presso la località di Varos di cui faceva parte nel Medioevo.

A Varos si trova il monastero dell'Arcangelo Michele che fu restaurato da Vukasin e da suo figlio Marko. Proprio qui in un affresco viene rappresentato Kraljevic, come spiega Irene Bernardi:

avvolto in un mantello bianco, colore che simboleggia il lutto. Secondo la tradizione bizantina, quando moriva un membro della famiglia imperiale, l'imperatore indossava un abito bianco. Questo sta a significare che l'affresco è stato dipinto dopo la morte del re Vukasin nella battaglia della Maritza e che il giovane re, cioè Marko, era ancora in lutto prima della sua incoronazione⁹.

Scarse, dicevamo, le notizie tramandate ai posteri di Marko e scarse anche quelle che riguardano la vita personale del giovane re che, pare, si barcamenò tra due donne fra le quali alla fine ebbe la meglio la ragion di Stato e Marko si riprese la prima moglie, in un primo tempo 'ceduta' per opportunità territoriale. La testimonianza racconta di una storia d'amore di Marko. In una nota su un libro, uno studente di Dobra annuncia innocentemente di aver copiato nel momento in cui il devoto re Marko "diede Teodor, la moglie di Grgur, a Hlapena, e prese la sua prima moglie Jelena, la figlia di Hlapena"; così ci raccontano Giljen e Mandic¹⁰.

Nel 1389, il 15 giugno per l'esattezza, si svolse la battaglia del Kossovo, nell'altopiano denominato Campo dei Merli, un episodio della guerra degli alleati serbo-bosniaci contro i Turchi vincitori, definito il più grande episodio bellico nella storia della Serbia fino a quella data. Da allora Marko divenne a sua volta vassallo degli Ottomani fino al momento della sua morte avvenuta nella battaglia di Rovine del 1395 nei pressi dell'omonimo villaggio oggi in Romania tra le truppe del regno di Valacchia e quelle dell'Impero ottomano; la battaglia si concluse con una vittoria tattica delle forze valacche. Pare che poco prima di soccombere

⁹ Irene Bernardi. *Il mito di Marko Kraljevic nella ex Jugoslavia*, tesi di laurea, Anno Acc. 2012/2013. Università Cà Foscari, Venezia, 50.

¹⁰ Nikola Giljen, Jelena Mandic, <https://www.srpbratstvo.org/2013/05/17/ko-je-bio-kraljevic-marko> (consultato il 19/06/2025).

Marko, cosciente del fatto che egli si trovava a combattere la sua stessa gente, abbia detto a Kostantin Dejanovic le seguenti parole: “Dico e chiedo al Signore di aiutare i cristiani, e lasciarmi essere il primo tra i morti in questa guerra”¹¹.

Note di lettura

Ogni racconto (due di Yourcenar ed uno di Percoto) sboccia con quella pacata grandezza che ben distingue le autrici sebbene, come già detto, di epoche, tradizioni e costumi diversi: Caterina (1812-1887) confinata *obtorto collo* nel suo feudo friulano in quel periodo dell'Ottocento in cui si stavano per completare i disegni dell'unità d'Italia, per i quali profuse il suo impegno letterario, Marguerite vissuta dal 1903 al 1987, cittadina del mondo e la cui immensità è deterrente per ogni confine. Eppure, anche se con vissuti e traversie diverse dal punto di vista storico e personale, mettono a disposizione del lettore, entrambe, racconti di respiro diamantino con i quali determinano le loro straordinarie capacità espressive, con parole che sono “canto, poesia, rito”¹² e non compromettono la loro etica e nessuna aderenza alla mistificazione, tanto da rendere quasi accettabili le lodi rivolte ad un protagonista risibile.

Nei racconti l'elemento scenico gioca un ruolo fondamentale, il paesaggio soprattutto, legato alla stagione della narrazione. Naturalmente, il riferimento dovrebbe andare al paesaggio del tardo Medioevo del XIV secolo, durante il quale molti luoghi erano quasi completamente occupati da foreste di vegetazione spontanea e spesso difficilmente accessibili per chiunque, una specie di riserva della divinità, perciò misteriosa e pericolosa in taluni tratti e tuttavia attraversata, ove era possibile, da contadini che vi transitavano con le greggi ed altri animali. Distese incolte e selvagge in attesa di un prossimo uso nel momento in cui l'incremento demografico avrebbe richiesto di sfamare i nuovi numerosi nati. Perciò il paesaggio descritto nelle novelle poco corrisponde, se non in alcuni tratti, al vero paesaggio del XIV sec. in cui si svolsero i fatti. Ciò viene ‘glissato’ dalla capacità creativa delle autrici.

Il paesaggio di Caterina è un ricco esercizio descrittivo d'impronta fotografica dove a tratti s'insinua una pennellata di tragedia greca:

Gli alberi pendenti dall'alto gocciolarono per anni ed anni sul capo di lui le loro lagrime. Ora s'alza dalla voragine un gruppo di nubi: vanno esse lentamente volteggiando al di sopra di tutto il paese. Or alte, or basse, ora illuminate dal sole, ora urtate dal vento, cangiano di forma, cangiano di colore. Talvolta si distendono come un ampio velo di nebbia e salgono i greppi della montagna, poi si condensano nella valle e mandano lampi. Donne vestite a lutto, madri piangenti, vedove e fanciulle desolate escono dalle loro case per tutto dove quella visione passa, o guardano, guardano e sentono che è venuto il giorno fatale¹³.

¹¹ Stessa fonte, sulla quale si dibatte anche della singolarità divergente dei due episodi citati.

¹² Luigi Zoja. 2009. *La morte del prossimo*. Torino: Einaudi, 2009, 45.

¹³ “Proprio questo tipo di struttura suscita in lui l'associazione con l'antica tragedia greca” ci suggerisce Marjana Drndarsky, parlando del Tommaseo nel suo saggio “*Tommaseo e la poesia popolare serba: tra estetica e psicologia*” (2004: 183) nel quale fa riferimento, appunto, alle immagini della tragedia greca colta così da Caterina Percoto. Si veda: http://www.museocivico.rovereto.tn.it/UploadDocs/5251_Art08_drndarsky.pdf (con-

Il paesaggio di Marguerite ha una straordinaria doppia valenza, definendosi in parte con le linee descrittive del paesaggio vero e proprio che, tuttavia, trasuda, attraverso alcune parole collocate in modo strategico, lo stato della condizione umana, come per valorizzare alla fine un palcoscenico dalle doppie quinte. Così il paesaggio diventa “movente” e dove “si mangia bene anche nei giorni di magra”:

[...] Già il sole era scomparso dietro gli aridi contrafforti delle Alpi montenegrine, disseminate di alberi macilenti. Il mare, così azzurro quel mattino al largo, prendeva tinte cupe all'interno di quel lungo fiordo stranamente situato in vicinanza dei Balcani. Le forme umili e raccolte delle case e la franca salubrità del paesaggio erano già slave, ma la sorda violenza dei colori e la fierezza nuda del cielo facevano ancora pensare all'Oriente e all'Islam¹⁴.

Le campane suonavano a morto nel cielo di un azzurro quasi insopportabile. Sembravano più forti e più stridule che altrove, come se in quel paese situato ai confini delle regioni infedeli volessero proclamare ai quattro venti che i campanari erano cristiani, e cristiano il morto che stavano per sotterrare¹⁵.

Alcuni esempi: *aridi contrafforti, le forme umili e raccolte, sorda violenza, fierezza nuda, azzurro quasi insopportabile ...* Questi paesaggi hanno un ruolo forte, non immaginando le autrici, che un giorno, nell'ineluttabilità dell'avvento della comunicazione di massa le parole pronunciate dagli altri sarebbero state relegate da Pessoa proprio ad un 'un paesaggio'¹⁶.

Se il cavallo di Marko Kraljevic di nome Sarac (deriva dalla parola serba *saren*, cioè 'pezzato') viene nominato da entrambe le autrici, come la spada (da Percoto) e la scimitarra (da Yourcenar), altri elementi a corredo della scenografia differiscono nell'esposizione dei racconti, come campane, cortiletti, scodella, canestro (Yourcenar), pozzo, fontana, calamaio (Percoto) e per elencare anche qualche altro animale, agnelli, cani, oche selvatiche (Yourcenar) e lupo, corvi e leoni (Percoto). Ad ognuna il suo universo immaginario dettato da una vivida creatività. Splendidi racconti, splendide autrici.

Dopo aver 'assegnato famiglia', per quanto possibile, all'ispirazione delle due scrittrici, ci lasciamo sfuggire una domanda. Perché accade che grandi intellettuali possano dedicare la loro attenzione ad un personaggio scialbo, considerato tutt'altro che un eroe? Per rispondere abbiamo immaginato un ingaggio di accusa e di difesa davanti ad un ipotetico giudice di pace.

L'accusa

Signori, come voce dell'accusa ho subito una domanda da sottoporvi, che è il quesito fondamentale per sciogliere questo giallo. Premesso che l'intellettuale è colui che in modo vero

sultato il 19/06/2025).

¹⁴ M. Yourcenar. 1982. *Opere*. "Il sorriso di Marko". Milano: Classici Bompiani, 1221.

¹⁵ M. Yourcenar. 1982. "La fine di Marko Kraljevic", 1278.

¹⁶ Fernando Pessoa. 2006. *Il libro dell'inquietudine*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

o presunto è dotato di una certa superiorità spirituale o culturale e “perlopiù destinata a rappresentare una parte direttiva o critica nell’assetto ideologico o politico della società o meglio cultore di studi riconducibili a un moderno valore umanistico”¹⁷. Va da sé che egli svolge un compito di orientamento. In questo specifico caso sono in sospeso le motivazioni dell’assenza di scontro fra le autrici, autentiche intellettuali del nostro tempo e una figura costruita fra le pareti di una Storia quantomeno ambigua. E, dunque, se è così, uno dei precisi doveri dell’intellettuale, è quello di accertare la verità prima di esporre la sua direttiva di pensiero, se risulta manchevole.

Primo testimone potrebbe essere Michele Prisco (1920-2003) letterato e scrittore italiano che afferma responsabilmente la mediocrità del personaggio Kraljevic nella nota di presentazione della novella del citato volume di Caterina Percoto e riportata in apertura¹⁸. Essendo egli un intellettuale nulla ci dice che dobbiamo mettere in dubbio la sua etica e quindi accettare che la sua nota sia stata redatta dopo responsabile accertamento.

Secondo testimone potrebbe essere Irene Bernardi la quale afferma nella sua tesi di laurea, redatta dopo lunghe ricerche, che “La tradizione popolare distorse i fatti, dando voce ad un sentimento politico antidinastico, che il popolo aveva accettato come verità storica impossibile da contrastare nonostante l’evidenza degli studi critici e specialistici almeno sino alla fine del XIX secolo e l’inizio del XX secolo”¹⁹.

Nel mito dell’eroe, il protagonista è spesso un individuo che intraprende un viaggio o una missione per affrontare sfide straordinarie, risolvere enigmi e compiere atti di grande valore. Egli è tipicamente ricco di una crescita interiore e di un destino più grande che lo spinge ad affrontare forze esterne o sovrumane. Nessun documento testimonia Kraljevic in queste vesti e le ballate in poesia dedicate alle sue ‘imprese’, come è stato detto, non hanno un riscontro storico.

Nel mito, e l’umanità occidentale è strettamente legata al concetto del mito, tanto che nell’era in cui viviamo perfino gli algoritmi dei computer ne sono fortemente influenzati, mettendo a rischio la stessa credibilità umana. L’eroe si scontra spesso con una figura antagonista contro la quale deve lottare per dimostrare il proprio valore. Questo conflitto è un tema comune, l’eroe combatte per ristabilire l’ordine e la giustizia, proprio come nel filone del giallo il detective agisce per risolvere il crimine e far emergere la verità. Nel mito, il ritorno dell’eroe spesso implica una trasformazione avendo egli stesso acquisito conoscenza e saggezza, o un potere che gli consente di ristabilire un certo ordine sociale. Nel nostro caso l’“eroe” preferisce continuare il vassallaggio per i turchi iniziato dal padre e sceglie di riprendersi la sua prima moglie per questioni di opportunità territoriale, come accennato nelle note che riguardano la sua biografia.

Concedendoci una breve digressione sulla mitologia tradizionale cui appartiene la vicenda postuma di Kraljevic, ricordiamo quanto gli esseri umani siano legati alla mitologia, tanto che oggi gli studiosi informatici si chiedono se gli algoritmi dell’intelligenza artificiale siano capaci di sviluppare sentimenti oltre che tenere in considerazione alcuni elementi del-

¹⁷ Devoto-Oli. 2005. *Dizionario della lingua italiana*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1181.

¹⁸ Caterina Percoto. 1972. *Racconti*, 405.

¹⁹ Irene Bernardi, *Il mito di Marko Kraljevic nella ex Jugoslavia*, tesi di laurea, 54.

le tradizioni mitologiche. Tutto questo pur se proiettati verso estremi auto-sviluppi di una costante rivoluzione informatica e nulla farebbe pensare ad antiche affezioni alla mitologia. E parlando di allineamento (tra computer come specchio di quello strategico umano) Harari dice che “il problema dell’allineamento risulta essere, in fondo, un problema di mitologia”, e cita a sua volta la filosofa Meghan O’Gieblyn dicendo che ella “dimostra come il nostro modo di intendere i computer sia fortemente influenzato dalle mitologie tradizionali”²⁰. Ecco spiegato, forse, l’aspetto così radicato della mitologia al quale le nostre due intellettuali non hanno saputo sottrarsi.

Lo storico svizzero Oliver Jens Schmitt ha dimostrato come il numero dei principi del XIV secolo della Valacchia e dei Balcani caduti nella lotta contro gli ottomani sia minore rispetto al numero di quelli che preferirono collaborare con i turchi. Ciò per dire che risultava più comodo il vassallaggio piuttosto che la contrapposizione al turco con tutte le sue implicazioni²¹.

Che parli adesso Egidio Ivetic che in un suo articolo sottolinea, riprendendo brevemente il discorso della traduzione dei Canti Servi da parte del Tommaseo, come in quel periodo dell’Ottocento “incalzavano le nuove idee che cercavano di identificare le masse con un’unità di lingua, di cultura e di appartenenza” e come “anche in lui (Tommaseo) troviamo l’entusiasmo di aver scoperto nella popolazione qualcosa di straordinario, troviamo la voglia di plasmare la massa del popolo e l’inevitabile e necessaria utopia” e quanto il personaggio Kraljevic abbia fatto al suo caso²².

Infine, un accenno ad una ulteriore incongruenza sul bevitore Kraljevic. L’adattamento della storia che si fa leggenda è una componente che conferma come il fatto di essere un grande bevitore (come si dice fosse stato Kraljevic), con tutte le conseguenze che ne derivano, appartenga alla discrepanza tra verità e leggenda e sia il risultato di secoli di folklore e simbolismo culturale. È quindi un aspetto ‘curioso’ ed anacronistico della figura idealizzata, un’incoerenza con l’archetipo cavalleresco di colui che, essendo un ‘eroe’ dal temperamento forte sa mantenere il controllo delle proprie emozioni ed azioni. L’alcol, come elemento che provoca smarrimento e perdita di autocontrollo è da considerarsi pertanto in contrasto con la figura eroica²³.

Le testimonianze dell’accusa fin qui proposte, voci parziali nella possibilità di un più ampio panorama, rafforzano la domanda espressa, cioè come sia possibile che due scrittrici di grande respiro siano cadute nella trappola della credulità? Quali i motivi per cui queste due donne straordinarie hanno in qualche modo creduto a racconti immaginari?

La difesa

Signor Presidente, signori qui riuniti, direbbe in apertura l’avvocato di difesa. Siamo in presenza di due autrici eccelse che hanno saputo fare carne delle parole attraverso il loro signi-

²⁰ Yuval Noah Harari. 2024. *Nexus*. Milano: Bompiani 2024, 378, 394.

²¹ <https://www.rri.ro> (consultato il 19/06/2025).

²² Egidio Ivetic. *Tommaseo e la sua Serbia immaginaria*, <https://www.research.unipd.it> (consultato il 19/06/2025).

²³ In uno dei due racconti Yourcenar colloca Kraljevic proprio in uno dei convivi che soleva organizzare con spirito di fratellanza per dare da mangiare ai meno abbienti, durante i quali scorrevano fiumi di vino di cui lui si serviva abbondantemente passando per grande bevitore.

ficato, realizzando quel prezioso evento che la scrittura consente attraverso il talento. Non è forse vero che la verità diventa tale in un preciso momento e cioè quando essa diviene condivisa da migliaia di persone nei secoli? Inoltre, da Platone a Pasolini si annuncia che la verità non è mai una sola, ma ha centinaia di sfaccettature così sensibili da tramutarsi, spezzettarsi, scomporsi e ricomporsi, e talvolta con maggiore chiarezza e forza vitale? Quali sono pertanto le circostanze nelle quali un eroe 'scadente' acquista il diritto di essere un eroe e basta? Vediamo dunque ogni singolo aspetto possibile della scelta narrativa di Percoto e Yourcenar che può rivelarsi straordinariamente ricca di significati, tanto da diventare implicitamente la summa delle verità, e ciò a discapito di ogni colpa.

Premesso ancora che non è forse vero che la scrittura come azione principale è sufficiente per dare credito a chi senza avere aderenza alla realtà ne diventa fruitore?

L'interesse di uno scrittore può risiedere nella volontà di esplorare il lato umano del personaggio definito eroe 'scadente' al quale si riconoscono difetti, contraddizioni e fragilità che li rendono più vicini al lettore, creando una connessione emotiva più autentica?

Non è forse vero che un simile atteggiamento nasconde, per esempio, una sfida alla narrativa tradizionale, viepiù significativa in Percoto che in Yourcenar essendo la prima più ancorata indietro nel tempo, dimostrando che la visione di una figura storica acquisisce valore anche al di fuori dei trionfi convenzionali?

Inoltre, non è forse vero che personaggi apparentemente scadenti possono essere utili ad illuminare dinamiche settoriali, di nicchia, che sfuggono ai grandi cronisti, mettendo magari in luce angolazioni diverse di strategie, ideologi dell'epoca, aspettative sociali, colte proprio da chi ha una particolare sensibilità o attitudine come un analista letterario?

Non dobbiamo nemmeno trascurare l'empatia per gli *outsider*. L'autore per eccellenza potrebbe sentirsi attratto da personaggi originalmente marginalizzati o fallimentari (grande esempio Victor Hugo ed i suoi miserabili). Raccontare storie di figure imperfette può essere un modo di dare voce a chi sarebbe andato incontro ad un destino di oblio se la voce popolare non lo avesse riconosciuto altrimenti. Poi, il 'finto eroe, o eroe presunto' offre più spazio ad interpretazioni creative, ad una maggiore complessità che potremmo chiamare libertà creativa. La quale è elemento di costante attenzione del lettore e del suo mondo.

Mi chiedo se ogni critica su questo argomento possa divenire anche una critica al concetto di eroismo come è visto nella consueta foggia mitologica preferita dagli esseri umani e scriverne non è inchinarsi al secolare folklore esibito dalla storia, ma una precisa scelta che dice eroe vero o falso che sia io scelgo comunque di definirlo con questa parola, perché ciò che mi basta è il desiderare di raccontarlo. È proprio necessario descrivere la vita di un eroe riconosciuto tale e non semplicemente millantato nella fantasia di chi lo crea? Non per questo, visto che esiste il genere delle favole, quindi della pura fantasia, si realizzerebbe un falso storico.

Un eroe non eroe, come dicevo, è tale fino a quando non è riconosciuto dalla voce popolare, allora diventa una specie di attore capace di incarnare temi universali, come la lotta contro le avversità, l'inadeguatezza e il fallimento a misura della sensibilità contemporanea. Insomma, signori, il fascino di un eroe, suo malgrado, risiede proprio nel suo essere lontano dall'ideale tradizionale, offrendo una prospettiva unica sulla condizione umana e sull'inganno perpetrato dagli umani stessi e non dal fatto di essere un eroe mancato. E quest'ul-

timo aspetto, come quelli elencati sopra, pungolano le capacità dello scrittore di svolgere il suo ruolo di intellettuale senza prima preoccuparsi di fare l'investigatore. Non è forse che, come dice Platone, la verità si sviluppa legata al mondo delle idee, anche se Platone alludendo alle idee eterne e immutabili ci riporta all'essenza pura delle cose attraverso la contemplazione delle stesse idee? Platone permetterà che ci adagiamo alla versione più empirica di Aristotele. O meglio ancora all'idea di Foucault ed alla sua teoria della verità poco tradizionale, ma come essa venga costruita e distribuita all'interno delle società attraverso determinati discorsi e azioni pratiche.

E, dunque, Kraljevic è una 'azione pratica' alla luce di tutto ciò che si è fin qui detto, eroe suo malgrado, è stato ispiratore per la scrittura di tutte quelle verità letterarie, che non sono strumento di controllo sociale, descritte singolarmente da Percoto e Yourcenar, se non come esercizio del loro libero arbitrio intellettuale.

Nessuna colpa è quindi ascrivibile a Percoto e Yourcenar se non il ritorno da parte nostra all'apprezzamento della loro scelta come sacralità dell'individuo e sacralità della scrittura in quanto tale. In questo caso la loro verità non è uno strumento di controllo sociale. Pertanto, ne chiedo la completa assoluzione perché il fatto non sussiste.

Ludovica Cantarutti, giornalista e scrittrice, ha collaborato con testate come *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *La Nazione*, *Il Gazzettino* e con RAIUNO. Ha pubblicato circa trenta volumi tra narrativa, saggistica e poesia. Studiosa di Caterina Percoto, ha curato l'Epistolario con Carlo Tenca e saggi recenti. Ha promosso progetti culturali innovativi e poetici, tra cui mostre, murali e quaderni annuali sui protagonisti dell'Ottocento. Fondatrice dell'associazione "via Montereale", è attiva nella diffusione della cultura della diversità. Presiede per il FVG e il Veneto l'Associazione Amici della Biblioteca di Alexandria-UNESCO. Vive e lavora a Pordenone.

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Moving Bodies and Identities Across the Atlantic: The Subversive Narrative of the Slave Trade in Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots*

Abstract I: La qualità sovversiva della scrittura creativa di Bernardine Evaristo, tra le voci più interessanti del panorama letterario britannico contemporaneo, trova espressione dirompente nel suo quarto romanzo, *Blonde Roots*, pubblicato nel 2008 a valle delle celebrazioni per il bicentenario dell'abolizione del commercio degli schiavi. La spiazzante narrazione dello *slave trade*, che si caratterizza per un'inversione di ruoli lì dove sono gli Africani a ridurre in schiavitù gli Europei, è intesa a gettare una nuova luce su un capitolo infame della storia 'gloriosa' dell'Impero per sollecitare una consapevolezza e una conoscenza non solo degli orrori commessi nel passato, ma, altrettanto, delle loro drammatiche conseguenze nel presente, un'ingombrante eredità che segna pesantemente la società britannica contemporanea.

Abstract II: The subversive quality of Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing finds a most challenging expression in her fourth novel, *Blonde Roots*, published in 2008 after the celebrations which took place in Britain for the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The disrupting narrative, in which she operates a risky inversion of the history of the Black Atlantic in a race-reversal novel where "Aphrikans" enslave "Europeans", is meant to shed new light on a notorious chapter of the 'glorious' history of the British Empire in order to provoke an awareness and knowledge not only of the horrors of the past, but also of their traumatic consequences and legacy in the present, revealing the centrality of that page both for Black and British history at large as well as for the shaping of contemporary identities.

Keywords: Evaristo, *Blonde Roots*, slave trade, neo-slave narratives, *herstory*.

The subversive quality of Bernardine Evaristo's creative writing finds one of its most challenging and 'disorienting' expressions in her fourth and first full-length novel in prose, *Blonde Roots*, published in 2008 soon after the celebrations in Britain marking the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade¹. The disrupting narrative, in which she undertakes

¹ The novel was completed in 2007, the year of the Bicentenary, in the middle of very harsh debates about the legacy of the system of slavery and the profits derived from it not only in the past but also in the present.

a risky inversion of the history of the Black Atlantic in a race-reversal novel where Africans enslave Europeans, is meant to shed new light on a notorious chapter of the 'glorious' history of the British Empire to provoke a critical awareness not only of the horrors of the past, but also of their traumatic consequences and legacy in the present, revealing the centrality of that page both for Black and British history at large as well as for the shaping of contemporary identities.

In order to compensate for the lost opportunity represented by the pompous celebrations which emphasised the abolitionist stance of the British nation overshadowing its direct, guilty and most lucrative involvement in the trade, Evaristo counteracts official accounts by presenting a *herstory* in the shape of an innovative neo-slave narrative, destabilising both the traditional genre and its new creative expressions. If contemporary slavery fiction² adopts the form and the conventions of the classical antebellum slave narratives creatively re-imagining the subjectivity of the enslaved to reclaim their full humanity and agency (Lima 2012), Evaristo apparently aligns herself with the new cast of the traditional form, but actually introduces an ironic twist which redirects it, humorously inverting racial paradigms to depict a "parallel universe" that "hopefully gives readers a modern and historical context" through which to "a) view that history and b) understand notions of civilization and savagery" (Evaristo in Ashfeldt 2009). Evaristo's project is explicitly synthesised in her own comments on the novel:

The book is provocative and aims to stir things up a bit and it uses a lot of satire and humor generally. [...] My project as a writer is to always push the boundaries, to venture into new, sometimes precarious territory. It's risky but I can't help myself (Evaristo in Collins 2008).

The writer's words reveal once again the militant stance of her unswerving literary engagement. As a "freedom lover and disobeyer of rules" she intellectually and artistically defies all conventions to shake the reader out of their complacent certainties and comforting views of the world, granting herself, "the most rebellious of writers", the "complete artistic license to write from multiple perspectives and to inhabit different cultures across the perceived barriers of race, culture, gender, age and sexuality" (Evaristo 2021: 201).

Born in London to an English mother and a Nigerian father, with a grandfather who had returned to his home country from Brazil in 1888 after the abolition of slavery, Evaristo personally embodies the experience of a family directly involved in the fluxes of the triangular trade whose shadows still inform of themselves a society profoundly marked by a rhetoric of colors. The multiple roots of her Afro-Brazilian, British, African familial history

² Neo-slave narratives, which draw upon and reshape the antebellum and post-emancipation autobiographies written or dictated by liberated slaves, in their re-imagining of the experiences of Atlantic slavery, cast a special focus on the subjectivity of the once enslaved Africans who are no longer represented simply in relation to their status of subjugation, but as individuals calling into question master narratives and the official historiography through their own personal voice and testimonies and their extraordinary resilience. The stereotypical image of blacks as victims only is reversed. For an exploration of the genre see, among the others, Asraf (1999).

interweave, reconnecting the many routes of the Black Atlantic which she is determined to re-trace in order to achieve full awareness of the past and thus be able to understand the present and, possibly, contribute to changing the future. As she herself explains, “I’m interested in exploring the roots of British history and looking at the black presence in Britain, and that comes from my particular ancestry and history” (Evaristo in Muñoz Valdivieso 2004: 13), a project driven by the awareness, as one of her fictional characters claims in *Girl, Woman, Other*, that “We are all part of a continuum [...] the future is in the past and the past is in the present” (Evaristo 2019: 221).

Moving from her painful experience of discrimination and exclusion as a black woman living on the margins of a white world, in which “colourism or shadism is historical and omnipresent, from the hierarchy of the slave plantations to the internalised racism of today’s black populations” (Evaristo 2021: 26), Evaristo transforms her original creative vein into an instrument of resistance and affirmation. She gives voice through her literary writing to all those confined to the status of second-class citizens, marginalised and silenced by oppressive and discriminatory systems and by biased master narratives that reinforce dichotomous oppositions and hierarchical classifications.

If the dialogue with the past is the *fil rouge* which runs through all her literary production, it is specifically the re-thinking and re-writing of the history of the Black Atlantic which, questioning how slavery can be remembered and narrated, interrogates not only the tragic reality of the phenomenon through the lived experiences of its protagonists, but also its reverberations in the present that affect the subjective and collective identities of the descendants of the Black diaspora, in order to “make sense of what it means to be black in this country” (Evaristo 2005). Restoring dignity and visibility not only to the Black presence, but also to the Black History erased from official narratives is essential to discard the racist ideology which still constitutes a hindrance to the creation of a peaceful and inclusive society. Such a history is obscured primarily by the British educational system, as the writer underlines in several of her interviews, even though it is inextricably intertwined with that of the nation whose affirmation and very identity are indisputably indebted to it, insofar as it is constructed on the myth of the superiority of its civilisation and culture.

In *Blonde Roots* the challenge to binary systems of thought and representation at the very foundations of the national historiography and of its master narratives, systems based on essentialist and exclusivist discourses marked by the rhetoric of purity as well as by ethnocentric and racialised normative models, is carried out through an avant-garde displacing writing that breaks the categorisations of the canon, crossing genres, literary forms and expressive modes. Reconfirming the constant trace distinguishing Evaristo’s oeuvre, the novel is characterised by a daring experimentation that results in innovative narrative solutions, under the banner of cross-fertilisations and of the dismantling of oppositional logics, in artistic expression as well as in content. The dialogic quality of her writing makes use of a fruitful interweaving of voices and stories that echo and refer back to each other in a continuum between past and present, restoring the complex and varied portrait of the world of the black diaspora, placed in a historical perspective that allows the reader to trace its development over the centuries and to detect its many forms in the contemporary world.

In the book the first-person gendered narrative of the experience of slavery is deployed through the voice of Doris Scagglethorpe, the “whyte” English woman who reconstructs and denounces the cruel system of capture, transportation and exploitation by which the “Aphrikans” enslaved “Europanes”, a system of which she is herself the victim in her new life as Omorenomwara, a name that deprives the slave of her former identity and marks her subservient condition. The story opens on the young woman’s attempt to escape from her master Kaga Konata Katamba I into whose property she was sold after being kidnapped. In the Bwana’s household in Londolo, at the very heart of Aphrika, she works as a home slave and personal secretary. While she plans her escape, her mind fills with the memories of her past life woven through her deep and moving longing for her family and lost home country, a kaleidoscope of images and sensations which synthesise her tragic experience of life, epitomised by the forced separation from her children who were sold into slavery:

We slaves don’t end relationships. Other people do it for us. Often we don’t start them either, other people do it for us. We’re encouraged to breed merely to increase the workforce.

My three were sold on.

Each time they promised I could keep the child. A bold-faced lie, because some expectant mothers would rather kill themselves if they knew their child was going to be taken away at birth (Evaristo 2009: 22)³.

The narration is structured around constant flashbacks which allow the reader to reconstruct Doris’s life and experience in an atemporal yet, at the same time, very concrete dimension. The sort of medieval peasant world of poverty and serfdom on the Cabbage Coast of Europa where she lived in the days “BS (Before Slavery)” (Evaristo 2009: 11), where the feudal landlords sold their subjects to the slave traders, is represented with stark realism in its social inequalities. The girl’s adolescence is brutally interrupted by the appalling moment in which her life as a slave began, depriving her of every form of dignity and control over herself: “My kidnapper tugged me towards the traders. I had lost control of my body. It was no longer I who decided whether I walked to my right, to my left, backwards and forwards, or at what speed” (Evaristo 2009: 63).

In the First Book, altering the natural progression of events, the narrative interweaves and overlaps different temporal layers moving back and forth in an oscillatory motion from the girl’s present condition of fugitive to her childhood, from her first transportation in chains to the new world where she served the young Miracoletta as personal slave and companion to her shipment to the Kingdom of Ambossa after the death of her first owner, until her second crossing of the ocean to work on the plantations where she is confined as a punishment for her attempted escape. The following passage encompasses in a few lines these three crucial and traumatic moments in her life:

³ Evaristo (2009). All further references to this novel are from this edition.

My feet could not, would not climb aboard the ship.
 Not another floating torture chamber.
 Not another floating coffin.
 Not after all this time.
 I dug my heels into the sludge of the docks and felt myself sinking.
 Back through the years to when I was a captured child (Evaristo 2009: 75).

These words introduce the most touching and dismaying pages in the novel. The chapter entitled "The Middle Passage" plunges the reader into the abyss of the abominations of the slave trade, reconstructing Doris's first harrowing voyage across the Atlantic: "I was being pulled in two: my body forced away from the shore, while my heart dragged me back to the landmass to which my whole life was attached" (Evaristo 2009: 76). Her shattering experience of physical and psychological fragmentation is reinforced by the newly acquired awareness of the insurmountable and irreconcilable gap between 'races', a divide generated by the hierarchical rhetoric of color and its constructed stereotypes:

If I had to pinpoint a moment when the human race divided into the severe distinctions of black and white, that was it: people belonged to one of the two colors and in the society I was about to join my color, not my personality or ability would determine my fate (Evaristo 2009: 76).

The horrors of the Middle Passage and the cruelty of the treatment of the slaves are reproduced in shocking detail through appalling and unforgettable scenes built from an accumulation of harsh disorienting particulars. The ironic touches which characterise the novel's overall style are suspended leaving readers breathless in front of the unacceptable abominations perpetrated by human beings against other human beings.

The reconstruction of her alienating and disrupted life as a slave is temporarily broken off by the anti-abolitionist pamphlet written by her chief enslaver which occupies Book Two of the novel. Evocatively entitled *The Flame*, in direct reference to the white supremacist National Front journal published in the 1970s as a testament to the long, uninterrupted line of intolerance and racism, it represents an abrupt change of perspective and narrating voice which shocks the reader out of their complacency introducing the key ideological foundations of discriminatory thinking, the ideological system which justified the exploitation of the subjugated. By celebrating the civilising mission of the superior race Chief Bwana exposes his "Candid & Free" ideas on "TRUE NATURE OF THE SLAVE TRADE", offering a "Modest & Truthful" (Evaristo 2009: 113) account of his growth as a slave trader thanks to "self-sacrifice and an upwardly mobile mind" (Evaristo 2009: 117). In an ironic reversal of their cruel treatment, he asserts that the slaves "have been saved from the most horrendous deaths, punishments, and morally reprehensible indulgences and serfdom, while being given the opportunity to adopt the manners and customs of civilized men" (Evaristo 2009: 127). The eighteenth-century language full of anachronisms interpolated and mixed up with contemporary colloquialisms testifies to a continuum of discrimination which lays its roots in Enlightenment thinking and resonates still in the present of a society

which, though professing itself post-ethnic, has not yet overcome prejudicial attitudes and racist ideologies.

It is significantly to Doris's voice that the writer consigns the third and last Book of the novel in which she reconstructs her life from the moment in which she was recaptured by her enslaver and transported once again across the Ocean to work on the sugar plantations in the West Japanese Islands run by the cruel and lazy Bwana's son, a place ironically named "Paradise Island", until her final liberation when she breaks the chains of her servitude and gets free joining a group of maroons living on the mountains. As Newman remarks, the plot apparently reproduces the typical mode of the slave narrative genre charting the process of emancipation of a young woman after her tragic experience of enslavement:

the novel incorporates almost all the familiar elements of the slave narrative genre: capture, failed escape, Middle Passage with slave insurrections, multiple deaths, rape, torture and mutilations, branding [...], slave auctions [...], family separation [...], renaming, whippings, the acquisition of literacy [...], and a final escape to freedom to a long-established community of maroons (Newman 2012: 286).

However, it is from the very opening that the displacing quality of this innovative text manifests itself assuming its first plastic shape in the image of the map that introduces the reader to the subverted spatial representation of the Atlantic world, an alternative cartography which requires an adjustment of perspective, revealing the arbitrary nature of any fixed point of view whose relativity is denounced through Nietzsche's words chosen as the epigraph to the novel: "All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth" (Evaristo 2009).

The paratextual element of the map, the first of several in the novel, echoes the long-established tradition of the slave narratives which opened the autobiographical testimonies with the portrait of the protagonist as a guarantee of the verisimilitude of the narrated story. It is that very pretense of objective testimony that the writer aims at discarding disclosing the fictionality of every representation and, thus, of its associated ideology, such as the prejudiced and constructed assumption of the superiority of the 'North' and the subalternity of the 'South', visually marked by their physical placing in a hierarchal, pyramidal depiction of the globe. The map reconstructs the factual history of the transatlantic slavery reproducing the axes of the triangular trade, but it alters its location and vectors in a provocative reversal which unsettles traditional paradigms and, together with them, the familiar history of the Black Atlantic and of the slave trade conveyed by its master narratives. In Doris's world Aphrika, sitting on the Equator, is located in the north of the hemisphere in the place of Europe, highlighting the centrality of the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, whose capital is Londolo, positioned off the western coast of the continent. The slave trading Empire provocatively takes the shape of Great Britain:

Great Ambossa - Doris reveals - is actually a very small island with a growing population to feed, and so it stretches its greedy little fingers all over the globe, stealing countries and stealing people.

Me included. I'm one of the Stolen Ones (Evaristo 2009: 6).

The play on the acronym U.K. serves to unsettle the readers who are obliged to constantly consult the alternative map to reorient themselves. Europa is geographically 'degraded' occupying the place conventionally assigned to Africa in the Eurocentric representation of the globe. England, with its Cabbage Coast which clearly evokes the African Gold Coast, is the point of departure of the slave ships directed along the infamous middle passage to the American colonies. Amarika is not geographically re-set but re-named, and the Caribbeans are indicated as the West Japanese Islands. Spatial assumptions are dislocated in the radical inversion of the familiar identification of northern and southern countries, a distinction which is imbued with hierarchical connotations and deeply rooted in preconceptions about the superiority and inferiority of civilisations and 'races'. The turning of the world upside down upends the reader's expectations and questions their conventional assumptions drawing the attention anew both on the phenomenon of the slave trade as well as on the legacies of its founding ideology which bears heavy traces in the present. Evaristo's intention is very clear in this respect:

Everything is shaken up, not only racially, with the power imbalance of the transatlantic slave trade inverted, but also geographically, with Europe (or Europa) located where Africa is and vice versa. I wanted to write about the transatlantic slave trade so that people imagined it afresh, to avoid a straightforward telling of a familiar history. I began asking myself the question WHAT IF-what if I turned this world upside-down. I discovered that the racist ideology that justified the slave trade, the legacy of which we live with today, is exposed and ridiculed by means of this inversion (Evaristo in Gustar 2015).

In the writer's dystopian version of the Black Atlantic world (Newman 2012) not only spatial expectations, but also temporal ones are discarded in a daring and astonishingly creative intermingling of medieval scenes of witch burnings, Enlightenment coffee-houses and customs, Victorian crinolines and corsets, contemporary locations and cultural products, as well as images of an unspecified future, symbolically represented by the disused Underground Railroad, once the crowded Londolo tube, through which tunnels Doris tries to escape, its stations' names recalling those of the contemporary metropolis. The most disparate settings and temporal markers take the reader backward and forward while their co-presence and overlapping cross conventional barriers of time establishing a constant interweaving of past and present. Such a commingling is powerfully conveyed by a bold, inventive mixture of archaic languages and XXI century jargon, an intriguing "mongrel voice" (Evaristo in Muñoz-Valdivieso 2004: 17) with a defamiliarising and destabilising effect which fearlessly and daringly overcomes borders and unsettles all expectations reproducing the "chaos world" of Glissantian memory (Glissant 1997). The multilayered time-shifting representation prevents the pinpointing of a definite historical moment in which to locate the narrative, making the text a complex arena of interlaced interdependent stories and experiences which commingle and echo one another, encompassing within the complex picture of an enlarged Atlantic world a long and unending history of oppression, from the serfdom of the Middle Ages to contemporary forms of human trafficking and exploitation of the

poorest and most vulnerable. The conventional periodisation of the phenomenon of slavery is thus revised emphasising its protean nature and the multifarious forms it has taken throughout the centuries, never erasing or blurring the reality of the slave trade and the horrors of the system which are reproduced in their most brutal details. Evaristo unequivocally attests her intent to write about the transatlantic slave trade “in a way that enabled people to see it afresh. It’s a subject that elicits strong responses, including anger, defensiveness, resentment, self-righteousness, guilt, sadness” (Evaristo in Collins 2008: 1201). However, she seems to suggest, this jumble of reactions is not a sufficient and satisfying answer as the conventionality of its representations produces a sort of habit-forming familiarity, whereas it would be necessary a radical re-vision of that recognisable history as well as of the narratives which have represented it. The shocking reversal of skin colors and social roles thus deprives the readers of the comfortable position of passive receivers of a much-told history obliging them to take an active critical stance to react to the legacy of that past in our contemporary world.

As the writer claims, her work is a “what if? book but it’s also a ‘This is what was’ book” (Evaristo in Collins 2008: 1201), a book which uncompromisingly depicts and condemns the system of slavery together with its racist ideological underpinnings which reverberate in the present. The self-reflexive nature of this neo-slave novel, with Doris’s first-person narration revealing its biased nature, though contradicting “any sense of a fixed historical vision of Atlantic slavery” (Burkitt 2011: 406) and exposing the relativity of its narratives, neither deprives the phenomenon of its substantiality, nor does it divert the attention from its dramatic and suffered reality. On the contrary, it reveals the concreteness of a personal, and thus inevitably ‘compromised’, lived and narrated experience, a story which coalesces with a multitude of other stories weaving and re-composing the complex and multilayered world of the Atlantic slavery. The fictionality of Doris’s slave narrative is foregrounded through the many references to her role of storyteller who reconstructs the events from her subjective angle of observation drawing on oral sources and anecdotes which are constantly re-shaped in the act of their re-telling, revealing in such a mutability their unreliability. The novel’s postmodern stance, which manifests its self-conscious metafictional nature interrogating any fixed and objective form of narration, neither questions the reality of facts, nor does it diminish its gravity. On the contrary, it guarantees, through its overtly biased reconstruction, that what happened does not remain relegated to the fixity and the conclusive dimension of a past chapter, thus opening it up to the present (Hutcheon 1988: 110).

It is for the same reason that the enlarged perspective on other highly disquieting forms of servitude and exploitation, which are not necessarily racially determined and confined just to one specific historical moment, does not compromise the clear focus on the Atlantic slave trade, but reinforces its dramatic history placing it within a continuum of oppression and discrimination across the centuries that emphasises its most devastating and dehumanising dimension. Evaristo, thus, reconstructs a “historiography of slavery which complicates it as a purely black experience” (Burkitt, 2011: 407). From the first chapter such a never-ending history of slavery explored in its many different forms finds an explicit manifestation in Doris’s narrative when she introduces herself and her family.

I am proud to declare that I come from a long line of cabbage farmers.
 My people were honest peasants who worked the land and never turned to theft even when it snowed in summer or rained in winter so that the crops miscarried their pods and turned to mulch.
 We weren't landowners, oh no, we are serfs, the bottom link in the agricultural food chain, although no actual chains clinked on the ground when we walked around. Nor were we property, exactly, but our roots went deep into the soil because when the land changed hands through death, marriage, and even war, so did we, and so tied we remained, for generation upon generation (Evaristo 2009: 8).

The parallel with her following condition of white slave at the service of cruel black masters strikes the difference between the medieval serfdom, a condition of subalternity which does not eradicate her sense of identity and belonging both to the family and to her much beloved land, and the totally displacing alienation and disruption of her inner self determined by her new status of bondage. In line with the same strategy, the allusion in the opening chapter to the enslavement of approximately one million Europeans by North Africans on the Barbary Coast between the 16th and the 19th century, does not divert the attention from the history of the Atlantic slave trade, but, conversely, contextualises and re-situates it underlining the devastating dimension of the phenomenon and its racist legacy in the present (Evaristo in Collins 2008). As a matter of fact, *"Blonde Roots"* does not eradicate the real history of the Black Atlantic slave trade, but it allows for that 'pre-history' to be considered as part of a wider context" (Burkitt 2011: 408).

As well as different experiences of servitude and oppression are recalled and intertwined to enshrine the multilayered complexity and dramatic concreteness of the phenomenon of the Atlantic slavery, various modes of discourse which give voice to those experiences are echoed, reproduced and reshaped in the novel's network, alerting the attention on their nature of fictional constructions. It is only by re-composing all those narratives and reconnecting their manifold voices that we can achieve the awareness of what happened in the past and of what continues to happen in the present. The shrewd recast of different literary genres calls into question the simplistic binary true/untrue revealing the relativity of such a dichotomy. Slave narratives are not necessarily true in their quality of autobiographical accounts because the texts depend on specific formal conventions linked to their political purposes as part of the abolitionist campaigns and are thus inevitably influenced by the readers' expectations (Gould 2007: 19)⁴, as well as neo-slave narratives, as creative fictional accounts of the tragedy of slavery, are not necessarily untrue (Iromuanya 2017: 181). The objectivity of pseudo-scientific journals is likewise masterfully exposed through the biased testimony of Chief Kaga in Book Two in which he adopts the typical stance of the Eighteenth century anti-abolitionist slavers with the pretentious style of their reports, exposing his racialised and racist rationale that justifies the subjection of 'lesser' human beings, disguising his role of enslaver as that of the 'savior' of the most unfortunate and debased 'races'. The

⁴ In addition, we should not forget that autobiographical accounts were shaped and deeply altered by their white editors and amanuenses.

weaving together of all these different narratives makes the disquieting painting of the slave trade emerge in its monstrosity denouncing its consequences and enduring effects.

The broadened perspective embracing the whole Black Atlantic world, from the past to the present, is reproduced as well through the intertextual references to literary works which enter into a fruitful and dynamic space of dialogic interaction, crisscrossing the ocean and connecting one with the other despite the different contexts in which they were produced. The history of colonial slavery and of its legacy is thus recast in literary terms by the allusions to renowned masterpieces which symbolically stand for the vertices of the infamous 'triangle'. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the novel at the center of the late Victorian canon, is explicitly recalled in Chief Kaga's cry "the horror, the horror" in reference to the 'barbarity' of the 'Europeans' life, as well as reproduced in the description of the place as "the Heart of Grayness", the capitalisation directly alluding to the title of the XIX century text. Traces of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the Nigerian novelist's writing back to Conrad's masterpiece, can be detected in *The Flame*. The biased master narrative echoes the voice of the District Commissioner who silences the tragedy of the colonised in his enthusiastic narrative entitled *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Literary allusions to the novels of the black descendants of the Atlantic slavery represent the third apex of the triangle set in the New World. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is often evoked in the text starting from the reverberation of the title in the protagonist's anaphoric cry of longing for her lost sisters, "Beloved Beloved, Beloved" (Evaristo 2009: 10), whereas the most renowned slave narrative by the American writer Alex Haley, *Roots* (1976), finds reflection in the novel which bears in its title a direct reference to it.

If it is true that these texts testify the transcultural dimension of a transnational space of circulation of voices and ideas (Gilroy 1993), it is likewise evident that in depicting the Black Atlantic Evaristo avoids a universalising approach which would run the risk of uprooting it from its specific historical and social context. At the same time, if on the one hand she exposes the capitalist nature of the colonial adventure at large guaranteed by its highly profitable system of slavery (Newman 2012), Evaristo never sidelines the question of 'race' in favor of a socio-economic reading of the phenomenon. On the contrary, she explores the harsh reality of the slave trade foregrounding the mechanisms of racialisation which justified and guaranteed its survival for over three centuries and whose legacy is deeply entrenched in our present. *Blonde Roots* thus reconstructs a contextualised and much detailed setting of that infamous history which does not allow a "colorblind reading" of the story (Iromuanya 2017: 176) representing it as a vague condition of oppression and subalternity which has assumed different shapes throughout the centuries. To make an example, the mercantile adventure of Chief Kaga which, thanks to a strict class-defined hierarchical system ruling first on the slave ship and then on the plantations, allows him to accumulate wealth and capital through the sale of slaves and the exploitation of their workforce, is never disjunct from his prejudiced racialised view of the 'Europeans'. When he lands on the shores of Europa he meets the 'savagery' of the 'inferior race' encompassed in a myriad images depicting the presumed barbarity of their costumes and habits, since their very first appearance in front of the dismayed eyes of the coloniser shocked by their irredeemable alterity:

As they crept in a cowardly way towards us, I heard them whispering rapidly in their nonsensical “language”. [...] A language without the c!icks, c!ucks, c!acks and !tsks of normal speech sounded dreary beyond belief, more akin to the low monotonous moan of cattle than the exuberant sounds of human communication (Evaristo 2009: 130).

Represented as beasts, more than human beings, the autochthonous population is associated with the filthiness of the muddy earth:

Naturally the savages were overdressed, as I had been told they would be. They wore grimy layers of cloths and matted wools which were coloured in browns and greens so dingy they could blend into the filth of the earth without need of camouflage (Evaristo 2009: 131).

Questions of ‘race’ and class are skillfully woven by a gendered perspective which shapes the text as a very distinctive *herstory*, though the privileged feminine dimension, which definitely marks the novel giving it a specific characterisation, does not limit itself to shedding light on the experience of oppression lived by women, but, in a wider perspective, embraces the predicament of the whole enslaved community, independently from gender identity. Thus, female sensibility serves as a powerful lens through which to view and ‘enter’ that world, but such an angle of observation is never exclusive and excluding, respecting the writer’s aim to overcome both racial and gender dichotomies. In a radical shift away from the tradition of the slave narratives mainly narrated by men in whose accounts women were represented exclusively as passive victims of abuses and violence, *Blonde Roots* places at the forefront a courageous young woman who tells her story in her own voice raising her head to reaffirm her right to a dignified life. Despite the selling into slavery of her three children and the forced separation from her partner, despite the dehumanising treatment of the slaves with the horrors of whippings and cutting of limbs, despite the abuse and humiliation of female bodies, despite all the abominations of the system of slavery, Doris retrieves her agency finding a source of comfort and power in the solidarity of the slave circle and in that very peculiar form of sisterhood of a female world carefully and lovingly portrayed in the novel. The education of children, cooking, music and religious rituals are preserved and cultivated by women offering the community a sense of normalcy and dignity which saves its members from the abyss of desolation and despair. Seated in a circle on the Sunday evenings, Doris narrates, “We let our laughter stream up into the sky and ricochet between the mountains. It was almost as if our lives were normal” (Evaristo 2009: 215).

That ‘unspeakable’ reality, whose immeasurable brutality seems impossible to be represented, is transmitted by her empathetic voice characterised by an ironic stance which produces the double effect of both involving and distancing the reader placing them in an uncomfortable position (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2022: 224, 231). Deployed in its different forms, from hyperbole to reversal, from incongruity to harsh humor, irony represents a powerful strategy to convey an otherwise unrepresentable story, as the following passage significantly demonstrates:

When Bwana bought me he had me tattooed with his initials too – KKK.
Can you imagine having a red-hot poker searing into your skin? Twice? The delayed shock reaction as it sizzles and smokes, then the warm bloody tears streaming down your arms and spine? (Evaristo 2009: 18)

The cruelty of the branded initials of Chief Kaga on her body, “K.K.K.”, three capital letters which call to mind the contemporary extremist white supremacist hate group, could not have been rendered in a more vivid and incisive way than through the apparently light humorous touches of the woman’s narrative which creates a highly distinctive and original form of “empathic unsettlement” (LaCapra 2001), reaching beyond a sense of guilt and hatred. The irony of Doris’s daily mantra aimed at reconstructing her shattered identity and regaining the pride of her belonging through the acceptance of her body provokes the reader into questioning prejudiced assumptions and rooted stereotypes concerning the ideals of feminine beauty:

“I may be *fair* and *flaxen*, I may have *slim* nostrils and *slender* lips. I may have *oil-rich* hair and a *non-rotund* bottom. I may blush easy, go *rubicund* in the sun and have *covert yet mentally alert* blue eyes. Yes, I may be *whyte*. But I am *whyte* and I am beautiful”. Our guys would call women who looked like me Barbie, named after the popular rag doll of the Motherland [...] (Evaristo 2009: 32, emphasis in original).

The canons of beauty are exposed as a prison which entraps women revealing their nature of fictional constructions as a result of racialised operations of power. Hair in particular, as Kobena Mercer convincingly asserts, “is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value” (Mercer 2000: 118).

The hairdressers used kinky Aphrikan hair on the Burbite women, who had their own hair chopped off and these bushy pieces sown onto them so that the effect was (un)naturally Aphrican. It took up to ten hours and when the blonde, red, brown or straight roots came through, it looked just plain tacky, apparently (Evaristo 2009: 30).

If the blonde, tacky roots of Doris’s hair are the sign which condemns her to slavery, they are, at the same time, the expression of her potential liberation when she comes to accept herself and her body, as in the aforementioned passage in which she retrieves her rights and proudly reasserts her identity, through words which recall the rallying cry of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement.

Instances of ‘race’ and gender constantly intertwine in the novel crossing spatial and temporal boundaries to demonstrate the persisting legacy of an unending past whose shadows loom large in the present. Doris’s final words in the postscript are revealing in such a respect:

In the twenty-first century, Bwana’s descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside. The cane workers, many of whom are descended from the original slaves, are paid (Evaristo 2009: 269).

The novel denounces the persistence of forms of slavery referring directly to the prosperity of the U.K., the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, which is still nowadays constructed on the exploitation of the work force and resources of the neo-colonial world. The Bwana's descendants run "the Business", as the Chief did in the past, and their dependents, though paid, are nonetheless kept in a subservient condition. The novel, as the inscription recites, is thus a tribute to both "THE TEN TO TWELVE MILLION AFRICANS TAKEN TO EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS AS SLAVES ... AND THEIR DESCENDANTS" (Evaristo 2009): the writer's interest in the past is indisputably motivated by its enduring relevance to our society in our present world.

The strategy of 'race' reversal, "translating black experience into a white one" (Rosenberg 2014: 390), encourages a sense of proximity for the western reader to the slaves' predicament and an instinctive identification with the young woman's tragedy because, as Evaristo repeatedly emphasises in many of her interviews, the magic of fiction consists in facilitating the "understanding of stories that are not your own stories" (Evaristo in Hughes 2020). Taking her readers on an "unpredictable moral journey" (Evaristo in Collins 2020), the writer calls us all to our own responsibilities: as inheritors of that tragic history we are all implicated in its enduring legacy. The creative word contributes to foster such critical knowledge and empathic sharing because, borrowing Evaristo's words, it "is perhaps the deepest way in which we can experience other people's lives and broaden our understanding of who we all are as people" (Evaristo 2025).

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Anna Enrichetta Soccio

Robert Graves, the Victorian Education System, and the British Identity

Abstract I: Questo saggio esplora il profondo legame di Robert Graves con la letteratura classica, plasmato dalla sua educazione e formazione vittoriana. Si intende analizzare come i suoi romanzi, saggi critici e poesie riflettano una continua rilettura dei Classici, radicata nei valori di disciplina e rigore intellettuale appresi negli anni formativi. Contestualizzando Graves all'interno del più ampio panorama culturale ed educativo vittoriano, e confrontando il suo approccio con quello dei suoi contemporanei, questo studio mostra come questo background abbia creato la sua voce letteraria unica. In ultima analisi, viene messa in luce l'attualità dei testi classici nell'opera di Graves e la loro rilevanza culturale nella Gran Bretagna del primo Novecento.

Abstract II: This paper explores Robert Graves's deep engagement with Classical literature, shaped by his Victorian upbringing and education. It examines how his novels, criticism, and poetry reflect a lifelong reinterpretation of the Classics, rooted in the values of discipline and intellectual rigour from his formative years. By contextualising Graves within the broader Victorian cultural and educational framework, and comparing his approach to that of his contemporaries, this study reveals how this background informed his unique literary voice. Ultimately, it highlights the enduring relevance of Classical texts in Graves's work and their cultural significance in early 20th-century Britain.

Keywords: The Classics, Victorian education system, Ancient Greece and Rome.

In Victorian Britain, education relied heavily on the study of the Classics. Ancient Greek and Roman languages, history, literature and philosophy were the core of school and university curricula as they were regarded not only as the foundation of intellectual and moral development but also as the mirror of the values and aspirations that the Victorians advocated.

The Classics were a pillar of élite education in preserving the social structure and were also important in shaping the British cultural identity. Ancient Rome in particular, was seen as a metaphor for nineteenth-century Britain in terms of imperial ideology, the European view and 'civilising mission' that made the British the modern people who received the legacy of classical wisdom and moral excellency. As Norman Vance demonstrated extensively in his groundbreaking *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* the Victorians "were able to respond to the vestiges of the Roman world and of Latin literature which reached them through the

classics of English literature and in contemporary fiction and poetry, painting and theatre, accessible to men and women on more or less equal terms”, more than they responded to ancient Greeks as few of them “understood or bothered about the precise nature of Rome’s debt to Greece” (Vance 1997: 16). Therefore, studying the Classics (and, particularly, Latin) was an inevitable aspect of the Victorians’ education, in order to feel part of a social and cultural milieu and be ready for leadership in the modern technologically developing world.

Throughout the nineteenth century, public schools as well as middle-class schools offered curricula based on the Classics. However, Greek language and literature were always only central to the gentleman’s education in the great public schools, whereas Latin was taught everywhere. Between 1858 and 1864, three Royal Commissions were appointed to examine the state of the education system in England and Wales. The results of Clarendon’s Report (1864), which dealt with the great public schools, and the results of Taunton’s Report (1868), which dealt with middle-class schools, showed that teaching Ancient Greek and Latin was still recommended for male education:

In accounting for the position which the classics now hold in that course, the first place should perhaps be assigned to their intrinsic excellence as an instrument of education, on which we shall remark hereafter¹.

University curricula were also discussed in extensive debates on disciplines, subject matters and topics, involving academics, intellectuals and public officials. From the 1830s, innovations in the university structure and academic staff were taken into consideration in Oxford, Cambridge, London, Dublin and Edinburgh. Such innovations went in the direction of an idea of a modern university that implied a more and more professional curriculum. Adam Sedgwick, the author of *A Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge* (1833), which was to become a sort of “handbook for prospective students” (Gibbins 2005: 247), maintained that the studies at university had to be divided into three branches:

- 1st. The study of the laws of nature, comprehending all parts of inductive philosophy.
- 2ndly. The study of ancient literature – or in other words, of those authentic records which convey to us an account of the feelings, the sentiments, and the actions, of men prominent in the history of the most famous empires of the ancient world. In these works we seek for examples and maxims of prudence and models of taste.
- 3dly. The study of ourselves, considered as individuals and as social beings. Under this head are included ethics, and metaphysics, moral and political philosophy, and some other kindred subjects of great complexity, hardly touched on in our academic system, and to be followed out in the more mature labours of afterlife. Our duty here is to lectin a good foundation on which to build; and to this end we must inquire what ought to be the conduct of the mind in entering on any of these great provinces of human learning (Sedgwick 1834:10).

¹ Clarendon’s report: <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/clarendon1864/index.html> (consulted on 24/05/2025).

Sedgwick's idea was, as can be observed, still basically theocentric: the study of science was "driven by knowing the mind of God", whilst the study of ancient literatures and languages was "driven by human concerns, gaining knowledge, wisdom and judgment" (Gibbins 2005: 247). No wonder that only two years later, John Stuart Mill counterattacked Sedgwick in his *Professor Sedgwick's Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge* (Mill 1905: 77-129): by questioning in detail the university don's argumentation, Mill argued that universities were still sanctuaries of academic immobility for the education of the British élite. However harsh the utilitarian philosopher's critique may have been, it was clear evidence of the ongoing debate on reforming education in the light of the social and economic revolution that Britain had been experiencing for some decades. Starting from the mid-century, William Whewell and later Mark Pattison and John Grote established and revised the university systems, curricula and statutes for a substantial change not only in tutoring, teaching and lecturing but also in offering a wider reflection on the role of education in the modern context in order to shape a liberal tolerant society. They each provided their own position and suggestions, yet they all agreed that modern sciences, physics, chemistry, natural history, geology and mathematics had to be included in any university curriculum. Likewise, they regarded the study of modern languages and philology as necessary in order to prepare British young generations to the ideal of liberal education. As to philology, Whewell and Grote in particular maintained that comparing (modern) languages to classical languages had become a more and more important activity, but philology – "a fresh and rising science" as Grote aptly called it (Grote 1856: 95) – could not replace the study of the Classics as it could not "provide the lessons, the learning and the guidance provided by [them]" (Gibbins 2005: 252). For Whewell,

Greek and Latin are peculiar and indispensable elements of a liberal education; and it is my business to shew, that the study of the modern authors just enumerated, and of others, however admirable their works may be, does not produce that kind of culture of the mind, which is the true object of a liberal education (Whewell 1838: 33).

Grote also championed the idea that Greek and Latin were no way replaceable, as they were the roots of the English language and culture and the means to make other (European) cultures accessible:

It is evident that classical study lends itself very well, in the general, to the idea of preparatory education of this kind. The subjects which it is concerned with have enough of literary charm, when pursued far enough, to make them come in, when recurred to in after life, as a mental recreation, and enough of business character to make them preserve the regard of practical and intelligent men, and to keep them in relation with the habitual manner of thought of such. They help to enlarge and liberalize the conception of our own work on earth, by bringing into comparison with it other people similarly employed under different circumstances, whose views on the subjects which interest us we may compare with our own, and so at once correct our views and relieve our attention (Grote 1856: 87).

Later, in the years between the turn of the century and the First World War, when public school curricula were enlarged with the study of other, more modern subject matters, the place of the Classics was still undisputable, as they were, for many public-school students, “part of the furniture of the mind” (Jenkins 1997: 519). However, it was ancient Rome that influenced the way the Victorians perceived their own past and present, their roots and language, their laws and sense of administration. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Rome was beginning to be a model for the Victorian empire in terms of administrative efficiency and the construction of national identity (see Edwards 1999). It was also the source and the inspiration of modern life, “the city of visible history” as Dorothea Brooke, the female protagonist of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, calls Rome during her tour in Italy (G. Eliot 1965 [1874]: 224). In other words, the Eternal City and the culture it represented shaped the life of the western world, its languages, laws, ideologies, art and architecture. As T. S. Eliot later would recognise, “We are all, so far as we inherit the civilization of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire” (T. S. Eliot 1957: 130).

This sense of belonging to a great civilization permeated the many discussions about education, and yet the attempts to reform or re-design curriculum for educational institutions (Oxbridge and the new London University, in particular) never questioned the role of the Classics in the transmission of culture and the reproduction of social élites. Even the most fervent supporters of scientific knowledge such as Thomas Huxley, who strove to establish new areas of study – e.g. law, psychology, anthropology, philology, economics – in university curriculum, admitted that for “a very good scientific education [...] putting [students] through the Latin and Greek mill will be indispensable” (Huxley 1903: 242). That is to say, the prestige of the Classics permeated the whole century as they “provided avenues for advancement in secondary schools, the universities, the church, the military, the professions, and the Civil Service” (Huxley 1903: 242). A classical education constituted the basis for gentlemen and the social élite; however, it was also regarded as an instrument of social mobility and a means of securing gender division. In fact, it was not until the creation of women’s colleges, later in the century, that women were allowed to study the Classics (Huxley 1903: 163).

In such a context, the role of Roman studies and Latin was as relevant as ever in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in connection with the expansion of the British Empire, and in the twentieth century when Rome came to represent a potent symbol of both cosmopolitanism, embraced by England as a colonial nation, and the transcendence of time. Like Rome, the Eternal City, London also aspired to be a model in its architecture, its power and its temperament. Like the Romans, the British also celebrated, for example, the *pax romana* (the Roman Peace) in India, drawing parallels between the Roman and British empires. Such comparisons were useful in discussions on race, citizenship, nation, and the British perception of the ‘other’ in terms of national identity and process of assimilation to that identity (see Majeed 1999: 88-109).

Apart from the unsurprising idea of associating the two empires within the Western tradition, it was the Victorian view on *latinitas* that corroborated the belief in the inevitability of the study of the Classics. In delivering his address titled “On the Place of Greek and Latin in Human Life” at the meeting of the *Classical Association of England and Wales* in

1904, J. W. MacKail stated that “The Latin achievement in the conquest of life is definite and assured. It represents all the constructive and conservative forces which make life into an organic structure” (*Classical Association of England and Wales Proceedings* 1904: 14). Therefore, in an age of profound changes, technological progress and rapid innovations in almost any area of human life, Rome, as Norman Vance puts it, “presented challenging paradigms and reference points, ways of making sense of a chaotic and volatile present” (Vance 1997: 25).

* * *

The Victorian age was a complex arena of debates and experimentations from the point of view of educational theories and practices. Robert Graves was born and grew up in this cultural environment. His father, Alfred Perceval Graves, who married twice and had ten children altogether from two marriages, was an intellectual, a poet himself and an inspector of schools. He introduced his son Robert to poetry and the imaginative power of versification from when he was a child. Already in 1908 Robert Graves started to write poetry: as he himself recognizes in the first chapter to *The White Goddess* “poetry has been my ruling passion” (Graves 1948: 17).

I have no intention of going into Graves’s reasons for taking up poetry and the history of his relationship with prose or of the perception of his success as a novelist and critic. On the other hand, what I will deal with is his approach to the Classics and the use of Rome and of *romanitas* as the paradigm for the organisation of his artistic world. The Graves family moved to Wimbledon in the 1890s and young Robert attended various prep schools: King’s College Junior School and Rokeby School in Wimbledon, then Hillbrow School in Rugby and in the end Copthorne Prep School in Sussex. When he was eleven, he went to one of the most famous public schools in England, Charterhouse on a scholarship in Classics. His education included Latin, Greek, English, Mathematics, French, History, Geography, Divinity, Arts and Music and physical education. He was not good at sports and did not enjoy boarding school, which as he remembered later on, encouraged ‘pseudo-homosexual behaviour’ that caused him to feel extremely uneasy (Graves 2018: 36-68). At Charterhouse studying the classical civilisations made him familiar with and fascinated by antiquity, which led him to his historical novels *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*, *Count Belisarius* and *The Greek Myths*. In addition, during his last years in Charterhouse, his editorial experience with *The Carthusian* and the publication of his first poems were fundamental for Graves in that he became aware of his talent and his aspirations and at the same time, critical of the educational system². After the First World War, he went up to Oxford to continue his studies but in his opinion, the English syllabus was “tedious” (Wilson 2018: 253). He preferred Anglo-Saxon poetry and again, reading the Classics, since he was surrounded by translators and Greek and Latin scholars like Robert Bridges, Gilbert Murray and Edmund Blunden.

The point is that Graves, unlike the Victorian poets and, even more so, the modernist poets for whom myth (and classicism), in T. S. Eliot’s words, is “simply a way of controlling

² Graves writes: “My last year at Charterhouse I did everything possible to show how little respect I had for school tradition” (Graves 2018: 55).

of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (T. S. Eliot 1923: 483), used the Classical world to give shape to his imaginary world. In fact, he never considered himself a Classicist or a scholar but a poet who moulded Classical material for his own work, to his creative "making" (in the etymological sense of *ποιέω*). For him, poetry had to be the combination of emotion and craftsmanship, as he explained in his 1922 essay *On English Poetry*:

"first, the Poetry, the unforeseen fusion in his mind of apparently contradictory emotional ideas; and second, Poetry, the more-or-less deliberate attempt, with the help of a rhythmic mesmerism, to impose an illusion of actual experience on the minds of others. [...] I would suggest that every poem worthy of the name has its central ideas, its nucleus, formed by this spontaneous process; later it becomes the duty of the poet as craftsman to present this nucleus in the most effective way possible, by practicing poetry more consciously as an art" (Graves 1922: 1).

This "fusion" of the poet's spontaneous emotions and ability to stimulate the reader's imagination is the basis of his poetic creation. It was the Classics that taught him to become aware of this process and how to render the poetry correctly.

In the 1964 Arion questionnaire on the relationship between the Classics and the literary community, when Graves was asked about the use of the Classics, he gave some interesting, though very short answers: "the point about the Classics is that they make one realize problems of meaning and syntax in writing one's own language" (Graves 1964: 57). He added a *post scriptum* saying that "I am not a 'literary man' but try to write clear English for which, as Mr. Charles Chaplin told me with passion recently on getting his hon. degree at Oxford, Latin is absolutely necessary" (Graves 1964: 57). Eddie Marsh, one of the editors of the anthology *Georgian Poets* to which Graves contributed early in his career, criticised Graves's style for being outdated. The poet replied that his style had been formed by his "reading, the immense preponderance of the 'classical' over the modern" and the Victorian literary tradition embodied by his father (Graves 1982: 30). However, that tradition used to regard the Classics as models to imitate, an idea that Graves never shared. He disliked imitation since it meant "virtuosity as opposed to inspiration" (Seymour 1995: 23)³. In other words, the point about the Classics is that they allowed Graves to find his own style.

Let us take, for example, the poem "The Legion" written in 1917 and published in *Fairies and Fusiliers* that same year. As can be seen, it is clearly a war poem and the use of classical references appear conventional: Rome and the Roman army are symbolic equivalents for the modern war, and the legionaries may be associated with the German invaders in France and Belgium:

'Is that the Three-and-Twentieth, Strabo mine,
Marching below, and we still gulping wine?'

³ Isobel Hurst adds that "as a critic [Graves] is dismissive about the kind of poems that were inspired by the 'gradus ad parnassum spirit', the odes and pastoral poems of eighteenth-century Augustanism" (Hurst 2015: 204).

From the sad magic of his fragrant cup
 The red-faced old centurion started up,
 Cursed, battered on the table. 'No', he said,
 'Not that! The Three-and-Twentieth Legion's dead,
 Dead in the first year of this damned campaign –
 The Legion's dead, dead, and won't rise again.
 Pity? Rome pities her brave lads that die,
 But we need pity also, you and I,
 Whom Gallic spear and Belgian arrow miss,
 Who live to see the Legion come to this:
 Unsoldierlike, slovenly, bent on loot,
 Grumblers, diseased, unskilled to thrust or shoot.
 O brown cheek, muscled shoulder, sturdy thigh!
 Where are they now? God! watch it straggle by,
 The sullen pack of ragged, ugly swine!
 Is that the Legion, Gracchus? Quick, the wine!
 'Strabo,' said Gracchus, 'you are strange to-night.
 The Legion is the Legion, it's all right.
 If these new men are slovenly, in your thinking,
 Hell take it! You'll not better them by drinking.
 They all try, Strabo; trust their hearts and hands.
 The Legion is the Legion while Rome stands,
 And these same men before the autumn's fall
 Shall bang old Vercingetorix out of Gaul' (Graves 2003: 30).

It is important to notice here that Graves does not offer a positive or negative opinion of the Roman identity, in that for him it conveys a wide meaning. He is referring to the experience of war in general and to the figure of the 'soldier', regardless of whether he is English, German or French. War brings together everyone who fights it, irrespective of their allegiances and ideologies, both in ancient and in modern times. In Graves's poetry, the aim of the dialogue between Strabo and Gracchus is to illustrate two points of view of the same reality, war, which is always a synonym of death, loss and pain⁴. Like other war poets, Graves is not unaffected by Germany's invasion of France and Belgium, but here the association between the Roman invaders and Germany is not exclusive, since the English seem to have a lot in common with the Romans⁵. Starting from the context of the First World War, the poem "The Legion", composed in a disciplined and rigorous metric-rhythmic form that shows a considerable *labor limae*, then adopts a universal dimension by depicting war as a collective experience carried out in loyalty to one's country. This feeling invalidates any rhetorical consideration of the futility of war; being a soldier does not mean enforcing one or another policy; it means being part of a collective body ("O brown cheek, muscled shoulder,

⁴ According to Adrian Cesar, "Gracchus clearly articulates Graves's own position in the closing lines of the poem" (Cesar 1993: 202-203).

⁵ In fact, Elizabeth Vandiver suggests ambivalence and ambiguity in Graves's choice of his reference points and aptly speaks of "different readings of the relationship" (Vandiver 2010: 71-75).

sturdy thigh!" (l. 15) "their hearts and hands" (l.23) that is destined to die and yet will remain forever in people's memory. This is, moreover, the idea of life that the Roman identity expresses: it does not attribute a positive or negative value to the single human experience, to the single individual, or single events, rather it intends to record the truth about men and women and draw inspiration from it. "Truth" is in fact the aspect of Graves's conception of poetry that is associated with the *truth* of the Classics. It is not simply a question of historical truth, of the objectivity of the facts that one can find for example in prose or history texts. Truth in poetry is associated "with the magical, with inspiration, with the a-rational and with quasireligious thinking" (Bennett 2015: 40)⁶, so it interprets a dimension that transcends empirical data and even linguistic data which, according to Graves, has objective limitations in conveying the multiple meanings of reality. Poetry is "a miraculous, unpredictable and unassessable event in non-history" (quoted in Seymour-Smith 1995: 537)⁷, but the process by which it is achieved is quite complex.

Rome also appears in another poem "The Cuirassiers of the Frontiers" (1938)⁸. Here, Graves inherits the Victorian sense of the analogy between the Roman people and the people of the end of the nineteenth century, all depicted during the decline of their empire:

Goths, Vandals, Huns, Isaurian mountaineers,
Made Roman by our Roman sacrament
We can know little (as we care little)
Of the Metropolis: her candled churches,
Her white-gowned pederastic senators,
The cut-throat factions of her Hippodrome,
The eunuchs of her draped saloons.

Here is the frontier, here our camp and place –
Beans for the pot, fodder for horses,
And Roman arms. Enough. He who among us
At full gallop, the bowstring to his ear,
Lets drive his heavy arrows, to sink
Stinging through Persian corslets damascened,
Then follows with the lance – he has our love.

The Christ bade Holy Peter sheathe his sword,
Being outnumbered by the Temple guard.
And this was prudence, the cause not yet lost
While Peter might persuade the crowd to rescue.
Peter renegued, breaking his sacrament.
With us the penalty is death by stoning,

⁶ The opposition of poetry and prose is made clear by Graves in *On English Poetry* (1922), but it also appears in the *Claudius* novels.

⁷ Unpublished letter to Martin Seymour-Smith from July 1965.

⁸ In 1938 Graves also published the historical novel *Count Belisarius*.

Not to be made a bishop.

In Peter's Church there is no faith nor truth,
Nor justice anywhere in palace or court.
That we continue watchful on the rampart
Concerns no priest. A gaping silken dragon,
Puffed by the wind, suffices us for God.
We, not the City, are the Empire's soul:
A rotten tree lives only in its rind (Graves 2003: 348-349).

The language used by Graves takes one back to the Latin meaning of "sacramentum"⁹ (lines 2 and 19), "senators" (l.6), "eunuchs" (l.7), "Metropolis" (l.4), "City" (l.27), but it is obvious that these words all refer to the British people. This way, an analogy is established between Roman and British greatness, but there is also an analogy between the fall of Rome and the decline of the British Empire. Graves acknowledges the sense of continuity linking Caesar with Queen Victoria that characterises European history, whose values and disvalues the British personify. There is an interesting use of the word "cuirassiers", of French origin, instead of a Latin synonym like *catafracti* as Jon Coulston suggests (Coulston 2015: 116), which indicates heavily armoured cavalry. The choice of a modern word, which also appears in the novel *Count Belisarius*, of the same period, highlights the sense of continuity that the Victorians proudly emphasised, starting with that "Civic Romanus sum", spoken by Palmerstone in Parliament on the occasion of the Don Pacifico diplomatic case. None the less, unlike the Victorians, Graves was aware that the analogy with the greatness of Rome also applied to the decline of Rome. He interpreted the analogy from a modern point of view, as a complex and ambivalent model of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, as an endless source of ideas, of stories and emotions, of values on which to build one's own identity as a European citizen of the twentieth century.

I would like to conclude by mentioning Graves's lecture entitled "Legitimate Criticism of Poetry" held at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1957. He began by saying that poetry "is more than words musically arranged. It is sense; good sense; penetrating, often heart-rending sense ... it often has layer after layer of meaning concealed in it!" (Graves 1958: 34), implying a complexity in poetry that derives from the Latin concept of "veritas", in other words of the Greek concept of "aletheia" (ἀλήθεια), that is, the unveiling of truth. Only poetry, since it is therapeutic art, can unveil the multiple aspects of life. This is taught by the Classics as the "matrix" of modernity¹⁰.

⁹ Vance suggests that "sacramentum [...] could denote both a military oath of allegiance and a Christian rite", (Vance 1997: 223).

¹⁰ I use the word "matrix" in the sense used by Graves himself in an interview for *The Paris Review* in 1969 à propos of his method of revising poetry: "You feel there are a certain number of poems that have got to be written. You don't know what they are, but you feel: this is one, and that is one. It is the relation between jewels and the matrix – the jewels come from the matrix, then there's the matrix to prove it. A lot of poems are matrix rather than jewels" (Graves 1969: 119-145, 137).

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Loredana Salis

R. L. Stevenson's "The Enchantress" (1889): A *Fin de Siècle* Cautionary Tale?

Abstract I: *The Enchantress* di R. L. Stevenson racconta "le avventure di un gentleman squattrinato e di una giovane ereditiera", che si incontrano in Francia, vanno in Inghilterra e poi in Scozia per contrarre "un matrimonio singolare". La coppia si separa il giorno stesso delle nozze dacché la signora Hatfield abbandona il marito per recarsi nelle Americhe. Ci si propone di rileggere il racconto, con attenzione particolare alla sua valenza in termini di critica sociale e di cambiamento culturale. Indagando se e in che misura il racconto funga da monito per il lettore, se ne sottolinea la rappresentazione di tradizione e convenzione, coi propri limiti e potenzialità, oltre gli stereotipi culturali dominanti nel periodo del *fin de siècle*.

Abstract II: R. L. Stevenson's *The Enchantress* recounts "the adventures of a penniless man and a rich heiress" meeting in France, travelling to England and then to Scotland to be united in "a singular marriage". The newlyweds separate shortly afterwards, with Mrs Hatfield leaving her husband for good and moving somewhere "in the continent of America". This study focuses on the tale's value in terms of social critique and cultural change. In posing the question of whether it is a cautionary tale, it investigates Stevenson's insight into the meaning, the potentiality and the limitations of tradition and conventions as well as his ability to go beyond *fin-de-siècle* clichés.

Keywords: Stevenson, *The Enchantress*, New Woman question, *fin de siècle*.

Robert Louis Stevenson's long lost *The Enchantress* recounts 'the adventures' of a young gentleman turned 'penniless and a rich heiress in a foreign country', as the subtitle from the original manuscript has it (Catucci 2021: 40, n30). Mr Hatfield and Miss Croft meet accidentally in the French town of Royat, where he yearns for an evening meal and a bed he cannot afford, having pawned his "last remaining articles" and spent all the money (Stevenson 1989: 554). Thus, he encounters the eponymous charming "orphan of wealth and beauty" (555). The couple comes to an agreement, with Hatfield signing "a marriage contract [he] never saw the like of [...] for stiffness" (564) and travelling to England, then to Scotland, where the two marry. As soon as they leave the clergyman's house, however, the newlyweds separate, with Mrs Hatfield abandoning her husband for good without explanation. It turns out, in the epilogue, that she has moved 'to the continent of America' (567), leaving

him free to seek divorce or else accept the terms of their 'singular marriage' – the original title of the tale. Stevenson wrote *The Enchantress* around 1889, during a boat trip to Samoa, where he would spend the last years of his life together with his wife Fanny and stepson Lloyd Osbourne. It took a whole century for the manuscript to be printed and published, thus formally closing the Stevenson canon. After the author's death in 1884, the 27-page handwritten text went missing for a while, arguably because of Lloyd's disapproval of a story that seemed too autobiographical¹. Following Fanny's death, it was sold by Stevenson's stepdaughter, Isobel Strong, to a Manhattan art gallery in 1915. It was subsequently auctioned and resold in 1923, before being acquired by a librarian in 1947 and donated to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library – Yale University in 1983². Six years later, US scholars David D. Mann and his wife, Susan Garland Mann, announced the discovery of the uncatalogued manuscript, "RLS: Un-cat. Ms. 406", which they transcribed and published in the north American quarterly *The Georgia Review*³.

Since then, the story has been translated into Italian, French and Spanish⁴, but has received relatively little critical attention compared to Stevenson's other works, both his major and canonical ones and those which may be termed as minor writings. Scholars who have written about *The Enchantress* have expanded on the line of investigation first pursued by the Manns, thereby further exploring the aspects of hereditary wealth, class, gender, marriage and the law. Indeed, the tale is a romantic parody about marriage laws in Scotland and England, with special attention to gender differences and a woman's right to manage her own finances and retain ownership of her property (the Married Women's property Acts had been passed by the British Parliament in 1870 and 1882)⁵. However, there is more to *The Enchantress* than just that. Undoubtedly this is a typical *fin-de-siècle* tale, testifying to Stevenson's own expertise in legal matters, his interest in "the background of gentility" (Mehew 1989-1990), in male-female relationships. It also bears testament to his high regard

¹ See Catucci (2021: 41-42). Expanding on David Mann and Susan Garland Mann's suggestions (in Stevenson 1989: 552), Catucci lists possible reasons for Lloyd's resistance, including the fact that his mother was a divorcee, whom Stevenson had met and pursued while in France and followed her to California. According to Ernst Mehew, this is all "nonsense": "There is nothing to suggest the resemblance between Stevenson's marriage and his heroine's". Mehew's notes, dated 2 November 1989, were published by *The Times* on 13 November 1989. Copies of the article and original notes are held in the National Library of Scotland and catalogued as "Research papers concerning 'The Enchantress' by Robert Louis Stevenson, including a photostat of the original manuscript [1888-1889], 1989-1990, Acc.13917/251".

² Cf. Mitigan 1989: 17. Mitigan replicates the information reported by the Manns in their introduction to the 1st printed edition of the tale (the 1989 edn.). According to Ernest Mehew (1989-1990), "almost every statement in that introduction is incorrect or misleading", and he goes on to provide the correct information.

³ This is the first edition of the story. In Britain, *The Enchantress* was first published in 1990, in the *Telegraph Weekend Magazine* (4 August, pp. 20-22, 48-53). Ernest Mehew belies this information too. It is 'nonsense' to say that the Manns discovered a manuscript, which was uncatalogued, while the librarian had a list of all Stevenson's materials. *The Enchantress* had been accessed by Mehew himself in 1986 who "had no difficulty in obtaining a Xerox copy" (1989-1990).

⁴ *L'incantatrice: un amore a sorpresa* (1990a, repr. 1993) translated by Claudio Maria Messina; *L'incantatrice* (1990b) foreword and translation by Ornella De Zordo; *La Magicienne* (1991) translated by Patrice Rapusseau; *La hechicera* (2004) translated by Juan Antonio Molina Foix.

⁵ See, especially, Mallardi (1996: 133-152), Linehan (1997: 34-59) and Wånggren (2020).

for literature and the art of writing⁶, which is best understood, to cite Ian Duncan, “in terms of a series of choices and experiments which involved a critical refusal of the Victorian novel and its protocols, rather than a failure to master them, on the one hand; and, on the other, a virtuoso formal refinement of the magazine genres of tale, sensational novella and adventure serial” (2010: 15). Duncan speaks in defence of Stevenson’s *oeuvre* with a view to redressing the balance between the British canon and the work of a genius who remains somehow unduly considered secondary vis à vis the great authors of his time – Shaw, Wilde, Hardy, Conrad, Kipling, to name a few. Along Duncan’s lines, this study revisits a lesser-known, complex and thought-provoking, piece by Stevenson whose strength lies in its ability to tackle and articulate the individual’s existential dilemmas against the backdrop of late-Victorian social anxieties regarding power, gender roles, sexuality, finance and social conventions. In posing the question of whether or to what extent *The Enchantress* can be taken to be a cautionary tale in an extended sense, my aim is to investigate the writer’s engagement with what Francesco Marroni (2010) terms ‘Victorian disharmonies’ – a condition of permanent dissonance between the individual and society – as Stevenson looked beyond *fin-de-siècle* cultural stereotypes and clichés and focused upon the individual in his rapport with tradition and the present.

Significantly, the story depicts a paradoxical situation in which everything is “very much upside down” (Stevenson 1989: 564) especially regarding gender roles: “In a man’s stories – Hatfield tells Miss Croft – it is always he who gives [...] and I find myself in the position of the taker” (559). As the plot unfolds, in fact, it is the woman not the man, who proposes (564); it is she, not he, who owns and revels in managing the money. Indeed, while Hatfield loses all that he has at the casino, Miss Croft gains full knowledge of her possessions and looks forward to being her own administrator. She is “not highly emotional” (564) whereas he is; the man gives her his hand rather than take hers; the woman asks for and takes his arm rather than give him hers (563; 567). In Edward Hatfield’s words: “You are the man in this story, I the woman” (559). Man and woman emerge both as ethical and moral categories: in other words, what the protagonists do and say reflect cultural biases which this tale seeks to expose and possibly subvert. The reader is invited to imagine a world in which women yearn to manage finances (“Nothing agrees with me like business”, “Let me be your banker”, Miss Croft tells Hatfield, 563, 557), and men are at their service because they choose to be and not because they are tricked into it (“Do with me what you will. I am your chattel”, Hatfield tells Miss Croft, 565), women give orders and lead the game, and they do it well. The prospect of living in such a world *à l’envers* fed social anxieties in relation to the demands of early feminist movements and activists, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, the militant champion of woman suffrage, who may have inspired Stevenson to give his hero-

⁶ *Essays in the Art of Writing* (1905) is the title of a collection dealing with aspects such as *On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature*, *The Morality of the Profession of Letters*, *Books which have Influenced Me*, *A Note on Realism*, to cite a few titles.

ine that same name⁷. Notably, this name of Norman origin signifies ‘vigor’ and ‘bravery’⁸ and echoes also the concepts of ‘work’ and ‘industriousness’⁹, thereby highlighting the peculiar character of his protagonist. Stevenson fashioned Miss Croft as a strong-willed and independent woman, a New Woman in her own right. Perhaps he agreed with Emmeline Pankhurst that “well-behaved women rarely make history”, to cite a popular quotation that has been attributed to her but also to women like her (e.g. Eleanor Roosevelt), who devoted their life to the feminist cause and the emancipation of women within the largely male-dominated social and cultural contexts of the *fin de siècle*¹⁰. And he must also have known that well-behaved women rarely make stories either – indeed the literature of the period displayed a plethora of unwomanly, unconventional or ‘improper’ women, who did not conform to the angel-in-the-house motherly cliché and were therefore considered to be ‘bad’ or evil, fallen women, man eaters, man haters, agents or symptoms of social degeneration and decline¹¹. Emmeline Croft would appear to add to that catalogue of heroines who “exploit men for mercenary advantage” or else are “caught up in the grip of spiritual possession, whether devilish or divine” (Linehan 1997: 45), on a par with Wilde’s Salome (1893) and Machen’s Helen Vaughan (1894), to name a couple of contemporary fictional degenerates. Her story may thus be taken as a cautionary tale about the consequences of disrupting current or traditional power structures, including the separate-sphere conception of society.

The title of the story would accordingly highlight as its focus the bewitching quality of the female protagonist: associated with the moon (Stevenson 1989: 557), Stevenson’s enchantress replicates the notion of woman as *femme fatale*, manipulative and dangerous because capable of seducing, alluring, tempting, hypnotising men, and leading them away from their virtuous paths. Thus viewed, Miss Croft, is the kind of ‘plotting’ woman preying on her ‘innocent suitor’ that late-Victorian readers probably assumed her to be. Yet, a careful re-reading of the tale reveals that there is more to its New Woman rhetoric than meets the eye. Indeed, while *The Enchantress* draws attention to the machinations of a presumably opportunist young lady – partially belying its author’s reputation as a narrator of a men-only world (Linehan 1997: 34-35) – there is little doubt as to Mr Hatfield’s central place in the plot, as well as to the scope of this tale.

Unlike a well-behaved woman a well-behaved man makes both history and a story; at least this is what *The Enchantress* appears to suggest. The story is told from Hatfield’s perspective: recounted in retrospect, it is a typical first-person narrative, which readers are inclined to believe while also empathising with the protagonist. His little odyssey follows the fate of a

⁷ Ernest Meheew relates of a character named Emmeline in a tale that Stevenson drafted in the 1870s but which he never completed. See Meheew (1989-1990).

⁸ “Emmeline” (*The Dictionary of Medieval Names from European Sources* 2023, <http://dmnes.org/2023/1/name/Emmeline> consulted on 19/06/2025).

⁹ “Meaning of the first name – Emmeline”, <https://www.ancestry.com/first-name-meaning/emmeline> (consulted on 19/06/2025).

¹⁰ A slight variation of the sentence appears in an essay by the north American historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich entitled *Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735* (1976: 20).

¹¹ See definition by Lyn Pykett, highlighting the arbitrary use of the term ‘New Woman’ (2001: xii).

man whose ‘gentlemanly exterior’ is of no use to him in a foreign country (it would probably serve him more, were he in England). It could perhaps constitute a warning of the risk of being genteel and earnest in a world in which chivalric values have lost their significance – “I knew my fellow creatures – Hatfield muses – even to the most clamant cases of distress [...] they would be little likely to exceed a franc” (Stevenson 1989: 554). Mr Hatfield is the moral and emotional barometer of this “miserable story” (557), and a self-proclaimed tool in the hands of Miss Croft to whom he says: “You have picked up a tool [...] what do you propose to do with it? You have bought a slave; I hope you like him” (559). Thus read, *The Enchantress* is surely a cautionary tale about the tragic fall of its protagonist, a ‘gentleman’ proper, raised to be well-mannered as much as well-bred and possibly well-off, who faces the consequences of living at a time when the virtues of nobility and of nobleness no longer hold their classical value but rather are lost to the priorities of a changed society. Stevenson may have had in mind Walter Scott’s reflections on chivalry as expressed in a popular article of that title dedicated to the mutability of ideas and institutions (1824)¹². He may also have drawn on Samuel Smiles’ conception of “the True Gentleman” as “one whose nature has been fashioned after the highest models. [...] His qualities depend not upon fashion or manners, but upon moral worth. Not on personal possessions, but on personal qualities” (2002: 314; my emphasis). In fact, Mr Hatfield is one who could ‘never inflict pain’, to paraphrase Cardinal Newman’s definition of the gentleman (quoted in Antinucci 2012a: 78), as the end of the tale clearly suggests:

Mr Venable: ‘O, I think Mrs. Hatfield fully justified.’
 ‘I have no doubt of that,’ said I; and then immediately, ‘and I suppose nothing can be done for me.’ ‘Well,’ returned Mr. Venables. ‘You can go to law.’
 ‘I will never do that,’ cried I.
 ‘I believe she rather figured on it in that way,’ returned the lawyer.
 ‘She can go on figuring upon it in that way till Hell is cold, for me,’ I said, getting my hat.
 ‘That was just as she expected; she had a great esteem for your character, Mr. Hatfield’ (Stevenson 1989: 568; my emphasis).

A product of his time, Edward Hatfield thinks of himself and acts like a traditional gentleman (the histrionic gesture of ‘getting the hat’ in the exchange above is significant, in these terms). He represents “a steady anchorage to face the social, political and philosophical uneasiness of the Victorian period” and “the moral champion of an age that was ontologically in transition” (Antinucci 2012a: 79). As the tale progresses, he comes to terms with the need to adapt to a less perfectly noble ideal of the English gentleman – one that has no instinct for command, appears not to know right from wrong, has no authority nor power, an ordinary man, or worse, a “common beggar”:

¹² Commissioned by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the entry on “Chivalry” compiled by Scott thus defines the qualities of the gentleman: “A general feeling of respect to the female sex; in the rules of forbearance and decorum in society; in the duties of speaking truth and observing courtesy; and in the general conviction and assurance, that, as no man can encroach upon the property of another without accounting to the laws, so none can infringe on his personal honour, be the difference of rank what it may, without subjecting himself to personal responsibility”, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sir-Walter-Scott-on-chivalry-1987278> (consulted on 19/06/2025).

'Miss Croft,' I broke out, '... I have no money, no hopes, no friends, no honest trade; I am a *common beggar*, and that is the miserable truth.'

'How on earth have you got to such a pitch?' she asked. I told her at some length my *miserable story*; and though I was myself appalled by its *unbroken silliness*, I told it honestly. 'You can judge for yourself,' I added, 'if it be worthwhile to help a *creature so incompetent*' (Stevenson 1989: 557; my emphasis).

A self-confessed incompetent, Stevenson's *fin de siècle* gentleman is a 'hero in transition' (Antinucci 2012a: 79), the survivor of an extinct race, humble enough to speak "honestly" and admit to the "unbroken silliness" of his tale; he is possibly the result of the emergence of the New Woman in British culture and literature of the time. Mr Hatfield himself is rather naïve, somehow "proud" (Stevenson 1989: 564) and immature when it comes to sentimental relationships. He assumes he will be playing the traditional masculine role and pursuing chivalric love, while Miss Croft demands of him "knightly service" (Stevenson 1989: 560), clearly mocking Hatfield's love vocabulary with words and deeds:

[...] And from you – what do I ask?

'It is what I wish I knew,' I said. 'You say I picked you up,' she continued. 'You read in tales of magicians who pick up strays like you in the slums of mediaeval cities, and what is it they buy from them? their wind, their appetite, their soul. You will begin to think me greedy, for I want a little of all that.' She broke off with her smile. 'I hope I frighten you,' she said. 'You charm me,' said I. She looked at me in a manner too peculiar to be told, so much of doubt, of interest, of animation as that glance contained. 'I did not say I wished your love,' she said (Stevenson 1989: 559-560).

The exchange confirms Stevenson's interest in the themes of romantic love, gentility and courtship, which he had previously explored in several essays reflecting a critical awareness of the "blind arrogance rooted in his society's system of distorted sex roles", what the Scottish writer termed a "man's vanity and self-importance" (Stevenson 1906: 87). He contended that "men must learn to reckon with female individuality and subjectivity if adult love is to succeed" (Linehan 1997: 36), possibly as a result of his own experience, being the partner of a woman his senior and facing the daily challenges of love as necessarily linked to an individual's moral maturation. Indeed, love challenged "both sexes not only to move beyond youthful extremes of egoism, but also to repair the effects of a social ideology which artificially aggrandizes ego in men while misguidedly denying it in women" (Linehan 1997: 36).

Hardly a New-woman or a New-man writer *stricto sensu*, Stevenson was intrigued by the possibility afforded to him by the art of writing to explore and narrate "a vertiginous sense of fractured perspectives" (Poole 2009: 267)¹³ – he conceived of life as adventure; to him existence remained an open question. Viewed in such terms, *The Enchantress* does not simply tell the story of a *femme fatale* and of her victim, nor does it relate solely their singular

¹³ What Adrian Poole (2009) writes with reference to *The Master of Ballantrae*, also written in 1889, equally applies to *The Enchantress*.

marriage, rather it expands on the author's interest in the individual and his/her maturation or elevation – the capacity to cope with the adversities of life and pursue one's goals in a non-selfish and openminded way¹⁴. A former Socialist, Stevenson looked back 'with regret' on those times; already by 1875 he was convinced that "we had better leave these great changes to what we call great blind forces: their blindness being so much more perspicacious than the little, peering, partial eyesight of men" (Stevenson 1881: 94-95). He referred to both men and women; though cognisant of the claims of the "enslaved sex" (Stevenson 1923: 360), he focused upon the condition of the human being ontologically caught up in existential dilemmas such as Shakespeare, one of his mentors, had magisterially staged them¹⁵.

Hatfield faces the consequences of his actions – the fact that he gambled all his money in a casino – and of that strange encounter which is somehow reminiscent of Macbeth's fatal encounter with the three witches, also transposing Hamlet's dilemma to the present. The question of "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them" (Shakespeare 1994: III, i, 56-60) – Hamlet's choice between life and death – becomes a choice between financial security and the lack of it. If Hatfield were to break the matrimonial contract, he would lose the £300 yearly allowance he and Emmeline have agreed on. But if he doesn't, he must remain committed to an absent wife and give up both his liberty and the possibility of engaging in a genuine love relationship. The tale's end presents him with a moral question concerning his integrity: whether it is more noble to suffer and live penniless but a free man, or else to set the price of his own freedom and happiness (£300), thereby also giving up his gentlemanly past. Stevenson provides no answer other than that which every reader is prepared to give him/herself each time s/he goes through the pages of the story. Here as elsewhere with his work, reading is "an independent effort – a window open to a different view" (Henry James quoted in Fielding 2012: 159). And as he wrote to Trevor Haddon in a letter, "No man can settle another's life for him. It is the test of the nature and courage of each that he shall decide it for himself" (Stevenson 1923: 123). Or herself, for that matter. Miss Croft is equally entangled in a dilemma regarding her survival. Brought up in a world in which men fail her, one way or another – her father has died while Mr Ramley, her guardian, is "not a sound man of business" (Stevenson 1989: 568)¹⁶ – Emmeline must learn to look after herself and her inheritance. She thus employs Mr Venables, a lawyer, a 'venerable gentleman' by name and deed, who helps her make the most of marriage laws in order to gain access to her father's property¹⁷. By the end of the tale, it becomes clear that the

¹⁴ Stevenson was clearly influenced by J. S. Mill's individualism as expressed, for instance, in chapter 3 of his essay *On Liberty* (1859). Individualism is opposed to the blind submission to social customs and traditions, and choice is crucial to individual freedom and happiness: "He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice" (Mill 1991: 65). By making independent choices, individuals develop and strengthen their character.

¹⁵ Stevenson acknowledges Shakespeare as the first of his most influential writers (Stevenson 1905a: 77).

¹⁶ "A famous financier in those days, and a great and daring card player; nor will the reader have forgot the singular scandal with which, some ten years later, he collapsed and like Samson involved thousands in his fate" (Stevenson 1989: 555).

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that the three male figures in the tale are defined as 'gentleman', each of them rep-

law allowed her, almost compelled her to find a man who would agree to her peculiar terms and get married. She also knew that Mr Hatfield was a true gentleman and that he would behave as one – he would honour his word to the last.

‘A literary treasure’¹⁸, *The Enchantress* confronts its reader with significant moral and ethical questions while also liaising with themes and tropes that were crucial to the cultural debate of the *fin de siècle*, notably the New Woman question, the marriage debate, the place of love in the matrimonial contract, and the meaning and value of honesty, liberty, trust and self-dignity in human relationships¹⁹. Stevenson experimented with his characters in a way that recalls not only Shakespearean tragedy, but also his own Dr Jekyll conducting his laboratory tests. In that gothic novella (published just three years earlier) it is an accident that initiates the story; here too life happens in consequence of an uncalculated or unpredictable event. A destitute gentleman and a young heiress meet, by chance, they unite in a matrimony that serves to resolve each other’s issues while it questions their integrity and ability to choose freely. A dissonance underlies the tale and functions as “a structural element of change” (Marroni 2010: 49): the myth of stability through matrimony gives way to a pressing demand for individual evolution and maturation. Hatfield will have to face up to his being a “melancholic anachronism” (Antinucci 2012b: 33) and negotiate his worth, as an individual and a man. This brings us back to the question of whether and to what extent Stevenson’s tale is a cautionary tale. It cannot be considered such if viewed as the expression of *fin de siècle* degeneration theories, which would mean considering Stevenson’s enchantress as the root of all of Hatfield’s evils. On the other hand, the tale is cautionary in its exposure of the perils of an uncritical mind (one that blindly accepts social customs and traditions). At first, Hatfield articulates his sense of superiority to women to justify how he chooses the person he will ask for money: “Being a man, I should certainly be a great ass if I did not choose a woman: upon that I did not hesitate an instant”, he tells the reader (Stevenson 1989: 555). As the story unfolds, Miss Croft reveals herself as the agent of Hatfield’s transformation – this enchantress is construed not as a destructive woman but rather as a vehicle of his self-realisation. Her ‘use’ as a ‘tool’ within the tale is in stark contrast with Hatfield’s preoccupation that he has “no use” (Stevenson 1989: 554) and has become “a tool” in her hands (559). By shaking the world of his delusions (‘the gentlemanly exterior’), Emmeline allows him to look around and within himself with different eyes and a different sensibility, leaving him (and the reader) to face the existential dilemma of what it is to be (or not to be) a man and of whether he can still be a true gentleman. Storytelling – itself a supreme enchantress amongst the arts (Stevenson 1905b: 9-12) – gets the reader emotionally and intellectually involved as s/he is confronted with a necessary disharmony and possibly ends up sympathising with Hatfield while also sharing Mr Venables’s view that Miss Croft is “fully justified” (Steven-

resenting a different way of being a gentleman in late-Victorian times, each of them allowing for a critique, on the part of the author, to that tradition and its legacy.

¹⁸ That is how *The Telegraph Weekend Magazine* defined the tale in the issue that published the first British edition of the tale.

¹⁹ See, on these aspects, a study conducted among law students asked to assess Stevenson’s tale in the light of Karl Polanyi’s social theory (Wolcher 1990).

son 1989: 568). The singularity of Stevenson's *récit* lies precisely there, in its potential for cultivating mutual understanding and comprehension beyond consolidated clichés and fears of precariousness and fragmentation.

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‘Landscape for its own sake’: Walter Pater’s Ecology in “Sebastian van Storck”

Abstract I: Questo saggio si propone di analizzare la rappresentazione in Walter Pater delle modalità di percepire la natura, il paesaggio e la loro interrelazione con l’umano, alla luce della teoria eco-critica e dell’estetica materialista. Il suo ritratto immaginario “Sebastian van Storck” offre lo spunto per indagare come in Pater il testuale sia in continuità con la vita, mettendo in discussione nozioni di dualità e differenza tra sistemi in conflitto. Più di altri protagonisti pateriani, Sebastian sperimenta una simbiosi con il suo ambiente. Il presente saggio si concentrerà in particolare sul suo rapporto con la terra nell’Olanda del XVII secolo, al fine di mettere in luce la radicale poetica ecologica iscritta nel ritratto di Pater.

Abstract II: This paper aims at analysing Walter Pater’s representation of modes of perceiving nature, landscape and their interrelation with the human, from the point of view of ecocritical theory and materialist aesthetics. His imaginary portrait “Sebastian van Storck” offers scope for investigating how in Pater textuality is in continuity with life, questioning notions of duality and difference between conflicting systems. More than other Paterian protagonists, Sebastian experiences symbiosis with his environment. This paper will specifically focus on his relation with the land in seventeenth-century Holland in order to unearth the radical poetics of ecology that Pater’s portrait embeds.

Keywords: Walter Pater, imaginary portrait, Holland, landscape, ecology.

1. Introduction

The traditional critical approach to Walter Pater’s imaginary portrait, “Sebastian van Storck”, has analysed it in terms of a dichotomy between form and dissolution, art and the matter of life. The intention of this essay is to probe the interspace between these assumed binaries and unearth the radical poetics of ecology that it embeds. In this work Pater reflects on the golden age of Dutch art, the period in which the narrative is set. The Dutch, according to Pater, were beginning to realise the pictorial beauty of their country aided by their painters, ‘the first true masters of landscape for its own sake’¹. They valued their landscape as much

¹ “Sebastian van Storck”. 1910 [1886]. *Imaginary Portraits*. London: MacMillan and Co., 81-115, 87. All quotations are from this edition. The present essay originates in a discussion at the University of Roma Tre on

through aesthetic as through direct experience. This landscape, we are reminded, has been created by feats of engineering, by a fight with the sea no less heroic than the fight against the Spanish for Dutch independence. Holland's fragile water ecology frames the story and sets in relief the alienation of the protagonist as he distances himself from its environment, led by a desire for self-effacement and annihilation. He believes in Spinoza's doctrine of the one absolute being, sharing the "infectious mania" that Pater discusses in *Plato and Platonism*, and is unable to live the finiteness of the phenomenal world². In his devotion to permanence, Sebastian feels the deadly appeal of the primeval, of a time when Holland's inhabitants were living "a humble existence" with no desire to change, surrounded by "great breadths of calm light above and around" just "influenced by, and in a sense, living upon them" (Pater 1910: 94-95).

2. Primeval Landscape

In the 16th chapter of his *Natural History*, Pliny, quoted twice in Pater's text, had described the two primitive tribes of the Chauci, situated in north-west Germany, justifying his digression from an ongoing discussion of fruitful trees with the urgency to reveal the surprise "felt on finding by actual experience what is the life of mortals when they inhabit a country that is without either tree or shrub"³. Obviously there is no mention of the Low Countries but the geography Pliny describes is that typical of the area:

I have already stated that in the East many nations that dwell on the shores of the ocean are placed in this necessitous state; and I myself have personally witnessed the condition of the Chauci, both the Greater and the Lesser, situate [sic] in the regions of the far North. In those climates a vast tract of land, invaded twice each day and night by the overflowing waves of the ocean, opens a question that is eternally proposed to us by Nature, whether these regions are to be looked upon as belonging to the land, or whether as forming a portion of the sea?

Here a wretched race is found, inhabiting either the more elevated spots of land, or else eminences artificially constructed, and of a height to which they know by experience that the highest tides will never reach. Here they pitch their cabins; and when the waves cover the surrounding country far and wide, like so many mariners on board ship are they: when, again, the tide recedes, their condition is that of so many shipwrecked men, and around their cottages they pursue the fishes as they make their escape with the receding tide. It is not their lot, like the adjoining nations, to

Maria Del Sapio's seminal essay "Pater, Sebastian e l'assoluto", re-edited by Maddalena Pennacchia, Simona Corso and Maria Paola Guarducci in *Eretiche ed Esteti* (2021). Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 137-162 (10 May 2024). Paola Colaiacomo's comments on Pater have been invaluable. I am building on the important scholarship of Lene Østermark-Johansen, bringing together a wider body of material and a longer history to chart a trajectory of ideas hitherto perhaps not fully addressed. Perhaps the most significant discussion of the theme developed in this article is to be found in Denis Denisoff's volume *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (2021). See also Giovanni Bassi (2017).

² Pater 2004 [1893]: 24. Pater's revision of metaphysics and his materialist aesthetic are discussed in Morgan (2017).

³ Pliny the Elder 1855 [AD 77-79]: Book XVI, 1.

keep any flocks for sustenance by their milk, nor even to maintain a warfare with wild beasts, every shrub, even, being banished afar. With the sedge and the rushes of the marsh they make cords, and with these they weave the nets employed in the capture of the fish; they fashion the mud, too, with their hands, and drying it by the help of the winds more than of the sun, cook their food by its aid, and so warm their entrails, frozen as they are by the northern blasts; their only drink, too, is rainwater, which they collect in holes dug at the entrance of their abodes: and yet these nations, if this very day they were vanquished by the Roman people, would exclaim against being reduced to slavery! Be it so, then – Fortune is most kind to many, just when she means to punish them (Pliny 1855: Book XVI.I).

In an informed geography, where borders between land and water remain unstable, unfixed, it is the chaos of the ocean that predominates. Pliny defines these primitive inhabitants as a “wretched race”, compelled to inhabit elevated spots of land, although when they suffer flooding they become mariners exposed to the dangers of sea water, or shipwrecked men who have lost all their possessions. Unlike other nations they cannot settle anywhere, nor become farmers, nor raise their own cattle, but feed only on fish and drink rainwater.

In other classical historiographic sources, the Chauci mainly appear as the “most noble nation among the Germans”, as Tacitus writes, but also bellicose and resisting Roman dominion⁴ (Murphy 2004: 170). Pliny’s version, however, emphasises not their value but their inferiority with respect to Rome. Given their wretchedness, it would be a blessing for them to be enslaved and spared a miserable condition. Trevor Murphy (2004) has thoroughly commented on how Pliny channels the anxieties of the empire, providing an image of periphery that reminds one of the risk of reverting to primeval confusion. The Romans would have given the Chauci fixed territories and would have made their country less vulnerable with a network of dykes and roads, exporting a model of acquisition, since in Pliny’s Rome, “‘living’ means ‘having’, if not ‘getting’” (Murphy 2004: 173). Guided by the ocean, far away from that balance between sea and land that for the Latin writer is peculiar to Italy, the life of the Chauci testifies to the instability of possessing and of possessions, since they are not colonists but castaways and exiles (Murphy 2004: 171-174). If they can be seen as constituting a kind of anti-Rome, Pliny’s myth of Roman dominion changing the Cauci’s fortune is overtly destabilised in Pater. Sebastian van Storck, the bird-like protagonist of Pater’s portrait, looks in fact at the living conditions of primeval forefathers “but without Pliny’s contempt for them” (Pater 1910: 94):

A cloyed Roman might despise their humble existence, fixed by necessity from age to age, and with no desire to change, as “the ocean poured in its flood twice a day, making it uncertain whether the country was a part of the continent or of the sea”. But for his part Sebastian found something of poetry in all that, as he conceived what thoughts the old Hollander might have had at his fishing, with nets themselves woven of seaweed, waiting carefully for his drink on the heavy rains, and taking refuge,

⁴ Tacitus (*Germania*) is quoted in Trevor Murphy (2004). For a discussion of Pliny and the margins of the empire see Murphy (2004: 165-193).

as the flood rose, on the sand-hills, in a little hut constructed but airily on tall stakes, conformable to the elevation of the highest tides, like a navigator, thought the learned writer, when the sea was risen, like a shipwrecked mariner when it was retired. For the fancy of Sebastian he lived with great breadths of calm light above and around him, influenced by, and, in a sense, living upon them, and surely might well complain, though to Pliny's so infinite surprise, on being made a Roman citizen (Pater 1910: 94-95).

We could ask whether Sebastian is providing a predictably romanticised version of primitive life or whether he shows greater awareness of how many tales of shipwreck and disaster are implied in colonial ventures, how many stories of erasure of indigenous life, thus undermining an "action-hero version of history" (Park 2025: 1). The poetical look of Sebastian here seems to coincide with that of the author and reduce the tension between the viewpoints of the character and of the author.

3.1. A Politics of the Environment

Pater uses the genre of imaginary portraiture to present a historical and cultural climate, a set of ideas rather than a story. In sending his first portrait to the editor of *Macmillan's Magazine*, he writes:

I send you [...] a M.S. entitled *The House and the Child*. It is not, as you may perhaps fancy, the first part of a work of fiction, but is meant to be complete in itself [...]. I call the M.S. a portrait, and mean readers, as they might do on seeing a portrait, to begin speculating – what came of him? (Park 2025: 1).

In "Sebastian van Storck" Pater uses character to elaborate a politics of the environment, while questioning the boundaries of subjectivity: "The Paterian body as a viewing body, a travelling body, perceptive of space and landscape, needs further addressing, and the geographies of his imaginary portraits invite us to do just that" (Østermark-Johansen 2022: 6). Not only does the text decentre the foundation of European culture from the established settings of France and Italy by refocusing on the North (Østermark-Johansen 2022: 137), but also, to borrow the words that Amitav Ghosh (2016) uses in another context, it looks "first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of [an] altered world" (Bassi & Mason 2021: 8)⁵.

The acquisitive code of Rome interferes with the way the Dutch are represented although the latter embody a different conception of land dominion, one that is not political but ecological. Pater remarks that "[s]o genially attempered, so warm, was life become, in

⁵ On ecocritical imagination and discourse see also Bate (1991), Matheus (1991), Buell (1995), Mentz (2009, 2021). As theorised by Kerridge & Sammels "Never before has so much scientific argument been assembled to support the perception of a global ecosystem [...]; the contemporary movement, from Rachel Carson onwards, expresses a new perception of the relationship between human practices and the material world. An ecological perspective strives to see how all things are inter-dependent, even those apparently most separate" (1998: 7).

the land of which Pliny had spoken as scarcely dry land at all' (Pater 1910: 92). By the seventeenth century the Dutch had managed to greatly improve their strategies to reclaim land from the sea. Polders (reclaimed land protected by dykes) and hydrological innovations were crucial in enhancing the country's wellbeing and expansion. Dykes, windmills and military engineering as well were reshaping and permanently altering Holland's unique geography. Wet and dry ditches were designed to create complex, layered defences suited to the environment. Flooding was controlled in specific areas to impede enemy movement. Dykes controlled water levels, since people lived in fear of them being fragile, eventually leading to disaster and sinking. Water shaped national identity, producing a strong emphasis on planning and cooperation while the fight against water was assimilated "to the fight against human enemies" (Mostert 2020: 313).

Sebastian rejects both human and artistic reshaping of the watery landscape. In his search for the effective equivalence between his "line of being" and his "line of thought" (Pater 1910: 83), he would erase any perturbation of the essence, of the absolute being, and escape to a pre-modern landscape of unreclaimed land. A first sign of his tension with the environment is his alignment with winter immobility:

Sebastian van Storck, confessedly the most graceful performer in all that skating multitude, moving in endless maze over the vast surface of the frozen water-meadow, liked best this season of the year for its expression of perfect impassivity, or at least of a perfect repose. The earth was, or seemed to be, at rest, with a breathlessness of slumber which suited the young man's peculiar temper (Pater 1910: 81).

The immobility of nature is a topos which implies the idea that there is no fight going on; the stillness of the Arctic Sea, in particular, has provided an image of the paralysis of Nature, its failure to maintain control of the tides' regular rhythms (Murphy 2004: 179-181). Inseparable from his environment, the phlegmatic Sebastian, for whom the "one abstract being was as the pallid Arctic sun, disclosing itself over the dead level of a glacial, a barren and absolutely lonely sea" (Pater 1910: 108), experiences the "freezing influence" (109) of his philosophy of emptiness, of *tabula rasa*. However, he is also led sometimes to assert his own self and mar the "calm" of "that one, unruffled consciousness" (109). Sea-related metaphors are used to describe abstract entities, again opening up conceptual bridges between the author's implied stances and those of the character. If, as Pater writes, Sebastian can always tolerate the sea both in art and in life, the sea he loves is unconstrained, an invading, pervasive power, breaking all boundaries:

Invading all places, stealing under one's feet, insinuating itself everywhere along an endless network of canals (by no means such formal channels as we understand by the name, but picturesque rivers, with sedgy banks and haunted by innumerable birds) its incidents present themselves oddly even in one's park or woodland walks; the ship in full sail appearing suddenly among the great trees or above the garden wall, where we had no suspicion of the presence of water (Pater 1910: 92-93).

3.2. “Forced and Artificial Production”

Similarly Sebastian does not appreciate the artistic rendering of the Dutch landscape framed or commodified by the artists attending his family house. Thanks to the “tribe” of such “creatures of leisure” (Pater 1910: 84, 87), “The Dutch had just begun to see what a picture their country was – its canals, and *boomppjis*, and endless, broadly-lighted meadows, and thousands of miles of quaint water-side [...]” (87). On the one hand they appreciate art through the landscape, while art in turn encourages them to see pristine, original, beauty: “in the achievement of a type of beauty so national and vernacular, the votaries of purely Dutch art might well feel that the Italianisers [...] went so far afield in vain” (88). Artefacts, to use a notion discussed by Terence Cave, “participate ‘enactively’ in the human environment” and “belong to an ecological continuum, without priority of cognition” (Cave 2022: 34). Dutch artists validate the qualities of the environment revealing all the “wealth of colour” of a land that was supposed to be sad (87) and bringing consciousness of the values the Dutch had fought for both politically and geographically, perceiving the drama of a nation always “ready at any moment to fight anew, against man or the sea” (84). Indifferent to the “thriving genius”⁶ of the Dutch, “making and maintaining dry land where nature had willed the sea” (95), Sebastian repudiates the vitality and sensuous warmth of domestic comforts, of life and seasonal change. He refuses to become the prisoner of “this picturesque and sensuous world of Dutch art, its genial warmth, its struggle for life, its selfish and crafty love” (106). His dislike for “the warm sandbanks of Wynants” or the “eerie relics of the ancient Dutch woodland which survive in Hobbenas and Ruysdael” (88) can be understood in terms of the way they prevent flooding, annihilation: “Why add, by a forced and artificial production, to the monotonous tide of competing, fleeting existence?” (88). The text forges continuity between art and life, and Sebastian has got his own artistic ideal. He privileges views from a distance, “map-like” (Østermark-Johansen 2022: 147), the kind of view he can enjoy from a room at the top of his house, a refuge for sea-birds – the only birds that can be seen from his windows, whose mention provokes an allusion to the ‘ingenious contrivances’ to attract birds in the windows of cottages represented in the scenery of Jan Steen among others (90):

His preference in the matter of art was, therefore, for those prospects *à vol a’oiseau* – of the caged bird on the wing at last – of which Rubens had the secret, and still more Philip de Koninck, four of whose choicest works occupied the four walls of his chamber; visionary escapes, north, south, east, and west, into a wide-open though, it must be confessed, a somewhat sullen land (89).

Sebastian’s rejection of art starts from his rejection of the comfort of the house and its many ornaments, worlds and dimensions. In fact, this life is in complete contrast “to all

⁶ Pater quotes twice Thomas Browne, although without any attribution to him – “The success of that petty Province of Holland (of which the Grand Seignour proudly said, if they should trouble him as they did the Spaniard, he would send his men with shovels and pick-axes, and throw it into the Sea,) I cannot altogether ascribe to the ingenuity and industry of the people, but the mercy of GOD, that hath disposed them to such a thriving Genius’ (*Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici* with an Introduction by Prof. C. H. Herford, 1906, 1-89, 20). His essay “Sir Thomas Browne” was first published in May 1886 (*Macmillan’s Magazine* 54).

that is abstract or cold in art" (86). Surrounded by art as if by a natural element, he needs to adapt: "finding so much art actually about him, he was compelled [...] to adjust himself to it; to ascertain and accept that in it which should least collide with [...] his own characteristic tendencies" (88). A Darwinian process of adaptation is necessary to avoid potential collision between opposing forces and preserve individuality. Pater's response to Darwin was in fact "complex and inconsistent" (Hext 2013: 20). Sebastian's drive is towards emptiness, towards the simplicity of the equation "zero equals zero", sharing Spinoza's philosophy of the existence of one absolute being. He retires to a personal space progressively removed from the heart of the building, alienated from what is contained and constructed there, from what is there achieved, away from "the busy and busy-looking house, crowded with the furniture and the pretty little toys of many generations" (89). The geography of his personal house is not linear, but labyrinthine, since he has to go through a long passage "up a winding staircase, and (again at the end of a long passage) he found himself as if shut off from the whole talkative Dutch world, and in the embrace of that wonderful quiet which is also possible in Holland at its height all around it" (89).

What is interesting is that the land is a similarly layered place, where relics emerge revealing a subterranean world. In particular those of a man's waggon, caught in an inundation perhaps while returning with merchandise from the shore, become intermittently visible. The waggon is artistically wrought and the "throne, set upon it, seemed to distinguish it as a chariot of state". Yet Sebastian with his morbid cast of mind thinks of it as sepulchral, a "grand burial [...] of a king or hero, whose very tomb was wasted away" (94), annulling any sense of political hierarchy. The earth itself is imagined as transformed and transforming: "cooling down for ever from its old cosmic heat", taking colours out of things, with the sea washing away "the long sand-bank [...], which had been the rampart of a town" (98-99).

4. "Scarcely dry land at all"

"Heroic industry", the progressive effort to modify the land, is a "feverish, unworthy agitation" (95): the Dutch's fight against the sea is not part of Sebastian's consciousness. Indeed, his strange indifference to artistic and natural landscape, his flight from the finiteness of his surroundings, is seen literally as a threat to the security of the land. If his intellectual commitment is for some people precious, for others he could be "a plotter" against the Dutch Republic: "A single traitor might cut the dykes in an hour, in the interest of the English or the French" (100). In fact he does not value the dykes, and praises times when the land was at the mercy of floods:

In his passion for *Schwindsucht* – we haven't the word – he found it pleasant to think of the resistless element which left one hardly a foot-space amidst the yielding sand; of the old beds of lost rivers, surviving now only as deeper channels in the sea; of the remains of a certain ancient town, which within men's memory had lost its few remaining inhabitants and, with its already empty tombs, dissolved and disappeared in the flood (93).

If Sebastian's "intellectual consumption" (112) is tied to a search for the absolute that, as for Marcus Aurelius in Marius the Epicurean, is a dystopian ideal leading to self-destruction and "disaster" (Del Sapia 2021: 137), his historical imagination fuels awareness of progressive improvements and problematises the idea of ecological disaster. Going back imaginatively, he helps reconstruct an archeology of the land, perhaps hinting at human responsibility. Sebastian therefore defies heroism. He admires practical action when it is associated with personal affection, as in the reported episode of Hugo Grotius's wife, sacrificing herself to save her husband. Grotius was able to escape from political captivity by hiding in the box regularly sent him full of books.

As the narrative develops, Sebastian's desire for self-erasure is reflected in his journey to a desolate sea-scape that is at one with his state of mind. Repelled by social expectations and by the innocent physical attentions of Mademoiselle van Westrheene, whose ruddy beauty has the heaviness of his ruddy house (101), he takes flight. Sebastian's wish for annihilation is reflected in the appeal for him of the un-reclaimed landscape. He surrenders to the sea. His death by drowning is consonant with his nihilism. Sea imagery encapsulates Sebastian's sense of non-being, it is the epitome of his longing to erase himself from life and re-establish "the calm surface of the absolute, untroubled mind" (106):

Detachment. To hasten hence: to fold up one's whole self, as a vesture put aside: to anticipate, by such individual force as he could find in him, the slow disintegration by which nature herself is levelling the eternal hills: here would be the secret of peace, of such dignity and truth as there could be in a world which after all was essentially an illusion (110).

To discard the artificial vesture of subjectivity and be levelled by nature like a hill is his final goal. The last part of the portrait presents a darker vision of Sebastian's nihilism, associated with ideas of man as a mere reduction of the absolute being. His black melancholy, "unkindly" (112) to individuals and society, is perhaps produced both by physical disease and culture. Sebastian's consumption, which would have caused anyway an early death, reflects *fin de siècle* spleen, in deriving from over-delicateness due to modern luxury, a disease, moreover, 'begotten by the fogs of that country – waters, he observed, not in their place, "above the firmament" (115)⁷.

Sebastian is constituted as a palimpsest, layered by different historical, material conditions. His melancholy is connected with modern capitalistic ways of life and environmental disorder and crisis. In the abandoned house full of family memories, surrounded by water and seen as the perfect garden of Holland, the inundation is presented as man-made: "[...] people might have fancied that an enemy had indeed cut the dykes somewhere – a pin-hole enough to wreck the ship of Holland" (114). Sebastian's annihilation and sacrifice is anticipated in the reference to the story of Grotius's escape from captivity. This episode of 'real life' appeals greatly to Sebastian and is at one with his saving of a child as the sea breaks its

⁷ Pater conveys a critique of solipsism and intimist writing, possibly inspired by the publication, in 1882 and 1884, of Henri-Frédéric Amiels's *Journal*. For a discussion, also in relation to "consumptives" like Spinoza and other sensitive Paterian heroes, see Østermark-Johansen (2022: 152-157).

man-made barriers. The aqueous language is richly allusive, the landscape looks natural but is not, since industry has created it. Living by his own theorems, he is bound fatalistically to his journey towards death. In the end Sebastian is claimed by the sea, a sea that the Dutch have fought to produce a new landscape.

5. Conclusion

Pater's imaginary portrait of Sebastian van Storck has been read against the Dutch landscape as imagined and created by seventeenth-century artists and engineers. The landscape is as germane to the narrative as its morbid protagonist. The hardly won warmth and vitality of Holland militate against the sensibility of a person intent on dying to self. The ecology of a landscape shaped out of water by heroic exertion puts into relief the threat to life of a fanatical devotion to a life lived in the renunciation of materiality and the human enterprise. Pater produces a network of images linking the vegetal, the animal, the human with space, time and architecture, exemplifying that trans-species intimacy Denis Denisoff has shown to be characteristic of the decadent ecologies of Pater as well as of Simeon Solomon and Michael Field, among others (2021). Landscape and art are intertwined and seen in sympathy with national character, yet hostile to the unique sensibility of the protagonist and the ecology of lands. At the same time, the images constitute a barrier to the evolving sensibility of the character. While the narrative offers no crude binary, there remains a sense that detachment from all human achievement is destructive not only to the self but also to the land. A longing to recover a primeval landscape indifferent to ecological change is realised only through denial of the forces of life. At the same time this primeval image projects future scenarios Pater had already envisaged in *Plato and Platonism*:

Increasing indeed for a while in radius and depth, under the force of mechanic law, the world of motion and life is however destined, by force of its own friction, to be restored sooner or later to equilibrium; nay, is already gone back some noticeable degrees (how desirably!) to the primeval indifference, as may be understood by those who can reckon the time it will take for our worn-out planet, surviving all the fret of the humanity it housed for a while, to be drawn into the sun (Pater 2002: 25).

The world of motion and life Pater conceives, presented in its strongest form in the conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), transcends, throughout his work, the idea of isolated subjectivities through what Denisoff describes as the sentiment of an "ecological, panpsychic history" (Denisoff 2021: 49).

Ideas of cosmic disaster abound in current literature and criticism, focusing often on representations of ecological doom. Pater's text provides a surprising ecological perspective in that it does not subscribe to such common ecological topoi. Representing human intervention in the world of nature as "a contribution to a protean design" (ibid: 44), it recalibrates our view and makes us think of the validity or the possibility of ecological reparation. Its macro-ecological and cultural scales help articulate, as in *Marius the Epicurean* and in general in Paterian textuality⁸, a process of transformation and renewal, while asserting nevertheless

⁸ See Denisoff's discussion of the influence of paganism on the decadent ecology of Pater, also explored in relation to Victorian science (2021).

the powerful autonomy of nature. We can keep asking whether it offers only a fantasy of land improvement, or whether it uses the resources of a specific minor genre to create a character that works as a dynamic interface for a radical poetics of symbiosis with a larger environment, creating seeds for bridging opposites and challenging our received critical parameters.

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The Representations of “Deutschtum” in the *Literary Gazette*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, and the *New Monthly Magazine*, 1817-1821

Abstract I: Questo contributo esamina la rappresentazione dell’identità tedesca in una selezione di articoli pubblicati su *The Literary Gazette*, *Blackwood’s Magazine* e *The New Monthly Magazine* tra il 1817 e il 1826, sullo sfondo della politica britannica post-napoleonica. Lo studio indaga in che misura tali riviste abbiano mediato le tensioni tra preoccupazioni nazionali e impegno letterario transnazionale. Particolare attenzione è rivolta alle strategie retoriche e discorsive che offrono una rappresentazione dell’alterità culturale, unendo politiche nazionaliste e conservatrici all’interesse per la Confederazione Germanica di recente formazione. L’analisi sottolinea come la rappresentazione ambivalente del “Deutschtum” nei periodici romantici evidenzii il ruolo delle pressioni sociopolitiche nella costruzione della “Englishness” in dialogo con l’Europa.

Abstract II: This contribution examines the representation of German identity in a series of articles published in the *Literary Gazette*, *Blackwood’s Magazine* and the *New Monthly Magazine* between 1817 and 1826 against the backdrop of post-Napoleonic British politics. The study investigates the extent to which these periodicals mediated tensions between national concerns and transnational literary engagement. Specific attention is placed on the rhetorical and discursive strategies providing a representation of cultural otherness that combines nationalist conservative policies with an interest in the newly formed German Confederation. The ambivalent portrayal of “Deutschtum” in Romantic periodicals suggests the role of sociopolitical pressures in the construction of Englishness in dialogue with Europe.

Keywords: Deutschtum, Romantic periodicals, Transnationalism, British Romanticism.

Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the political geography established by the Congress of Vienna, the British cultural identity was shaped by a dual tension. On the one hand, conservative politics intensified censorship, as evidenced by the Peterloo Massacre and the “Six Acts”. In the aftermath of the events that occurred in Manchester in August 1819, Lord Liverpool’s government imposed harsher penalties, expanded the authority of sheriffs and magistrates, and increased taxes on printed materials to curb the spread of

radical ideals¹. This repressive climate sought to suppress dissent in response to the perceived threat of revolutionary contagion. Yet and perhaps paradoxically, this inward-looking political stance co-existed with a vibrant cultural openness to European influences, with British writers and intellectuals engaging with continental aesthetic theories, literary forms, and philosophical ideas. The duality between restriction and receptivity fostered a uniquely charged cultural environment, one in which Romantic writers navigated, negotiated, and often subverted the boundaries of national identity.

As Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson remark in *Romanticism and Colonialism*, the very idea of a “Romantic canon” should not be detached from “the later nineteenth-century cultural imperialism of Britain’s domination” (Fulford & Kitson 1998: 5). This view is echoed in scholarship that emphasises the role of the nation and the empire as macropolitical forces instrumental in shaping cultural production and identity formation in Romantic-period Britain. Particularly in poetry and fiction, the ensuing construction of alterity can thus be seen as a means of negotiating these national and imperial dynamics (Richardson & Hofkosh 1996: 1-11). In the post-Napoleonic era, however, such ideological stances co-existed and interacted with a cosmopolitan attitude that embraced foreign models and paradigms which, in turn, contributed to shaping contemporary aesthetic models. As Diego Saglia convincingly demonstrates, particularly between 1815 and 1830 British literary culture may be seen as resting on a composite palimpsest that simultaneously conflates national, international, and transnational contributions (Saglia 2018). The result was a dynamic framework that simultaneously resisted and absorbed national, international, and transnational elements.

In this context, the adjective “transnational” warrants some preliminary clarification. In *Flexible Citizenship* (1999), for instance, Aihwa Ong defines “transnationalism” from an anthropological perspective, focusing on “the cultural specificities of global processes, tracing the multiplicity of the uses and conceptions of ‘culture’”. In this sense, “transnationalism” differs from “transnationality”, which intends as “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space” (Ong 1999: 4). From this perspective, the literary and print culture of the Romantic period arguably responds to national and transnational forces at once, largely because of the role of anthologies and periodicals. By circulating foreign works – and especially poetry – in translation, these publications provided an “archive of mobility” that dismantled national frameworks while fostering commonality and intersection (Stanford Friedman 2015: 77). Within this transnational literary ecology, the German case emerges as particularly significant. In its attempt at restoring political stability and conservative order, the Congress of Vienna had endorsed the creation of the *Deutscher Bund* (1815-1866), a confederation of thirty-nine predominantly German-speaking sovereign states providing

¹ Passed by the British Parliament in December 1819, the Six Acts aimed to suppress radical dissent and control public discourse. These comprised (1) the *Training Prevention Act*, banning unauthorised military drills; (2) the *Seizure of Arms Act*, authorising magistrates to confiscate weapons from individuals or groups suspected of posing a threat to public order; (3) the *Seditious Meetings Prevention Act*, restricting large public gatherings; (4) the *Misdemeanours Act*, reducing bail and limiting delays in trials to ensure swift punishment of political offenders; (5) the *Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act*, imposing harsher penalties on radical publications; and (6) the *Newspaper and Stamp Duties Act*, extending taxes to cheap pamphlets to discourage radical publications. See Poole (2019: 383).

a framework for cooperation and mutual defence while maintaining political autonomy. German territories, and their shared identity, became the subject of interest and admiration for their intellectual and cultural legacy, but they were also kept under observation as a potential political and economic rival.

Despite their divergent outlook, periodicals such as the *Literary Gazette*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and the *New Monthly Magazine* provided representations of German identity, or *Deutschtum*, that served ideological purposes while contributing to the contemporary literary and aesthetic debate. The noun "Deutschtum" literally translates as "Germanness", but the *Duden Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* lists three meanings that should be borne in mind for the purposes of this argument:

- a. Gesamtheit der für die Deutschen typischen Lebensäußerungen; deutsche Wesensart;
- b. Zugehörigkeit zum deutschen Volk;
- c. Gesamtheit der deutschen Volksgruppen im Ausland (*Duden Online* 2025)².

This composite definition expresses the multifarious dimensions of the German identity from a cultural, national, and diasporic viewpoint. Although they are clearly hinged in contemporary discourses and debates, these aspects dwell on issues that are also relevant with reference to the post-Napoleonic context. Because each member state maintained political independence and self-governance within the union, the concept of a unified German identity remained still largely elusive, shaped by linguistic and cultural elements as opposed to political unity, and therefore frequently represented as transnational and semantically pliable.

While the *Literary Gazette* contributed to disseminating German literature and philosophy from a cosmopolitan perspective and offers a relevant framework for examining the Romantic-period interest in Germany, *Blackwood's* resorted to conservative rhetorical strategies to depict the Confederation as a buttress of traditional values. The *New Monthly* shows instead a more liberal stance, commending the domestic change brought about by Germany as a model for progress alternative to the French Revolution. In so doing, these periodicals shaped the contemporary public opinion by representing Germany as a canvas onto which British cultural and political identity could be negotiated. By focusing on the ideological frameworks that shapes the representation of *Deutschtum* in these publications, this article examines the role of periodicals in mediating foreign identities and consolidating national self-understanding in the Romantic period. More to the point, it argues that these publications functioned as dynamic sites of cultural production, intersecting literary criticism and political commentary to define the relationships between Britain and Germany at a period of intense social and ideological transformation.

1. Romantic Cosmopolitanism in the *Literary Gazette*

Founded by Henry Colbourn in 1817, the *Literary Gazette* had a circulation of about 4,000 copies per week, with sales possibly encouraged by the relatively low price of 1 shilling. The

² "a. The totality of expressions of life typical of the Germans; the German character or nature; b. Affiliation to the German people; c. The entirety of German ethnic groups living abroad" (my translation).

subtitle, *Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences*, states the aims of the magazine, which intended to refine taste through literature and culture. The “Preliminary Address” that appeared in the first issue, published on 25 January 1817, explicitly articulates the cosmopolitan outlook of the *Gazette*, welcoming the end of “a state of arduous and protracted warfare” so that exchanges with the Continent might improve national literature and taste. In particular, the address laments that the existing periodicals

uniformly embrace such a variety of particulars as to be precluded from exhibiting any thing like a detailed view of Literary History; and though some of them devote a few pages to this interesting object, in none will be found an exact account of instructive picture of the state of knowledge in other countries. The British public still remain very imperfectly acquainted with the progress made by their neighbours in discoveries which enrich, and refinements which embellish society; notwithstanding the facilities now afforded for this important species of information, so essential to the commerce of the genius, by the opening of the Continent, and the restoration of that intercourse which was so long suspended among the Nations of Europe (*Literary Gazette* 1817: 1).

The “Preliminary Address” highlights the insularity of the British literary landscape after years of conflicts, emphasising the need for Continental engagement. This editorial policy is at once mirrored and sustained by the structure of the *Gazette*, whose sections on “Original Correspondence” and “New Publications” signal its intention to situate British literary culture within a transnational context. Likewise, recurring sections on philosophical and scientific innovation, including insights into the proceedings of universities and learned societies, reveal an editorial policy that embraces progress while mediating between elite knowledge and public readership. This structure reflects a liberal, cosmopolitan ethos that balances a national focus with international awareness, seeking to cultivate a readership that values cross-cultural understanding. These aims were not devoid of commercial purposes, since Colburn’s own publishing firm relied on the *Gazette* to promote subscription plans boosting the sales, and therefore the circulation of foreign works³.

The *Gazette*, in other words, helps mediate German cultural and intellectual content for British audiences, but its engagement is uneven and shaped by an ideological framework aimed at negotiating national identity and reassessing Britain’s cultural primacy. The brief commentary published on 8 February 1817, for instance, inscribes Johann Heinrich Voss’ edition of Shakespeare’s plays within a post-Napoleonic climate of cultural diplomacy that celebrates Germany as a refined intellectual partner. Admiration, however, is framed by a reaffirmation of cultural supremacy insofar as the magazine emphasises the challenges of capturing the British national genius in a foreign language:

³ Henry Colburn had been publishing French works both in the original language and in translation since the beginning of his venture at the Conduit Street Library in 1806. He believed that his subscription plans would meet the favour of the reading public thanks to the “the various new arrangements” he had concluded “in London, and his Continental connexions” (Doherty Hudson 2023: 31; cf. also Sutherland & Melnyk 2018).

This is a very agreeable piece of intelligence to the friends of German literature, since they may justly expect from the pen of so distinguished a poet, a more spirited translation than the German language yet can boast, of the works of our immortal Bard (*Literary Gazette* 1817: 41).

The excerpt suggests that the *Literary Gazette* endorses a selective cosmopolitanism that subtly reinforces national pride and celebrates the intellectual and cultural legacy of Great Britain. At the same time, this transnational outlook embraces foreign models in an effort to refine domestic standards of taste, learning, and artistic achievement. Proof of this is the survey of the “Present State of the German Universities” that appeared on 14 February 1818, which consists of a detailed, chronological catalogue of the “Learned Established” that testifies to “the distinguished part which Germany is taking in the pursuits of science and literature in our times” (*Literary Gazette* 1818: 104). As Mark Schoenfield rightly suggests, the Romantic periodical press was at once a “repository” and a creator of “public opinion” – a concept that was popularised precisely at the time (Schoenfield 2009: 1-3). The editorial policy of the *Gazette* exemplifies the prominent role of periodicals in shaping public discourse, acting as influential mediators in the development, circulation, and reception of literary production across borders. Besides serving as outlets for news or commentaries, these publications provided a platform for the dissemination of scientific, social and political ideas. Periodicals, in other words, asserted their role as arbiters of cultural and aesthetic standards in the Romantic period. Another popular publication partaking these dynamics was *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, whose provocative editorial stance often engaged in heated debates and polemics.

2. *Blackwood's* and the Conservative Values of Germany

Originally titled *Edinburgh Monthly Magazine*, and nicknamed *Maga*, *Blackwood's Magazine* was conceived as a rival to the Whig-oriented *Edinburgh Review*. The magazine was launched in 1817, and its tone was often ferocious and scathing. This was mostly due to its main contributors, John Wilson, who wrote under the pseudonym of Christopher North, and John Gibson Lockhart, known by the penname “Z”. Lockhart's notorious targets were Leigh Hunt and John Keats, whose works he lambasted for turning working-class speech into poetry (Dart 2003; Parker 2020). Deployed on aesthetic grounds, these attacks were also rife with political implications, which suggests the editors' desire to validate and reinforce conservative cultural norms.

This conflation of culture, identity, and conservative values also accounts for the attention that *Blackwood's* devoted to Germany. Despite the primacy initially held by French literature, interest in German poetry and writers had been growing steadily during the Napoleonic Wars, gaining popularity as tensions with France “reduced British gusto for French fare” (Johns 2018: 190). From November 1817 to May 1826, *Blackwood's* featured twenty-one different contributions related to Germany, spanning from “Letters on the Present State” of the country to reviews of plays and commentaries on German editions of Greek works. Among the reasons accounting for the convergence of conservative politics with a novel interest in *Deutschtum* is the commercial threat represented by the recently established Con-

tinental power. Germany features extensively in the “Foreign Intelligence” section in *Blackwood’s*, and in October 1817 the editors report that

There have been successively published in Prussian Holland, ordinances of the greatest importance, relative to the commerce and agriculture of that kingdom. These ordinances tend, in particular, to afford a full and entire liberty for industry to develop itself. It is said also, that when the Emperor Alexander shall arrive at Warsaw to remain there several months, he intends to examine minutely every thing which may contribute to the amelioration of the Poles. Agriculture is becoming more and more flourishing (*Blackwood’s* 1818a: 102).

The column foregrounds the flourishing of German economy and the emergence of a modern, pan-German sentiment. The reference to recent political efforts to sustain commerce and agriculture signals the attempt made by the *Deutscher Bund* to modernise its economic structure. At the same time, the unwavering support of industrial development suggests liberal policies that encourage innovation and expansion, aspects which the conservative outlook embraced by *Blackwood’s* intends to keep at bay. Moreover, the mention of Emperor Alexander’s interest in the situation of Poland suggests a transregional consciousness seeking to unify cultural and linguistic communities under shared aspirations and values. In this way, *Maga* captures a transitional moment in which economic modernization intersects with the formation of a collective German identity, all while maintaining a tone of critical scrutiny and guarded observation.

The rise of a modern German state and its political and commercial implications are further explored in the “Letter on the Present State of Things” that was published in April 1818. The anonymous reader, allegedly writing from Düsseldorf, laments that Britain is so “amused and occupied with domestic trifles” that it “remains in a state of utter ignorance concerning many things that should at present rivet the attention of all European politicians” (*Blackwood’s* 1818b: 24). Both Whigs and Tory politicians are criticised for misinterpreting the political and social situation in Germany, a fact that is functional to rebuking radical claims in Britain:

Germans who are dissatisfied with the state of affairs in their country, resemble the vulgar, illiterate, and despicable crew who are the present advocates of reform in England. If ever Britain needs a reform, I hope in God she will not listen to the advice of such men as recommend it to her now. But it argues the most deplorable ignorance on the part of any Englishman to suppose, that the discontented party in Germany bears any resemblance to that nest of croakers with which London is infested. We once needed a revolution, and we had it: it was brought about by such men as Hampden, Sidney, Fairfax and Milton (*Blackwood’s* 1818b: 24).

The letter presents Germany as a nation enlivened by internal ferment. This condition, however, is framed through a comparison with the sociopolitical situation of Britain that is meant to reinforce conservative narratives resistant to reform. In so doing, *Blackwood’s* legitimises reactionary positions by presenting change as destabilising, and bolsters its opposition against radical views by delegitimising them through rhetorical vilification. Moreover,

intellectual progress is called upon to deploy a narrative that is functional to reinforcing class-based elitism, hierarchy, and national pride.

In *The Making of English Reading Audiences* (1987), John P. Klancher argued that *Blackwood's* stylistic excesses were crucial in shaping the identity of the middle-class readership that the magazine aimed to target. This rhetorical strategy enabled *Maga* to promote a sense of intellectual centralisation, consolidating diverse reader experiences into a unified cultural and ideological framework. The result, Klancher contended, was “a concretely externalized world” (1987: 62) that instructed the middle-class to read itself by reading other classes. This is manifest when one considers the stance adopted by *Blackwood's* in presenting *Deutschtum*. The “Letter on the Present State of Things” recounts an alleged first-person experience, a recent trip along the Rhine, the Elbe, and the Danube that brought the anonymous writer into contact with the ferment enlivening Germany. Whilst this state is interpreted as naturally leading to change, the absence of revolutionary movements from the political agenda of the German Confederation is attributed to the character of its population, which is genealogically connected with the English. Violence and convulsion, the letter claims, “would ill accord with the habits and constitution of those in whose persons was never made manifested” (*Blackwood's* 1818b: 25). This representation of the manners of the German peoples, and their common identity, is functional to promoting a conservative ideology that intends to quench radical claims in Britain:

No one who knows any thing of the present state of Germany, – who is aware, that in that country, ruled as it almost every where is by a set of arbitrary despots, there prevails, upon every subject but one, the utmost possible liberty of thought and writing, – no one who is acquainted with the simple fact, that (if we except politics) the Germans are in truth very much like the same sort of people with the English, – that their ancestry is the same, – that their ancient institutions, their religious habits, and, above all, the tone and complexion of their literature, bear the strongest resemblance to ours, – that their favourite authors are, in truth, the intellectual children of our own; – no one who knows this, can be surprised with the general fact, that the Germans are at present a discontented people (*Blackwood's* 1818b: 25).

That German states are preparing for political change and aspiring to a different role in the post-Napoleonic geopolitical scenario is patent, but so is their avoidance of open conflict. Accordingly, the writer concludes that the parliament of the Rhine Province should enact appropriate political initiatives to ensure the prosperous development of the country and its people. This stance marks a change from the stereotypical representation of Germany in the literature of the time, particularly Gothic novels such as Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or, The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century* (1806), where Count Ardolph is depicted as a German naturally inclined to depravity⁴. Whilst an ambiguous attitude still shaped the

⁴ Dacre's novel offers various insights into the representation of cultural alterity in the Romantic period, from European to black otherness. Count Ardolph's homeland, Germany, is presented alongside Venice as the source of the moral contamination that sparks the downfall of the two female protagonists, Laurina and Victoria de Loredani (cf. Burley 2004).

representations of German culture in periodicals targeting women⁵, *Blackwood's* is telling of a change resulting from the conservative order re-established by the Congress of Vienna and the need to quench revolutionary waves at home, as the Peterloo Massacre and the repressive politics it brought about would soon reveal.

This attitude also shapes the review to Thomas Hodgskin's *Travels in the North of Germany* (1815), which appeared in February 1820. *Blackwood's* dismisses the memoir as "Two very bulky octavos" with "a cumbrous title-page" written by an unlearned, self-centred author whose intellectual reputation is repeatedly challenged:

his style of language alone sufficiently testifies him to be, of all elegant education, and no less manifestly a stranger to elegant society, either foreign or domestic – profoundly ignorant of history, both ancient and modern – possessing merely a sort of commonplace imperfect smattering of the doctrines of political economy, and a plentiful measure of vulgar assurance [...] (*Blackwood's* 1820: 536).

German history is framed as worthy of knowledge, and so are its literature and its philosophy. Consequently, they deserve an erudite style and a sound presentation for readers endowed with intelligence and education. Hodgskin, however, failed to do achieve both aims due to his political orientation and class, as the criticism of his Cockney background, and his association with both Leigh and Henry Hunt, reveal:

He is a literary Esquire, of the same class with some political Esquires, whose names have attained greater celebrity than his is ever likely to reach; in other words, he is a radical traveller and a Cockney philosopher – and if he finds readers at all, it must be either of the enlightened followers of Henry Hunt, Esquire, or among the still more enlightened admirers of Leigh Hunt, Esquire (*Blackwood's* 1820: 537).

Blackwood's flattered their commercial and professional readers by apparently casting them as the defenders of aristocratic values, high culture, and national culture and morality. In so doing, the magazine attacked the semi-educated, fashion-conscious urban readership that Hunt and his circle were addressing, and this also accounts for the allusion to Hodgskin's interest in political economy and his *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital*. Published in 1815, the pamphlet collected Hodgskin's socialist views and his advocacy of trade unions against unbridled liberalism.⁶ In contrast to the ideal of organic social unity celebrated by *Deutschtum*, Hodgskin's radicalism represented a threat to the moral and economic order that *Blackwood's* sought to defend. Within this ideological frame, the references

⁵ According to Johns (2018: 191-192), women's interest in German literature in the Romantic period stemmed from their role as readers in circulating libraries. Besides popular Gothic novels, women favoured religious and moral works like Salomon Gessner's *The Death of Abel* (1761) and Christoph Martin Wieland's *Abraham* (1764). The fact that many translators at the time were women further reflects their engagement with German fiction and poetry.

⁶ Although he did not fully agree with Hodgskin's individualist leanings, Karl Marx welcomed his extension of David Ricardo's theory of value against capitalist exploitation, see Hollander (2008: 353-360).

to Henry “Orator” Hunt – whose talk to the Manchester working class in 1819 notoriously ended up in the Peterloo Massacre – and Leigh Hunt – whose *Examiner* was associated with a lower-class, radical readership – underscore the magazine’s attitude towards the destabilising potential of radical claims. In this light, Germany embodies a cultural model as well as an ideal refuge from the perceived chaos brought about by industrial unrest, free trade, and democratic demands. This ideological positioning enabled conservative readers targeted by *Blackwood’s* to imagine themselves as custodians of the nation’s political, cultural, and economic heritage, aligning their interests with those of the traditional elite (cf. Kelly 2013).

3. Liberal Values, Social Mobility: Germany in the *New Monthly*

A similar ideological stance shapes the construction of Germany and *Deutschtum* in the *New Monthly Magazine*, even though its editorial policy served opposite aims. Leaning towards Whig and liberal values and characterised by a progressive and cosmopolitan outlook, the periodical had been founded by Colburn in 1814 as an alternative to *Blackwood’s*. Its different positioning is evident in the essay “Germany – Past and Present”, which appeared in 1821 and criticises the class privileges that constrain the rise of the middle class in the German territories. The feudal character that forged *Deutschtum* over time and its medieval heritage, the writer states, were obliterated by the wave of libertarian uprising sparked by the French revolution. The result was a novel, cohesive and liberal political structure, but the separation of learning and commerce typical of Germany was only partly able to foster economic and intellectual development in a country characterised by political fragmentation. Only towards the end of the eighteenth century were social hierarchies progressively dismantled, binding previously divided citizens in response to a shared, external threat:

Oppressive privileges, and prescriptive abuses, were laid low; feudal severities annihilated; petty sovereignties abolished; the claims of birth confounded with those of merit: the sovereigns were taught the lesson of adversity; the people acquired energy and consciousness of strength; the barriers of rank were broken down, and the jarring citizens of the different states were, for the first time, united into *one nation of Germans* – one common interest, “*externus timor maximum concordiae vinculum*”⁷, for the first time united all (*New Monthly* 1821: 300; italics in the text).

Once the old feudal system and its small sovereignties were overthrown, merit began to outweigh birthright. In keeping with its editorial policy, the *New Monthly* adopted a reformist stance, at times bordering with radical ideals setting it in contrast to the more conservative tone embraced by *Blackwood’s*. This is evident in its support of the revolutionary cause in the development of an industrious and non-elitist German society. The representation of *Deutschtum* underlying this essay is still ideological, but its construction is instrumental to promoting liberal values in the Continent as well as in Britain. German aristocracy is commended for endorsing the middle-class ethos, supporting an economic order that encourages innovation and independent entrepreneurship against class privilege and birthright.

⁷ “External fear is the greatest bond of unity” (my translation).

In appreciating Germany and its social structure, the *New Monthly* implicitly celebrates English liberal values, supporting the rise of a rational, independent middle class empowered by intellectual and economic freedom. The allusion to the British context is concealed in the statement “the nation of barons is daily imbibing more of the spirit of ‘the nation of shopkeepers’” (*New Monthly* 1821: 302). The statement, which the Irish surgeon Barry Edward O’Meara famously attributed to Napoleon,⁸ celebrates Britain and Germany in that they encourage “the spirit of improvement, and the activity of talent” and foster “a mixed and middling class” of “important, independent, reasoning” individuals” (*New Monthly* 1821: 295, 302). By portraying the class struggle between the aristocracy and the middle class, the *New Monthly* appropriates the commitment to rationality, innovation, and civic unity inherent to *Deutschtum* to acclaim values shared by English liberals such as individual freedom, economic progress, and social reform.

4. Defining National Ideals, Negotiating Otherness

The multifarious representations of Germany and *Deutschtum* in British Romantic periodicals reveal the complex interplay between culture, ideology, and the discursive construction of national identities. In spite of their different editorial agendas, the *Literary Gazette*, *Blackwood’s* and the *New Monthly* appropriate and represent post-Napoleonic Germany and the character of its people as a cultural as well as a political symbol reflecting the anxieties and the aspirations of their readers. While *Blackwood’s* depicts German identity to affirm elitist ideals and reformist attempts in Britain, the *New Monthly* welcomes the cultural and commercial ferment enlivening the German Confederation as a model for liberal progress and middle-class empowerment, and as a state embracing political and economic modernity. In so doing, the periodical press of the Romantic period did not only look at the Continent to report on foreign affairs, but it also actively shaped cultural perceptions and political imaginaries by negotiating national otherness in such a way as to articulate ideological visions of social order. The rhetorical strategies exploited in these depictions of *Deutschtum* ultimately underscore the central role of Romantic print culture in mediating transnational ideas and in consolidating ideological narratives within the British public sphere.

The representations of Germany and *Deutschtum* in British Romantic periodicals illuminate the ideological entanglement of cultural exchange and national self-definition in the post-Napoleonic era. Far from being passive conduits of foreign reportage, publications such as the *Literary Gazette*, *Blackwood’s*, and the *New Monthly Magazine* actively shaped British perceptions of continental Europe, transforming Germany into a discursive space fit for negotiating domestic anxieties and aspirations. Notwithstanding their divergent political stances, these periodicals reveal the role of the Romantic press in framing transnational ideas into national narratives that mediate foreign identities during a period of profound transformation.

⁸ In *Napoleon in Exile*, Barry Edward O’Meara (1822: 52) reports Napoleon’s alleged statement, “You [i.e., the British] were greatly offended with me for having called you a *nation of shopkeepers*”. While O’Meara certainly accompanied Napoleon to St. Helena, the statement is not attested by other sources and was in fact introduced by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

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Milena Romero Allué

'Naked Beauty display'd'. Bodies, Souls and Sexuality in William Blake's Composite Art. Part I

Abstract I: Il sistema filosofico ed estetico di William Blake è una rielaborazione sincretica e originale del pensiero classico, neoplatonico, gnostico, cristiano ed ermetico. Ispirandosi altresì al mito del paradiso delle origini, a John Milton e alle Rivoluzioni francese e americana, Blake crea un linguaggio del corpo altamente simbolico con cui esprime la consustanzialità di opposti quali spirito e materia, divino e umano, macrocosmo e microcosmo. I corpi blakiani, rappresentati principalmente nelle due posture contrapposte di espansione e contrazione, sono spesso caratterizzati da torsioni 'serpentine' e da tratti androgini che evocano l'arte di Michelangelo: considerando che il fine ultimo di Blake è la *coincidentia oppositorum* alchemica, l'androgynia è un tema ricorrente nelle sue opere.

Abstract II: William Blake's philosophic and aesthetic system is a syncretic and original re-elaboration of classical, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian and Hermetic thought. Inspired by the myth of the earthly paradise, by John Milton and by the American and French Revolutions as well, Blake creates a complex and symbolic body language that reveals the consubstantiality of opposites such as spirit and matter, the divine and the human, macrocosm and microcosm. His bodies, mainly represented in the two opposed postures of expansion and contraction, are endowed with a writhing movement, a serpentine pattern and androgynous features that evoke Michelangelo's art: considering that Blake's main goal is the alchemic *coincidentia oppositorum*, androgyny is a recurring theme in his works.

Keywords: Panism, Word and image, Socio-political radicalism, The human and the divine, Body language.

1. 'Every thing that lives is holy'. Blake's Animistic Philosophy

According to the programme of the Pescara-Chieti conference ("Transitional / Transnational Identities, Gender Issues, and Cultural Dialogism from the Romantic Age to the Present") and complying with the subject of our Prin research project ("Bodies, Ecology and Moving Identities"), in this essay I will 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. This is the *fil rouge* that tightly connects the themes illustrated on these pages: the profound relationship be-

tween man and the natural world (section 1), the idea of a radically free and egalitarian society (section 2), Blake's fundamental sentiment of the human body (section 3), the compenetration of the human with the divine (section 4) and the ideal model of an androgynous sexuality (section 5). All these themes have a central position in Blake's work, a position that is essentially constant in time and throughout his macrotext: for this reason, I will consider Blake's verbal and visual work as a whole, as an organic source rich in passages and suggestions – visual and verbal – that refer to the themes under analysis. The following pages, thus, are not intended as an introduction to Blake but presume that the reader is familiar with his work and his culture. Due to limits of space, here are presented the first three sections (Part I), whereas the last two ones (Part II) will be published in the 2026 issue of this magazine.

Universally known as a pre-Romantic or Romantic poet, William Blake is not easily definable nor interpretable. He bases his philosophic and aesthetic system on a syncretic and original re-elaboration of classical, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian and Hermetic thought¹ and concentrates all the features that in his opinion make a real and complete artist: in *The Laocoön* (1820), one of his last works, he declares that “a Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian” (Blake 1979: 776)². Blake regards himself not only as a poet, as a philosopher, a painter, an engraver and a musician, but also as a sculptor, a smith and an architect: moving from the traditional identification of poetry with smithery as well as engraving with sculpturing, he believes that the creation of a “System” of ideas has an architectural substance. In *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), his last and longest prophetic poem, Blake highlights the plastic and architectural quality of ideas and languages by defining English as “the rough basement”³: moving from the assumption that he “must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's”, the blacksmith and alchemist Los – Blake's fictional alter ego – “built the stubborn structure of the Language” (*Jerusalem*, plates 10, 40. K. 629, 668).

Inspired by Pythagoras, Plato, Plutarch, Ovid, Porphyry, primitive Christianity, Renaissance Neoplatonism, alchemy, Jakob Böhme and Emanuel Swedenborg, Blake permeates both his life and his work with a respectful, reverential and almost animistic attention towards any element of the natural world, from the basest insect and humblest vegetal to the human being. The influential essay *The Moralists* by Antony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, can be regarded as another source of inspiration for Blake since Theocles and Philocles, the two speakers of the philosophic dialogue modelled on Plato's *Phaedrus*, “feel Divinity present” in the awesome beauty of untamed nature:

Here, Philocles, we shall find our *Sovereign Genius*; if we can charm the *Genius* of the Place (more chaste and sober than your Silenus) to inspire us with a truer Song of Na-

¹ Blake is profoundly indebted to Thomas Taylor's English translation of Plato's and Plotinus's works: see Taylor (1969). For Blake and Neoplatonism cf. Harper (1961); for Blake's interest in Neoplatonism and in other religions see Raine (2002); for Blake, Gnosticism and other religions cf. Givone (1978).

² Henceforward Keynes's edition of the complete writings of Blake will be quoted as K. followed by the page number. Another excellent edition of the poet's works is Blake (1982).

³ “I call them by their English names: English, the rough basement” (*Jerusalem*, plate 40. K. 668).

ture, teach us some celestial Hymn, and make us feel Divinity present in these solemn Places of Retreat. Haste then, I conjure you, said I, good Theocles, [...] some Divinity has approach'd us and already moves in you (Cooper 1709: 156).

Shaftesbury is convinced that God dwells in the natural world and, close to the Cambridge Platonists and to Böhme⁴, argues that there exists a direct, immediate and personal contact between humanity and divinity. Embracing Shaftesbury's Panistic philosophy, Böhme's natural theology, Swedenborg's principle of the continuity between the infinite and the tangible reality⁵ and Burke's celebrated elaboration of Pseudo-Longinus's theories on the sublime, Blake believes that the sacred vastness and infiniteness of nature and of the whole world mirror and contain divinity. If, praising Plato, Longinus argues that "the whole universe is not enough to satisfy the speculative intelligence of human thought; our ideas often pass beyond the limits that confine us" (Longinus 1995: XXXV, 3: 277), Edmund Burke maintains that "Another source of the sublime, is *infinity* [...]. Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime (Burke 1757: Part II, Section VIII: 52).

In *There is No Natural Religion - second series*, Blake argues that "The bounded is loathed by its possessor" and that "The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite" (plates 6, 9. K. 98), thus attesting his appreciation of Longinus and Burke and anticipating Leopardi's "teoria del piacere"⁶: the poet, then, draws the conclusion that "He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God" (plate 11. K. 98). Printed in 1788 and consisting of twenty-one tiny plates that expound philosophical aphorisms against the rational theology of Deism, the two series of *There is No Natural Religion* are Blake's first illuminated experiment: the poet produces these two minute works thanks to the original engraving and printing technique he has just invented, a method that, as Medieval manuscripts and as the Renaissance emblem tradition, combines word and image⁷.

Blake enlarges his conviction that when seeing "the Infinite in all things, we see God" claiming that "every thing that lives is Holy", a sentence that recurs numerous times throughout his work, since the beginning of his career. In his *Annotations to Lavater's Aphorisms on Man*, written in 1788 as well⁸, he states that "All life is holy" (K. 74), that God "is become a worm that may nourish the weak" and that "every thing on earth is the word of God & in its essence is God":

⁴ For the links among Shaftesbury and the Cambridge Platonists see, for example, Patrides (1969). For Böhme's influence on Shaftesbury cf., among others, Brett (2020).

⁵ About 1789 Blake writes *Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* and about 1790 *Annotations to Swedenborg's The Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Providence*.

⁶ "La tendenza nostra verso un infinito che non comprendiamo, forse proviene da una cagione semplicissima, e più materiale che spirituale. L'anima umana (e così tutti gli esseri viventi) desidera sempre essenzialmente, e mira unicamente, benché sotto mille aspetti, al piacere, ossia alla felicità" (Zib. [165], 12-23 July 1820. Leopardi 1991: 164).

⁷ For Blake's complete composite works see Blake (1991a, 1992, 2009). For a study of Blake's visual and verbal production cf. Mitchell (2019).

⁸ For Blake's interest in the Swiss theologian and philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater see Erle (2017).

God is in the lowest effects as well as in the highest causes; for he is become a worm that may nourish the weak. For let it be remember'd that creation is God descending according to the weakness of man, for our Lord is the word of God & every thing on earth is the word of God & in its essence is God (K. 87).

Few lines above the aforementioned passage Blake quotes Job⁹ and reckons that "It is the God in *all* that is our companion & friend, for our God himself says: 'you are my brother, my sister & my mother'"; then he mentions St. John to express the idea that God is "a brother and a friend" that lives in humanity, and vice versa¹⁰: "& St. John: 'Whoso dwelleth in love dwelleth in God & God in him'" (K. 87). In the beginning of *Jerusalem*, the lyrical voice – the very Blake – reports that it was God who revealed to him that the human and the divine are consubstantial:

[...] I see the Saviour over me
 Spreading his beams of love & dictating the words of this mild song.
 "Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!
 I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine:
 [...] I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend:
 Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me"
 (*Jerusalem*, plate 4, ll. 4-7, 18-19. K. 622).

If we consider that, as just read, "God himself says: 'you are my brother, my sister & my mother'" and "'I am a brother and friend: / Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me'", the anthropomorphic representation of Nature depicted on the second-last plate of *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* – a series of seventeen small line engravings accomplished in 1793 – explicitly identifies herself with both the Creator and the worm when exclaiming

I have said to the Worm:
 Thou art my mother & my sister
 (*The Gates of Paradise*, plate 16. K. 770).

On the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise*, humanity is visually represented as a divine creature and, at the same time, as a worm ready to be united to a chrysalis (see plate 1)¹¹. Dante Alighieri, whose *Comedy* is illustrated by Blake¹², exquisitely exposes the classical idea of man as a worm-butterfly when attacking the *superbi*:

⁹ "I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: To the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister" (*Job*, 17: 14).

¹⁰ "And we have known and believed the love that God hath for us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (*John*, 4: 16).

¹¹ The illustrations are at the end of the essay, before the Bibliography.

¹² Exhorted by John Linnell, in 1824 Blake starts his drawings for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. See, for example, Blake (1983) and (2025). For Dante's *Comedy* see Alighieri (1984).

non v' accorgete voi che noi siamo vermi
 nati a formar l'angelica farfalla,
 che vola a la giustizia senza schermi?
 (*Purg.*, X: 124-126).

The worm that stands for the body (human and divine) and the butterfly, or *ψυχή*, that stands for the soul¹³, moreover, graphically allude to Blake's conviction that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul", an audacious theory expounded in the revolutionary prophetic book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, etched about 1790-1793: in the beginning of this work, Blake proclaims that "All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors: 1. That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul" (plate 4. K. 149). This seemingly blasphemous confutation of the biblical word assumes coherence if observing that Blake has always interpreted the Bible and the main tenets of Christianity in the light of their primitive and authentic principles, rejecting orthodox interpretations: if on the last plate of *The Marriage* the poet reveals that he reads the Bible "in its infernal or diabolical sense" (plate 24. K. 158), in *The Everlasting Gospel*, written in 1818, claims that

Both read the Bible day & night
 But thou read'st black where I read white
 (*The Everlasting Gospel*, ll. 13-14, p. 33. K. 748).

After confuting some erroneous principles of the Bible, Blake declares that "the following Contraries to these are True: 1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of the Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (plate 4. K. 149). Most significantly, the last words of *A Song of Liberty*, the 'biblical poem' that concludes *The Marriage*, are "For every thing that lives is Holy" (plate 27. K. 160).

2. 'That stony law I stamp to dust'. Blake's Vision of Society

Firmly convinced that "every thing that lives" is sacred, Blake believes that the rigid and hierarchical organisation of society should be replaced by a brotherly and democratic commonwealth in which social classes, gender and ethnical discrimination, economic categories, political constrictions and State institutions such as marriage, churches and militarism are abolished. Blake's attempt to recreate a sort of primeval Eden is undoubtedly inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a poem that he and his wife admire so profoundly that they use to declaim it strolling in their garden "in naked majesty", as Adam and Eve¹⁴:

Two of far nobler shape, erect and tall,
 Godlike erect, with native honor clad,
 In naked majesty seemed lords of all,

¹³ The Greek term *ψυχή* means, as it is well known, both 'butterfly' and 'soul'.

¹⁴ For Blake and Milton cf. Wittreich (1975). For Blake's biography see Raine (2014); Ackroyd (1995); Gilchrist (1863). See also Holmes (2005). For *Paradise Lost* see Milton (1993).

And worthy seemed [...]
(*Paradise Lost*, IV: 288-291).

I am convinced that also Thomas Tryon's vehement struggle against slavery and the exploitation of the New World, and in particular his essay *Friendly Advice to the Gentlemen Planters* (Tryon 1684), is an important source of inspiration for Blake's Edenic ideal: it is worth considering that the Americas, in spite of their being placed in the West, have always been perceived by the Europeans as the concrete earthly paradise described in the Bible, placed in the East¹⁵. The very Milton provides a parallelism between "our first parents" and the Amerindians:

[...] Such of late
Columbus found th' American so girt
With feathered cincture [...]
(*Paradise Lost*, IX: 1115-1117).

As this short survey may highlight, several authors and works manifest the same conception of the relationship between man and the natural world inherited, and expressed in a personal way, by Blake. Relying, like Blake, on the sacredness of any living being, Tryon is against flesh-eating and, as he illustrates in his treatises *The Way to Health* (Tryon 1683) and *Pythagoras* (Tryon 1691), advocates vegetarianism, for both moral and healthy reasons. In all paradises, as in the classical golden age, humanity and animals live in harmony, speak the same language, only know eternal spring and immortality and are nourished by the fruits, berries, herbs and vegetables that offer themselves spontaneously. As Tryon, close to Böhme's philosophy, argues that the beginning of wars and rivalry within human society is the consequence of killing and eating animals after the Fall, so Milton rejects the Cartesian conception of animals as machines without intelligence and feelings and believes that all living creatures have a soul and a mind. In order to comfort Adam, frightened by solitude, God assures him that he can enjoy the company of animals since, like the human beings, "they also know, and reason not contemptibly":

"What call'st thou solitude? Is not the earth
With various living creatures, and the air
Replenished [...]?
[...] Know'st thou not
Their language and their ways? They also know,
And reason not contemptibly; with these
Find pastime [...]"
(*Paradise Lost*, VIII: 369-371, 372-375).

In his translation of the XV Book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Book centred on Pythagoras's moving defence of animals, Dryden exclaims "For all Things have an equal right to live" and rejects "the sacrilegious tast of Blood":

¹⁵ See Marx (1967); Greenblatt (2017).

Take not away the Life you cannot give:
 For all Things have an equal right to live.
 Kill noxious Creatures, where 'tis Sin to save;
 This only just Prerogative we have:
 But nourish Life with vegetable Food,
 And shun the sacrilegious tast of Blood
 (*Of the Pythagorean Philosophy. From Ovid's Metamorphoses Book XV, ll. 705-710. Dryden*
 1700: 529).

Among the works of the Platonist Thomas Taylor, the first English translator of Plato's works¹⁶, it is worth mentioning *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (Taylor 1792)¹⁷, a mock-serious defence of the rights of animals that – in spite of being an ironical response to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* – fosters thoughtful meditations on the dignity of animals. Close to Pythagoras, Plutarch, Porphyry, Tryon¹⁸ and Taylor, Blake refers to a vegetarian diet when, in one of his *Proverbs of Hell*, argues that "All wholesom food is caught without a net or a trap" (*Marriage*, plate, 7. K. 151).

Along with Tryon's and Taylor's considerations and, more in general, along with the new sensitive approach towards the natural world encouraged by numerous classic authors, by Neoplatonism and by the philosophic reflections derived from the "scientific Renaissance"¹⁹, the ideals conveyed by the French and American Revolutions strongly contribute to Blake's democratic and radical vision of the natural world and of society²⁰. Edmund Burke's extremely unsympathetic *Reflections on the Revolution of France* (Burke 1790) prompt two replies by Mary Wollstonecraft and one by Thomas Paine: if in 1790 Wollstonecraft answers with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, followed by her celebrated *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in 1791 Paine responds with his famous and effective *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*. Thomas Paine, sincerely esteemed by Blake²¹, is the inspirer of the independence of the American colonies from Great Britain and the author of *Common Sense* (Paine 1776) and *The American Crisis*, two pamphlets written at the beginning of the American Revolution²².

Two of Blake's early works are precisely *The French Revolution*, printed in ordinary type

¹⁶ Blake is deeply inspired by Taylor (cf. note 1).

¹⁷ Cf. the facsimile edition: Taylor (1966).

¹⁸ See Plutarch (1957); Porphyry (2000); Tryon (1691).

¹⁹ The still-surviving strong influence of Neoplatonism during the scientific revolution, the Copernican and Galilean theories depriving man of his sovereignty in the universe and the reaction to the mechanistic vision of the world implied in the new science led to a respectful and even animistic approach towards the natural dimension. The formula "scientific Renaissance" is coined by Marie Boas, one of the first scholars of the impact of modern science on sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries culture, particularly in Great Britain: see Boas (1962). For the approach to nature in the modern age see Thomas (1984).

²⁰ For Blake's revolutionary ideals cf. Erdman (1991); Williams (1998); Thompson (1994).

²¹ Cf. Essick (1991b).

²² *The American Crisis* is a series of sixteen pamphlets published between 1776 and 1783.

for the bookseller Joseph Johnson in 1791 and never published²³, and *America: A Prophecy*, accomplished in 1793: *The French Revolution* is Blake's only work conceived for conventional publication²⁴, whereas *America* is a composite prophetic poem printed with the author's original technique. In 1793, the year in which he etches *America*, Blake participates in the illustration of the *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* by captain John Gabriel Stedman, a work in two volumes (Stedman 1796; Stedman 1813) that, by describing slavery and other aspects of colonisation in the New World, continues Tryon's moral battle against slavery and becomes an important tool in the early abolitionist cause. The sixteen engravings produced by Blake for Stedman's *Narrative*, the most moving and powerful among all the drawings that illustrate the two volumes²⁵, depict some of the atrocious cruelties against slaves that the captain witnessed, including hanging, lashing and other forms of torture. In the etching entitled *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*²⁶ (see plate 2), Blake represents one of "the reclaimed" that Joseph Conrad will bitterly describe in *Heart of Darkness*, i.e. slaves that have the tragic task of controlling, subduing and punishing their fellows, defined "unhappy savages" and "raw matter": "Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle" (Conrad 2000: 33).

In the early prophetic poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, printed, as *America*, in 1793, Blake dwells on the theme of colonialism and slavery in the New World and draws inspiration from some of his engravings for Stedman's *Narrative*, etched in the same year. By presenting the female character of Oothon, "the soft soul of America" (plate 1. K. 189), Blake expresses explicit proto-feminist views and celebrates free eroticism²⁷. Oothon casts doubts on deeply rooted social habits and moral conventions such as chastity, possession and jealousy and innocently exclaims:

"How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys
Holy, eternal, infinite? and each joy is a Love.
[...] I cry: Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!
Can that be Love that drinks another as a sponge drinks water,
That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weepings all the day?"
(*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 5, ll. 5-6, plate 7, ll. 16-18. K. 192, 194).

Oothon, morally and sexually free, and her beloved Theotormon, imbued with a hypocrite sense of Christian righteousness²⁸, are interpretable as the fictional counterpart of cap-

²³ In *Let the Brothels of Paris be opened*, a lyric included in *Poems and Fragments from the Note-Book* (1793), Blake deals again with the French Revolution (K. 185).

²⁴ As observed by Keynes, "only one copy now remains, probably a set of page proofs. [...] This was preserved in the collection of John Linnell until 1918, and is now in the H. E. Huntington Library, California" (K. 887).

²⁵ The other illustrators of the *Narrative* are Inigo Barlow, Francesco Bartolozzi, Michele Benedetti, Thomas Conder, Thomas Holloway, John Perry and Anker Smith. For Blake's contribution see Essick (1991a).

²⁶ Stedman (1813): unnumbered plate placed between p. 308 and p. 309.

²⁷ For Blake's attitude towards sexual freedom and female desire see Matthews (2011).

²⁸ In the Argument to the poem, Oothon says: "I loved Theotormon / And I was not ashamed; / I trembled

tain Stedman and his companion Joanna, a slave of African origins living in Suriname: in his *Narrative*, Stedman describes his relationship with Joanna in romantic terms, avoiding any reference to the colonisers' habit of sexually exploiting slaves and natives. It is worth noticing that on the last plate of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Oothoon advocates bodily pleasures, thus attacking obtuse probity and unnatural chasteness, by precisely arguing that "every thing that lives is holy": "Arise, and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!" (plate 8. K. 195). Orc, the revolutionary spirit of the New World, can be aligned with Oothoon when he proclaims "For every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life" (*America*, plate 8. K. 199).

The 'manifesto' of free sexuality presented by Milton when describing the natural eroticism of Adam and Eve in the earthly paradise²⁹ and the ideas and personality of Mary Wollstonecraft have – along with the news from the New World and along with the more open approach to sexuality fostered by the French Revolution³⁰ – a profound influence on Blake. Attesting his sincere admiration, he dedicates to the French and American Revolutions his two eponymous works³¹, to the author of *Paradise Lost* the prophetic poem *Milton*, completed in 1804, and to Mary Wollstonecraft the lyric *Mary*, composed about 1794: Blake admires so sincerely the initiator of modern western feminism that even imagines a triangulated spiritual and erotic relationship with her and with Heinrich Füssli, the Swiss artist living in London that has a relevant influence on him. In the poem dedicated to Wollstonecraft, Blake celebrates her moral dignity and freedom as well as the liberation from "the spells of law"³², from "the frozen marriage bed"³³ and from "the Marriage hearse"³⁴:

And Mary arose among Friends to be free,
But no Friend from henceforward thou, Mary, shalt see.
Some said she was proud, some call'd her a whore,
And some, when she pass'd by, shut the door.
[...] She remembers no Face like the Human Divine.

in my virgin fears, / And I hid in Leutha's vale! / I plucked Leutha's flower, / And I rose up from the vale; / But the terrible thunders tore / My virgin mantle in twain" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate III. K. 189).

²⁹ "[...] into their inmost bower / Handed they went; and, eas'd the putting off / These troublesome disguises which we wear, / Straight side by side were laid, nor turn'd, I ween / Adam from his fair spouse, nor Eve the rites / Mysterious of connubial Love refus'd: / Whatever hypocrites austere talk / Of puritie and place and innocence, / Defaming as impure what God declares / Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all" (*Paradise Lost*, IV: 738-747).

³⁰ For the freer attitude towards sexuality encouraged by the French Revolution see, for example, Offen (1990); Heuer (2023).

³¹ For Blake and the American Revolution see Freedman (2018).

³² "Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound / In spells of law to one she loathes [...]" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 5. K. 193).

³³ "Such is self-love that envies all, a creeping skeleton, / With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed" (*Ibid.*, plate 7. K. 194).

³⁴ "But thro' midnight streets I hear / How the youthful Harlot's curse / Blasts the new born Infant's tear, / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse" (*London*, in Blake, *Songs of Experience*, 1789-1793, plate 46. K. 216).

All Faces have Envy, sweet Mary, but thine
(*Mary*, ll. 15-18, 43-44. *Poems from the Pickering MS.* K. 428-429).

Further expressing his advocacy of moral and sexual freedom, in *The Everlasting Gospel* Blake considers that "If Moral Virtue was Christianity, / Christ's Pretensions were all Vanity" (*Supplementary Passages*. K. 758), rhetorically asks "Was Jesus chaste? or did he / Give any lessons of Chastity?" (p. 48. K. 753) and, in seemingly blasphemous terms, questions:

Was Jesus Born of a Virgin Pure
With narrow Soul & looks demure?
If he intended to take on Sin
The Mother should an Harlot been,
Just such a one as Magdalen
With seven devils in her Pen
(*The Everlasting Gospel*, ll. 1-6, p. 120. K. 756).

We should not forget that Blake disproves conventional interpretations of the Bible, or, as Milton would say, "Whatever hypocrites austere talk / Of puritie and place and innocence"³⁵. In the beginning of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he announces that "All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of [...] Errors" and in *A Song of Liberty*, its conclusion, declares: "Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy" (plate 27. K. 160). The poet parallels the institution of priesthood, with its moralistic and repressive law, to a noxious caterpillar and to a cemetery; if in *The Marriage* he states "As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys" (plate 9. K. 152), in *The Garden of Love* – one of the lyrics included in *Songs of Experience* (1789-1794) – he explains how the intrusion of priests has transformed a luxuriant and pleasant garden into a cemetery:

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires
(*The Garden of Love*, ll. 7-12. K. 215).

3. 'The Human Divine'. Humanity and Divinity in Blake's Bodies

Advocating the doctrine of primitive Christianity and believing in the sacredness of any living form, Blake sustains equalitarianism, democracy, the abolition of slavery, feminist ideas, free love and sexuality and, as a natural consequence, is profoundly interested in the position and role of humanity within the whole universe, or, in other terms, in the identity of the human and the divine, in what he calls, as in the above-mentioned poem *Mary*, "the Human Divine".

³⁵ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV: 744-745.

The divinity of mankind is the reason why human bodies deserve the most important, if not unique, position in all the designs by Blake whereas the natural world has a symbolic meaning and does not represent an autonomous subject in his visual work: far from being ignored, the natural dimension is contained in Blake's "Human Divine" since the human body epitomises the sacredness of any living form and "All Things are comprehended [...] in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination" (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*: 70. K. 605-606). Blake concludes his minute first composite work with a syllogism: on the second-last engraving of *There is No Natural Religion - second series*, he announces, as already said, that "He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God" and concludes the sentence stating that "He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only" (plate 11. K. 98). On the last etching, he completes the syllogism with the words "Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is" (*Application*, plate 12. K. 98), explicitly declaring that humanity is identifiable with divinity, and vice versa: as announced in *The Marriage*, "men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (plate 11. K. 153).

The symbolism and representation of human bodies in Blake's composite art derive from two indissoluble premises: on the one hand, the author's philosophic and aesthetic syncretism and, on the other, his complex personality and multiple artistic skills. As already noticed, Blake concentrates all the features that in his opinion constitute the real and complete artist in the Renaissance meaning of the term: he is a poet, a painter, an engraver, a philosopher, a composer and, since he has created and constructed a system of ideas, he is also a smith and an architect. Exactly as he is firmly convinced that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul", Blake overcomes the boundaries between the intellectual and the physical dimension by identifying the creation of ideas and languages with a plastic and architectural construction. Being also convinced that "God is a man"³⁶, that "every thing on earth [...] in its essence is God" and that God told him "I am in you and you in me", Blake embraces the classical, Christian, Neoplatonic and Hermetic principles according to which man is the "likeness & similitude"³⁷ of God and of the universe and, by means of an intricate body language and symbolism, visually illustrates what he calls "Human Form Divine"³⁸: Blake's Human Forms Divine are spiritual bodies that graphically represent the intellectual and physical faculties of the human being and symbolise the identity of body and soul, above and below, macrocosm and microcosm, the divine and the human, or, in Swedenborg's terms, the identity of the infinite and the tangible reality.

Blake's human bodies are mainly represented in the two symbolical and contrasting postures of expansion and contraction, two postures that have inspired modern ballet dancers³⁹: it is worth mentioning Ralph Vaughan Williams, who bases his ballet *Job: A Masque for*

³⁶ "God is a man not because he is so perciev'd by man, but because he is the creator of man" (*Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, 1789 circa. K. 90).

³⁷ Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 96 (K. 743).

³⁸ Blake, *A Divine Image*, l. 3 (K. 221): this lyric, etched about 1791, is added to *Songs of Experience*. As observed by Keynes, "the print bearing this poem was never included by Blake among the *Songs of Experience*, but it is found with two sets of prints which were made from the plates after his death" (K. 894).

³⁹ For a pioneering study on Blake and dance cf. Howe (1938). For the influence of Blake on contemporary arts cf. Clarke, Connolly & Whittaker (2014). Cf. also Whittaker (2010).

Dancing (1930) on Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* and on a scenario derived from them by Geoffrey Keynes (Frye 2013: 477), as well as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, the pioneers of twentieth-century avant-garde dance, who centre their technique precisely on 'contraction and release', or, in Blakean terms, on contraction and expansion. In Blake's visual language of forms, a human body with outstretched arms and legs in a lively attitude of extension and expansion evokes Christ crucified and stands for the act of self-sacrifice, generosity, forgiveness and open-mindedness, whereas a contracted, crouched and stiff posture alludes to mental closure, selfishness, spiritual limitation and constriction⁴⁰.

In the light of the symbolic meaning of bodily expansion, it is clear why on the fourth plate of *Jerusalem* God exhorts the lyrical voice to awake and to *expand* in order to redeem the world: "Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!" (K. 622). The design in the upper part of this page, a page that marks the very beginning of the poem⁴¹, provides an interesting instance of Blake's two contrasting poses (see plate 3): the crouched, cowed female figure wearing a heavy grey-blue tunic and evoking, as observed by Morton Paley (Blake 1991b: 135)⁴², the Delphic and the Persian Sibyls painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel stands for spiritual blindness and mental contraction, whereas the leaping, athletic and naked figure on the left soaring in an expanded posture with extended arms – Jerusalem followed by her daughters – alludes to the path of liberation and redemption presented in the poem. The open arms of the contracted and hooded 'Sibyl', however, can be interpreted as a signal of her longing for spiritual rebirth. Since the personification of Nature on plate 16 of *The Gates of Paradise* is precisely represented as a crouched and hooded woman wearing a tunic, the 'Sibyl' on plate 4 of *Jerusalem* is interpretable as Vala, the symbol of the natural dimension of humanity, opposed to Jerusalem, the spiritual dimension of mankind. The contrast between clothes and nakedness is another important symbolic conflict in Blake's designs, as testified by this plate and by the beginning and end of *Jerusalem*: Los-Blake starts his mental journey wearing a black smock and a broad-brimmed hat and concludes it – enlightened and spiritually reborn – with an adherent and transparent robe that does not conceal his "naked majesty" (plates 1, 97). In *Mirth and Melancholy*, two designs that illustrate Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*⁴³, Blake reproduces the leaping and slightly Christological pose of Jerusalem and that of the hooded, stiff and crouched 'Sibyl' depicted on plate 4 of *Jerusalem*: whereas *Mirth* is wearing a transparent veil, *Melancholy* is cowed and heavily dressed.

The engraving *Execution of Breaking on the Rack* (see plate 2 again) is another example of the two opposed Blakean postures. If the "reclaimed" slave acting as a torturer of his fellow sufferer is portrayed in a contracted pose, the victim displays extended arms and legs in an expanded and explicitly Christological position: besides being wounded and mutilated, he

⁴⁰ For Blake's symbolic language of the body see Warner (1994). See also Connolly (2002).

⁴¹ Plate 1, a full-page design showing Los-Blake entering a gothic door, is the frontispiece; plate 2 is the titlepage; plate 3 is an address "To the Public"; plate 4 is the beginning of the poem. Each of the four parts of *Jerusalem* is addressed to a specific audience: "To the Public", "To the Jews", "To the Deists", "To the Christians".

⁴² Paley's majestic edition of *Jerusalem* reproduces copy E (Paul Mellon Collection).

⁴³ *Mirth and Melancholy* (pen and watercolour, 16.1 x 12.1 and 16.2 x 12.2 cm, circa 1816-1820) are, along with the other ten watercolours illustrating Milton's twin poems, in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York. Lister (1991: plates 54, 55).

is tied to a sort of cross. The hanged slave, the hills and the two palms in the background of the plate further evoke Christ's ascent to Golgotha and his crucifixion. Conrad as well represents in Christological terms the Stoic dignity with which the African slaves endure injustice, suffering and tortures (their chains are interpretable as metaphors for the cross): "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps" (Conrad 2000: 33).

Blake elaborates his two main body postures, especially the crouched one, innumerable times throughout his visual work. The frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, for instance, majestically exemplifies the squatted pose by depicting three naked figures (Oothon, the "soft soul of America", Theotormon, her moralistic beloved, and Bromion, a slaver that has raped her) chained in a Platonic cave close to the sea (see plate 4): physically contracted, mentally closed and symbolically blind, they are all unable to see the sun, metaphor for light, freedom, life, divinity. Significantly enough, the three figures are not 'closed' in the same way: if Bromion (Oothon's raper) is totally contracted and Theotormon has a tragic countenance, Oothon has a serene expression and is trying to extend her trunk⁴⁴.

On the titlepage to *The Book of Urizen*, printed in 1794, the eponymous character – symbol of the rational and limited intellectual dimension of humanity – is crouched on the ground in a pose of contraction that in Blake's language of the body also signifies materialism, narrow-mindedness and despair (see plate 5). The stony and cold colours that dominate the plate, the dry branches of the weeping willow forming an archway, the biblical tablets of the Law, Urizen's heavy gown, his closed eyes and his contracted posture are unequivocal signals that in Blake's symbolic and aesthetic system refer to spiritual blindness and death.

Considering that Blake has always read the Bible refusing conformist interpretations, no wonder, then, if the Ten Commandments placed behind Urizen represent a negative feature. On the last plate of *The Marriage*, the poet declares that "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules" (plate 24. K. 158) and, when arguing that "the son of fire [...] stamps the stony law to dust", means that the "ten commands" must be destroyed (*A Song of Liberty*, plate 27. K. 160). Using the same words, Orc, the voice of the American Revolution, defends "the fiery joy" (as Oothon) and revolts against Urizen's "stony law":

[...] I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:
 [...] The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,
 [...] That stony law I stamp to dust; and scatter religion abroad
 To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves
 (*America: A Prophecy*, plate 8, ll. 1, 3, 5-6. K. 198).

We should not fail to notice, however, that on the titlepage to *The Book of Urizen* the paradigm of sterile rationality is trying to open his arms – exactly as the cowled 'Sibyl' at the beginning of *Jerusalem* (see plate 3 again) – as if to outstretch them and give birth to his

⁴⁴ For Blake's political bodies see Makdisi (2003).

creation in an act of generous self-sacrifice: explicitly referring to the artistic activity of the very Blake, Urizen is writing and engraving a book.

Among the numerous examples of the crouched posture in Blake's visual macrotext, it is worth mentioning the colour-printed drawing entitled *Nebuchadnezzar* (see plate 6), a figure portrayed on the last plate of *The Marriage*, above the words "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (plate 24. K. 158); the gigantic naked angel on the frontispiece to *America*, squatted and chained since he is still spiritually slumbering; plate 41 of *Jerusalem*, displaying a stately figure crouched on the floor in a contracted posture: besides evoking Füssli's *Silence*, this plate provides an interesting occurrence of a Blakean visual self-representation since the tiny figure on the left writing in reversed letters on a scroll is a portrait of the author. It is worth mentioning also plate 51 of *Jerusalem*, a plate that depicts Vala, the goddess of Nature, in a cowered and melancholic pose, wearing a blue-grey weighty clothing.

Between 1795 and 1805 Blake creates the large colour print *Newton*⁴⁵, a portrayal of the English scientist that in his opinion represents the archetype of barren scientific and rational thought and, thus, is a personality that he associates with Urizen (see plate 7). Isaac Newton is represented in a crouched and contracted posture, busy at drawing a triangle with the compass he holds in his left hand: the huge sculpture accomplished in 1995 by Eduardo Paolozzi and placed in the courtyard of the British Library is a three-dimensional reproduction of Blake's *Newton*.

Blake's favourite and most re-elaborated plate is *The Ancient of Days*⁴⁶, a picture that shows the Old Testament God, shrank in a squatted pose, when creating the universe with his compasses: "When he prepared the heavens, I was there; when he set a compass upon the face of the depth" (*Prov.*, 8: 27). Blake illustrates both the Bible and *Paradise Lost*:

[...] in his hand
He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
In Gods Eternal store, to circumscribe
This Universe, and all created things
(*Paradise Lost*, VII: 224-227).

The two plates that conclude *There is No Natural Religion - second series*, Blake's first composite work, provide the earliest visual instance of the two opposed postures, thus documenting the central symbolism they have within the philosophic and aesthetic system of the poet⁴⁷. The second-last etching represents the human being that "sees the Ratio only, and therefore sees himself only" as a hunkered figure with a compass that can be interpreted as an embryonic anticipation of *Newton* and *The Ancient of Days*; the last engraving offers the

⁴⁵ The third and last version of the plate *Newton* (1804-1805), a colour print finished in watercolour (46 x 60 cm), is now in the Tate Gallery, London. See Townsend (2003) and Butlin (1978).

⁴⁶ *The Ancient of Days*, or *God Creating the Universe*, is the frontispiece to Blake's prophetic book *Europe* (1794). A relief etching of this plate finished in gold, body colour and watercolour (23.4 x 16.8 cm) and perfected by Blake in his deathbed (1827) is now in the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. Lister (1991: plate 75).

⁴⁷ The first series of *There is No Natural Religion*, etched about 1788 as well and consisting of nine little plates, presents three early instances of the crouched posture (plates 4, 5, 7) and one of the expanded pose (plate 6).

conclusion of the syllogism – “Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” – and visually depicts the ecstasy of being united with God as a human figure in an expanded posture, with radiations round its head and with outstretched arms.

On the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise* (see plate 1 again), the worm-body is contracted and the chrysalis-soul is extended in a perfect complementary pose to visually testify that, as much as body and soul are indissoluble, the two Blakean contrasting postures and all the other oppositions are necessary, as the poet declares in *The Marriage* when stating that “without Contraries is no progression”:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell (plate 3. K. 149).

On the following plate Blake expounds some errors implied in an orthodox reading of Christian doctrines, as already said, and explains what for him is true:

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors: 1. That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul. 2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body; & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul. [...] But the following Contraries to these are True: [...] 2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy (plate 4. K. 149).

The sentence “Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” may be integrated with the adjective ‘Divine’: considering that Böhme and Blake are convinced that God is a polarity of opposed forces and contains both good and evil, spirit and matter, light and darkness – “Heaven and Hell”, “Reason and Energy” –, the reflection should be “Attraction and Repulsion, [...] are necessary to Human *and Divine* Existence”. Moving from the Neoplatonic principle of the unity of contraries in God, the German theologian and philosopher argues that the Creator is the eternal absolute unity and, therefore, the religious experience is basically the experience of an ineluctable series of dualisms.

A watercolour created by Blake in 1793-1794 circa and entitled *The Good and Evil Angels struggling for Possession of a Child* (see plate 8)⁴⁸ depicts a blond good angel above a seascape and a dark evil angel against a background of flames contending the soul of a child in order to visually represent the necessary coexistence of contraries: as announced in *The Marriage*, “Opposition is true Friendship” (plate 20. K. 157). Water, connected to the good angel, and fire, connected to the evil angel, have always been regarded as the two opposed elements

⁴⁸ The pen and watercolour design (29.2 x 44.5 cm) here reproduced, created in 1793-1794, is in the Cecil Higgins Museum, Bedford. A later, larger and reversed version of this subject (1795-1805 circa, 44.5 x 59.4 cm), a colour print finished in pen and watercolour, is now in the Tate Gallery: in this later version the colours are brighter and the evil angel has blank eyes and a tragic countenance that evokes Nebuchadnezzar’s expression (see plate 6 again).

par excellence. If for alchemists all metals, consisting of mercury (associated with water) and sulphur (associated with fire), derive from water and are purified by fire, for Ovid all things are created thanks to the “inharmonious harmony” (*discors concordia*) implied in the union of water and fire, two elements “naturally at enmity”:

quippe ubi temperiem sumpsero umorque calorque,
 concipiunt, et ab his oriuntur cuncta duobus,
 cumque sit ignis aquae pugnax, vapor umidus omnes
 res creat, et discors concordia fetibus apta est
 (*Met.*, I: 430-433).

For when moisture and heat unite, life is conceived,
 and from these two sources all living things spring.
 And, 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
 (Ovid 1951: vol. I: 32-33).

Blake's fiery evil angel, with arms and legs extended, is hovering in an expanded and lively posture that evokes a crucifixion, whereas the watery good angel is standing in a stiff upright pose, with contracted arms. The child, with arms and legs outstretched but with a frightened expression, functions as the link between the two contending angels, as the spirit that unites body and soul: it is worth noticing that this design appears, much reduced in size, precisely below the text of plate 4 of *The Marriage*, a page that expounds the poet's theories on the identity of body and soul. In his comment on this plate of *The Marriage*, Erdman further highlights the opposed and complementary features of the two angels claiming that the good one is unequivocally a female (Blake 1992: 102): from this perspective, the child can be interpreted as the means for the fusion of man and woman, one of Blake's main tenets. Blake's idea of the original androgyny of humankind and of the necessary re-union of male and female is a theme analysed in Part II of this essay. Keynes, on the other hand, is convinced that “both figures are male” (Blake 1990: plate 4v) and concludes that the dark one is fettered by his ankle⁴⁹ to visually illustrate the third “Error” of “all Bibles or sacred codes”: “That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies” (plate 4. K. 149). Considering that this plate of *The Marriage* is entitled *The voice of the Devil*, the evil angel can be associated with one of the active and creative devils busy at confuting the “Errors” listed in the upper half of the page, an association corroborated by the drawing *Satan smiting Job with sore Boils*, a tempera on mahogany representing Satan with arms and legs extended in a similar Christological pose⁵⁰: for Blake, as already said, “Evil is the active springing from Energy”.

The modes and meanings of the representation of the human body function as the the-

⁴⁹ Erdman notices that “there is no chain or manacle on his ankle in copies A, B, C” of *The Marriage* (Blake 1992: 102).

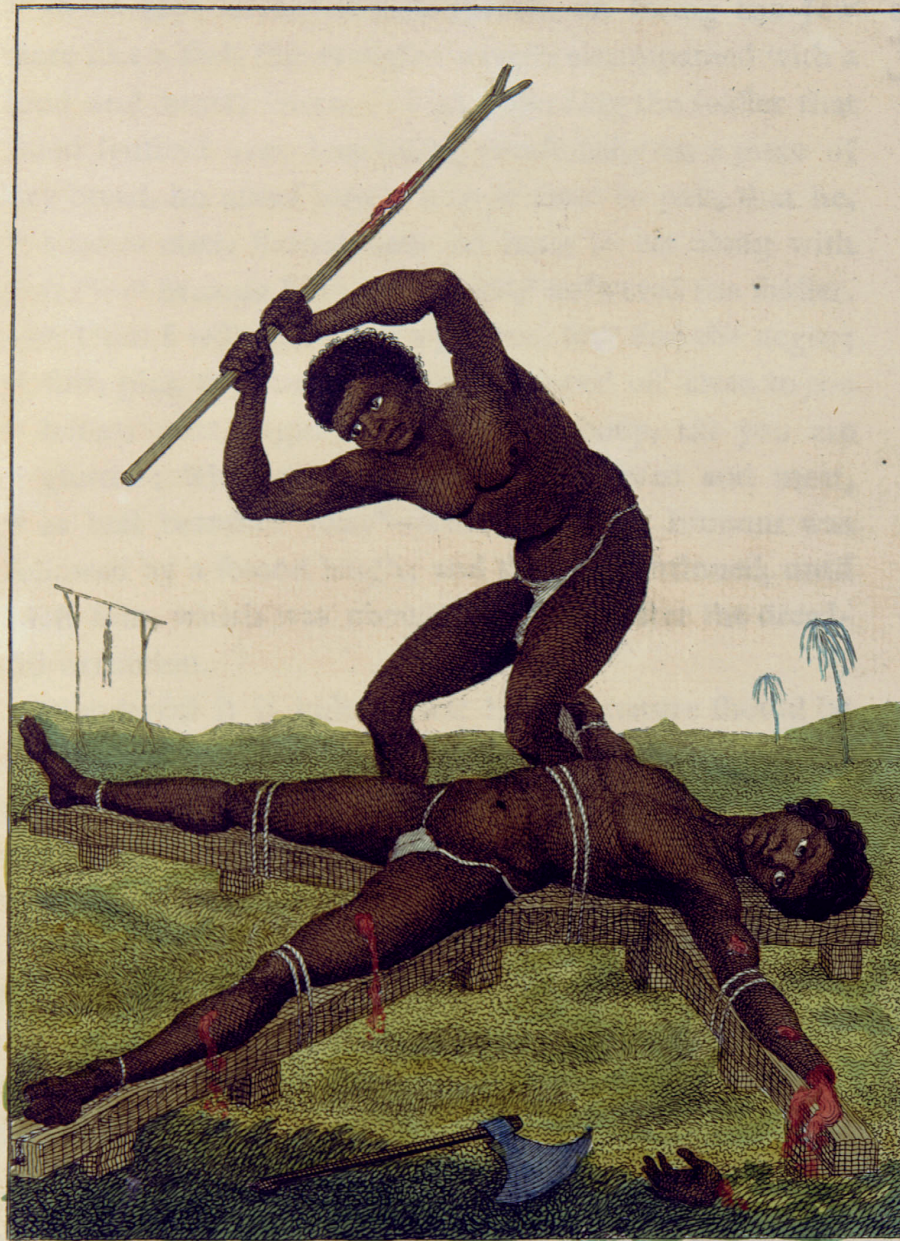
⁵⁰ *Satan smiting Job with sore Boils* (pen, ink and tempera on mahogany, 1826 circa, 32.7 x 43.2 cm) is in the Tate Gallery.

oretic and practical core of this extraordinary poet-painter-engraver and as the *trait d'union* that marks the conclusion of the first part of my essay and opens the path for the second one: in Part II the theme of the human body is fundamental also for the Blakean representation of the identity of the human and the divine and, as already said, for the ideal of an androgynous – and thus complete – sexuality.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Plate 1. William Blake, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, 1793, frontispiece.



The Execution of Breaking on the Rack.

London, Published Dec^r 27 1793, by J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church Yard.

Plate 2. William Blake, *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, 1793.

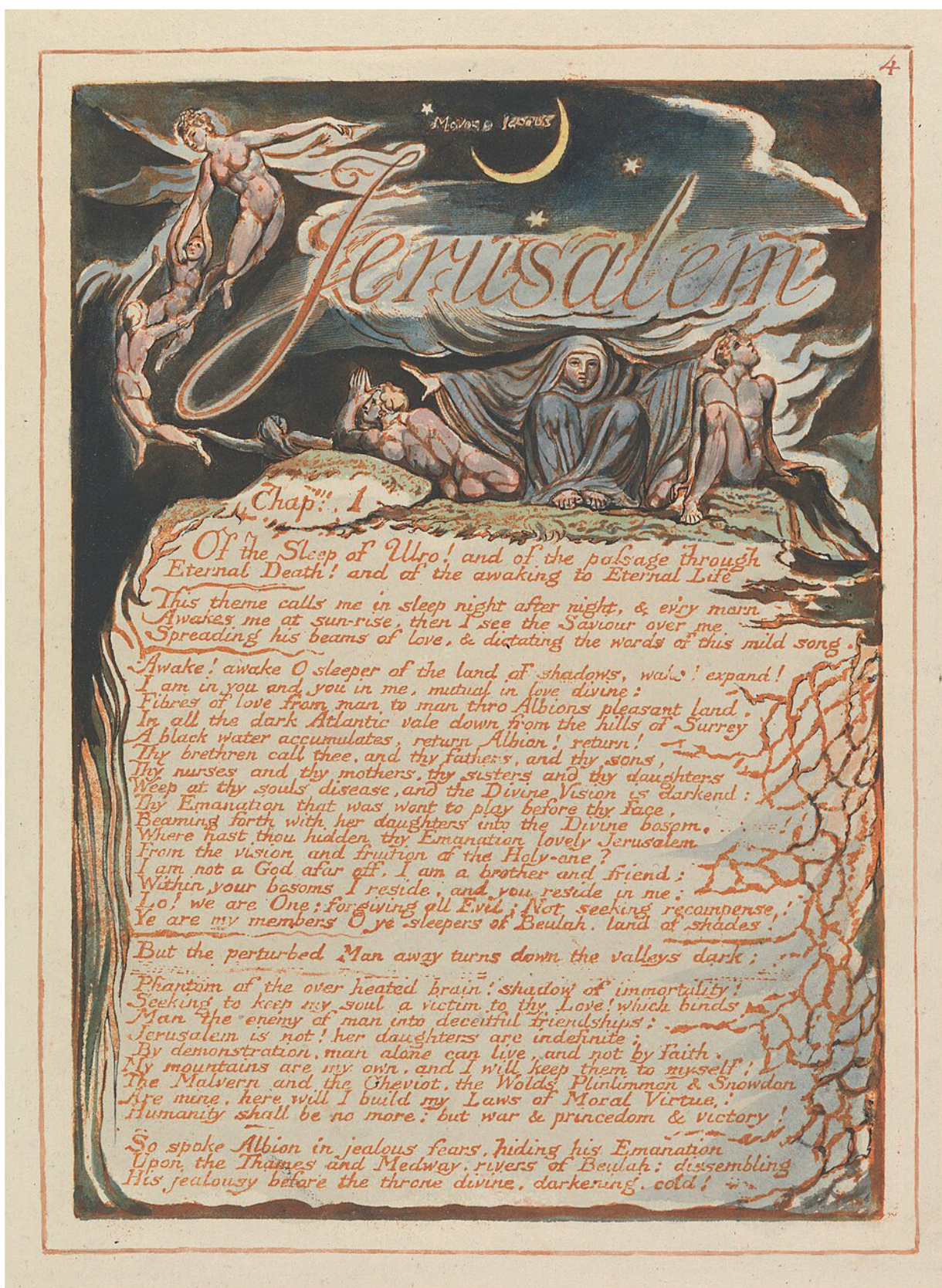
Plate 3. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 4.



Plate. 4. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, frontispiece.



Plate 5. William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, titlepage.



Plate 6. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-1793, plate 24 (detail).

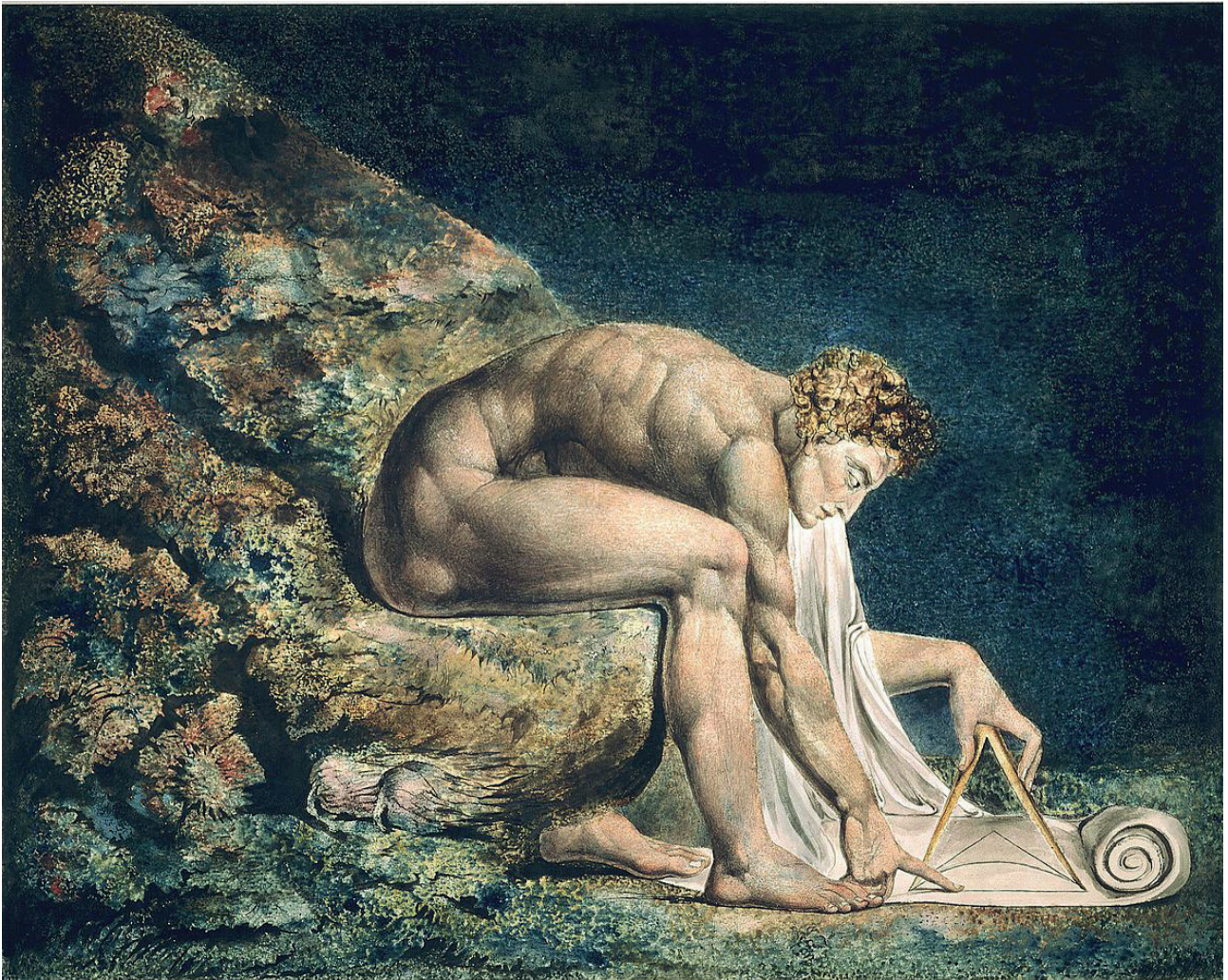


Plate 7. William Blake, *Newton*, 1795-1805 circa.



Plate 8. William Blake, *The Good and Evil Angels struggling for Possession of a Child*, 1793-1794 circa.

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Raccontare Juan José Millás: l'altro lato della realtà. A proposito di *Volver a casa*, *El orden alfabético*, *El mundo*, *La mujer loca*, *Ese imbécil va a escribir una novela*

Abstract I: L'obiettivo di questo saggio è l'analisi di alcuni romanzi di Millás nei quali, attraverso modalità paradossali di rappresentazione dell'esperienza, la realtà, in continua trasformazione e lungi dall'essere riferimento oggettivo, deve essere ripensata e risemantizzata. Dall'attività simbolica, decisiva nei testi di Millás, scaturisce il tema del doppio che coinvolge l'autore stesso e la sua scrittura in un gioco di dislocazioni e rispecchiamenti. Fondamentale in questo processo è l'atto di percepire, sempre legato all'emozione, attraverso il quale si intuisce la propria alienazione. In questo panorama, l'identità si scopre posticcia e priva di senso e acquista importanza il corpo come luogo dove il *logos* si dissolve.

Abstract II: The objective of this paper is to analyse some of Millás' novels in which, through paradoxical ways of representing experience, reality, in continuous transformation and far from being an objective reference, has to be rethought and resemantised. From the symbolic activity, decisive in Millás' texts, emerges the theme of the double that involves the author himself and his writing in a game of dislocation and mirroring. Fundamental in this process is the act of perceiving, always linked to emotion, through which one intuits one's own alienation. In this panorama, identity is discovered to be fake and meaningless, and the body takes on importance as the place where the *logos* dissolves.

Keywords: Juan José Millás, narrativa spagnola, altra parte della realtà, simbolo, percezione e sdoppiamenti.

1. Confusi e disarticolati

Juan José Millás García, nato a Valencia nel 1946 e trasferitosi a Madrid all'età di sei anni, scrive principalmente romanzi e racconti, tra cui *articuentos* (mescolanza tra articolo giornalistico e racconto di finzione), e collabora con vari periodici. Vincitore di premi letterari e giornalistici, è molto conosciuto in Spagna mentre in Italia, in piccola parte tradotto, non ha avuto la stessa diffusione forse anche per la difficoltà della traduzione a restituire l'aspetto di *complessità semplice*, di paradossalità, di rivelazioni inaspettate e di effetto comico improvviso che sono caratteristiche della sua scrittura.

Nell'arco della sua lunga carriera, Millás ha evidenziato in varie occasioni la necessità di scrivere evocando aspetti insondabili e latenti della realtà. Egli non specula sulla forma, non cerca l'abbellimento estetico e linguistico fine a se stesso, la sua scrittura è piuttosto semplice e lineare, il periodo grammaticale è in genere facilmente comprensibile. Le strategie semantiche e formali servono a rappresentare l'originarietà e l'ambivalenza di ogni gesto raccontato e favoriscono una riflessione sulla precaria condizione del soggetto nel mondo. I tratti più caratteristici non si basano tanto sulla riconoscibilità di modelli narrativi, di criteri estetici o ideologici, quanto sull'attitudine a esplorare i limiti della realtà manifesta, tradizionalmente intesa e sostenuta dalla logica della civiltà occidentale.

Di conseguenza, le narrazioni di Millás offrono una serie di protagonisti confusi e turbati, le cui peculiarità non sono mai ben definite, che hanno smesso di porsi esplicitamente le domande drammatiche sull'esistenza e sulle infinite maschere che l'individuo è costretto ad esibire o di proporre nuove ideologie e modelli estetici. Essi, totalmente disarticolati e non a caso assimilati spesso a manichini, si muovono in un mondo in cui il non senso è già un dato acquisito (Jameson 1989: 64).

Strettamente legata all'intreccio (che implica gesti e movimenti nello spazio facilmente individuabili), è fondamentale l'attività percettiva dei protagonisti. Anche queste azioni minime (che possiamo chiamare *microdiegesi*) appartengono all'ambito diegetico e la loro analisi permette di valutare, in maniera più articolata, che cosa fanno veramente i personaggi, qual è la loro attività, per esempio: lasciarsi sorprendere da un'emozione, riconoscere una sensazione, percepire i minimi cambiamenti del proprio corpo legati al sopraggiungere e al trasformarsi delle emozioni (Contadini 2002: 8).

Attraverso strumenti di carattere principalmente filosofico, procederemo all'analisi di alcuni romanzi dello scrittore nei quali, attraverso modalità paradossali di rappresentazione dell'esperienza, la realtà appare in continua trasformazione e deve essere risemantizzata. Dall'attività simbolica, decisiva nelle opere di Millás, scaturisce il tema del doppio che coinvolge l'autore stesso e la sua scrittura in un gioco di dislocazioni e rispecchiamenti. Fondamentale in questo processo è l'atto di percepire, sempre legato all'emozione, attraverso il quale i personaggi intuiscono la propria alienazione. In questo panorama, l'identità si rivela posticcia e acquista importanza il corpo come luogo dove il *logos* si dissolve.

2. La percezione della realtà

Millás ha ribadito più volte che la letteratura è un modo per conoscere la realtà (Millás 2010), la quale esige una profonda riflessione, un approccio mai scontato e sempre polivalente.

Si scrive perché in certi momenti della vita, in seguito ad alcuni episodi o per una particolare predisposizione percettiva, può succedere che la realtà appaia trasformata in una finzione, una montatura. Impressione, questa, che scatena dubbi, disagi, conflitti. La scrittura è, dunque, una forma terapeutica per narrare (se non per risolvere) il dissidio fondamentale tra l'essere umano e la realtà. Una delle modalità primordiali di avvicinamento alla realtà, sostiene lo scrittore, è avvenuta attraverso il mito e, in seguito, attraverso il discorso letterario. Purtroppo, però, di solito ciò non viene riconosciuto perché la saggezza e l'utilità che offre la letteratura non sono quantificabili (per questo l'ambito umanistico in questa epoca subisce tagli e ridimensionamenti più di altri settori).

Per esemplificare queste considerazioni, Millás, in un'intervista (Millás 2010), propone un esempio tratto dal cinema e menziona il noto film *The Truman Show* (1998) del regista Peter Weir, il cui protagonista è Truman Burbank, interpretato dall'attore Jim Carrey, un trentenne apparentemente normale, che ignora di essere il fulcro di uno spettacolo televisivo, il *Truman Show*, incentrato sulla sua stessa vita, ripresa in diretta sin dalla nascita, quando Truman fu prelevato da una gravidanza indesiderata. Tutto si svolge all'interno di una megastruttura appositamente creata, piena di telecamere nascoste, che il protagonista, ignaro, confonde con la realtà stessa.

C'è un momento, però, in cui il protagonista scopre che nella realtà che lo circonda ci sono regole, norme stabilite: gesti, avvenimenti che si ripetono, schemi di comportamento senza i quali la vita sembra non possa procedere, incluse le pubblicità che vengono surrettiziamente enunciate dagli interlocutori del protagonista. Questo fa sì che Truman inizi a scoprire che la realtà è una costruzione, l'effetto di un assemblaggio, il prodotto di una mente logica. Inoltre, il protagonista comprende che nella realtà in cui vive ci sono crepe, difetti, meccanismi che non funzionano, in alcuni casi perché obsoleti. Ciò può essere inteso come una metafora del nostro stare al mondo che ci spinge a considerare che la realtà nella quale siamo immersi sia un artificio, non la Realtà, ma una delle *tante realtà* che ci riguardano (e che il senso comune spaccia per l'unica vera Realtà).

Strettamente vincolata alla percezione, la realtà dunque non è sempre uguale a se stessa poiché consente rivelazioni, mutamenti, attraversamenti. In un istante può accadere una nuova e improvvisa rivelazione che Millás definisce come il riconoscimento della "trampa de la realidad" (Millás 1998: 246): si intuisce cioè la propria alienazione, si avverte che esistono altre zone della nostra esistenza, inesplorate, misteriose. È la scoperta di una nuova condizione che può far felici, ma che può anche portare al completo smarrimento. La realtà, dunque, deve essere riformulata, risemantizzata.

3. Il simbolo

Fondamentale in questo processo è l'atto di percepire, sempre legato all'emozione, che comporta la possibilità di cogliere il mondo prima di ogni giudizio¹. È questa capacità di una visione simbolica, e non meramente logica, il vero canale di connessione attraverso le diverse parti della realtà. Ma per arrivare a ciò, spesso i protagonisti hanno bisogno di un *mezzo di trasporto* che li aiuti a percorrere questo canale allentando le strette maglie della logica: per esempio il fumo, l'alcol, la febbre, il sogno, l'immaginazione, la sorpresa.

In questa maniera Millás indaga sulla necessità di ripensare la realtà attraverso paradossali rappresentazioni dell'esperienza (e del rapporto, o dissidio, dell'individuo con la realtà). Ne è un esempio il breve racconto *La puerta secreta*, tratto dalla raccolta *Ella imagina* (1994), che consideriamo una specie di testo chiave per introdursi nell'universo della scrittura millasiana.

Vicente Holgado, il protagonista dedito alla fantasia e all'immaginazione, non trascor-

¹ Percepire "non è giudicare, bensì cogliere un senso immanente al sensibile prima di ogni giudizio. Il fenomeno della percezione vera offre quindi un significato che inerisce ai sensi e di cui il giudizio è solo l'espressione facoltativa" (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 72).

re “en la realidad más tiempo del estrictamente necesario” (Millás 1994: 117), riuscendo così a sopportare abbastanza bene le umiliazioni dell’esistenza. Le sue fantasie preferite passano attraverso una porta fittizia, disegnata da un filo della luce nella parete di fronte al letto. Tale porta rappresenta “el acceso secreto a aquellos lugares dictados por su imaginación” (Millás 1994: 118). Spesso, chiudendo gli occhi, egli si alza immaginariamente e si dirige alla porta segreta che si apre sui luoghi più disparati: “a una estrecha calle de Hong Kong o a una playa del Caribe o a un museo de ciencias” (1994: 118). Quando Vicente è stanco di rimanere “en el interior de una fantasía” (1994: 119) percorre a ritroso lo stesso cammino fino alla porta segreta che si apre all’interno della sua camera, dove raggiunge il letto e ritrova il suo corpo.

Un giorno, però, decide di fare un esperimento particolare: immagina che la porta segreta della sua camera si apra sulla sua stessa camera, con la variante che ciò che prima era a destra ora è a sinistra e viceversa, poiché la relazione tra uno spazio e l’altro è speculare. Addentrandosi nella sua camera attraverso la porta segreta, Vicente si rende conto che “todo era igual, pero que al mismo tiempo era distinto en el sentido de que los objetos tenían una relevancia especial, una solidez de la que carecían en el otro lado” (1994: 119). Vicente si avventura per il corridoio e scende in strada: “la realidad poseía una intensidad cegadora y apasionante” (1994: 120). Egli comincia a vivere una quantità di incredibili emozioni semplicemente contemplando la realtà di tutti i giorni: “la mera contemplación de los transeúntes excitaba todos sus sentidos, como si se asomara a un hormiguero de cristal que le mostrara los secretos de estos animales” (1994: 120). Ad un certo punto, un rumore, svegliandolo, lo rende consapevole di essersi addormentato. Decide quindi di uscire dalla fantasia e di fare ritorno percorrendo la strada all’inverso, ma, stavolta, non trova la porta segreta. Dopo alcuni istanti di smarrimento apre gli occhi e si accorge che la realtà della sua camera è la stessa di quella che aveva lasciato prima di attraversare la porta segreta, ma non è uguale poiché “lo que antes había estado a la derecha se encontraba ahora a la izquierda y al revés” (1994: 120). Vicente non riesce a ritrovare la porta per ritornare nella dimensione iniziale, ma è molto felice nell’altra realtà perché è in grado di ammirare e apprezzare tutto ciò che vede e non ha più bisogno di ricorrere alle fantasie.

Le due parti di realtà rappresentano le due metà di un oggetto spezzato, il *symbolon*, per l’appunto, una presente, l’altra evocata, l’una identica all’altra, eppure non uguali. Carlo Sini fa riferimento ad un’usanza dell’antica Grecia da cui si è formato il termine “simbolo”. Quando due persone legate da un vincolo affettivo si separavano, spezzavano un oggetto e ciascuno prendeva una delle due metà, potendo, così, tramite la propria metà, evocare l’altro, l’assente, in modo che idealmente le due parti si ricongiungessero. È proprio questa operazione di “mettere insieme”, operazione ideale ma emotivamente intensa, che dà vita alla parola simbolo². Le due parti sono la stessa cosa perché appartenevano allo stesso in-

² Prendendo le mosse dal significato letterale del termine greco *symbolon* (*sym-ballo*, metto insieme), Sini afferma che “il simbolo è una presenza [...] che presuppone la separazione o rottura di ciò, e da ciò, che era originariamente unito [...] l’altro a cui il simbolo rimanda è ancora se stesso [...] L’intero spezzato del simbolo rinvia allo stesso intero non ancora spezzato. E così pure, le sue due parti stanno, ognuna per l’unità integra dalla quale derivano e che esse rappresentano”; ma è “la fessura che sym-ballei, che mette assieme. È essa che

tero originario a cui rinviano, ma al contempo non sono uguali perché ormai separate per sempre. Millás non è interessato ad esaltare una parte a discapito dell'altra o a fare in modo che una possa sostituirsi o sovrapporsi all'altra, ma, piuttosto, ad esplorare la zona della frattura, quella fessura a partire dalla quale entrambe le parti si rivelano. Distanza che più non separa, ma permette il passaggio, la metamorfosi, lo scambio, tra le due *parti* di realtà, tra *io* e *l'altro*.

È l'attività del simbolo, dunque, che ha modificato la vita di Vicente Holgado. Il protagonista ha messo in atto un'interpretazione simbolica della realtà, è andato al di là di una visione esclusivamente logica e convenzionale, limitata e limitante, ed è riuscito a percepire la realtà come fosse una scoperta, una rivelazione, un nuovo mondo (anche se lo stesso) aperto ad una possibilità di senso. Noi non abbiamo esperienza della totalità, o dell'intero che si rompe. Nasciamo con una ferita che è già presente, la frattura che contiene e separa, che apre e chiude allo stesso tempo. Nasciamo come oggetto spezzato, non conosciamo la pienezza se non appunto per via *simbolica*.

4. Canali di connessione

L'altra parte della realtà non è costituita semplicemente dall'immaginazione e non è sostitutiva di *questa* realtà³. L'altra realtà è *anche* questa realtà, ma vista con occhi diversi, che colgono nelle cose di sempre una nuova apertura di senso. Non avviene un trasferimento magico da una dimensione all'altra. Tanti personaggi di Millás sanno di vivere in un mondo reale (vanno al lavoro, mangiano al ristorante, prendono il taxi, parlano tra loro, scrivono, ecc.) ma nello stesso tempo intuiscono che questo stesso mondo è irreale perché *questa* realtà non è più riconosciuta come fondamento del soggetto, luogo di accoglienza dell'identità, perché *questa* realtà più non dice del senso dell'esistenza (Contadini 2002: 182). I protagonisti, dunque, la riconoscono, ma contemporaneamente la negano, cercando nella quotidianità, una fessura che permetta un contatto, una connessione, con l'altra parte. Il paradosso rappresenta la possibilità di abitare dimensioni diverse e quindi di essere contemporaneamente *sé* e *altro da sé*.

Nei passaggi tra due dimensioni del reale in cui si muove Vicente Holgado acquista importanza, come indicato nel titolo del racconto, la porta di accesso e il percorso che egli fa da una realtà all'altra, cioè il canale di connessione che permette il transito. Ad un certo punto, nel viaggio di ritorno, la porta scompare perché è come se Vicente l'avesse assimilata: una volta trovato il varco non ha più bisogno di immaginarlo. La porta fittizia si rivela limite transitabile, soglia sfrangiata, canale di connessione, che trascende la quotidianità e schiude un orizzonte di possibilità. Non si tratta, quindi, di un confronto tra una realtà vera ed una falsa, tra una realtà concreta ed una immaginaria, ma del possibile transito da una all'altra,

unisce distanziando e distanzia unificando [...] Il simbolo, pertanto, è quell'originaria dimensione in cui si manifesta l'apertura della differenza" (Sini 1989: 165-166).

³ "L'operazione simbolica non consiste dunque nel *capovolgimento* dei valori collettivi [...] ma nella loro *dissoluzione* che non si ottiene liberando l'irrazionale che, come nuovo valore, rientra nel disegno già collaudato della ragione, ma affiancando il razionale e l'irrazionale. Questo è il vero scacco della ragione che, dall'ambivalenza simbolica, si vede privata del suo valore assoluto" (Galimberti 1997: 60).

di quel passaggio decisivo che porta i protagonisti a scoprirsi in *altra* dimensione, in *altra* realtà, pur riconoscendo gli oggetti e gli ambienti con cui si relazionavano fino a poco tempo prima; una dimensione che suggerisce una percezione *altra* da sé, nonostante siano riconoscibili le stesse sembianze, il proprio timbro di voce, le stesse parentele, lo stesso nome⁴.

Sovente i personaggi si predispongono a questa inedita modalità di percepire il mondo, nei momenti in cui i dispositivi di controllo razionale si allentano: un breve sonno (è il caso di Vicente Holgado), una malattia con febbre alta (è il caso del piccolo Julio e di Julio Orgaz, rispettivamente in *El orden alfabético* e *El desorden de tu nombre*), uno stato di alterazione dovuto all'alcol o al fumo (è il caso di Juan-José di *Volver a casa* e di Elena in *La soledad era esto*). Ma una volta innescato il meccanismo di transito, essi non hanno più bisogno di tali espedienti, poiché comprendono che quella parte di realtà occulta e insondabile è un patrimonio latente e sempre esperibile. Espedienti, questi, che spesso si combinano o che vengono sostituiti da oggetti che hanno una presenza ricorrente nella scrittura millasiana divenuti, ormai, oggetti di culto tra i lettori affezionati per l'assiduità e l'importanza che lo scrittore gli concede: l'armadio, la zona sotto al letto, la porta (come nel caso della porta segreta), il corridoio, la protesi; luoghi di frontiera tra dimensioni diverse della realtà o che favoriscono repentini spostamenti nello spazio, verso l'esterno, tra un dentro e un fuori oppure all'interno del proprio corpo (come nel caso del corridoio).

5. Da una dimensione all'altra

I passaggi di dimensione sono evidenti in particolare nella prima parte del romanzo *El orden alfabético* (1998), in cui il transito *all'altro lato della realtà* assume le proporzioni di una pratica frequente e indispensabile:

vi a otro que sin embargo era yo (Millás 1998: 17); me encontraba realmente en dos lugares distintos a la vez (1998: 17); Comprendí, en fin, que las cosas sucedían al mismo tiempo a un lado y otro de la vida (1998: 22); era capaz de estar en dos sitios a la vez (1998: 28); me sentí arrebatado hacia la otra región o hacia el otro lado del calcetín (1998: 148); percibí sobre las plantas de mis pies la presión de otras plantas de dimensiones idénticas, como si hubiera otro cuerpo también echado boca arriba al otro lado de un espejo invisible [...] Entonces adiviné que aquellos pies eran también los míos, pero en la versión del otro lado [...] Cerré los ojos y en unos segundos, apenas sin esfuerzo, pasé de un cuerpo a otro (1998: 62).

Durante questi trasferimenti, Julio (favorito inizialmente dalla febbre) prende atto di una nuova, autentica e originaria maniera di percepire se stesso e il mondo circostante:

⁴ In questo modo viene sovvertito il principio di identità e non contraddizione, capisaldi della nostra civiltà, per cui non più questo o quello, l'uno o l'altro, ma questo e quello, l'uno e l'altro insieme (Galimberti 1997: 27). Si mette in crisi, dunque, l'unità del molteplice come principio unitario in cui si raccoglie ogni possibile senso umano, che si è affermato a spese del corpo, dei suoi sensi e dei suoi significati, sacrificati a quel principio unificatore del soggetto in cui l'ambivalenza viene dissolta nel principio di identità e dell'equivalenza del soggetto con se stesso (Galimberti 1983: 26).

yo era consciente de todo mi cuerpo a la vez, de los dedos de los pies y de las orejas, de la lengua y de las pestañas, de la nariz y los párpados (Millás 1998: 17); Tomé un cenicero sobre la mesa y supe, como nunca hasta entonces, que tenía entre los dedos un objeto formal (1998: 17); De súbito aprecié esta capacidad para producir calor de la que tampoco hasta entonces había sido consciente (1998: 19); alcancé un salón que, sin dejar de ser también el de mi casa, *parecía* diferente (1998: 17).

Il fatto che gli oggetti emanino un'altra luce o brillantezza significa che la relazione tra il protagonista e il mondo recupera un senso inaugurale, ma ancora indefinito nelle sue valenze. Gli oggetti si rivelano più lucenti perché accadono nell'evento che contemporaneamente determina colui che li percepisce. Viene quindi evidenziato l'atto originario dell'essere al mondo⁵.

Il protagonista ci spiega con molta chiarezza ciò che effettivamente sta accadendo: "Estaba, en fin, contemplando la realidad cotidiana con la extrañeza de lo nuevo, como cuando entras en una casa desconocida en la que cada habitación es un sobresalto" (Millás 1998: 25). Tale sussulto non è altro che una rivelazione che esige una sospensione del giudizio e l'abbandono di tutto ciò che è scontato e predefinito: è il corpo (e non la *ratio*) che si relaziona al mondo e lo esperisce⁶.

Afferma lo scrittore: "En *El orden alfabético*, precisamente, una vez que a Julio, su personaje principal, [...] se le aparece la encuestadora [...] y le miente, le dice que tiene esposa e hijo, [...] resulta que esa familia inexistente se convierte en lo único real de su vida" (Millás 2000b: 19). La famiglia inventata da Julio, che mente alla sondaggista, diventa quindi l'unica cosa reale della sua vita di uomo solitario proprio perché si sottrae ai vincoli formali, ai codici, alle categorie di tipo socioeconomico che la nostra civiltà impone invadendo anche l'intimità delle persone. La famiglia inventata diviene "lo único que no está codificado y regulado por las leyes del mercado, por la economía o por la acometida general" (2000b: 20). Di conseguenza, "todo lo demás -su casa, la calle, la ciudad, el periódico en el que trabaja- adquiere en ese momento el tono de las cosas inexistentes" (2000b: 20). Questa rivelazione problematizza una volta di più la tradizionale idea della realtà oggettiva valida per tutti, ne coglie l'aspetto ideologico e nichilista in base al quale l'uomo non è altro che un artefatto meccanico che si muove per inerzia.

6. Sdoppiamenti

La possibilità di un'interpretazione simbolica della realtà, generalmente, non restituisce ai personaggi la felicità che nonostante tutto continuano a cercare. Il loro disagio si fa narra-

⁵ Secondo Merleau-Ponty la percezione non si può considerare indipendente dall'oggetto percepito poiché essa non si riferisce mai a qualcosa, ma ad un insieme, una rete di relazioni, da cui qualcosa emerge come risultato del nostro bisogno di senso: "Poiché siamo al mondo noi siamo *condannati al senso* e non possiamo fare nulla e dire nulla che non assuma un nome nella storia" (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 29). La percezione, dunque, "è quell'atto che in un sol tratto crea, con la costellazione dei dati, il senso che li collega – quell'atto che non si limita a scoprire il senso *che essi hanno*, ma fa sì *che abbiano un senso*" (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 74).

⁶ "Ogni percezione esterna è immediatamente sinonimo di una percezione del mio corpo allo stesso modo in cui ogni percezione del mio corpo si esplicita nel linguaggio della percezione esterna" (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 281).

zione, diviene letteratura orientata alla rappresentazione delle inquietudini più profonde della nostra epoca.

In alcune opere l'attività del simbolo predispone una visione favorevole per i personaggi, soprattutto quando vi è una donna protagonista (o nel caso di Vicente Holgado esaminato al paragrafo 3), mentre in altri testi l'aspetto nichilista prende il sopravvento.

Dall'attività simbolica scaturisce il noto tema del doppio, in cui si enfatizza la dualità intrinseca, la dislocazione costitutiva dell'essere umano⁷, permettendo di riflettere su aspetti reconditi dell'esistenza⁸.

Molti sono gli esempi nei testi di Millás: sdoppiamenti d'identità, simmetrie, spazi che si duplicano, dinamiche tra esterno ed interno e, nel caso che qui ci apprestiamo a descrivere, la presenza di due gemelli⁹.

Nel romanzo *Volver a casa* (1990) il protagonista racconta di come da ragazzo, giocando a carte, scommette la propria identità, la perde ed è costretto a scambiarla con quella del fratello gemello. Senza la propria identità, al protagonista rimane solo un movimento inerziale, quello di un robot meccanico che compie gesti per convenzione, per abitudine, che sono poi i gesti dell'uomo integrato. Ad un certo punto, il protagonista Juan inizia a pensare al suicidio e alle forme più rapide e meno violente di togliersi la vita. Tuttavia, "no se daba cuenta, mientras llevaba a cabo aquel estudio, de que ya la había perdido [la vita] en una apuesta singular, aunque lo cierto es que ni él mismo había advertido entonces aquella privación, aquella pérdida, puesto que su cuerpo, atrapado en un movimiento inercial, conservó la agitación y la verticalidad propia de los vivos" (Millás 1990: 54).

Perdendo la propria identità, al protagonista rimane solo l'aspetto delle persone vive, la postura e una sorta di agitazione che è però svuotata di senso, è fine a se stessa e non rinviava a nulla. Ci viene data quindi l'immagine dell'uomo che ignaro di aver perso la propria identità, vive in anticipo la sua morte, comportandosi come un burattino, un ingranaggio inserito in un sistema che funziona per inerzia. Possiamo considerare questa immagine come una sorta di metafora che rappresenta la condizione abituale dell'essere al mondo, una delle modalità attraverso cui si esprime il nichilismo contemporaneo: non un essere vivo con un progetto, un orizzonte, ma un meccanismo che funziona per inerzia, senza ulteriorità (Contadini 2002: 198).

Il testo è saturo di oggetti, azioni e avvenimenti che fungono da canali di connessione

⁷ Valerio Magrelli afferma che "l'individuo esiste proprio in quanto diviso, a partire dal fatto che pensare postula l'esistenza di un altro" (Magrelli 2001: 54).

⁸ Così si esprime Massimo Fusillo in merito: "Il tema del doppio costituisce un attacco plateale alla logica dominante con cui leggiamo il mondo, basata sui principi aristotelici di identità e non contraddizione; un attacco che, come in tutte le tematiche del fantastico, implica il riemergere di un sapere magico e arcaico, di una totalità indistinta, omogenea e indifferenziata, insomma di quella logica simmetrica in cui la riformulazione di Freud operata da Matte Blanco ha individuato la cifra fondante dell'inconscio" (Fusillo 1998: 27).

⁹ Scrive Maria Alessandra Giovannini: "En el concepto de espacio millasiano están incluidos varios aspectos dependientes unos de otros: el primer nivel de significación se refiere a la dimensión física de la realidad, es el *lugar* donde cada objeto y persona se sitúan, sea en la experiencia vital y cotidiana, sea en su simulacro, representado por la literatura; el nivel sucesivo nos lleva a la concepción del espacio desde el punto de vista interior, personal, del individuo, como *espacio moral*, telón de fondo del enfrentamiento diario del *yo* con el *otro*, con la realidad exterior" (Giovannini 2000: 243).

(telefoni, televisori, radio, taxi, lettere, medium e sedute spiritiche), tant'è che il protagonista, durante l'intera opera, compie spesso gesti come scrivere una lettera, comporre un numero e parlare al telefono, prendere il taxi, accendere il televisore o spegnerlo, abbassare o alzare il volume, sintonizzarsi su un canale, ascoltare la radio, stabilire contatti con persone sconosciute o dimenticate, ecc. Egli, in tal modo, cerca un passaggio che possa condurlo, con il procedere della storia, al ritrovamento del fratello scomparso, e, in seguito, ad aspetti della propria esistenza che fino a quel momento ignorava.

È soprattutto tramite la presenza latente e minacciosa del gemello (paradossalmente messa in rilievo dalla sua scomparsa) esperita attraverso le sue lettere, i respiri telefonici e nella sensazione di ascoltare i medesimi, a volte inquietanti, programmi radiofonici, che il protagonista entra in contatto con l'altro lato della realtà. Quando i due vivevano, ignorandosi, in città distinte, inseriti ognuno nel proprio ritmo di vita quotidiano, erano esclusi da qualsiasi possibilità di collegamento: le loro vite, definite e confinate, non offrivano nessun tipo di apertura. L'irreperibilità improvvisa e volontaria di uno dei due attiva una serie di contatti e connessioni occulte che formano quella rete di relazioni che permette al protagonista di assumere una nuova modalità di percezione. In tal modo egli esperisce l'alterità, intuendo la morte e il nulla ("la sugestión de estar muerto no le había abandonado del todo", 1990: 224) e scoprendosi incapace di tornare a aderire ad un modello di vita tradizionale.

Lo scambio delle identità, dunque, che rappresentava apparentemente la promessa futura, il recupero di ciò che era stato smarrito, il ritrovamento del vero *io*, si rivela ben presto l'occasione per capire che non basta sostituire un'identità con un'altra, non esiste un'identità fittizia ed una autentica, poiché l'identità stessa non è altro che un fluido destinato a perdersi, una sostanza posticcia che è sempre più difficile tenere stretta¹⁰.

7. Rivelazioni

Anche *El mundo* (2007), uno dei romanzi più intensi e significativi dell'autore, un'autofinizione, presenta procedimenti simbolici e sdoppiamenti che conducono a una percezione rivelatrice di una parte di realtà vista fino a quel momento solo in modo convenzionale e, allo stesso tempo, a una dislocazione irrimediabile del soggetto rispetto a se stesso. Si tratta della strada Canillas, dove viveva il giovane Juanjo con i genitori e i suoi molti fratelli. La rivelazione è lo sguardo stupefatto che proviene da un punto di vista insolito: la finestrella della cantina del suo amico malato di cuore soprannominato ironicamente Vitaminas:

Era mi calle, sí, pero observada desde aquel lugar y a ras del suelo poseía calidades hiperreales, o subreales, quizá oníricas. Entonces no disponía de estas palabras para calificar aquella particularidad, pero sentí que me encontraba en el interior de un sueño en el que podía apreciar con increíble nitidez cada uno de los elementos que la componían, como si se tratara de una maqueta (Millás 2009: 48).

¹⁰ "Quand'anche la si afferri, questa imprevedibile, fatale e irripetibile identità – forse soggetta inesorabilmente al rischio della finzione – non si potrà che vederla poi sottoposta a cambiamenti continui, di grado e di natura, nella tensione verso *un altro* il cui destino finale potrebbe essere quello del leopardiano nulla" (Dolfi 2001: 14).

Successivamente, in un movimento di duplicazione finzionale, il protagonista vive, ormai adulto, una seconda rivelazione ricordando proprio quell'episodio dell'infanzia che abbiamo appena riportato. Dopo tanti anni, guardando una strada qualsiasi di Madrid, egli vi riconosce la strada della sua infanzia, con la stessa acuta percezione con la quale l'aveva guardata, molti anni prima, dalla finestrella della cantina del Vitaminas e comprende dunque che la strada della fanciullezza era diventata metafora del mondo e per questo poteva vederla ovunque: "comprendí en ese instante que mi calle era una imitación, un trasunto, una copia, quizá una metáfora del mundo" (2009: 92).

Infine, il protagonista comprende che tutto gira intorno alla percezione della realtà, al modo con cui la si guarda e al luogo nel quale ci si colloca per guardarla: "El problema era que no nos colocábamos en el lugar adecuado para observar la realidad" (2009: 94). Perfino la morte, in base a questa nuova prospettiva non è altro che un "desplazamiento dentro de la vida" (2009: 93).

Questo episodio, epilogo di un avvenimento più ampio che complessivamente occupa un numero considerevole di pagine, ha lo scopo di rappresentare il culmine di un processo di rivelazioni iniziato nell'infanzia e nell'adolescenza e che solo nella maturità assume un senso universale sfociando nella scrittura, attraverso la quale si illuminano le esperienze e le rivelazioni di tutta una vita: "La frontera, la tierra de nadie, la no pertenencia, el territorio de la escritura" (2009: 53).

Il testo di Millás può essere anche letto come una riflessione sulla sua pratica letteraria che gli permette di evidenziare ancor di più la natura frammentata e eterogenea del racconto (Gasparini 2008: 309). Inoltre, i riflessi che il testo attiva tra sé e gli altri dello stesso autore provocano, borgesianamente, una *mise en abyme*, come avverte Colonna¹¹, un gioco di specchi: il romanzo tratta di come sono nati altri romanzi che riconducono a loro volta al romanzo che il lettore ha tra le mani dando l'illusione di un rispecchiamento infinito e creando quell'effetto di *encuentro* e *desencuentro* in virtù del quale lo scrittore si riconosce e allo stesso tempo non si riconosce in ciò che è stato, in ciò che ha generato gran parte della sua letteratura (Contadini 2015: 178).

L'idea del doppio appare ogni volta che lo scrittore diventa anche personaggio menzionando se stesso e le sue opere. E ciò succede in modo ricorrente, specialmente negli ultimi anni, come, ad esempio, ne *La mujer loca*, *Ese imbécil va a escribir una novela*, ecc. In tal modo, Juanjo vive una specie di duplicato letterario, anche se con molte varianti, di ciò che numerosi personaggi di Millás hanno già vissuto all'interno dei suoi scritti. Ogni accadimento comprende zone occulte e indecifrabili e tuttavia presenti. Ogni realtà porta con sé il suo doppio che infrange dimensioni e frontiere. Ogni azione, ogni gesto, per il suo carattere

¹¹ Le considerazioni di Vincent Colonna sulla *mise en abyme* fanno parte della terza categoria, *l'autofinzione speculare*, tra le quattro delineate dallo studioso per descrivere i vari tipi di autofinzione (Colonna 2004: 121-135). È possibile adattare le categorie individuate da Colonna ai testi di Millás: *El mundo* presenta anche tratti della seconda categoria *la autofinzione biografica*, nella quale lo scrittore immagina la sua esistenza a partire da dati reali, così come accade nell'ultimo romanzo *Ese imbécil va a escribir una novela* (come si vedrà più avanti). La quarta categoria, invece, è definita *autofinzione autoriale* che si adatta ad altri testi di Millás in cui il narratore-autore assume il ruolo di reportagista sviluppando un'esistenza quasi senza corpo che corre parallela alla storia (è il caso, per esempio, di *Hay algo que no es como me dicen*, 2004; *María y Mercedes*, 2005; in parte di *Dos mujeres en Praga*, 2002 e, in parte, di *La mujer loca*, 2014).

simbolico, si ripete rivelando un senso inaugurale e allo stesso tempo conservando l'apparenza di ciò che è conosciuto.

8. Il terzo Millás

Il romanzo *La mujer loca* (2014) mette in scena lo stesso Millás nella veste di scrittore e giornalista intento a procurarsi idee, informazioni e interviste per un reportage. Vari sono i temi trattati in quest'opera che si alternano e si intrecciano in una complessa e suggestiva trama fatta di cambi di focalizzazione, descrizioni, dialoghi e ricordi: la funzione del linguaggio nel mondo e il suo dominio sull'uomo; il tema del doppio; la follia; la morte dignitosa rappresentata da un caso di suicidio assistito intorno al quale si indagano i risvolti pratici e morali; infine, come spesso accade nei romanzi dello scrittore, l'identità e la letteratura.

La *donna pazza* del titolo è Julia, protagonista dei primi otto capitoli del romanzo, una giovane che manifesta di avere problemi con le parole e per questo pretende di curarle. Per qualche oscuro motivo il personaggio Millás sente che ciò che accade a Julia lo riguarda profondamente. Il tema dello sdoppiamento, che qui ci interessa, appare proprio quando il Millás personaggio, nel nono capitolo, assume il ruolo di protagonista, nonostante il narratore si mantenga eterodiegetico. Durante le sedute di psicoterapia a cui assiste regolarmente sente la propria identità sdoppiarsi e vede nascere accanto a sé un *altro* Millás immaginario che assume via via sempre più importanza. I due Millás stanno in stretto contatto, ma la loro relazione è altalenante, si respingono e si attraggono. A volte il vero Millás scaccia il suo alter ego, ma allo stesso tempo capisce che senza di lui non può vivere né può scrivere ciò che desidera. Proponiamo, di seguito, alcuni esempi:

Lo que ocurrió aquel día, en el diván, después de que cerrara los ojos, fue que, a su lado, y en una posición idéntica a la de él, se manifestó otro Millás. Otro Millás al que habría podido tocar solo con desplazar el brazo derecho (Millás 2014: 111); Millás abrió los ojos con cuidado para no asustar a la alucinación y comprobó que el otro Millás seguía junto a él (2014: 113); El Millás de allá y el de acá ya no mantenían, como al principio, posiciones claramente diferenciadas, sino que el de acá era a veces el de allá y el de allá era a veces el de acá (2014: 115).

E così il personaggio Millás, all'interno del romanzo, comincia a riflettere sul fatto che ogni elemento del reale può essere osservato sotto differenti punti di vista. Di conseguenza, il momento più realista si verifica quando appare il secondo Millás, come afferma lo stesso scrittore in un'intervista:

Es un desdoblamiento que tiene una parte de retórica, pero tiene una parte de real. Yo cuento en la novela tres desdoblamientos que yo he sufrido a lo largo de mi vida, que han sido reales y que son los que me han invitado a escribir también esa novela y a escribirla de ese modo. [...] Ese es el punto más realista de la novela, que haya dos Millás: uno que es el que cuenta la historia, otro que es el que la actúa, que entre los dos haya consecuente incompatibilidades reales y que haya un tercer Millás que es el que firma el libro y que es el que está escuchando detrás de la puerta qué es lo que ocurre entre aquellos dos (Millás, in López 2014).

Le parole dell'intervista non sono altro che un'elaborazione di parti della sua opera espresse in forma metanarrativa e metaletteraria, come si evince dai seguenti brani:

Creo que he perdido la distancia entre el narrador y el personaje, tal vez entre el narrador y el escritor. Se han mezclado también (Millás 2014: 137); Cuando apareció el Millás de allá, pensé que él podría encarnar la voz narrativa, mientras que el de acá representaría al personaje. Y aún habría un tercer Millás: el firmante de la novela. Al haberse diluido el Millás de allá en el de acá, todas las voces están ahora enredadas. Nunca sé quién habla, quien actúa, ni quien firma (Millás 2014: 137).

Tutto ciò continua anche nella seconda parte del romanzo dove vengono riportati frammenti del *Diario de la Vejez de Millás*, in forma omodiegetica, alternati ai capitoli che continuano ad avere un narratore eterodiegetico. Lo sdoppiamento del Millás personaggio, l'apparizione del terzo Millás (colui che scrive il romanzo), la confusione tra i tre e i conseguenti rispecchiamenti creano una trama difficile da districare¹². È attraverso la dislocazione o la *trilocazione* del soggetto, che Millás mette in profonda discussione lo statuto identitario di matrice cartesiana che appare come qualcosa di posticcio che non dà indicazioni sull'autenticità del soggetto, ma solo sul suo aspetto grammaticale o ideologico.

Il tema del doppio esalta l'alterità costitutiva del soggetto che è allo stesso tempo sé e altro da sé. È un'ossessione per Millás l'idea che qualcun altro viva e operi al suo posto, che ciò che pensa, decide, scrive sia in realtà non il frutto di una volontà propria e riconoscibile, ma la conseguenza di una volontà estranea alla propria: non volontà ma indolenza, non proposito ma sproposito, non decisione ma sospensione, non desiderio ma perdita. È da questi aspetti che scaturisce l'andamento della vita del soggetto in sé e allo stesso tempo alienato da sé. Ciò costituisce uno scacco al desiderio di potenza e alla progettualità, intesi come valori irrinunciabili del nostro vivere civile. Ed evidenzia la natura teorica (quando non ideologica) del principio di realtà e di non contraddizione.

9. L'intruso

Lo stesso succede nell'ultimo romanzo *Ese imbécil va a escribir una novela* (2025), uno dei più interessanti, che può essere anche letto come una prosecuzione de *El mundo* per la sua generale formulazione autoriflessiva e metanarrativa. In quest'opera ancora una volta Millás gioca con se stesso, mostra il suo nome (come fa da tempo e in modo sempre più evidente), esibisce il suo ruolo pubblico conosciuto attraverso la radio, i giornali, le molteplici presentazioni dei suoi libri, le interviste, i programmi letterari televisivi e le fiere del libro. E soprattutto gioca con il suo ruolo di scrittore mettendo in scena se stesso nell'atto dello scrivere¹³.

¹² L'epilogo del romanzo "proyecta reverberaciones existenciales, consideradas, con toda propiedad, como nihilistas, tal y como lo pone de relieve el comportamiento de Millás, ya hacia el final del itinerario narrativo del relato en cuestión" (Higuero 2016: 63).

¹³ "Proprio perché mette a nudo un procedimento chiave, la variante metaletteraria del doppio sembra dunque continuare ad esercitare il suo fascino, e ad avere successo e risonanza, visualizzando la scrittura come una possessione demoniaca e demiurgica: un creare altre identità, altri spazi e altri tempi, un costruire mondi possibili" (Fusillo 2012: 330).

La scrittura, già di per sé fenomeno che comporta uno sdoppiamento ineludibile, nel gioco dell'autore provoca uno sdoppiamento amplificato, come accade in quest'ultimo romanzo. Il rischio che tutto ciò sia uno svago retorico e letterario e perda la sua portata vitale viene introiettato nella narrazione stessa e vissuto in maniera aperta, dichiarata dallo stesso protagonista soprattutto durante le sedute psicoanalitiche a cui si sottopone regolarmente: "Podía haber ahí algo de juego retórico, no lo niego, pero en el fondo de ese juego había también un charco oscuro lleno de sanguijuelas y demás anélidos chupadores de sangre" (Millás 2025: 79). Già dalle prime pagine di questa ulteriore autofinzione, il protagonista, Juanjo bambino, in base ad una serie di eventi vissuti in una dimensione onirica complessa, vive un prorompente fenomeno di sdoppiamento che poi, in un modo o nell'altro, lo accompagnerà per tutta la vita:

Pronto, ese bulto impalpable adquirió el tamaño de un huevo con forma de cabeza que a los pocos días se convirtió en una verdadera cabeza de cuya existencia solo yo era consciente. Una vez formada, aquella segunda cabeza empezó a hablar con la primera de manera telepática. Se comunicaban las dos sin necesidad de mover los labios. La cabeza sobrevenida tenía acceso a los contenidos de la cabeza antigua y al revés (Millás 2025: 6-7); Ahí sigo, con mi segunda cabeza secreta a cuestras, a temporadas confundida con la real, digamos, y a temporadas exenta, viviendo sus propios pensamientos (2025: 9).

L'idea ossessiva che l'altro possa interferire nella vita del soggetto e influenzare i suoi pensieri, le sue idee e la sua scrittura si realizza in maniera concreta (tecnica, si potrebbe dire) verso la fine del romanzo quando il protagonista Millás scopre che un suo antico amico, Alberto, una specie di fratello, che non vedeva dagli anni della gioventù, tramite il nipote esperto in *cybersecurity*, è riuscito a penetrare nel suo computer e a modificare a sua insaputa parti del romanzo che egli sta scrivendo: "Era evidente que Alberto no solo no me había querido ocultar su participación en la escritura de mi libro, sino que me lo había querido evidenciar con la información aportada sobre las actividades de su nieto" (2025: 91).

Il protagonista si accorge che Alberto apporta piccoli interventi che sono migliorativi, perfezionano lo stile e compensano lacune o arricchiscono alcune scene. Questo procedimento rimane occulto per gran parte del romanzo e si scopre solo alla fine: nei capitoli iniziali il lettore legge il resoconto di un pranzo a cui Millás partecipa nella lussuosa casa del suo amico, insieme al padre di questi e alla sorella disabile. Solo verso la fine dell'opera il lettore apprende che la presenza della sorella disabile in quella scena non è frutto del protagonista, che non ricordava questo dettaglio, ma dell'amico Alberto che era intervenuto a insaputa dello scrittore su una parte del romanzo già scritta (e già letta dal lettore). Quando Millás si accorge di questa intrusione non reagisce, non denuncia, non difende il proprio sistema informatico, ma lascia che il suo antico amico intervenga diventando di fatto coautore del romanzo e a poco a poco perde la capacità di distinguere gli interventi di Alberto dai suoi: "No siempre era capaz de distinguir dónde había intervenido la pluma de Alberto, pues había sido capaz de fundirse con mi estilo (¿o yo con el suyo?), pero sí advertí que, en general, se había centrado en crear o en acentuar las zonas reflexivas del relato" (2025: 92).

Sorge qui una variante interessante del tema del doppio, quella dell'intruso, un intruso che il protagonista finisce per accettare rinunciando a combatterlo e a scacciarlo, poiché si rende conto nel giro di poco tempo che egli stesso, in virtù della presenza dell'altro, è di fatto diventato un intruso del suo stesso computer e del suo stesso testo. A questo proposito, il protagonista fa riferimento ad una attività che tutti gli scrittori compiono, cioè quella di correggere quanto è stato scritto per cercare di migliorarlo. In questa pratica egli ci vede una forma ancora più accentuata di intrusione poiché tornare sul già scritto (anche se sul *proprio* scritto) vuol dire in qualche modo introdursi forzatamente in un discorso già elaborato, che ha già una vita propria e una sua ragione d'essere, per modificarlo dall'esterno: "el tema del intruso tiende a imponerse. Yo mismo actúo ya como un intruso en mis propios textos" (2025: 94).

L'altro, dunque, diventa presenza concreta anche se vive nell'ombra e lo scrittore Millás non può più dirsi autore unico del testo. La realtà si modifica senza che si possa intervenire per dominarne il processo di metamorfosi. Il protagonista non è più padrone delle proprie azioni, nemmeno del proprio passato, nemmeno dei propri ricordi intimi, delle proprie idee e della propria scrittura, attività doppia per eccellenza, diventando impossibile, dunque, ogni riconoscimento in ciò che è stato, in ciò che ha vissuto, nei gesti che ha compiuto, nelle idee che ha avuto, persino delle emozioni che ha provato. Il processo di sdoppiamento e di dislocazione si fa così sempre più completo e onnicomprensivo e diventa metafora, ancora una volta, della condizione dell'essere umano, smarrito e costretto, che lo voglia o no, che lo scopra o no, a delegare la sua vita a quell'*altro* che sta sempre in agguato, a quell'*io dislocato*, impedendo possibili ricongiungimenti, riconoscimenti e auto-riconoscimenti, idee di integrità, di consapevolezza, di padronanza delle proprie azioni, dei propri pensieri e della propria volontà.

Inoltre, l'intrusione nella sicurezza di un sistema informatico, che coinvolge la più stretta attualità, apre il campo ad una amplificazione della riflessione. Il computer del protagonista, ad una certa ora della notte, si anima autonomamente, come per magia, diretto da una volontà estranea, per apportare modifiche al testo dello scrittore. In una specie di network comunicazionale e globale che funziona autonomamente (Jameson 1989: 76) o per volontà estranee, sono gli esseri umani a diventare meri dispositivi. Come nel caso delle protesi, altra grande ossessione di Millás (si veda *Cuerpo y prótesis*, 2000a), non sono gli oggetti attaccati al corpo (o che il corpo usa) a costituire le protesi del corpo, ma è il corpo stesso che si fa protesi dell'oggetto da cui dipende così come il personaggio scrittore e il suo antico amico Alberto diventano protesi, dispositivi, intrusi, dell'attività *aliena* della scrittura operata in un computer collegato alla rete.

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Relics of Trees and Angels: J. M. Coetzee, Zbigniew Herbert, and Berlinde De Bruyckere at the Venice Biennale

Abstract I: La scultrice belga Berlinde De Bruyckere esplora i corpi in stati liminali tra vita e morte, fondendo forme umane, animali e vegetali per esporre la loro condizione comune di sofferenza e decadenza. Nel 2013 ha rappresentato il Belgio alla Biennale di Venezia con *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, a cura di, J. M. Coetzee. Undici anni dopo è tornata a Venezia con una mostra collaterale della Biennale 2024, *City of Refuge III*, un insieme di installazioni che evocano catastrofi e traumi collettivi. Adottando un approccio intermediale, questo contributo indaga le influenze letterarie alla base di queste esposizioni, mettendo in luce il ruolo ancora poco esplorato di Coetzee e di Zbigniew Herbert nella formazione dell'estetica e della visione etica di De Bruyckere.

Abstract II: Belgian sculptor Berlinde De Bruyckere explores bodies in liminal states between life and death, fusing human, animal, and vegetal forms to expose their shared condition of suffering and decay. In 2013 she represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale with *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, curated by J. M. Coetzee. Eleven years later she returned to Venice with a side show part of the 2024 Biennale with *City of Refuge III*, a set of installations evoking catastrophe and collective trauma. Adopting an intermedial approach, this paper investigates the literary influences behind these exhibitions, highlighting the underexplored role of Coetzee and Zbigniew Herbert in shaping De Bruyckere's aesthetics and ethical vision.

Keywords: Berlinde De Bruyckere, J. M. Coetzee, Zbigniew Herbert, Venice Art Biennial.

1. A Spiritual Affinity: *We Are All Flesh* (2013)

Berlinde De Bruyckere is one of the most acclaimed sculptresses on the art scene today. A Flemish artist, born and living in Ghent, she was the daughter of a butcher, whose profession largely impacted her imagination. Dead horses, fowls and deer, their hair, skins and bones, as well as emaciated, disfigured human figures, recur frequently throughout her work, characterised by a fascination with death and agonising bodies fed by centuries of Catholic iconography. Soft wax, horse skin and hair, fabric, leather and wood are among the 'feminine' materials she uses, set against the 'masculine' qualities of marble and stone – no-

bler, durable substances for admirable bodies. The effect of fleshiness, decay and decomposition is attained by colouring the several layers of wax using the same palette of the human body – a palette which is strongly reminiscent of the pinks and reds of late Renaissance, Baroque painting. Yet, what distinguishes her art from a macabre musing on corpses of all sorts is a form of secular compassion which makes use of Christian imagery to broaden the scope of the pitiful from humans to animals and plants.

Active since the 1980s, when she primarily focused on building cage structures, De Bruyckere gained international recognition with her first participation in a Venice Biennale, in 2003, when she exhibited the sculpture of a crouching horse, *K36* or *The Black Horse* – extraordinarily realistic but unnervingly devoid of eyes or genitalia. She continued working on horse figures, as well as on the human body – headless, maimed, deformed – throughout the 2010s, also exploring tree trunks and animal hides in her experimentation. These twisted, skewered, intersected, tortured, sometimes barely recognizable bodies demand and obtain a level of attention that instantly turns into a plea for assistance. De Bruyckere's aesthetics of the abject, despicable body, and her mute call for responsibility, is strikingly close to J. M. Coetzee's, whose work is traversed by the same concerns – as it is evidenced, just to mention the best-known examples, by the figure of the academic devoting his days to burying the carcasses of stray dogs in *Disgrace* (1999b); or by the Magistrate bestowing a sensual care on the brutalised body of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); or by Marijana, the Serbian nurse, attending her amputee patient in *Slow Man* (2005). Coetzee himself recognised the prominence of the question of the suffering body in his narrative as early as 1992, in a now widely quoted passage:

If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. [...] And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable (Coetzee 1992: 248).

Coetzee's long-standing concern with the suffering of all living beings has anticipated issues that have become crucial in post-humanist thinking, questioning human responsibility for it, and human capacity to respond to it sympathetically. Therefore, the title chosen by De Bruyckere for their first joint collaboration, the art book *We Are All Flesh* (2013), even though originally designating an earlier exhibition of her works (De Bruyckere & Giordano 2009), perfectly encapsulates their shared preoccupation with the disturbing reality of pain and death. De Bruyckere had approached him as a devotee to an internationally renowned novelist whom she considered “a soul mate” (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 32) working in a parallel world; she had dedicated a sculpture to him on his seventieth birthday in 2010.

We Are All Flesh comprises detail shots of De Bruyckere's art pieces and numbered extracts from Coetzee's novels selected by her. Both pictures and writing are fragments: they represent only a part of their respective, pre-existing wholes. The connection is not immediate nor straightforward: it is left to readers to determine the nature of their relation. Readers

are left wondering about the identity of the narrative voices, the context of their speech, the nature of their predicament; likewise, they are to decide whether the pictures they are observing reproduce human, animal, or plant features, as it happens with the series of deer antlers, which may look like tree branches or human bones.

The book (35 pictures and 113 prose passages) is organised in five unequal sections introduced by parenthetical, lowercase captions. The narrative, which constitutes the greater part of the work, is interspersed with images; sometimes just one picture, as if it were a pause in speech, other times a number of them, as if they took their turn to communicate. Some pages are left completely blank, as if it were not possible to reply; others present very little writing standing out from a blank space which serves as a pedestal for words. *We Are All Flesh* is arranged according to a visual, synchronic pattern which relies on the semantics of blanks: for example, a single line at the top of the page conveys the idea of unfinishedness, whereas a line at the bottom suggests something above has gone missing; the central position, or framing, is commonplace, and it is never used. Pictures do relate to narrative cues, as it happens on pages 46-47, where a sentence from *Boyhood* (1997), describing how the protagonist feels exposed and ashamed as he goes through puberty, is associated with the picture of what could be a mollusc or a snail deprived of its shell (*Unintentionally Keloid*, 2011); or, on pages 16-17, in an excerpt from *Age of Iron* (1990), Elizabeth Curren's musings and longing for her mother's body is responded to by the magnified detail of a piece of delicately stitched skin, where, possibly, birth has occurred (*Lingam II*, 2012); or again, on pages 106-107, a punched torso on the left (*Feminine Habitat*, 2008) is paired with a single line from *Age of Iron* at the top of the page ("These people can take many blows, but I, I am fragile as a butterfly"). Perhaps, the most obvious correspondence between writing and picture is found on pages 116-117: a long passage from *Boyhood* describing how the young protagonist is both repelled and darkly fascinated by the slaughtering of sheep is combined with the picture of what looks like entrails laid down in a padded crib, as it were a *Deposizione* or a *Pietà* – although admittedly a disturbing version of it (*Inside Me II*, 2010-2011). Surely De Bruyckere is strongly reminiscent of Baroque painting and sculpture, from which she derives the poses and colours for her bodies. Baroque suggestions are also noticeable in De Bruyckere's use of vitrines and glass display cases to host the remnants of her bodies, as in the front cover picture, featuring some sort of relic shrine in the foreground.

2. *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* (2013)

The origin and nature of De Bruyckere and Coetzee's collaboration in the *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* installation have been thoroughly investigated by Kusek and Szymański (2015), whose main objective was to ascertain the role of the writer in that partnership and the generic status of the book of the same name which was published as a sort of catalogue for the Belgian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale.

In September 2012, De Bruyckere was selected to represent her country at the Venice Art Biennial the following year. In accordance with custom, the artist was to choose her curator to see her through the working process and help her making artistic choices. She immediately wrote to Coetzee asking him to be her curator but then requalifying his prospective role: "not to help make any decisions, but as a source of inspiration" (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c:

29). By doing so, she cast him in the role of her Muse; she asked for a new text, something that he thought might be related to her work, 'a parallel text' that could be later published in the catalogue of the Belgian Pavilion. Coetzee replied on the same day, sending her a story that had not appeared in print yet, "The Old Woman and the Cats" (2013a). As observed by Kusek and Szymański, the story may well be one of Costello's lessons (2015: 23) – Costello being the female *alter ego* and protagonist of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), featuring an elderly novelist and her musings about the moral obligations humans have towards animals: in "The Old Woman and the Cats", Costello has retired to a small Spanish town and takes care of feral cats and a retarded man. The story is given from the skeptical point of view of her son John (a compelling form of authorial doubling), who visits his mother in an attempt of reestablishing a connection with her, only to find himself dragged into philosophical (Levinasian) debates over the moral authority of the face of the Other – be it human or animal. Coetzee's story, as well as the letters aforementioned, are now included in *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* (2013c), the publication serving as a catalogue for the exhibition.

After a few weeks De Bruyckere replied with a long letter, claiming that the narrative had inspired her in a profound way; yet, according to Kusek and Szymański, there is no evidence of a direct influence on her project for the Venice Biennial, neither in the correspondence nor in the exhibited installation (2015: 26) – but this is a comment the artist had already anticipated in her letters, acknowledging there were no literal references to Coetzee's story (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 32). In fact, De Bruyckere seems to have been developing a former idea she had of working on a tree form. Initially, she had thought to install some sort of undergrowth in the Pavilion, which she calls *Kreupelhout (Cripplewood)* – and it is for this earlier version of her project that Coetzee penned a specific short piece which was displayed in the vestibule of the Pavilion and is now included in the catalogue. Kusek and Szymański refer to it very briefly as "a lexicographic analysis of the term and its various meanings" (2015: 27) but they do not offer any further comment on it. Yet, I believe this text encapsulates Coetzee's understanding of De Bruyckere's project, focusing on the trope of a dormant, abortive life, and its Ovidian overtones – a concept which is arguably crucial to the Cripplewood art piece and its performative nature, as I am going to contend. In his signature concise, objective, speculative style, Coetzee writes:

Cripplewood is not deadwood. Deadwood: in the mythology of the American West, the town of failed hopes where all trails end. Cripplewood, by contrast, is alive. Like all trees, the cripplewood tree aspires towards the sun, but something in its genes, some bad inheritance, some poison, twists its bones.

The lexical tangle around *kreupelhout* – cripplewood – gnarlwood (gnarled, knurled, knarled are all the same words in variant forms):

(1) *kreupel* – *kruipen* – creep – crouch – crutch (*kruk*)

gnarl: gnarled, snarled (knotted)

snarl: 1. a snare (trap); 2. a tangle, knot (of hair)

The cripplewood tree that cannot straighten itself, that grows bent at a crouch; from whose limbs we get crutches for those who can only creep; a tree of knotted limbs, gnarled, snarled.

Knots are of two kinds: the rational kind, creatures of human reason, that having been tied can be untied; and the kind that occur in nature, for which there is no loosening, no solution, no *oplossing*.

Cripple – *kreupel*: a word no longer in polite use. Rejected as unclean, it is dismissed back from the world in which it came and to which it belongs, a world of hovels and tenements, of open drains and coal cellars and horse-drawn carts and starving dogs in the streets. An unwanted word, pressed back, repressed, buried. The cripplewood tree grows out of the buried past into our clean present, pushing its knotted fingers up through the grate / gate behind which we have shut it (Coetzee 2013b: 46).

The piece opens on a negative definition, as if it were countering a former explanation, making distinctions and then delving into the lexical analysis of the term. Yet, the tree has “bones”, “hair”, “fingers” and “limbs” suggesting an animal or human nature as well. The human element is then introduced with the use people (“we”) make of it (cutting out crutches for human cripples); and then cripplewood (a literal translation preserving the sense of dire necessity and unaccomplishment of the Dutch term) becomes a metonymy for the physically impaired, addressing the issue of the repressed in a society failing to attend to the needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged. These people are removed (“rejected”, “dismissed”, “unwanted”, “buried”, “shut”), and it is to this segregation practice that the first type of knot refers: the rational one, the one created by human beings (the “trap”), which has nothing to do with the second type, the knot of natural failures, sickness, and death¹.

Unlike the Costello story, which is essentially a lesson in moral philosophy – and, unsurprisingly, many moral philosophers have turned to Costello’s cogitations² – this short piece manages to address moral issues by simply conjuring the idea of discrimination. Likewise, the sculpture De Bruyckere eventually installed in Venice raises the issue of responsiveness to other living beings’ needs through the mere ostension of a pained body – a body which has seemingly undergone a sort of carnage. What the visitors saw in the pavilion, after their eyes became adjusted to darkness, was a giant elm-tree trunk, lying horizontally, maimed and beheaded, its branches alongside as if they were human limbs (fig. 1). The human likeness is strengthened by the fact that these branches are painted the pinks and reds of human skin and flesh, and they are braced by supports and swathed in bandages (fig. 2). And of course, bandaging means drawing attention to the wound and at the same time hiding it; raising the issue of harm but also indicating the path to healing. The unsettling experience of observing an object whose nature is unclear – and therefore literally grotesque, just like Coetzee’s cripplewood is grotesque, “pushing its knotted fin-

¹ Yet, humans are also capable of tying other knots, meant to sustain and promote life, which Coetzee alludes to when writing about Japanese gardeners in his last letter included in the catalogue (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 51).

² The subtitle of *Elizabeth Costello* is *Eight Lessons*, but the Costello character actually originated earlier, in *The Lives of Animals* (1999a), a volume edited by Amy Gutmann and comprising a contribution from bioethicist Peter Singer, who also edited, with Anton Leist, a collection focusing on the philosophical dimension of Coetzee’s work (2010). Other philosophers who thoroughly engaged with Coetzee’s writings are Stephen Mulhall (2009) and Jan Wilm (2016).

gers up through the grate” – is then amplified by the realization that the work is not wood but a painted wax cast simulating both arboreal and human features: a feat Alloa beautifully describes as “an almost alchemical transmutation of matter, replacing the wood of this *objet trouvé* with a much more fleeting substance” highlighting “the mass’s frailty through the use of wax” (2014: 205). Likewise, in an influential review of the Biennial, art critic Buchloh praised *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood*, 2012-2013 as “the embodiment of the spectacularised uncanny par excellence” (2013: 316) representing the ecological ruin caused by human misuse of the environment.

Neither Coetzee nor De Bruyckere address ecological issues in the correspondence produced in the catalogue, but the art piece certainly affords Buchloh’s interpretation – and anyway, once it is given to the world, any work of art is subjected to its audience’s evaluations despite its creators’ original intentions. This is the reason why I would argue that Kusek and Szymański’s evaluation of Coetzee and De Bruyckere’s collaboration is flawed by the expectation of a literal influence of the writer on the artist, which leads them to suggest that the latter merely exploited the association of her name with the Nobel Prize-awarded author³. They assumed that De Bruyckere would indeed “translate Coetzee’s piece into her sculpture” (2015: 26) just as she had written in her letter dated 9 February 2013 (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 45). They point out how she ignored his suggestions about Saint Sebastian, Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne*, Zbigniew Herbert’s “Apollo and Marsyas” as well as his doubts about the combination of steel and wax in her installation (Kusek & Szymański 2015: 27). Yet, despite one’s pronouncements, the creation of an artwork – be it visual or verbal – entails perpetual amendments, adaptations, and on occasion, radical restructuring of the preliminary designs due to several reasons. De Bruyckere, for example, mentions severe technical difficulties as well as new ideas imposing on her mind (notably, one central sculpture rather than a multipart installation scattered all over the pavilion; De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 41). It is probably true, as Kusek and Szymański contend, that the second collaboration between De Bruyckere and Coetzee did not meet all parties’ expectations, but this cannot be considered evidence of bad faith on the artist’s part; and there are other, hitherto unnoticed, aspects of the installation that can be traced back to the writer’s suggestions. In fact, besides contributing the *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* piece, Coetzee played a crucial role in bringing the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert to her attention – and it is to Herbert’s influence on her work that I am now going to turn.

3. Zbigniew Herbert

De Bruyckere explicitly acknowledges the import of Coetzee’s suggestion in a book published in 2021, *Angel’s Throat*, serving as a catalogue for her exhibition of the same name (*Engelenkeel*, 2021a):

³ “In what we are tempted to call a relationship of exploitation (as it is clearly De Bruyckere who profits from being associated with the major voice of contemporary literature), it is De Bruyckere’s and not Coetzee’s ‘story’ that is to be heard. As it was indeed *her* [our emphasis] piece that was shown during the 2013 Venice Biennial” (Kusek & Szymański 2015: 28).

J. M. Coetzee sent me the poem 'Apollo and Marsyas' by Zbigniew Herbert during our collaboration on *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood*, 2012-2013. I never thought that seven years later this poem would inspire me to make a Marsyas sculpture, which brought me back to figuration and triggered me to read more of his work (De Bruyckere 2021b: 141).

The poem – apparently neglected but nonetheless included in *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* – is a chilling, sardonic retelling of Ovid's version of the myth of Apollo and Marsyas in the *Metamorphoses* (as shown by Niżyńska, 2001); originally a narrative on the perils of human(like) hybris is turned by Herbert into a poignant reflection on the brutality of power in general and the atrocity of torture in particular. Just like many 16th and 17th century artists, when the myth enjoyed notable success, Herbert focuses on the second part of the story, with the god skinning the satyr alive as a punishment for daring to challenge him in a musical contest. Apollo has won because at the last moment, when they were tied, he has begun to sing as well as play the lyre, which the satyr could not do because he was playing a wind instrument. Despite his triumph, Apollo decides to take revenge on the loser by forcing him to do what he previously failed at, that is, singing – and sets to torture the wretch with his own hands. He ties the satyr to a tree, and Marsyas cries out in agony as he is reduced to one single wound and his internal organs are exposed to the gaze of the Arcadian people, all shedding tears for his plight. This is "The *real* duel of Apollo with Marsyas", writes Herbert in the stunning opening of his poem, referring to an antefact that is not given on the page because readers are presumed to be aware of it, as they "already know" (Herbert 2013: 48). It is not a contest between artists, but between a titanic state power and the individual (the dissident, the artist, the poet) culminating in the latter's demise:

bound tight to a tree
meticulously stripped of his skin
Marsyas
howls
before the howl reaches his tall ears
he reposes in the shadow of that howl

shaken by a shudder of disgust
Apollo is cleaning his instrument

only seemingly
is the voice of Marsyas
monotonous
and composed of a single vowel
Aaa

in reality
Marsyas relates
the inexhaustible
wealth of his body (48).

There are no earthly creatures weeping for Marsyas in Herbert's poem, and Apollo, "cleaning his instrument" (not the lyre this time but a knife) feels only disgust for the satyr's howl, which he perceives as "monotonous". Yet, "in reality" (which reconnects with "the real duel" in the opening line), the victim's body is disclosing unexpected beauty to his tormentor's unsympathetic eyes:

bald mountains of liver
white ravines of aliment
rustling forests of lung
sweet hillocks of muscle (48).

This anatomical landscape – recalling, as Niżyńska has suggested (2001: 162), Ovid's pastoral setting – is profoundly disturbing as it is not naturally visible but only as a result of extreme brutality. Apollo's aestheticization of Marsyas's body is comparable to what a hunter or a butcher can appreciate when disembowelling their game. Yet, Apollo's savagery is not born out of a need to procure meat: it is exclusively an act of vengeance confirming the unpredictability of the gods.

Later, when he leaves the slaughtering site and walks along an idyllic path ornated with a box hedge (underlining the artificiality of his world) Apollo wonders whether "Marsyas's howling" will not originate a more "concrete" kind of art "some day". He is immediately served his answer:

suddenly
at his feet
falls a petrified nightingale

he looks back and sees
that the hair of the tree to which
Marsyas was fastened
is white

completely (48).

The suspicion that the cry of the flesh may be more powerful than the ethereal melody of the god is immediately confirmed by supernatural changes (the petrified nightingale, the whitened crown of the tree). Apollo's horrifying cruelty has turned to stone two key elements of the traditional *locus amoenus* (Niżyńska 2001: 162); they are now *sculptures on the ground*, the most concrete of the visual arts, with the likeness of the beauteous forms they once were.

Now, my thesis is that, although the Coetzee-De Bruyckere correspondence does not contain any trace of it – correspondence which, however, is not complete, as pointed out by Kusek and Szymański (2015: 25) – there is a strong possibility that the artist had this poem in mind while working on her project. To all effects, what rests on the ground of the pavilion is a half-scalped body, its exposed limbs mercifully wrapped in bandages and propped up

with cushions – a gesture that may recall the earthly creatures' pity in the myth. Incidentally, the tree as an instrument and therefore a metonymy of torture resonates with the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, which De Bruyckere frequently returns to in her letters. Furthermore, the fact that this very poem is recognised, retrospectively, as a crucial step in the artist's path (the return to figuration and deeper engagement with Herbert's poetry) supports the idea that the *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* installation may well be an early, arboreal version of the subsequent animal and humanlike *Marsyas* (2020) (fig. 3).

Pictures of De Bruyckere's *Marsyas* are included in *Angel's Throat*, comprising other two poems by Herbert, both focusing on angels: "Preliminary Investigation of an Angel" (1969) and "The Seventh Angel" (1957). Herbert's influence is acknowledged from the very epigraph to the entire publication, citing the concluding lines of the former poem. Angels are a pervasive theme in European poetry after the Second World War, notably in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, and especially in Herbert's first four collections of poems covering the 1950s and 1960s. Building on previous Polish scholarship, Pyczek (2010) has attempted a reconstruction of Herbert's angelology, which is based on the iconographic, rather than moral, archetype of the Judeo-Christian angel. Herbert's angels are recognizable as such by the fact that they have halos, feathered wings, are perfect, move between Heaven and Earth and are guardians of mankind – but in a very different sense from the radiant, protective presence of angels in Western post-Christian spirituality. His angels are impassive, even cruel, carrying out orders in an afterlife where there is not much difference between Heaven and Hell, but above all, no difference from life on Earth. Even in the afterlife God is absent, or rather, he is visible only "for those of 100 per cent pneuma" (from "Report from Paradise", Herbert 2007: 240): all the rest must be content with his lieutenants supervising operations with a bureaucratic efficiency strongly recalling post-World War II Soviet reality – a correlation that seems to be confirmed by the relative scarcity of angels in the poet's work from the 1970s onwards.

A particularly ambiguous and unsettling feature of Herbert's angels is their corporeality, clearly indicating their belonging to the terrestrial world. Angels snatch children from their mothers' arms, wear clogs, "sharpen their wings" (Herbert 2007: 26), and, in a disturbing suggestion of vampirism, even drink the poet's blood emptying his heart⁴. There are few exceptions to these bleak representations, and De Bruyckere has chosen precisely two of them, selecting widely different poems as for subject, tone, and contextual reference, whose (only) shared element is the reduction of the supernatural figure to more common, human features.

Yet, the humanisation of the angel depicted in the first poem included in *Angel's Throat*, "Preliminary Investigation of an Angel", offers very little solace, as the reader is projected in the darkest profundity of a torture chamber and forced to adopt the perspective of the perpetrators – the same strategy employed in "Apollo and Marsyas". After the first question, the innocent angel blushes, possibly realising what is going to follow:

⁴ I'm here referring to the poems "At the Gate of the Valley", "Look", and "Seven Angels", all included in Herbert (2007).

the blood is helped on
 with instruments and interrogations
 with an iron ferrule
 a slow fire
 the limits of his body
 are defined (Herbert 2021a: 39).

The first aim of torture is the reduction of the victim's person to their body, and this is precisely what happens in this poem, where the angel is given what is presumably an excruciatingly aching body. Yet, the poet never refers to this pain, as it is beyond his tormentors' perception – which obviously intensifies the chilling effect of the description:

after a few nights
 the job is finished
 the leather throat of the angel
 is full of gluey agreement

how beautiful is the moment
 when he falls on his knees
 incarnate into guilt
 saturated with contents (39).

The informal tone of "the job is finished" indicates a contemporary setting, whereas "the leather throat of the angel" (referenced in the title of De Bruyckere's publication) suggests that the angel has been reduced even further in the cosmic order, to the state of a dead animal. In tune with the aestheticization of suffering already noticed in "Apollo and Marsyas", the perpetrators find the angel's fall onto the ground visually attractive. To help his imminent confession, hesitating "between knocked-out teeth", "they hang him head downwards", like an animal carcass to be butchered:

from the hair of the angel
 drops of wax run down
 and shape on the floor
 a simple prophecy (40).

These are the final lines of the poem, that De Bruyckere chose as the epigraph to her catalogue. According to Pyczek, Polish commentators of this poem were puzzled by its finale, and interpretations varied, some suggesting the angel's ultimate 'win'; and Pyczek himself hesitates (2010: 277-278). To me, the "simple prophecy" is a clear, sarcastic allusion to the fact that the "preliminary investigation" will not be followed by any further examination due to the highly predictable death of the angel (notably, a creature of light, as pointed out in the opening lines of the poem), melting on the floor like a wax candle – the most transparent symbol of the precariousness of human life, which is, first and foremost, a mortal life. Since her primary medium is wax, it is no wonder that De Bruyckere found this image so compel-

ling as to bring it into being: *Liggende – Arcangelo I*, 2023 is a superb embodiment of angelic, human, and animal traits in a single form, knocked down, unequivocally lifeless, lying face down on a sepulchral base (fig. 4). A black equine hide cloaks the figure's torso and head, evolving into feathered wings at the bottom edges, from which the 'humanised' angel's bare calves and feet become visible – recalling Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ*'s. This sculpture was first exhibited in Zurich in 2023 in a solo show titled *A Simple Prophecy*, clearly quoting Herbert – even though this reference, to the best of my knowledge, has gone unnoticed.

As anticipated, the poem appearing right after “Preliminary Investigation”, as if to emphasise the opposition, presents an entirely different scene. “The Seventh Angel” is the antiphrastic title (one of Herbert's distinctive features) of a poem describing an imperfect angel, and therefore an imperfect Heaven. The poem opens, just as noted for “Apollo and Marsyas”, *in medias res*, highlighting a contrast:

The seventh angel
is completely different
even his name is different
Shemkel (Herbert 2021b: 44).

This name refers to the Jewish rather than the Christian tradition. Readers are then introduced to the other angels – in lines that Pyczek describes as an example of onomastic exoticism (2010: 278): Gabriel, Raphael, Azrael, Michael, Azrafael, Deadrael, all attending to lofty occupations (“upholder of the throne”, “planet-driver”, “hetman of the hosts”, “interior decorator of the universe”, Herbert 2021b: 44-45). Shemkel, instead,

is black and nervous
and has been fined many times
for illegal import of sinners

between the abyss
and the heavens
without a rest his feet go pit-a-pat

his sense of dignity is non-existent
and they only keep him in the squad
out of consideration for the number seven
but he is not like the others [...]

the Byzantine artists
when they paint all seven
reproduce Shemkel
just like the rest

because they suppose
they might lapse into heresy

if they were to portray him
just as he is (44-45).

This idea of a foreign angel smuggling sinners into Heaven, who is fined repeatedly but eventually tolerated only to preserve a facade of flawlessness, reduces the celestial order and its regulations to the mundane level of local authorities prioritising their reputation while trying their best to keep the outcast at bay. The ironic distortion evidently calls into question the perfection of a Paradise discouraging compassion; it evokes the doctrine of universal salvation, very popular in the Orthodox world; and, by referencing the Byzantine painters, it gently mocks artists fearful of authority. De Bruyckere may have been thinking of Byzantine mosaics and their gilded background when she was fashioning *Sjemkel III* (2020), placed on a voluptuous golden blanket hanging on a wall (fig. 5). In this case – prior to the *Liggende-Arcangelo* sculptures, and before De Bruyckere's re-engagement with the human body – the artist evokes Herbert's odd angel by placing a dark-coloured wax cast of a bovine hide on the golden background, thereby elevating animal nature to the heavens⁵.

4. *City of Refuge III* (2024)

In 2024 De Bruyckere was back in Venice with another exquisite show for the Biennale, this time as a collateral event hosted in the Abbey of S. Giorgio on the island of the same name. The separateness of the location – the island can only be reached by ferry – was certainly instrumental to direct visitors' attention to what they were going to experience, which would not have been possible in the hustle and bustle of the pavilions in the Biennale Gardens. The monumental architecture of the church and the spiritual setting greatly contributed to the sense of something sacred being revealed; and as churches have always been art as well as worship sites, artwork displayed there is consequently understood as a sort of sanctuary offering shelter to a distraught humanity.

The idea of a sanctuary was emphasised by the title of the exhibition, *City of Refuge III*, paying homage to a song by Nick Cave of the same name – as acknowledged on the website of De Bruyckere's agent Hauser & Wirth and reported on many other art websites, but the reference is never explored or explained; which is a pity, because the idea of a 'city of refuge', beyond its connection to the topic of the 2024 Biennale (*Foreigners Everywhere*), provides valuable insight for interpreting the whole S. Giorgio exhibition. The cities of refuge are mentioned in the Old Testament as a provision which offered temporary shelter and protection against blood revenge to those who had unintentionally committed murder (Spencer 2024). In his song, Nick Cave – an artist whose imagery is often Biblical – makes reference to a divine judgment and a sin that must be paid for with death ("You stand before your maker / In a state of shame / Because your robes are covered in mud [...] You better run

⁵ Art historian Stijn Huijts, curator of the exhibition and contributing a critical essay to *Angel's Throat*, entirely misses Herbert's influence on this work, giving a different account for its inception (2021: 84); and in general, he prefers to quote from Paul Celan rather than Herbert, who is ignored throughout the whole piece. In her review of *Angel's Throat*, instead, Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans states "Herbert's poetry, and especially his view of the world, seems crucial for this book" (2022: 83), and then devotes a brief comment to the poems I have just analysed.

to the City of Refuge", Cave 1988). It is not difficult to note a connection between these Old Testament refugees and their modern counterparts, victims of wars, genocides, and environmental destruction.

Upon entering the church, the correlation was confirmed by the first figure the visitors encountered in the central nave: it was supposedly an archangel, as the title of the art piece indicates (*Arcangelo I*, 2023-2024), but what was on display was a human figure, bare-legged, bare-footed, its torso and head covered by a wax cast of a cow hide (fig.6). Heads never feature in De Bruyckere's artwork; as sites of individualising identities, they contrast with her poetics of universal suffering; similarly, her bodies are sexually indeterminate, as the artist is making a point on life in general, including animal and plant life. Placed on a high plinth, caught in a moment of imbalance as it is slightly tilting forward on its toes, the archangel suggests a transcendence made impossible by its weight, and obstructed by the encompassing tattered blanket⁶. Other two replicas were installed in the transept, held down on rusty metal supports which seemed to be the remnants of a wrecked vessel, hinting at a long-lost maritime disaster.

The idea of a maritime disaster was taken up again in the sacristy with the installation *City of Refuge I, II, III*, 2023-2024, a set of wax-cast tree trunks and metal supports arranged in a very precarious balance, just like the *Arcangeli*. Either cast there by the fury of the elements or gathered by survivors, this ensemble could not be called a shelter, and it was certainly not the city of refuge evoked by the title.

The exhibition then proceeded in the monastery galleries, displaying other cycles of works beyond the scope of this paper – except for the *Arcangelo Glass Domes IV and V* 2023-2024, which depicted the angels' slender, almost feminine feet in a posture clearly evocative of the Crucifix's legs and feet – until in the last room lay *Liggende-Arcangelo I*, 2023. If the visitor's progression in an exhibition is comparable to a narrative, then *Liggende-Arcangelo*'s funereal posture at the very end of it seemed to put a tombstone on the possibility of transcendence evoked by the *Arcangeli* in the church. Yet, its beauty did offer that transcendence.

⁶ As Huijts has noticed, *Arcangelo I* builds on De Bruyckere's 1990s blanket women cycle, a series of reclining figures under blankets, probably responding to the coeval humanitarian catastrophes in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. In these earlier works, though, the human figures' feet fully adhere to the ground, and the blankets are real ones, suggesting protection as well as suffocation (2021: 90).

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013. Installation view at the Belgian pavilion, 55th Biennale di Venezia. Wax, leather, cotton, blankets, linen, epoxy, iron. H230 x 410x 1790 cm. Collection of Brook and Pam Smith. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt.



Figure 2. Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013 (detail). Wax, leather, cotton, blankets, linen, epoxy, iron. H230 x 410x 1790 cm. Collection of Brook and Pam Smith. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt.



Figure 3. Marsyas, 2020. Wax, animal hair, wood, iron, epoxy. H 316 x 64 x 60 cm. Collection museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio.



Figure 4. Liggende-Arcangelo I, 2022-2023. Installation view at Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore, 60th Biennale di Venezia. Wax, animal hair, textile, bitumen, linoleum, zinc, wood, iron, epoxy. H 146 x 256 x 102cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt.



Figure 5. Sjemkel III, 2020. Wax, animal hair, silicone, textile, polyurethane, metal, epoxy. H 196 x 72 x 34 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt



Figure 6. Arcangelo II (San Giorgio), 2023-2024. Installation view at Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore, 60th Biennale di Venezia. H 254 x 84 x 80 cm. Wax, animal hair, silicone, iron, epoxy. Collection Flemish Community.

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Deborah Saidero

Decolonial Refeminization and Resurgence in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back**

Abstract I: Il contributo si ispira alle teorie femministe indigene sul genere, la rifemminizzazione, la decolonizzazione e la risorgenza per analizzare *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* (2011) di Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Nello specifico, esamina come la scrittrice indigena utilizza le storie ancestrali dei Nishnaabe per immaginare una realtà diversa per le donne/i popoli indigeni al di là del paradigma patriarcale, antropocentrico e coloniale. Il recupero di queste storie, che insegnano il rispetto per le donne, il femminile e la terra, risulta fondamentale per il processo di risorgenza, che riguarda sia la crescita personale della Simpson come donna, madre e attivista, sia il suo popolo impegnato nella decolonizzazione dei corpi indigeni e nell'autodeterminazione.

Abstract II: This article examines Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* (2011) in light of Indigenous feminist views on gender, refeminization, decolonization and resurgence. In particular, it focuses on how Simpson retrieves the stories of the Nishnaabeg people to envision ways of moulding the present and future of Indigenous women/peoples beyond the anthropocentric, settler-centric and patriarchal paradigm. The retelling of ancestral stories is fundamental both for her personal growth as an Indigenous woman, mother and activist, and for her people in their journey towards decolonizing Indigenous bodies and self-determination that will enable their resurgence by reinstating a respect for women, the feminine and the land.

Keywords: Indigenous, Decolonization, Refeminization, Resurgence, Nishnaabeg stories.

1. Refeminized Resurgence

Resurgence is broadly considered as a movement of regenerative nation-building by the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (i.e., North America). It aims at promoting decolonization by reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, cultural practices, and forms of governance, so as to adapt them to the challenges of contemporary times and transmit them to the future generations. It includes challenging colonial structures by

* I acknowledge that I am discussing Anishinaabe culture as a former member of Canada's settler society and take responsibility for any misinterpretations that may be unintentionally the result of my western mindset.

reconnecting with ancestral lands and restoring kin-centric relationships. Mohawk political thinker Taiaiake Alfred claims, for instance, that, having arisen from land dispossession, resurgence hinges on “the restoration of indigenous presences on the land and the revitalization of land-based practices” (Alfred 2009: 56). Most resurgence efforts are thus nation-based, rather than pan-Indigenous, and “community-centered” in order to restore disrupted cultural practices, ceremonies, and human/non-human relations through “daily acts of renewal” (Corn tassel 2012: 89).

In *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (2011), writer-activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, from Alderville First Nation, near Peterborough, Ontario, articulates her personal understanding of resurgence within the political, legal, intellectual, social and cultural contexts of her people, the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg¹, or Mississaugas, of the broader Anishinaabe nation. Rejecting state-centric discourses of recognition, she states that “resurgence must be Indigenous at its core in order to reclaim and re-politicize the context and the nature of Nishnaabeg thought” (Simpson 2011: 20); it must be theorized “from within” (Simpson 2011: 31) and support the regeneration of Indigenous languages, oral cultures, and traditions of governance (Simpson 2011: 22), without relying on government funding, permission, or state-driven reconciliation initiatives that just “neutralize Indigenous resistance” (Simpson 2011: 24). In her view, for example, the priority of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007-2015) was to make Canadians feel less guilty of the ongoing colonial subjugation of Indigenous peoples, instead of truly committing to righting the wrongs done to Indigenous nations and establishing respectful relationships with them. The Canadian state, she writes, is like an abusive partner who apologizes but does nothing “to stop the abuse” (Simpson 2011: 21); by allowing the non-consensual trespassing of Indigenous lands and bodies, it upholds settler-colonialism, heteropatriarchy and environmental destruction.

For Simpson, one of the core challenges and the starting point of resurgence is decolonizing gender, which is a key tool of colonization. Defying a certain scepticism towards feminism that still persists among Native women², she situates her “radical resurgence theory” (Simpson 2017: 11)³ in contemporary Indigenous feminism, which recognizes the urgency of addressing gender issues within collective claims to sovereignty and self-determination. Anishinaabe scholar Cheryl Suzack, for instance, defines Indigenous feminism as “a critical paradigm that ... focuses on the intersections between colonialism and patriarchy to exam-

¹ Nishnaabeg and Nishnaabe are alternative terms, used by Simpson, for the Anishinaabe or Ojibwe peoples of Turtle Island. The Anishinaabe territory is located in the Great Lakes area and extends from south-eastern Ontario to Manitoba and Saskatchewan and down into Wisconsin and Minnesota. The Michi Saagiig people have their home on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, between Niagara Falls and Ottawa, which is part of the Williams Treaty of 1818.

² See Anderson (2010). Some Native women find it unnecessary to address feminism since Indigenous efforts should, in their view, focus collectively on the bigger issues of “[d]ecolonization, healing, sovereignty, and nation-building” (Anderson 2010: 85).

³ It is radical, she explains, because “[I]t is an unapologetic refusal of colonialism, and a reclamation of the Indigenous life that it refuses. It is thinking and practice that gets to the root of domination and violence and builds otherwise” (Simpson 2022: np).

ine how race and gender systems overlap to create conditions in which Indigenous women are subjected to forms of social disempowerment" (Suzack 2015: 261). Thus, while Simpson aims to build a strong Nishnaabeg nation, she is cognisant that this requires a critical interrogation of the impact of colonialization and heteronormativity on Native women and Two-Spirit people. Indeed, healthy nation-building must acknowledge the persistence of misogynous, sexist, homophobic and transphobic attitudes in contemporary Native communities as an effect of internalized heteropatriarchal ideas; it cannot be achieved without seriously addressing "the political, social, and economic inequalities [still] faced by Indigenous women" (Anderson 2010: 85) or "without taking Two-Spirit experiences into account" (Pyle 2020: 110).

Throughout *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, Simpson endorses, in particular, the pioneering feminist call to refeminize Indigenous cultures made by Salish writer Lee Maracle in *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*. First published in 1988, at a time when second-wave white feminism was advocating social equality, Maracle's seminal work urged Native women to reappropriate their identities by reclaiming their traditional gender roles and ancestral knowledge. Refeminization, Maracle contends, is necessary to counter the denial of Indigenous womanhood and to root out all violence against Native women, who have been persistently racialized, sexualized and gendered, with the ruinous effect of stripping them of their agency and power. The racialization of Native women, for example, has reduced them to "a species of sub-human animal life" (Maracle 1996: 21), ranking them beneath both white women and Native males and rendering them "not fit to be referred to as women" (Maracle 1996: 18). As "the females of the species", she states, we are "'Native', undesirable, non-sensuous beings" whose "wombs bear fruit but are not sweet" (Maracle 1996: 20). This dehumanization of Native women has resulted in a negation of their femininity and sexuality which upholds both their commodification to sex objects for white males, as well as intimate partner violence within their own communities. At the same time, by marking their offspring as undesired and "not sweet", it has justified the erasure of Indigenous motherhood through sterilization campaigns, residential schooling, and child-welfare systems that remove Indigenous children from their mothers and communities, in name of the genocidal colonial dictate to eradicate species deemed 'inferior'. Equally, the sexualized framing of Native women within patriarchal binaries, like those of princess and squaw, has disempowered them as clan mothers, who engaged in domestic economy, child-rearing and agricultural activities, as well as in tribal governance, treaty negotiations and trade.

Like *I Am Woman*, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* is Simpson's personal effort to assert Indigenous womanhood, following her pivotal experience with motherhood, her interactions with Elders, and her involvement with activism. By charting Simpson's rediscovery of femininity through her birthing and breastfeeding ceremonies and the retrieval of Nishnaabeg stories, it enacts the empowerment of "a Native feminist being" auspicated by Maracle (Maracle 1996: vii). Simpson thus theorizes, I argue, a 'refeminized resurgence' which entails eradicating colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative violence by engaging in a process of decolonization in the feminine that will restore sovereignty to Native women, acknowledge their leading role in preserving and revitalizing Indigenous languages and cultures, re-establish respect for their bodies, and redefine gender beyond male/female categories.

2. Storytelling as Land-based Resurgence

To enact her refeminized resurgence and achieve *Biskaabiiyang*, “a new emergence” (Simpson 2011: 51), Simpson uses Indigenous storytelling as an embodied practice of living – as a way, that is, to live traditions and create new ones. Storytelling is, indeed, a powerful decolonizing tool because it is both “a process of remembering” past traditions and of “visioning and creating a just reality ... where [Nishnaabeg] can experience the spaces of freedom and justice” (Simpson 2011: 33). It not only provides the Nishnaabeg with the seeds of resurgence implicit in Nishnaabeg thought that their ancestors passed down through centuries of stoic resistance to colonialism (Simpson 2011: 15), but it also allows them to critique social reality and envision transformed decolonial spaces outside their current existences (Simpson 2011: 33-34). For Nishnaabeg women this means learning about their valuable roles in society and in the resurgence process in order to dismantle internalized patriarchal norms and enable self-actualization.

The retelling of Nishnaabeg creation stories in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* is in itself an act of resurgence because it reconnects Simpson with Nishnaabeg thought, which contains the instructions for decolonization and self-transformation. It thus challenges the neo-assimilationist dictate of cognitive imperialism according to which “Indigenous Peoples were not, and are not, thinking peoples” (Simpson 2011: 32) by revealing the richness of Nishnaabeg culture, values and ways. This richness derives from the deep connection between Nishnaabeg thought and the Michi Saagiig land situated around northern Lake Ontario. As in other Indigenous worldviews, Nishnaabeg knowledge, language, identity and stories are believed to come from the land, which is a constant teacher⁴ and shows the way to *Aanji Maajitaawin*, “the art of starting over” and regenerating (Simpson 2011: 20). “Our Nishnaabeg landscape”, Simpson writes, “flourishes with our stories of resistance and resurgence” (2011: 18). Everything in the landscape – the maple sugar bushes, the wild rice fields, and the animals, plants and rivers of this part of the Great Lakes – embodies emergence, transformation and regeneration and thus compels the Nishnaabeg to move beyond four hundred years of mere resistance and survival and to regenerate by achieving *mino bi-maadiziwin*, “the good life” (Simpson 2011: 13), which means ‘the art of living in a good way’ by keeping good, balanced relations with both the human and non-human worlds.

Being aligned with the natural world, Nishnaabeg thought prompts a restoring of the Indigenous practice of living in deep relationality with the land, both individually and as a collectivity. This is key to refeminization as it enables Indigenous women to retrieve the sacred identification between their bodies and the body of Mother Earth. As Simpson writes:

My consciousness as a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg woman, a storyteller and a writer comes from the land because *I am the land*. Nishnaabemowin [the Anishinaabe language] seamlessly joins my body to the body of my first mother; it links my beating heart to the beating river [Otonabee] that flows through my city [Peterborough] (Simpson 2011: 95, emphasis added).

⁴ Simpson elaborates on this idea in her article “Land as Pedagogy” (2014), where she advocates the need to reclaim land-based knowledge through Nishnaabeg stories as a decolonizing tool.

Acknowledging her inseparability from the land allows Simpson to imagine both her body and the land as decolonial sites of resilience, resistance and resurgence and thus to counter colonial commodification. The embodied experience of reuniting with her first mother, the Earth, and of merging her heartbeat with the purifying sound of the river enables her to see beyond the colonial abuse of Indigenous women and the land, which is, for instance, symbolized by the concrete hydraulic lift lock in downtown Peterborough. This towering man-made structure reminds her, on one hand, of how the Trent Severn Waterway negatively impacted the Mississaugas' territorial lands and, on the other, of how the medicalization of childbirth disrupted the sacred birthing ceremonies of Native women (Simpson 2008: 206-207). By turning to the land as a teacher of regenerative transformation, Simpson realizes, however, that forced hospitalization during childbirth was yet another colonial tactic aimed at enforcing patriarchy by attacking Indigenous motherhood and disrupting extended family and kin networks that supported, valued and protected women and their children. The goal of her land-based resurgence is thus to start rebuilding these kin-centric relationships as the basis for a healthy and sovereign Nishnaabeg nation.

3. Refeminization through Nishnaabeg Creation Stories

The sacredness of the woman/land connection is a core teaching of the Nishnaabeg creation story of the Seven Fires, which is the starting point of Simpson's personal resurgence process. In this story, the universe is created from the union of intellect (the first thought) and emotion (the first heartbeat) by the ungendered creator Gzhwe Mnidoo, who starts by creating fire (first fire), followed by the sun and moon (second fire), night, day and the seasons (third fire), movement (fourth fire), and birds to spread the seeds of creative energy (fifth fire). In the sixth fire, the creator makes a place in which to grow the seeds and that place is Mother Earth, the most beautiful woman of all, who has the creator's heart and the creative energy to give birth to new life. From her breast come all the animals, plants, trees and seas. Finally, in the seventh fire, after many attempts, the creator takes four parts from the first woman's body – soil, air, water and fire – and lovingly moulds a being, into whom s/he blows his/her spirit and thoughts. The being is then lowered down to the earth to be a child of the great mother (Simpson 2011: 37-39).

The meaningfulness of this story is that it teaches the Nishnaabeg that resurgence starts with women because, like Gzhwe Mnidoo, they are creators of new life. As Elder Edna Manitowabi explains⁵, it connects Nishnaabeg women to Mother Earth and shows them the importance of pregnancy as a means of replicating the creation story; it tells them that they are sacred and beautiful, that they are the mothers to future generations, and that they have all the creator's intellect and Mother Earth's wisdom to succeed in regenerating their nations (Simpson 2011: 37). In particular, by coming to "understand the Earth as their Mother", they "understand the Earth as themselves" (Simpson 2011: 36), thus learning to cherish the connection with the land as "the umbilical bond to all of Creation" and to "take care of themselves" and their nations by modelling themselves after the Earth (Simpson

⁵ Elder Edna Manitowabi retells Simpson this story during her first pregnancy and guides her through her life-giving ceremonies thus allowing her to accept her new identity as a mother.

2011: 37). The teachings held in this story are thus fundamental to decolonize and refeminize the sexualized self-image that young Nishnaabeg women have of themselves and thus to empower them. In contrast with the patriarchal view of women as inferior upheld by the Christian story of Adam and Eve, the Seven Fires of Creation re-instates the importance and agency of women as life-givers, nurturers, and generators of nations. It thereby legitimizes the reclaiming of Indigenous motherhood which “was the source of Indigenous female authority in the family and in the government of [Indigenous] pre-colonial nations” (Anderson 2010: 86).

On a personal level, experiencing motherhood allows Simpson to grasp the full meaning and personal implications of the creation story and to uncover the deep ethical principles implicit in Nishnaabeg thought, which is based on “non-authoritarian leadership, non-hierarchical ways of being, non-interference, and non-essentialism” (Simpson 2011: 18). Carrying, giving birth to, and nurturing her two children are transformative experiences that grant her access to what Métis / Cree scholar Kim Anderson calls “the emotional intelligence of mothering” (Anderson 2010: 83) – an intelligence that brings her back to the foundational life-affirming principles of her culture which were attacked by colonialism. Thus, when her birthing ceremonies disclose the power and sacredness of creating a new life, which is “an extension of ourselves” and of the creator (Simpson 2011: 39), Simpson is able to debunk the heteropatriarchal commodification of women as mothers which serves to relegate them to the domestic sphere and ensure the continuity of a male-dominated society. By reclaiming Indigenous motherhood through her creation story, she acknowledges, instead, women as indispensable in the life-cycle and creates a decolonial space that celebrates the female body, feminine qualities, and women’s roles as complementary to those of men.

The retrieval of breastfeeding ceremonies (in contrast to colonially-imposed bottle feeding) is, equally, a decolonial act of refeminization that releases Simpson from the shame Native women have developed towards their sexualized bodies and allows her to reclaim the importance of nurturing not only as an act of nourishing but also as an act of establishing treaty relationships. It thus elicits a reclamation of women’s traditional roles in connection with both child-rearing and treaty-making, thereby repositioning them at the centre of the domestic and public spheres. Breastfeeding is, indeed, a reciprocal relationship based on sharing between a mother and a child, which is beneficial to the health and well-being of both and requires commitment, patience, and constant negotiating as occurs with political treaties between nations (Simpson 2011: 107). Being “the very first treaty” (Simpson 2011: 106) that a child learns, it plays a significant role in educating youngsters about Nishnaabeg political culture and the importance of maintaining good relations with other human, animal and plant nations. In particular, it teaches that treaties are “sacred relationships between independent and sovereign nations” (Simpson 2011: 109) based on consent, respect and diplomacy.

The political relevance of breastfeeding as treaty is encoded in the creation story of Wenonah, which Simpson retells following the recounting made by Elder Doug Williams:

Before there were humans on earth, a female spirit being came to the earth. Her name was Wenonah, which means the first breast feeder – *nonah* is to breastfeed; *we* is ‘the one who’. Wenonah took the responsibility of creating humans on earth. She came

to earth, and with struggle, eventually created humans. Nishnaabeg people are her descendants. We exist today because she united with w-bngishmog (the west wind) and created the first humans. She created and then nourished us by nursing us. When women breastfeed, they are aligning themselves with this sacred story, engaging in the act of creating a new life. Breastfeeding was so important in this Creation Story that Wenonah carries it as her name. To me, this means that as a people, Nishnaabeg have a great deal to learn by being breastfed, by breastfeeding and by supporting and honouring breastfeeding women (Simpson 2011: 108).

In her typical narrative aesthetics, which reproduces the spontaneous simplicity and the repetitive, almost incantatory, qualities of Indigenous orature, Simpson intermingles the act of storytelling with her personal interpretation of the story, so as to summon her people to acknowledge the fundamental role that Nishnaabeg culture has always attributed to women as creators and breast feeders/nurturers. The use of the pronouns 'we/us' signals that the story of Wenonah serves to remind the Nishnaabeg of women's central place in Nishnaabeg governance, which, Simpson claims, starts at home, at the breasts of mothers, because "the family is the microcosm for the nation" (Simpson 2011: 122). Like this female spirit being who mated with west wind to generate the first humans and nursed them to ensure their survival, Nishnaabeg women nurture their families and nations by modelling leadership through their actions. They, for instance, teach children the non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical principles of Nishnaabeg political culture both through storytelling and a return to non-coercive parenting methods based on non-interference and respect for the right of children to follow their visions and abilities (Simpson 2011: 108). Equally, they play a key role in revitalizing Indigenous languages by teaching Nishnaabemowin to future generations – an endeavour Simpson also undertakes in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* by extensively introducing Nishnaabeg words into the text and explaining their meaning and etymology in English (as she does for Wenonah's name in the passage quoted above), so as to undermine the authority of the colonial tongue and expose its inadequacy in translating the complex conceptual meanings of Nishnaabeg words and worldviews⁶. Indeed, Simpson's effort at refeminization entails decolonizing the patriarchal mindset engrained in and transmitted through the English language by retrieving Nishnaabemowin and the more gender-balanced view it upholds.

Simpson's decolonization of breastfeeding reinstates the centrality of Nishnaabeg women as leaders and acknowledges their daily commitment to family and community as the basis of nation-building. As part of her refeminized resurgence, she aims to restore "a Native feminist ethics of leadership ... that emphasizes the role of culture and community and a shared sense of responsibility" (Tsosie 2010: 38) towards responding to the needs of this and future generations. This involves embracing the Indigenous understanding of lead-

⁶ Simpson considers herself a language learner and relies on her Elders to reach a deep understanding of Nishnaabeg words and the concepts they express. Throughout the book, she takes great care to explain core concepts like the Grandmother teachings to her (Indigenous) readers through a meticulous linguistic analysis. Her use of Nishnaabeg terms often followed by the English explanation or translation in brackets aims to decenter the settler status of English.

ership as relationship. Indeed, in Nishnaabeg societies, leadership is not about being the head of a political party or nation, but is based on shared power. Leaders emerge as needed in society and humbly divest themselves of their own authority and power to generate consensus cooperatively; they are individuals who inspire, encourage, bring out the best in others, and empower youth to self-actualize (Simpson 2011: 119).

By acknowledging breastfeeding as treaty-making Simpson also decolonizes her view of the William Treaty of 1818, which, from a Nishnaabeg viewpoint, was not an act of surrendering the land to the British Crown and the Canadian state, but rather an agreement between sovereign nations to mutually maintain peace and share responsibilities in stewarding Mother Earth. This understanding deconstructs the colonial premises of Indigenous-Canadian treaty relations which marked the beginning of Native women's removal from decision-making in their societies and reclaims their right to restore this decisional power.

4. Regendering Nishnaabeg Culture

Through mothering Simpson develops a refeminized/feminist consciousness which is, in Barker's words, "critically sovereign" (Barker 2017: 1) because it empowers a self-actualized female identity while problematizing the framing of Indigenous womanhood exclusively within the rhetoric of motherhood. While Simpson finds strength in her birthing and mothering experiences for her self-determination, she refrains from offering an essentialized view of motherhood as the sole and primary gender role available to Indigenous women. Equating Indigenous womanhood with motherhood would, indeed, limit women's options to child-rearing and nurturing and re-instate heteropatriarchal values in Indigenous communities. As Métis/Anishinaabe scholar Kai Pyle observes, the equation not only erases Native women's other historical and contemporary roles "as traders, diplomats, leaders, healers, warriors, artists and more", but also "posits a biological link between women's bodies and their social roles, which ignores women who cannot give birth or do not wish to, as well as people who can give birth but do not identify with womanhood" (Pyle 2020: 114).

Simpson's radical resurgence theory is, instead, gender-inclusive and envisions Nishnaabeg gender and sexual orientation "along a spectrum of variance" (Simpson 2017: 131) to counter the sexualized images of Indigenous womanhood/femininity and manhood/masculinity that uphold colonial imperialist ideas of indigeneity. Indeed, in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* she invokes a return to a "fluidity around gender in terms of responsibilities and roles" (Simpson 2011: 60) beyond the male/female binary, which was typical of many pre-contact Indigenous societies, including her own. As Lenape scholar Joanne Barker explains, many Indigenous cultures have "multiple (not merely *third* genders or *two-spirits*) identificatory categories of gender and sexuality", within which "male, man, and masculine and female, woman, and feminine are not necessarily equated or predetermined by anatomical sex; thus, neither are social identity, desire, or pleasure" (Barker 2017: 13). Traditionally, therefore, one's position in society was not determined by gender, but was, Simpson says, often linked to "one's name, clan affiliation, ability and individual self-determination" (Simpson 2011: 60). Accordingly, in the past, Nishnaabeg societies normalized queerness

and gender difference/variance and accepted all members of the community regardless of gender or sexual orientation⁷.

Following the Nishnaabeg creation story of the Seven Fires which teaches that each person contributes to society on the basis of their individual gifts and skills, Simpson counters the current marginalization of Two-Spirit, gender-diverse and queer people from community activities and ceremonies and, conversely, acknowledges their indispensable role in the resurgence process. As she explains, it is necessary to centre Two-Spirit-queer people in resurgent nation-building because queer bodies house powerful relationships such as “consent, diversity, variance, spiritual power, community, respect, reciprocity, love, attachment” which “generate a wealth of theory and critical analysis regarding settler colonialism that straight bodies cannot” (Simpson 2017: 126-127). She thus challenges heteronormative tendencies present in contemporary Indigenous communities like the practice of skirting, i.e., the custom of “forcing female-bodied people to wear skirts in ceremony and making them leave if they do not” (Fiola 2020: 147)⁸. In *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* she remarks that while she sometimes complies to wearing a skirt to show respect to Elders and honour women’s intimate power as life-givers, she also feels angered and irritated by this required attire which “maintains the rigid boundaries in a two-gendered system” imposed through colonialism and Christianity, while also obfuscating other roles, such as trapping, that Native women performed (Simpson 2011: 60-61). Moreover, she feels ethically compelled to challenge the exclusionary nature of this dress code that upholds gender violence against non-conforming people because her creation story teaches her that she is unconditionally loved by the creator because of who she is, even when this includes embracing or supporting fluid gender identifications. Deliberately breaking the convention is thus a decolonial way to honour one’s personal relationship with spirituality and to signal respect for body sovereignty and acceptance of diversity as necessary premises for collective resurgence.

The regendering of Nishnaabeg culture that Simpson advocates also has important implications for decolonizing Indigenous masculinities which centre cis-gendered straight men above everyone else. For refeminization to be successful in escaping the rigidity of colonial gender binaries and the resulting gender violence against Native women and queer people, it is necessary, she asserts, to critically reflect on how women can contrast colonial boy-culture and redefine masculinity away from patriarchal stereotypes, so that Indigenous boys can grow up to honour gentleness with the land, women and children, as it once was in Nishnaabeg communities. This involves decolonizing the sexualized images of Indigenous men as warriors and chiefs so as to allow Native boys to share multiple roles and responsibilities with women in both the domestic and public spheres, including land stewardship and sovereign nation-building, and thereby become “agents of Biskaabiiyang” (Simpson 2011: 60).

⁷ Simpson discusses queerness as normally accepted in Nishnaabeg societies in the chapter “Indigenous Queer Normativity” from *As We Have Always Done*. She, for instance, writes: “my sense is that my Ancestors lived in a society where what I know as “queer”, particularly in terms of social organization, was so normal it didn’t have a name” (Simpson 2017: 129).

⁸ Skirting is a controversial issue in many Indigenous communities, including the Nishnaabeg. Fiola explains that while some argue that the ceremonial practice of wearing long skirts was traditional, others argue instead that “it is a contemporary phenomenon influenced by heteropatriarchal Christianity” (Fiola 2020: 147).

5. Resurgence as Visioning: Turtle Island Recreation Story

A final instruction for resurgence found in Nishnaabeg stories is that it requires visioning, dreaming and connecting with the spiritual world. The recreation story about Waynabozhoo and the Great Flood, for example, tells about the recreation of Turtle Island after the great flood that had been brought to the land by Gzhwe Mnidoo “not as a punitive act, but as purification” (Simpson 2011: 68) to help the Nishnaabeg re-align with the good path, after having embraced an imbalanced life permeated with violence and conflict. As Simpson recounts, during the flood

Waynabozhoo managed to save himself by finding a large log floating in the vast expanse of water. In time, more and more animals joined him on the log. Floating aimlessly in the ocean of floodwater, Waynabozhoo decided that something must be done. He decided to dive down in the water and grab a handful of earth. Waynabozhoo dived down into the depths and was gone for a very long time, returning without the earth. In turn, a number of animals – loon, helldiver, turtle, otter, and mink – all tried and failed. Finally, Zhaashkoonh (muskrat) tried. Zhaashkoonh was gone forever, and eventually floated to the surface, dead. Waynabozhoo picked the muskrat out of the water and found a handful of mud in Zhaashkoonh’s paw.

Mikinaag (turtle) volunteered to bear the weight of the earth on her back and Waynabozhoo placed the earth there. Waynabozhoo began to sing. The animals danced in a clockwise circular fashion and the winds blew, creating a huge and widening circle. Eventually, they created the huge island on which we live, North America (Simpson 2011: 68-69).

This story, which instructs about the cyclical process of creation-destruction-recreation, metaphorically reveals that “resurgence is dancing on our turtle’s back; it is visioning and dancing new realities and worlds into existence” (Simpson 2011: 70) beyond the anthropocentric, settler-centric and patriarchal paradigm that still oppresses Indigenous lives⁹. As Edna Manitowabi points out, on a deeper conceptual level, the story also emphasizes that resurgence is an infinitely plausible and ongoing process that requires the personal and collective engagement and presence of every Indigenous person, who has to dive down and search for their own handful of earth, bring it to the surface, and share it with the community to engage in the process of starting over. Moreover, resurgence must be achieved in cooperation with and respect of the natural world and all the plant, animal and non-human nations, as it was in the origin stories.

Simpson’s ongoing effort to refeminize and queer resurgence is indeed a powerful act of visioning and dreaming a new gender-inclusive Nishnaabeg nation into existence. Challenging the multitude of patriarchal and heteronormative tendencies that are still engrained in Indigenous societies, she bravely endorses her battle against Windigo, the monster-like cannibalistic creature in Nishnaabeg stories who embodies imbalance and

⁹ While the image inspires the book’s English title, Simpson subverts the hierarchy between English and Nishnaabemowin in the title of Chapter Four: “Nimtoowaad Mikinaag Gijiyang Bakonaan (Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back): Aandisokaanan and Resurgence”.

unhealthy relationships, and, through the precious teachings contained in her people's stories and in the Nishnaabeg language, she envisions a new world where all Nishnaabeg women, men and gender-diverse people can dance together in a circle and achieve *mino bimaadiziwin*.

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Andrea Cuna

Discovery Systems and Information Literacy (Part I). Musings on the Current State of Search Interfaces

Abstract I: In generale, i cataloghi online delle biblioteche universitarie offrono agli studenti un'interfaccia con un'ampia casella di ricerca. Questo modello di interfaccia 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: Library Discovery 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*
Frederick Turner (1991: 123).

1. Introduction

Effectively searching a library catalogue or discovery system is not an easy task for learning-oriented users. Many libraries have revamped their catalogues with the faceted search

functionality to better help their patrons accomplish their search and browse tasks. However, what they typically provide is a simple flat list of topical terms with no other structure to the data.

On the one hand, the use of a flat format display may have contributed to simplifying 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 leverage on the semantic structure of a subject domain to make sense of it.

This is a two-part exploratory essay which focuses on this specific problem. Part I examines how topical terms are presented in current generation online public access catalogues (OPAC) and discovery systems and provides some musings on how to escape the tyranny of the search box by taking a more subject-oriented approach. Part II discusses the specifics of this approach and shows how it can foster learning and support information literacy.

2. Background

While we still need time to fully understand the impact of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools on students' information-seeking behaviour and library systems development, it is worth considering the assumptions that have led discovery system developers to follow Google's model to date.

The so-called 'Google Generation' has grown up using the Internet as the primary source of information. The term "googling" has become synonymous with searching for information itself, and the expression "Just Google it!" implies that Google Search can provide answers to any information need. The "googlization of everything" attests to both the ease and speed with which one can access information online through Google Search and how central Google Search has become to the digital information landscape (Johannessen 2017: 90; Frampton & Fox 2020; van Dijck 2013: 7).

Accordingly, library professionals have come to three conclusions: (1) "users form their information-seeking behaviors by using Google" (Wang & Mi 2012); (2) "library users are essentially Google users" and (3) users "have the same information searching needs" (Nelson & Turney 2015: 76). University libraries and library systems vendors have uncritically endorsed these assumptions by upgrading or replacing their old library systems with others that are more attuned to the demands of their patrons – in large part young people accustomed to accessing information quickly and easily via Google Search.

As web-scale discovery systems, university library online catalogues offer the capability to search across library information resources in different formats and/or a broad range of licensed and open-access bibliographic databases through a large-scale centralised index. These systems have simplified their interfaces by providing a single search box as the default mode of interaction to look for information online. This page layout clearly reflects Google's search paradigm and is intended to replicate a Google-like search experience (Calhoun *et al.* 2009: 12).

Conversely, library discovery systems behave like a black box, meaning that users know the input and the output, but not what happens in between. That is,

[i]t is often unclear what content is included, how that content is indexed, and how the discovery system determines the order the various search results are displayed. Vendors of discovery systems have legitimate reasons for the black box approach, including the need to maintain their competitive advantage, as well as the difficulty in maintaining a transparent and useable list of the vast set of resources being indexed (Moulaison *et al.* 2015: 3).

The problem becomes all the more acute when it comes to subject metadata because different content providers may use different controlled vocabularies and indexing languages for the semantic description of information resources. This makes it difficult to achieve a coherent semantic representation of the information space covered by the system, which is a prerequisite for providing domain-novice users with the necessary scaffolding to successfully navigate the information space along different dimensions.

However, unlike Google, library discovery systems include another capability: faceted navigation. Faceted navigation (aka faceted search, guided navigation) allows users to explore the search space from different angles based on the facets displayed in the interface, and then to filter search results by whatever facet they choose. One of the major drawbacks of this search-and-browse approach is that it tends to support the information-seeking behaviours of users who have clear information needs and goals in mind, or advanced users, more than those of novice users, because the latter are more likely to enter the search cycle by browsing first and then refining their browsing with a query.

3. Searching an Online Library Catalogue

Effectively searching an OPAC, either stand-alone or as part of an integrated library system, is not an easy task for end users as it requires some background knowledge, skills and know-how (Borgman 1986; Borgman 1996; Julien *et al.* 2012: 148; Markey 1984: 81-84; Matthews *et al.* 1983: 155-164). This is especially the case when end users want to engage in exploratory search (high-level searching and browsing activities) rather than lookup search (aka known-item search).

According to White and Roth, exploratory search

requires search systems to help users clarify vague information needs, learn from exposure to information in document collections, and investigate solutions to information problems. Systems supporting exploratory search facilitate intellectual growth and long-term personal/professional development, as well as task completion and user satisfaction (White & Roth 2009: 3).

The above definition has many aspects that overlap with the goals of information literacy instruction, which aims at fostering lifelong learning both in the workplace and society at large. Markey (2007) notes that most

people are domain novices about their topics of interest. Undergraduate students especially are just beginning to learn the summary knowledge of a discipline. They

have no depth, do not know the discipline's influential authors, important questions, cutting-edge research, or research methodologies.

What is more, researchers typically work both within and beyond disciplinary boundaries. Their research interests may be intra, cross, multi, inter, or even transdisciplinary, with the latter encompassing a scattered spectrum of subjects. Fifty years ago, one irritated library patron, the intellectual historian and Florida State University professor Robert J. Rubanowice boldly and bluntly wrote:

Among those influences most inimical to the aims of intellectual history I would list the names of Melvil Dewey, Charles A. Cutter, Henry Evelyn Bliss, and a collective villain simply called LC [Library of Congress ...]. Perpetuating the myopia of these classificationists of knowledge are those contemporary straight-jacketed librarians who unthinkingly give students outmoded advice such as: History can be found in the 900's [...]. The intellectual historian, or historian of ideas, is interested in everything. Probably his activity is not so much disciplinary as *transdisciplinary* – with this latter word not just in contrast to the concept of “disciplinary”, but also in contrast to the notion of “interdisciplinary” as well. The intellectual historian rises above traditional academic disciplines, asking any and all questions, using any and all methodologies, borrowing from accepted approaches, modifying and adapting where needed, and creating anew (Rubanowice 1975: 264-265, emphasis in original).

Although Rubanowice was speaking from the intellectual historian's standpoint, many scholars working in the so-called ‘cultural sciences’ and ‘natural sciences’ alike would agree with him that subjects are multidimensional. Consequently, locking them in one place does not do justice to their complexity. Every ‘science’ develops certain concepts and uses them to establish a systematic survey, differentiation, and classification of the phenomena falling under its domain of application. However, as researchers are called to answer increasingly complex questions and problems, they often transcend disciplinary boundaries and adopt a more holistic approach, opening up whole new fields of knowledge, where new concepts and ideas are born. Exploring subjects, especially complex and transdisciplinary ones, across different dimensions is of paramount importance for end users to accomplish their learning and investigation tasks.

Yet few OPACs have fully exploited the syndetic structure of controlled vocabularies in a meaningful way to make subject access intuitive and uncomplicated for end users (Olson & Boll 2001: 185; Yu & Young 2004: 170). Libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) “have often focused on what collections are made up (*Ofness*), while many users prefer to learn what collections are about (*Aboutness*)” (Schaffner 2009: 6, emphasis in original).

Notwithstanding OPAC persistent shortcomings in providing subject access, end users have not stopped doing subject searching. Making a virtue out of necessity, they have simply replaced subject searching with title keyword searching (Bates 1988; Larson 1991: 199; Schaffner 2009: 6). Using title as a subject access point can sometimes be an effective alternative retrieval strategy, but to think that there is a fixed correspondence between title

and subject is naïve and misleading (Hjørland 1992: 172-173; Hjørland 1997: 58-59; Hjørland & Kylliesbech Nielsen 2001: 263-269). For this reason, it seems more reasonable to see titles as part of descriptive rather than subject cataloguing (Bates 1988: 403).

4. The Issue of Subject Access

Subject access is the most problematic area of OPAC's interface capability (Julien *et al.* 2012; Hildreth 1993: 13; Larson 1991; Long 2000; Marchionini 1995: 24; Matthews *et al.* 1983; Olson & Boll 2001: 276; Taylor 1995; Yu & Young 2004). Library end users are typically unaware of or unfamiliar with the subject headings and classification numbers underpinning OPACs and expect that they behave exactly like general-purpose web search engines (Butterfield 2012: 533-534; Calhoun *et al.* 2009: 14), only to discover with great disappointment that they do not.

Most present-day OPACs have not advanced much beyond what Hildreth (1984) has termed "second-generation catalogues", meaning that they still largely rely on Boolean logic for their design and operation. All too often, changes to OPACs have focused more on improving their appearance than their core capability (Novotny 2004: 534; Tennant 2005). No wonder, then, that OPACs have repeatedly been criticised by library patrons for being, among other things, outdated, unfriendly, frustrating, time-wasting, lacking in key features and functionalities, or laden with unnecessary features and functionalities (e.g., Antelman *et al.* 2006; Silipigni Connaway *et al.* 1997).

The information-seeking needs and behaviours of OPAC users are as diverse as the users themselves. End users and library staff (as providers and users) have conflicting opinions and expectations about an OPAC's perceived utility. The former "want to find and obtain needed information", while the latter "have work responsibilities to carry out" (Calhoun *et al.* 2009: v). Although collection management and content management are to some extent overlapping processes, they have different core requirements, which demand different strategies and capabilities. It is because of this persistent failure to clearly separate the library staff's administrative and management needs from end users' expectations for increased access and relevance, coupled with the librarians' tendency to impose their search and browse mental model on end users, that the latter have developed a general dissatisfaction with OPACs and have eventually turned to general-purpose web search engines to accomplish most of their search tasks.

Nowadays, search engine use is one of the top-most performed online activities (Purcell *et al.* 2012: 3). General purpose web search engines, notably Google Search, have become the primary tools to find information online (Battelle 2005; Jeanneney 2008; Hillis *et al.* 2013; Vaidhyanathan 2012). Not surprisingly, contemporary society is often described as a "query-driven society" (König & Rasch 2014). Nielsen (2005) points out that current internet users have developed a firm mental model of how search should work, which includes three core components: an input box, a search button, and a vertical list of top results. This is the standard search interface model proposed by current major web search engines. Nearly every internet user is familiar with this basic interface. It has become so ingrained in their lives that it is assumed that presenting them with an alternative model is likely to baffle them (Nielsen 2005).

Yet the simple search box alone, however familiar it may be to internet users, is also a black box (Hillis *et al.* 2013: 14; Nicholson 2000: 17). Since search engine matching and ranking algorithms are held secret, internet users only know the input (the query) and the output (the search engine results pages) of the box (Nicholson 2000: 17). Anything that happens between the two sides of the process – how the query module converts their keyword or natural language query into a language that the search system can understand, as well as how the matching and ranking module fetches the set of relevant pages from the query module and ranks it – is wilfully concealed from them (Hearst 2009: 15).

In a way, the search box is like a camera: “the camera does what the photographer wants it to do, even though the photographer does not know what is going on inside the camera” (Flusser 2000: 27-28). Just as the novice photographer can be photographically illiterate, so the novice searcher can be algorithmically illiterate (see Rainie & Anderson 2017). Novice photographers may have an idea of the picture they are trying to take, but they do not know or care how to make their camera work to get the picture they want. Unwilling or unable to struggle with the complexities of the manual mode, many novice photographers choose to shoot in the full auto mode. In this way, all they need to do is to point and shoot. Although it can often yield ‘good enough’ pictures, the fully automatic nature of the mode means that they cannot make any adjustments when the camera gets it wrong because the camera decides all the settings for them based on its own guessing of a photographic situation.

By way of comparison, novice searchers may have an idea of what they are looking for, but do not know or care how to formulate good queries to help the search engine better understand their information need. Hoping for the best and unprepared for the worst, they usually pay little to no attention to the way in which they combine their keywords or phrases in the search box.

Query assistants help them formulate well-formed queries, but they do not prevent irrelevant or overwhelming results. Advanced search operators and commands would allow them to narrow down or broaden their search to perhaps get better results, but they seldom use them, either because they are unaware of their existence or because it takes too much time and practice to master them (Marchionini & White 2007: 211). On the one hand, the query “represents the *maximum freedom for the user* in interacting with the web search tools” (Stacey & Stacey 2004: 48, emphasis in original), but on the other hand, it is “the point which can make or break a search for information on the Internet” (Stacey & Stacey 2004: 49; see also Marchionini & White 2007: 209-210).

Although the kind of technological advances deployed by current web search engines are somewhat capable of compensating for the user’s possible lack of searching skills (Stacey & Stacey 2004: 48), in most cases the decision to stop searching and use some of the results is only “satisfactory rather than optimal and searchers accept results that are ‘good enough’” (Marchionini & White 2007: 228). This is especially true for exploratory search tasks (aka exploratory subject searches in Library and Information Science terminology). In the early days of the Web, large-scale subject directories such as Yahoo! and LookSmart allowed unskilled and uneducated internet users to easily browse websites organised by general subject areas and to drill down through a hierarchical index while often taking advantage from relevance feedback to adjust their query (Wheatley: 2000: 133). But with the

exponential growth of the Web, the manual approach underpinning subject directories has become unsustainable, and so they have fallen out of fashion. Furthermore, because searching via a web search engine has now become so routine and effective, mainstream information specialists have assumed that anyone would hardly adopt a browsing-first approach (Bawden 2011: 2). Emblematic of this attitude is Yahoo's decision to discontinue its directory – once the company's cornerstone service.

5. Lookup and Exploratory Searches

Present-day web search engines have proven to be immensely powerful tools for lookup tasks, but ill-suited for exploratory tasks (Marchionini 2006; White & Roth 2009). This imbalance is not surprising given that much of computer science research and development applied to information retrieval systems and interfaces seems to have been driven by the implicit or explicit goal of eventually automating every step of the search process (Bates 1990: 575). Indeed, one of the reasons for the average internet user to prize the standard search interface described above is its simplicity and ease of use. Yet this premium comes at a cost: the higher the system's degree of automation, the lower the user's possibility to proactively control the pace and direction of the search (Bates 1990: 575).

Once the search engine has executed the query, the initial simplicity and ease of use are easily lost to novice users who do not know how to take advantage of document surrogates to judge whether what the search engine has found is relevant, trustworthy, and complete and hence worth a click. Some users are willing to compromise and let the system do everything for them, others instead want to be constantly in control of their search, able to refine it on the fly, and interact with results as they are displayed while the search is still ongoing (Bates 1990: 575). Because of their closed-ended nature, lookup tasks can be conveniently completed through analytical search strategies based on keyword-oriented queries (Marchionini 1995: 8; Marchionini 2006: 42).

By contrast, due to their complex, vague, and open-ended nature, exploratory tasks can only be best accomplished through a combination of searching and browsing strategies that strongly depend on on-the-fly "selection, navigation, and trial-and-error tactics" (Marchionini 2006: 42). The difference between the two types of tasks is not so much one of degree in search depth and breadth as of goal: whereas lookup tasks are aimed at finding a specific piece of information or answer to a question, exploratory tasks are more geared towards learning and investigation (Marchionini 2006: 42), intended not only as simply knowledge acquisition, but also as the development of high intellectual skills in a subject domain (White & Roth 2009: 13). In this sense, exploratory search is thought of as a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

The traditional and dominant black box model underpinning much of today's search interface design is increasingly seen as a poor representation of general information-seeking behaviour. Bates, among other scholars, has been one of the strongest critics of this model, arguing "that it represents some searches, but not all, perhaps not even the majority, and that with respect to those it does represent, it does so inadequately" (Bates 2016: 197). The core of her argument is that under this model the query, and the search terms, are mistakenly conceived as something static rather than changing and evolving. In her alternative "ber-

rypicking model” she metaphorically likens searching to picking berries in the woods. The analogy being that as berry foragers gather berries one by one from scattered bushes while they explore the environment and interpret the visual information encountered to find the right area, searchers typically gather information in bits and pieces and adjust their strategy to fit the need at hand. Thus, “the query is satisfied not by a single final retrieved set, but by a series of selections of individual references and bits of information at each stage of the ever-modifying search” (Bates 2016: 198).

Bates’ model seems to provide a good general theoretical framework for the design of OPAC interfaces that support exploratory search and browse behaviour, especially if seen in relation to her conceptualisation of browsing as an activity that goes beyond mere intentional visual scanning. For, although both scanning and browsing involve visual and body movement, according to Bates (2007), they are different in that the former consists of “smooth, sequential, orderly actions”, while the latter encompasses “a series of glimpses, usually followed by actions between the glimpses”.

Put it another way, one is one-dimensional, or linear, the other is multidimensional or non-linear. More precisely, browsing seems to have four components which can be reiterated indefinitely within an episode: “1. glimpsing a field of vision; 2. selecting or sampling a physical or representational object from the field; 3. examining the object; and 4. physically or conceptually acquiring the examined object, or abandoning it” (Bates 2007). Components 2-4 need not occur in every episode, but 1 *does* as “glimpsing a field of vision” is understood to be the very essence of browsing, that without which there would be no such thing (Bates 2007).

If so, how can then the standard OPAC search interface be turned from a black box into an “engine of visualization” (Maynard 1997: 119-120), a tool for not only locating information resources, but also for enhancing the users’ power to see and understand relationships among concepts conveyed by information resources in a manner that lowers the cognitive load associated with learning a large amount of complex information and allows for “programmed serendipity”?

The following actionable insights provided by Bates seem to point in the right direction:

Good browsable interfaces would consist of rich scenes, full of potential objects of interest, that the eye can take in at once (*massively parallel processing*), then select items within the scene to give closer attention to.

Creating a virtual physical layout on the screen may make it easier for the searcher to think of moving among familiar *categories* of resources in an information retrieval system, in the same manner in which they move among resources in the actual library (2016: 211, emphasis added).

By adopting these insights, library systems developers can create intuitive and engaging interfaces that foster positive interaction and learning, and at the same time reduce the cognitive load associated with searching and navigating complex information spaces and processing large amounts of information. Bearing this in mind, the second part of this essay puts forward and discusses some suggestions for aligning information literacy instruction with learning-oriented users’ information needs and requirements.

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Myriam Di Maio

Ecology, Gender and Cultural Ideology in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

Abstract I: L'articolo offre una lettura ecocritica del primo romanzo di Doris Lessing *The Grass is Singing* (1950). La natura è un elemento imprescindibile che incontra e sostiene la necessità dell'autrice di affrontare concomitanti questioni migratorie, etniche, sessuali e di genere nonché, contestualmente, di richiamare a una presa di consapevolezza ambientale e politica. Oltre allo sfruttamento delle risorse naturali, i rapporti fra uomo e natura nel romanzo generano casi di crudeltà verso gli animali ed ecoansia. L'articolo analizza, inoltre, limiti e potenzialità dell'approccio ecofemminista in riferimento alla protagonista e ad altre categorie emarginate.

Abstract II: The article reads Doris Lessing's debut novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) through an ecocritical lens. Nature is a fundamental feature of the book, serving Lessing's agenda to address interconnected issues of migration, race, gender, and sexuality while raising environmental and political awareness. Besides the exploitation of natural resources, human-nature relationships lead to instances of animal cruelty and eco-anxiety. The article further discusses the limits and potentialities of the ecofeminist approach in the case of the female protagonist and other marginalised categories.

Keywords: Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Race, Gender, Ecophobia.

*In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is an empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one
(T. S. Eliot 1998: 41, vv. 385-390).*

The article integrates ecocriticism, gender studies, and postcolonial studies to foreground the interconnectedness of themes such as environmental degradation, gender discrepancy, and racial issues in the novel. Drawing on ecocriticism, the article explores ecological violence and land use in Southern Rhodesia, as well as the legacy of colonial agriculture in terms of bankruptcy and farming failure. The interplay of gender and postcolonial ap-

proaches articulates how, by operating through gender norms, environmental policies position Indigenous and European women as victims and forced co-creators of oppressive human, domestic and social conditions in colonial contexts. An intercategorical theoretical framework is thus required to comprehend the complex, interlocking systems of oppression (and resistance) that Doris Lessing outlines in her first, controversial novel.

In 2008, when interviewed by the BBC on the influence of Africa on Nobel laureate Doris Lessing, Julian Mitchell introduced her as a rather underestimated nature writer¹ who wonderfully captured the dangerous beauty of the African continent, something that might escape those who deem her mainly political. But a largely extended oeuvre of a prolific writer like Lessing cannot be compartmentalised; her vivid memories of her Rhodesian upbringing inform every page set in the hot, dry veld. “Do you sort of get nostalgic still for Africa?” – asks her presenter Alan Yentob for the same TV special. “I get nostalgic for the bush. Most of that is gone anyway. What I was brought up with is gone completely”². Despite this harsh reality, what is left of the land she grew up in lives on in her short stories and novels. From the first post-war period to our contemporary age, Lessing’s literary and autobiographical activity is a precious testament to the racial divide and the environmental changes afflicting South Africa.

Born in Kermanshah into a family of British settlers, at the age of five she moved with her parents to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she grew up on a failing farm. Her father was a war amputee with farming ambitions; her mother was a nurse with whom she had a rocky relationship. The African woodlands, her childhood playground, served as a backdrop to her life’s vicissitudes and her literary imagination. Her experience influenced her brilliant storytelling in works such as *The Grass is Singing*, the later *Children of Violence* series, and *The Golden Notebook*. Before moving to England for good as a single woman, Lessing walked out on her former husband and children to join the Left Book Club and begin her writing career. A second failed marriage to the radical activist Gottfried Lessing was the last chapter of a colonial life she found intolerable. Her geographical relocations and political commitment significantly shaped her identity, and her first novel, published in London, was a product of such cross-cultural influences.

The Grass is Singing is a story of inadequacy, failure, and meltdown. Mary and Dick Turner lead a life of hardship and austerity on unprofitable land in Southern Rhodesia, both struggling to live up to the expectations of the affluent white community that seems to prosper all around them. The initial portrayal of the female protagonist as a single and cheerful woman content with her urban lifestyle is gradually clouded by the social and gendered coercion inflicted on her by patriarchal structures. Notwithstanding her own explicit ambivalence towards matters of sex and relationships³, she seeks a husband in an attempt to comply with social customs. Her conformist response to the social environment leads her to relinquish her self-sufficiency and conform to the wider, constraining colonial context.

¹ BBC (2008). Doris Lessing, the Reluctant Heroine.

² BBC (2008).

³ The author frequently alludes to the character’s sexophobia in the text (Cf. Lessing 2007: 37-39), sustaining her original intention to depict a “woman who loathed the bush and the natives and hated all natural processes, hated sex, liked to be neat and clean” (Lessing 1998: 14).

If she feels safe inside city clubs and tall buildings made of reassuring concrete, unable to acclimate to the veld, her husband belongs there. He acts as an experimental farmer, seeking sustainable and non-hazardous solutions to benefit from his piece of land without damaging it. Despite his perseverance, he harvests nothing but disappointment and defeat, which gradually worsens the protagonist's progressive neurosis. Stemming primarily from the frustrating experience of adjusting to the prevailing standard, her debility reflects the wrenching conditions of European women within colonial systems and the underlying expectations placed upon them both as 'conniving' promoters of imperial ideology and active participants in the domestic and public spheres.

Mary is not even entitled to recuperation, as on the eve of her departure for an unspecified seaside resort, she is murdered by her black houseboy on the front verandah of her decaying homestead. A newspaper clipping reporting her assassination in the opening is a double red herring; this is not a detective novel, and the case is soon dismissed as what a community of uninformed white farmers would expect, namely a native breaking into a house in search of valuables. The circular structure of the novel is rather a means to convey a sense of inescapability from impending doom, sustained by the prescience the woman develops that her death is approaching.

Lessing wades into the psychological implications of colour prejudice and environmental conflict through Mary's contempt for the natives and the African bush: "Her mind was filled with green, wet branches, thick wet grass, and thrusting bushes" (Lessing 2007: 196). Natives are hypersexualised in her eyes: both women with their saggy, naked breasts and men with their bulging muscles and pungent odour. The bush and the bushmen are crucial to essentialising white prejudice, while the sexual tension-repulsion between Mary and her houseboy Moses subtly exposes white hypocrisy in a book that was originally intended to be a lengthy satire⁴. Not only does their relationship disrupt a racialised and gendered code of behaviour; Mary's unsuitability for defending Western, male-coded restrictions determines her psychophysical decline, followed by a fear of social judgement and her struggle with the climate, which notoriously "gave rise to a specific set of psychotic disorders" (Stoler 1989: 646) in colonial areas.

Instances of ecophobia permeate the novel, as the protagonist loathes the harsh South African landscape and its sweltering temperatures. The revulsion Mary feels when being around natives is symptomatic of a more generalised fear of the African nature, reflecting the view that "the role and function of ecophobia works in similar ways to homophobia, racism, and sexism" (Estok 2018: 55). Moreover, her self-entrapment within the house and her refusal to venture into the bush and the vleis and kopjes beyond it echo colonial tenets of racial distance⁵, when in the colonies enforcing and "guarding the social boundaries often fell to women, as it did in Britain" (Strobel 1991: 9).

⁴ Lessing declared the original manuscript was two-thirds longer than it is. BBC. 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p06fc4nh>, 00:16:37 (consulted on 01/09/2025). She addresses the theme of interracial encounters in *Martha Quest* and *The Grass is Singing* through Tony Marston's reflections on "the sexual aspect of the colour bar" (Lessing 2007: 186).

⁵ Chapter nine is pivotal in this regard. As Moses watches over Dick, who is delirious with fever, the sound of his breathing through the thin mud wall and his physical proximity upset Mary.

In this regard it is quite telling that the murder site is on a verandah, which is the part of the house most exposed to interracial proximity; concurrently, a looming green threat is introduced as the narrative unfolds: the bush in fact “should be cut back for another hundred yards about the house” (Lessing 2007: 107) because it is infested with bugs, while Mary visualises it slowly “conquering the farm, sending its outriders to cover the good red soil with plants and grass” (198). Visions of swarms of beetles, rats, and floods ensue, resembling plagues inflicted upon this corner of defiled earth⁶. There exists a quasi-apocalyptic possibility that nature will reclaim everything once the settlers give up on their ambitions and once capitalised agriculture fails. The Turners’ house is situated among the bush and will eventually fall to pieces, like the Ushers’. Industrial failure signals nature’s triumph, and as soon as Dick sells his car to contain his financial struggles, the grass regrows over the roads.

Mary perceives nature as literally plotting against her (“the bush knew she was going to die!” Lessing 2007: 198), while the source of her demise is almost transcendental. The native Moses and the surrounding landscape are inseparable; he is a metonymical part of the bush. She envisions him hiding in the dark, blending in with the African night, and waiting among the trees. All the while, an old resentment, an ‘ancient grudge,’ underlies the text. The blazing, angry sun with its thick, cruel rays and the hostile bush tell a story of mutual hatred, which is sublimated in two distinct stances: Mary hates the sun, and the trees hate her. She snags her clothes on the thrusting bushes as she walks through them, ripping civilisation to shreds. The cicadas, chirping incessantly and giving her headaches, add to the narrative’s extreme sensoriality but worsen the protagonist’s feverish fatigue. Her inability to live in communion with nature prevents her from distinguishing sound from noise, hence from enjoying the grass singing:

Such little beetles to make such an intolerable noise! And she had never seen one before. She realized, suddenly, standing there, that all those years she had lived in that house, with the acres of bush all around her, and she had never penetrated into the trees, had never gone off the paths. And for all those years she had listened wearily, through the hot dry months, with her nerves prickling, to that terrible shrilling, and had never seen the beetles who made it (Lessing 2007: 197).

Eliot’s *What The Thunder Said* anticipates the protagonist’s thoughts, representing the dryness and sterility that connote what will become of her existence in nature as well as the nature of her existence: “If there were the sound of water only / Not the cicada / And dry grass singing / But sound of water over a rock [...] But there is no water”⁷ (Eliot 1998: 40, vv. 353-6; 359).

Bill Schwartz coined an ethics of “principled unknowability” (Schwartz 2016: 130) in

⁶ Some characters’ names (Solomon, Moses, Mary, Jonah) suggest a biblical interpretation.

⁷ Water scarcity, supply, and waste are recurring themes, and so is the excruciating wait for the rainy seasons. Water is also the element that informs Mary and Moses’s interactions. If she turns against him when he stops working to take a small sip, the native shows her indulgence and fetches her a glass when she is sick. Again, Moses taking a bath outdoors creates a sense of anticipation and erotic tension.

which the unconscious informs the entire novel. The dark bush and, by implication, Moses's skin are manifestations of a Conradian *Unheimlich*, shaping the fanatical cult of colonialism, haunting white culture, and fuelling racial hysteria. Such is the legacy of centuries of subjugating colonial history in the country that has stigmatised Indigenous people as remote and alien, as well as dark and threatening⁸. "The bush," writes Lessing,

is full of secrets. No one can live in Africa, or at least on the veld, without learning very soon that there is an ancient wisdom of leaf and soil and season – and, too, perhaps most important of all, of the darker tracts of the human mind – which is the black man's heritage⁹ (Lessing 2007: 70).

Mary's repulsion for nature is an extension of her fear of childbirth, breastfeeding, and sexual acts. She has nightmarish visions and memories of her abusive father, of the "unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him"¹⁰ (163), the same smell Moses gives off that she cannot bear. Inside and outside the house, exotic smells stir in the air. The uncanny is also expressed through Mary's unfamiliarity with those black natives she abhors and abuses. Her impatience soon "grows into intolerance [while] her initial annoyed indifference turns to hatred" (Roberts 2003: 131); this stems from her lack of knowledge of Indigenous customs as well as from her being unempathetic and unable to read any signs of emotions on *kaffirs'* faces, as they are often seen as laconic, inexpressive, and unresponsive¹¹. This principle of impersonality is consistent throughout the novel, exemplifying even "the unspoken, devious codes of behaviour of the whites" (Lessing 1998: 7), a set of "certain unwritten rules" (Lessing 2007: 65) imposed in *kaffir/baas* relationships, which Mary is expected to observe and live by.

Overall, as Charlie Slatter claims, natives "don't understand women giving them orders", (23) and white women do not know how to treat them. Thus, the sjambok that Mary lifts against Moses in the crop field can be read as a phallic surrogate, representing white male domination over a feminised (sometimes infantilised) minority of labourers, and particularly "the super-sadomasochism of [...] white supremacist patriarchal colonialism" (Rabaka 2010: 248). In this case, the appropriation of "a phallic-shaped weapon, picked up in the bush" (Clayton 1989: 154) is an expression of reallocation of agency and responsibility. The portrayal of Dick as a vulnerable individual who is also generally more tolerant toward Indigenous people than his wife implies that the latter is assigned the role of reaffirming white supremacy during his absence. On the one hand, this subversion of gender roles expands on the protagonist's resentment towards her father and her emotional rigidity; on the other hand, it recapitulates the complex set of conjugal duties and colonial diktats involving European women as settlers. As such, the whip in Mary's hands becomes a symbol of her rejection of patriarchal control expressed in terms of appropriation.

⁸ See Maylam (2001).

⁹ From "No Magic for Sale" (Lessing 2014).

¹⁰ Lessing recalls the unwashed smell of her own father in her first autobiography. Cf. Lessing (1994).

¹¹ The natives' emotional numbness is a recurring element in Lessing, from *Martha Quest* to *A Proper Marriage* and *African Stories*.

Even Slatter¹² believes in “farming with the sjambok”, convinced that “one should buy a sjambok before a plough or a harrow” (Lessing 2007: 14). This condenses the phallogocentric and coercive protocol of colonial agriculture in general and the character’s ideas on farming in particular. His keeping a sjambok on his front door is a statement of intent: this is how he conceives of farmwork and exerts control over nature and the natives. The fact that he and Mary are the only characters who brandish the whip reflects their shared tendency to antagonise nature, thus perpetrating an “act of geographical violence” (Said 2021: 299).

On the other hand, Dick is a biophilic character who forms a passionate, poignant attachment to his land. Unlike Slatter, who primarily uses his arable land to cultivate tobacco (thus causing environmental degradation), he tries to rehabilitate his property from previous damage caused by a mining company that “had cut out every tree on the place, leaving nothing but coarse scrub and wastes of grass” (Lessing 2007: 86). His insistence on growing crops and planting short, stunted gum trees creates further contention between him and his wife, who gradually refrains from interfering with his work and looks up to Slatter and his methods. Lessing provides the most reliable testimony to contemporary land exploitation in Southern Rhodesia, as Slatter’s “inattention to his farm’s health [...] shows the impact of unchecked capitalism on environmental sustainability” (Iheka 2018: 670).

Dick knows every tree; he knows the veld “as the natives know it” (Lessing 2007: 125) and holds old-fashioned, rudimentary (though ethical) views on farming. All his attempts to conform and experiment with modern techniques fail due to the African soil’s lack of predisposition; his study of a pamphlet on bees, which turns into an obsession, reflects his poor business skills, as it was written for English conditions and African bees do not like hives “made after an English pattern” (87). At least up to the second half of the 19th century, beekeeping had little status in South Africa and did not become a fundamental practice even later. Dick’s virtuous, yet unconventional farming “marks him out as one who does not conform to the tenets of white domination and is therefore a weak link in the chain of white hegemony over the blacks” (Mutewka & Musanga 2013: 248). As it turns out, the only way to get the most out of the African land is by exploiting it and its inhabitants. Consequently, settlers “either rape the land or are ruined by it. No harmonious relationship between whites and veld seems possible under colonialism” (Sprague 1987: 30). Dick’s cultivation practices transgress the ‘Western canon’ and almost resemble those of the natives: disorderly, scattered, and makeshift. His failure is inevitable, and his land becomes Slatter’s object of interest as he has destroyed acres of grazing and needs extra pasture for his cattle.

Nevertheless, Dick’s “treatment of animals in the novel [...] raises doubts about his ecological proclivity” (Iheka 2018: 667), making him an ecoambiguous character. Each misstep he takes results in the jeopardization of various species. The pigs he buys from Slatter die from the heat, followed by chickens, turkeys, and rabbits. Although the commodification of animals is a key aspect of the colonial enterprise, a focus on the question is imperative. The novel does not explicitly champion such a perspective, but animal treatment gains depth if ascribed to an ecofeminist view of Mary’s existence on the farm. The fenced areas

¹² The character is based on a real acquaintance of Lessing’s. He also appears in “Getting Off the Altitude” from the American edition of *African Stories* (1965).

and the cages Dick builds prove inadequate for the animals he keeps, failing to shield them from the harshness of the environment. Mary herself is a caged animal and shows signs of oikophobia¹³. She lives inside a stifling, mud-walled house¹⁴ with no thatched roof, exhausted, debilitated by a lack of fresh air, and in thrall to a system of white, capitalistic interests. Symbolically, “the money spent on the store, the turkey-runs, the pigstyes, the beehives, would have put ceilings into the house, would have taken the terror out of the thought of the approaching hot season” (Lessing 2007: 93). In this regard, the treatment of Dick’s two starved mongrels is worth considering. After the killing, as Mary lies dead on the verandah, the dogs crouch at Moses’s feet, growling but wagging their tails as “this man had fed them and looked after them; Mary had disliked them” (205). The fact that he can easily tame them proves again the author’s will to overturn colonial stereotypes, considering the phenomenon of “racialization of dogs during the colonial period” (Doble 2020: 70). Hounds were trained to accompany their white owners, while American colonial history is rife with cases of agitated dogs attacking black individuals. Mary’s dread of such animals shows in how she treats them, paralleling her interactions with black day labourers¹⁵.

In a state of delusion, Mary forgets to fill the chickens’ drinking troughs causing them to die. As always, human actions and conditions affect the environment and viceversa; the unattended animals are a victimised part of a chain of regression that imperils the Turners’ respectability and livelihood. In her first autobiography, Lessing recalls overseeing an incubator of eggs during a hatch in the Highveld winter. She writes: “I brooded over those eggs as if the future depended on seventy-two chicks [...] which would be my private and personal drama” (Lessing 1994: 196-197).

Besides, the introduction of an unmotherly and, when it comes to black women, misogynistic¹⁶ character such as Mary raises critical questions about the potential for an ecofeminist interpretation of the novel. The author has publicly declared herself a lapsed communist but has never embraced her feminist identity¹⁷. *The Golden Notebook*, her most acclaimed, controversial, and influential work, is still treated as feminist literature despite her claims. Likewise, she firmly denied any feminist approach or intent in *The Grass is Singing*. It is safe to say that the book presents a series of issues that current critical frameworks further problematise. In this regard, the publishing history of the novel proves enlightening: the Alfred Knopf Inc. initially proposed some changes to the submitted manuscript, suggesting “Moses must rape the unfulfilled and half-willing Mary, and then murder her out of a mixture of disgust and fear”¹⁸ as it would be “in accordance with the mores of the country” (Lessing 1998: 7).

¹³ Paradoxically, Dick finds the town claustrophobic in chapter two.

¹⁴ Cf. *The Waste Land*: “But red sullen faces sneer and snarl / From doors of mudcracked houses” (Eliot 1998: 40, vv. 44-5).

¹⁵ “A white person may look at a native, who is no better than a dog” (Lessing 2007: 143).

¹⁶ “If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. [...] Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies [...] they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about” (Lessing 2007: 94-95).

¹⁷ “I have nothing in common with feminists. They never seem to think that one might enjoy men”, Barbara Ellen for *The Guardian* (2001).

¹⁸ Mrs Robert Shaplen to Naomi Burton at Curtis Brown, Ltd. (January 3, 1950). Ransom Center Magazine (2015).

Lessing was indignant and determined to expunge such ideological pretensions from her book, as its centre was the unthinkable and deliberately ambiguous bond between Mary and her houseboy, which represents an attempt at self-determination *per se*. Mary consents to marry Dick, albeit under social pressure. Her only attempt to escape the farm and return to her city life in a bid to reclaim her independence fails miserably, leading her to opt for reconciliation with her husband. Her situation eludes the defining ecofeminist “links between the domination of women and the domination of the environment” (Bell & Ashwood 2015: 213). At the same time, she refuses to be “relegated to the realm of nature and its reproductive requirements” (213). The ecofeminist discourse safely applies to background black female characters from the compound who are simultaneously subjected to gendered racial discrimination, the colonial system, and their husbands who “keep their own women in the right place” (Lessing 2007: 23). These women, all mothers, coexist in tenuous harmony with nature (as impoverished as they are) and are visually and culturally associated with it, “making a bright-coloured group against the green trees and grass” (95). Lessing seems to be hinting at “African cosmology [where] female fecundity and productivity, as well as participation in sustaining livelihoods are celebrated, making them co-players in issues of survival and eco-preservation” (Magosvongwe 2017: 269).

Mary’s apprehension regarding the alternation of wet and dry seasons (and, by extension, of women’s cyclicity)¹⁹ is beyond her husband’s understanding. The slow movement of the seasons gradually becomes Dick’s only means of tracking time as he endures the challenges posed by droughts, rainfalls, and floods. Dick-‘Jonah’ strives to find sustainable solutions to atone for anthropocentric/anthropogenic policies and prevent the depletion of natural resources. Meanwhile, his disenchanted wife turns green leaves into cheques with her twisted imagination. Dick’s cultural background affects his ambiguous stance on issues of land monetisation and liberalism; he cultivates a rare, emotional attachment to his ‘ungrateful’ soil until, bankrupt, childless and widowed, he is seen wandering frenziedly “in and out of the bush with his hands full of leaves and earth” (Lessing 2007: 12).

Notwithstanding, the Turners remain complicit in the apartheid system, supporting it even though they are looked at with suspicion by the community of settlers. Because the whole society is racialised, they risk falling into the category of poor whites who are “Africans, never British” (11). A code of silence among the whites persuades Slatter to do his bidding on the abject farm and help the Turners out regardless of his interests; he perceives their failure as the failure of the collective, which the natives should never witness. In line with a Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge whereby the former generates the latter, the blacks are compelled to live in ignorance; power and knowledge are inseparable, as they “directly imply one another” (Foucault 1977: 27). Tony Marston, the Englishman who comes to the country in search of opportunities, carries with him a suitcase filled with books on the mining economy, Rhodes and Kruger, which will end up symbolically eaten up by white ants. Lessing seems to suggest that Western cultural heritage and colonial history are involved in a process of autophagy and exclusion; as such, they are made inaccessible to Indigenous people. Inevitably,

¹⁹ “Her [Mary’s] problem was, she just couldn’t stand any natural process”, BBC (2018).

Like most South Africans, Dick did not like mission boys, they 'knew too much'. And in any case they should not be taught to read and write: they should be taught the dignity of labour and general usefulness to the white man (Lessing 2007: 155).

Being a mission boy himself, Moses is unlike the house servants who came before him; he is vocal about his expectations and thoughts and speaks gibberish-sounding English to Mary, which irritates her. According to what seems to be a retaliation principle, the catatonic woman almost loses her ability to communicate towards the end.

In the novel, Lessing reconfigures a series of doctrinal constructs, thereby challenging established racial, social, and gender codes and reshuffling formal ideologies. The overturning (or, rather, transgression) of interrelated standards thus highlights the complexities of a subversive narrative that interrogates traditional assumptions by dismantling them. For instance, the colonial simulacrum of the black man as a savage, sexually promiscuous, irrational being is provocatively subverted; if Mary flogs Moses in a split-second reaction, not knowing what she is doing, the native's acts show premeditation. He hides in the *kaffir* store and later in the bush. Then, he spends a whole day patiently "polishing and sharpening" (Lessing 2007: 205) his murder weapon, carrying out his deed in cold blood. Likewise, "we see a transformation in [Mary's] personality, from repulsive to voyeuristic" (Goswami 2011: 42) as she finds herself guiltily contemplating the native's body when he is not looking. The unvoiced sensual tension between the two revisits the Hegelian dialectic of master and bondsman, where the former has no choice but to rely on the latter. Mary, whose illness causes her to depend emotionally on Moses and even consent to physical contact, is ventriloquised by him. Like a doll in front of a mirror, she lets him dress and undress her, breaking a formal pattern and eliciting incredulity from the British outsider who stands by watching. In doing so, the woman fails in her sacred duty to "maintain the status of the family and preserve social boundaries between the Europeans and Indigenous peoples" (Strobel 1991: 13).

Husband and wife, whose "polar relationship to the land is another example of the fatal incompatibility between [them]" (Sprague 1987: 29), are involved in a further reversal of gender and authority. In the initial chapters, Mary wears trousers (looking nothing like a 'female' to Dick), and halfway through it she is seen victoriously wielding a sjambok. Her reluctance to start a family stands in stark contrast to her husband's desire for one. Moreover, up to a certain point, Mary tries to hold the reins of their marriage (as unfruitful as the land they fail to cultivate) by persuading Dick to reconsider his views on tobacco, which he deems "an inhuman crop" (Lessing 2007: 81). Despite their differing attitudes, the enraged veld rebels against them both with cataclysmic consequences: "And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming" (205).

Having witnessed the history of environmental and colonial violence surrounding South Africa, the author discusses ecological ethics with a keen awareness, affirming its significance within a broader colonial and gendered discourse. It is no surprise that Martha Quest, a character Lessing created in her image and likeness, reads Whitman and Thoreau while growing up in a colonial landscape shaped by human intervention. Like her passionate and progressive heroine, Lessing spent her youth driving through the Rhodesian fields,

educating herself in Marxism, and making a significant social contribution. To a certain degree, Mary Turner is herself a refractory character who, as her name suggests²⁰, overthrows a male-coded system and defies stigmatisation most unconventionally. A colonial anti-heroine in true definition, she fails in her responsibility to embody white settler ideals by undermining gendered expectations and by tragically exposing the false premises of colonial idolatry. Overall, she is “alone, and lonely – as so many farmers’ wives were” (Lessing 1994: 130). Similarly, Dick epitomises the unsustainability of colonial farming, whilst his personal and social predicaments reflect the historical truth that “only a minority of the white farmers were successful; most failed” (Lessing 1998: 14).

In 1956, once *The Grass is Singing* had proven successful enough in spreading progressive ideas, Lessing was declared a prohibited alien by the governments of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia due to her anti-supremacist activism and outspokenness against the apartheid system. For her, it was “emotionally impossible [...] to be excluded from the land [she] had been brought up in” (Lessing 1998: 197), from the land where the grass was singing a historical reality that institutions and federations were neglecting. Today, the bush she was so nostalgic for is still threatened by high rates of deforestation and woodland degradation.

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²⁰ Cf. Jiménez (2020: 168).

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Gabriele Sorice

L'Etnofilologia come in-disciplina. In memoria di Francesco Benozzo

Abstract I: Il presente contributo si propone di fare luce sulle origini della in-disciplina denominata "Etnofilologia" fondata da Francesco Benozzo (1969-2025), ripercorrendone le principali tappe di sviluppo. L'obiettivo è offrire al lettore una prima cartografia dei concetti fondamentali di questa proposta metodologica, delineandone al contempo le possibili prospettive future.

Abstract II: This paper aims to shed light on the emergence of the in-discipline known as "Ethnophilology" founded by Francesco Benozzo (1969-2025), by retracing its main stages of development. It seeks to provide readers with an initial cartography of the key concepts underlying this methodological proposal, while also outlining its possible future perspectives.

Keywords: Etnofilologia, Francesco Benozzo, Filologia e anarchia, Scienza e poesia, Paradigma della Continuità Paleolitica.

Per parlare di Etnofilologia¹, devo tornare indietro nel tempo, precisamente al lontano 2008 – quando ero una giovane matricola della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Bologna – e raccontare di un doppio incontro decisivo per la mia vita. Nel primo semestre di quel mio primo anno universitario, frequentai per un periodo, in parallelo, i corsi di Filologia italiana e di Filologia romanza – tra cui mi trovavo costretto dal piano di studi a scegliere – e in breve tempo finii per innamorarmi, letteralmente, di quest'ultima disciplina. All'epoca non lo sapevo ancora, ma mi capitò qualcosa di molto simile a quanto accaduto, qualche anno prima, a Mattia Cavagna, ora docente di Filologia romanza presso l'Università di Lovanio, che ha recentemente dichiarato, a questo proposito:

quando mi sono iscritto a lettere non avevo mai sentito il termine "filologia", poi ho incontrato un professore con un approccio interessante: riusciva ad aggiornare delle problematiche di questa disciplina. Per me la storia di ognuno di noi è una storia d'incontri e con questo professore c'è stato un colpo di fulmine (Michelazzi 2024).

¹ Per prima cosa, desidero ringraziare la prof.ssa Antonella Riem per avermi invitato, il 17 maggio 2025, all'incontro "Io sono una barriera frangivento / la vela lacerata di una nave", primo di una serie di eventi in ricordo di Francesco Benozzo organizzati, all'interno del progetto ALL-Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia, *Itinerari di Bellezza tra Poesia, Canto e Arte*, dal Dipartimento DILL dell'Università di Udine; la ringrazio inoltre per avermi dato, il giorno seguente, durante le lezioni del Master MaPS, la possibilità di ricordare Francesco e la sua opera con un intervento dedicato all'Etnofilologia. In questa occasione è stato ideato e scritto il primo abbozzo del presente contributo che conserva tratti e stilemi tipici dell'oralità per cui era stato originariamente pensato.

Ebbene, questo professore ha un nome: si chiama Andrea Fassò, è ora emerito all'Università di Bologna, dove ha insegnato per molti anni (ne ha compiuti ottanta il 20 marzo 2025), e devo confessare che anch'io rimasi folgorato dalle sue splendide lezioni tanto che decisi che mi sarei laureato con lui. In una delle prime lezioni, il professor Fassò ci disse che, a completamento del suo corso, sarebbe iniziato di lì a poco un seminario di grammatica storica dell'antico francese tenuto da un suo giovane collaboratore.

Conobbi Francesco Benozzo proprio così: era lui il giovane ricercatore confermato che teneva quel seminario – ufficialmente sull'antico francese, ma ufficiosamente anche, come non mancò di dirci lui al primo incontro con un occholino, sui 'pallini' del professor Fassò, cioè sulle cose da non dire assolutamente all'esame per non contrariarlo ... E questi furono i due incontri decisivi del mio primo anno alla Facoltà di Lettere: Fassò e Benozzo.

Negli anni seguenti, mi laureai in Filologia romanza con Fassò come relatore e Benozzo come correlatore nel 2011 e poi, di nuovo, con entrambi, alla laurea magistrale, nel 2014. Nel mezzo frequentai altri corsi, sempre con loro, e – cosa che forse interessa più da vicino l'argomento di questo contributo – scelsi, come esame opzionale, il seminario di Etnofilologia tenuto da Francesco nell'a.a. 2010-2011. La mia tesi di laurea magistrale, intitolata "Da Bran a san Brandano: preistoria e protostoria del possessore del Graal", fu di fatto una tesi di (Etno)filologia romanza e comparata, nello spirito di quegli anni che Francesco, se fosse qui oggi, definirebbe certamente 'gloriosi'. L'anno seguente, nel 2015, un estratto piuttosto lungo della mia tesi, opportunamente rimaneggiato, fu pubblicato nel volume monografico dei *Quaderni di Studi Indo-Mediterranei* curato da Francesco col titolo *Le origini sciamaniche della cultura europea* (Sorice 2015). È per questo che posso scrivere di Etnofilologia, una disciplina che ho visto nascere, si può dire, e che ha avuto un peso decisivo negli anni della mia formazione e solo per questo mi sono permesso di indulgere in particolari personali. Del resto, e devo confessarlo subito, solo il Cielo sa quanto vorrei che, al posto mio, a scrivere e parlare di Etnofilologia ci fosse ancora una volta Francesco.

Per prima cosa, possiamo chiederci quando e come sia nata l'Etnofilologia. Vediamo solo alcune delle tappe essenziali del suo sviluppo, senza alcuna pretesa di esaustività². Si potrebbe pensare a un'origine nel 2007, con la raccolta di saggi confluiti in quella grande opera di "stratigrafia culturale" che è *La tradizione smarrita* (Benozzo 2007a: 6) e con l'articolo eponimo, pubblicato su *Ecdotica*, in cui Francesco spiega che a coniare il nome della nuova disciplina sarebbe stato, parlando al telefono con lui, "un filologo dell'Università di Vigo, in Galizia" (Benozzo 2007b: 208)³; e invece, a mio avviso, l'origine è più antica: credo che il concetto fosse già presente, in potenza, *in nuce*, per così dire, almeno a partire dal 2002, anno di un'entusiastica recensione che Francesco dedicò al secondo volume delle *Origini delle lingue*

² Gran parte della produzione scientifica di Francesco Benozzo, almeno a partire dal 2007, può essere ricondotta all'Etnofilologia. Non essendo questa la sede per un'analisi esaustiva della sua sterminata bibliografia, ci si limiterà a mettere in rilievo alcune tappe significative del suo percorso etnofilologico, in una prospettiva cartografica che ben rispecchia il suo approccio, rinviando a futuri approfondimenti uno studio più esteso.

³ L'articolo, come tanti altri tra quelli di Francesco Benozzo e come molti di quelli che mi occorrerà di citare in questa comunicazione, è disponibile nella sezione "Texts on line (list per author)" del sito www.continuitas.org (consultato il 19/06/2025) realizzato dal gruppo di ricerca che sostiene il Paradigma della Continuità Paleolitica (PCP) delle lingue indoeuropee.

d'Europa, la monumentale opera di Mario Alinei, fondatore del Paradigma della Continuità Paleolitica (PCP):

Non ho il minimo dubbio che questo volume di Mario Alinei, da leggersi in continuità con il precedente, rappresenti uno di quei rari lavori di scienza cui spetterà una fama soprattutto postuma e di lunga durata. Ci si trova di fronte, infatti, a una nuova teoria 'globale' in grado di sradicare molte acquisizioni (teoriche e non) circa le origini del linguaggio e le origini delle lingue (Benozzo 2002: 243).

E proseguiva così:

Mi chiedo inoltre se questa teoria non possa fornire chiavi interpretative decisive anche nello studio di fenomeni culturali non solo linguistici, come il folklore e la letteratura, dove da sempre, ma in particolare negli ultimi anni, sono state studiate le 'persistenze' antiche, e in qualche caso preistoriche, di archetipi, motivi e concezioni (Benozzo 2002: 251-252).

Non si sottolineerà mai abbastanza che in *Etnofilologia* (2010) molti degli esempi analizzati nei *fieldnotes* sono direttamente debitori del PCP alineiano. Il quattordicesimo ed ultimo esempio della III parte del volume, invece, intitolato "Esperienze di filologia comunitaria (a tavola e lungo gli argini per far parlare i documenti)" (Benozzo 2010a: 247-259) anticipa il tema del *Borgo degli incontri possibili* (Benozzo & Gazzotti 2011), una monografia sulle forme di solidarietà del comune di San Cesario sul Panaro (MO) pubblicata l'anno seguente con Quinto Gazzotti. Si tratta di un esempio importante per capire in che senso l'Etnofilologia rivendichi a sé il ruolo di scienza sociale. Scrive Francesco:

[A] San Cesario sul Panaro, un paese nella campagna tra Modena e Bologna, [...] ha cominciato a prendere corpo la mia idea di un'etnofilologia intesa come scienza che si riconcilia con una comunità. A San Cesario, infatti, riesco a essere contemporaneamente, e senza fratture, l'amico di osteria e il filologo, il raccoglitore di frutta e il suonatore d'arpa celtica: un viaggiatore curioso che di tanto in tanto va a far visita agli amici e uno studioso al quale è stato talvolta chiesto di mettere a disposizione le proprie eventuali conoscenze. A San Cesario ho svolto diverse indagini sul campo: sulla toponomastica orale, sui rituali di guarigione popolare, sul lessico dialettale, sull'etnobotanica, e su tanti aspetti della tradizione materiale (Benozzo 2010a: 247).

In queste esperienze, secondo Francesco, "sul serio, la filologia si fa etnofilologia: scienza che torna alla comunità, che si mette a sua disposizione, che ricostruisce insieme alle persone che vi appartengono i percorsi di una tradizione" (Benozzo 2010a: 247). In questo senso, si può affermare che l'Etnofilologia realizza il principio "dall'edizione all'azione" (Benozzo 2010a: 35-39). È appena il caso di notare che, nel volume del 2011 scritto con Quinto Gazzotti, è ancora una volta presente un esplicito richiamo all'anarchismo come pensiero che dovrebbe portare il ricercatore ad "aderire senza assolutismi a un modello di indagine duttile e in grado di mettersi costantemente in discussione" (Benozzo & Gazzotti 2011: 38),

tema che Francesco ricollega esplicitamente al proprio articolo intitolato *Filologia e anarchia*, pubblicato nel 2010 in risposta al libro di Luciano Canfora intitolato *Filologia e libertà* (Benozzo 2010b).

Sempre al 2011 sono datati il contributo intitolato “Dalla filologia tradizionale all’etnofilologia tradizionante”, pubblicato nel volume *Canoni liquidi*, a cura di Domenico Fiormonte (Benozzo 2011b)⁴, e l’importante botta e risposta, sulle pagine di *Ecdotica*, tra Massimo Bonafin, autore di una recensione (di fatto una stroncatura) di *Etnofilologia* e Francesco che, alla domanda provocatoria del primo “L’etnofilologia ci salverà?” ribatte beffardamente con un contributo intitolato “Si salvi chi può!”⁵. Nel 2012 esce prima, significativamente, *Anarchia e quarto umanesimo. Un’intervista su irriverenza, scienza e dissidenza* (Benozzo 2012a)⁶ (e dopo otto anni uscirà, ancora per Clueb, un’altra raccolta di interviste dal titolo molto simile: *Poesia, scienza e dissidenza*, [Benozzo 2020]⁷) e, poco dopo nel medesimo anno, il *Breviario di Etnofilologia* (Benozzo 2012b) che riprende, nel titolo, il *Breviario di ecdotica* di Contini, il quale a sua volta riprendeva il *Breviario di estetica* di Benedetto Croce. Nel 2014, viene ripubblicato in volume, per i tipi della casa editrice Kolibris di Chiara De Luca, *Onirico geologico* (Benozzo 2014)⁸, un poema profondissimamente legato alla riflessione condotta in ambito etnofilologico e frutto di un soggiorno a Smerillo, nelle Marche, svoltosi significativamente nel marzo del 2007. Torna quindi ancora una volta il 2007, anno in cui il poema in questione aveva peraltro già visto la luce sulla rivista *Poesia e Spiritualità* diretta da Donatella Bisutti (Benozzo 2007c: 63-82)⁹.

Arriviamo così al 2015, anno della fondazione della rivista *Philology*, pubblicata da Peter Lang. In realtà, l’idea della nuova rivista è precedente e data almeno al novembre 2014 quando Francesco mi inviò un’e-mail per informarmi del fatto che avrebbe dato vita a una nuova testata che avrebbe parlato, nelle sue intenzioni

di vento ampio e coste in genere non toccate (filologia artica, precolombiana, orale). Il primo numero come si evince dal tipo di contributi finora pianificati avrà carattere teorico e di manifesto¹⁰.

⁴ Sul “tradizionarsi delle tradizioni”, cfr. anche Benozzo (2010a: 48-58).

⁵ Si vedano, rispettivamente, Bonafin (2011) e Benozzo (2011c).

⁶ Sulla figura dell’intervistatore, Robert A. Buttinger, converrà tornare, in altra sede, in avvenire.

⁷ Di particolare interesse e rilievo etnofilologico risulta essere la prima intervista del volume, datata al 2015, intitolata “Per una filologia terracquea e libertaria” (Benozzo 2020: 17-41). Ancora nel 2016, nella premessa della raccolta *Il giro del mondo in ottanta saggi*, vol. I, *Linguistica, etnolinguistica, dialettologia* (Benozzo 2016a: 8), Francesco affermava di avere dedicato alcuni dei suoi libri “alla teorizzazione di una filologia terracquea, libertaria e antiautoritaria”. Segnalo qui in nota che un secondo volume della medesima opera, che avrebbe dovuto raccogliere scritti di “Etnofilologia teorica e applicata”, per quanto annunciato come in corso di stampa e di imminente pubblicazione a fine 2015, non ha poi mai effettivamente visto la luce. Cfr., a questo proposito, la seguente pagina: <https://cris.unibo.it/handle/11585/520194?mode=full> (consultato il 25/06/2025).

⁸ Tornerò in altra sede sui profondi rapporti che legano quest’opera poetica alle teorizzazioni etnofilologiche di quegli anni.

⁹ È significativo che tra i nomi dei membri del comitato scientifico di questa rivista figurino anche quello di Gonzalo Navaza (cfr. più oltre n. 11).

¹⁰ Dal testo di un’e-mail inviata nel novembre del 2014.

Nel primo numero, infatti, l'editoriale, scritto in inglese e intitolato per l'appunto *Philology Two Thousand Fifteen*, contiene una dichiarazione d'intenti molto netta che chiarisce quello che sarà, almeno nelle intenzioni del direttore, un indirizzo culturale schiettamente (e aggiungo anche: polemicamente, com'era nel temperamento di Francesco) etnofilologico. Basti citare le prime righe dell'editoriale stesso:

Philology is an international journal devoted to the study of human traditions as they emerge from oral, written, carved, painted, digital, performed, ancient, contemporary texts and ethnotexts. The journal aspires to be the expression of philological studies in the present day, insofar as the contemporary world should be understood in its multi-cultural complexity and philology must therefore be re-founded as a *social science* and as an *ethnophilology* (Benozzo 2015: 7).

L'enfasi sui termini *social science* ed *ethnophilology* è di Francesco. E ancora – traduco dal medesimo editoriale – antidogmatici e spregiudicati saranno gli strumenti che la nuova testata adotterà per affrontare le sfide contemporanee. La filologia ha gradualmente abbandonato la sua inclinazione verso la libertà per abbracciare sempre più cogenti e sclerotizzati “regimi di verità” (Benozzo 2015: 8): la nuova rivista vede invece innanzitutto la ricerca scientifica come un atto di irriverenza e ribellione, come una difesa del dissenso. Si noti che sono qui ripresi, pressoché alla lettera, i termini della dicotomia tra “agenti dell'impero” e “difensori del dissenso”, richiamata appena tre anni prima nel *Breviario di Etnofilologia* (Benozzo 2012b: 34-36). E per concludere, Francesco afferma che, lungi dall'inseguire un'ossessione per la ricerca della verità riguardo o dentro ai testi, la filologia dovrebbe talora provare a fare un tuffo salutare nelle acque del dubbio (Benozzo 2015: 8).

Il 2015 è anche l'anno della prima candidatura al Premio Nobel da parte della sezione galega del Pen Club International, una candidatura avanzata e sostenuta specialmente da Gonzalo Navaza, scrittore, traduttore e docente di Filologia presso l'Università di Vigo, in Galizia, nonché membro del gruppo di ricerca del PCP, un particolare, quest'ultimo, su cui vorrei richiamare l'attenzione perché tornerò su questo punto più avanti¹¹.

All'inizio del 2017, ma anticipato l'anno prima da un articolo pubblicato su *Philology* (Benozzo 2016b)¹², è datato il controverso *Speaking Australopithecus* (Benozzo & Otte: 2017), saggio scritto a quattro mani con l'archeologo belga Marcel Otte, esplicitamente ispirato all'“e-

¹¹ Si vedano, a questo proposito, le dichiarazioni di Francesco contenute nell'articolo intitolato *Il Pen Club candida al Premio Nobel il modenese Francesco Benozzo, poeta dei paesaggi*, pubblicato sulla *Gazzetta di Modena* il 26 luglio 2015: “La notizia mi è arrivata da un collega filologo di Vigo, in Spagna: Gonzalo Navaza, uno dei referenti principali del Pen Club in Spagna. Mi ha detto che per la mia opera, così come composta, centrata sull'oralità, e per il mio poema “Onirico Geologico”, hanno proposto di candidarmi al Nobel”; cfr. Gregori (2015), <https://www.gazzettadimodena.it/tempo-libero/2015/07/26/news/il-pen-club-candida-al-premio-nobel-il-modenese-francesco-benozzo-poeta-dei-paesaggi-1.11837386> (consultato il 25/06/2025).

¹² Tra le parole-chiave che avrebbero dovuto sintetizzare, in inglese, il contenuto di questo articolo, Francesco incluse significativamente “Ethnophilology”, a riprova del fatto che, per quanto a prima vista di ambito diverso, anche l'ipotesi relativa all'origine del linguaggio col genere Australopiteco ricadeva, per lui, nel campo di applicazione dell'Etnofilologia.

pistemological frame” del PCP (Benozzo & Otte 2017: 52)¹³ e per effetto del quale Francesco ebbe uno scambio epistolare, secondo quanto egli stesso affermava, con Noam Chomsky. E poi, ancora, è rimasta traccia on-line di una lezione-seminario di Etnofilologia calendarizzata per il giorno 16 aprile 2019, presso il LILEC, il Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture moderne dell’Università di Bologna, prevista per il curriculum di World Literature e studi post-coloniali¹⁴. E, da ultimo, nel biennio 2020-2021, hanno visto la luce alcuni nuovi articoli, ancora di ambito etnofilologico, elencati insieme agli altri nella pagina on-line del sito *continuitas.org* che raccoglie i contributi afferenti al già più volte citato PCP¹⁵.

Ora, un chiarimento doveroso: non mi è possibile, in questa sede e nello spazio concessomi, affrontare partitamente il contenuto dei precedenti saggi: non mi addentrerò, quindi, in un’analisi che non sarebbe in alcun modo possibile senza macroscopiche e indebite semplificazioni. Vorrei invece concentrarmi su alcuni punti che ritengo capisaldi indispensabili che necessitano di essere chiariti in via preliminare, prima di affrontare, nello specifico, lo studio della disciplina in questione per come essa è stata pensata e realizzata da Francesco. Per prima cosa, dovremmo chiederci che cos’è (stata) e che cos’è tuttora, se tuttora esiste, l’Etnofilologia. Francesco avrebbe probabilmente risposto che l’Etnofilologia è un modo di guardare il mondo, che si tratta di uno sguardo, più che di un approccio o di un paradigma e che comunque è molto più del semplice prodotto di una reazione tra metodi della filologia e metodi dell’antropologia – su questo è già chiaro l’articolo pubblicato nel 2007 su *Ecdotica* (Benozzo 2007b: 208). L’Etnofilologia studia i testi come tracce del passaggio su questo pianeta di uomini e donne in carne e ossa, uomini e donne esattamente come noi. Francesco avrebbe forse detto che l’Etnofilologia è una disciplina che non reifica i testi e non può essere tacciata di riduzionismo. Io dico che si trattò anche certamente, ma solo in parte, di una reazione dovuta all’insofferenza per un certo feticismo filologico, per una certa cattiva filologia formalistica e seriale allora (e anche ora?) imperante¹⁶.

Per capire che cosa sia stata l’Etnofilologia “fondata”¹⁷ da Francesco Benozzo – e vorrei sottolineare il paradosso di un anarchico che fonda, che “istituisce” una nuova disciplina accademica, ma Francesco avrebbe parlato appunto dell’Etnofilologia come di un’*in-disci-*

¹³ Si noti che anche Marcel Otte è membro del gruppo di ricerca del PCP.

¹⁴ Si veda la seguente pagina: <https://phd.unibo.it/lingue-letterature-e-culture-moderne/it/agenda/1-etnofilologia-come-in-disciplina-etnotesti-visioni-del-mondo-immaginazione> (consultato il 25/06/2025).

¹⁵ E a questo sito si rimanda per i relativi ragguagli bibliografici. Non mi è possibile soffermarmi, per assoluta mancanza di spazio, su *Homo poeta. Le origini della nostra specie* né su *Lo sciamanesimo. Origini, tradizioni, prospettive*, entrambi del 2024 ed entrambi editi dalla casa editrice La Vela. Basti rilevare che, in queste due opere di sintesi, confluiscono i risultati di quasi un ventennio di ricerche etnofilologiche, a testimonianza dell’incessante fedeltà di Francesco a questi temi.

¹⁶ Sono confortato in questa mia affermazione da quanto asserito da Xaverio Ballester in una recensione a Benozzo (2010a) che Francesco ha ripreso, con evidente orgoglio, nel già citato *Breviario di Etnofilologia* (Benozzo 2012b: 16); scriveva Ballester: “in opposizione all’ossessione ecdotica-critica-stemmatica che tanti eruditi sfoggiano di fronte a se stessi e di fronte al nulla, in opposizione all’inumana reificazione del testo della filologia formale e conservata sotto formalina, quest’opera [*scil.* il volume *Etnofilologia* del 2010], scritta con bellezza e passione, proclama che la filologia terracquea e terrena non deve venerare la tradizione ma viverla, e rivendica il ruolo centrale, anche a livello di fruizione, delle comunità e delle persone reali”.

¹⁷ Sul verbo “fondare”, in questo contesto, cfr. (Benozzo 2007b: 208).

plina, come di una forma di irriverenza irriducibile – per capire che cosa sia stata e sia l’Etnofilologia, bisogna partire da un primo presupposto fondamentale: nell’analizzare l’opera di Francesco – e intendo *tutta* la sua opera: sia quella di ambito poetico, sia quella musicale, sia quella scientifica o latamente intellettuale e di disobbedienza civile – nel farlo, non si può mai scindere la triade formata da poesia, scienza (leggasi: filologia e linguistica – romanze, ma non solo ...) e dissidenza (cioè: anarchia), titolo peraltro di una raccolta di interviste pubblicata, come accennato poc’anzi, nel 2020 da Clueb (Benozzo 2020).

Francesco è anarchico in quanto poeta ed è filologo ed etnofilologo perché poeta e anarchico; nella sua poesia, è pervasivo uno sguardo che potremmo definire propriamente filologico (etno-...) e questo sguardo è frutto di una *Weltanschauung* inconfondibilmente anarchica. In questo senso, per Francesco, proprio la filologia è stata e dovrebbe tornare a essere la più ever-siva delle discipline, ovvero dovrebbe offrirsi come il campo di indagine privilegiato per un anarchico innamorato della libertà tanto quanto della parola. Qui però occorre un chiarimento: nella concezione di Francesco, l’anarchia è un modo di stare al mondo; non ha nulla a che fare con i centri sociali o la lotta armata. Si potrebbe dire che anarchia è per lui un altro nome della poesia. Quando Francesco ha capito di essere innamorato della libertà? Quando ha capito – o deciso – di essere un poeta? Più o meno nello stesso momento, ed è sempre lui a dircelo.

“Gli esseri umani nascono liberi”: questo è l’aforisma incipitario, quello che apre il *Piccolo manuale di diserzione quotidiana*, l’ultima opera di Francesco, pubblicata appena il giorno prima della sua morte (Benozzo 2025: 7). Risuona chiarissima qui l’eco dell’art. 1 della “Dichiarazione universale dei diritti umani” del 1948. Ma concentriamoci sugli aforismi immediatamente seguenti:

Di quando ero un bambino ricordo soprattutto le lunghe giornate estive quassù in Appennino, dove trascorrevi le estati con i miei nonni. E ciò che più nitidamente mi torna alla mente è il senso di libertà di andarmene a zonzo per i campi, di scendere al torrente, di inventarmi continuamente avventure tra i faggi, di costruire casette per creature immaginarie con le cortecce e i sassi.

A questa sensazione di libertà, cominciando a un certo punto della mia vita a considerarla un bene supremo e non barattabile, ho dedicato la mia esistenza, cercando per quanto possibile di non tradirla mai, o di non tradirla più.

Per non tradire questa idea di libertà innata ho capito che bisogna provare a compiere un percorso simile a quello del poeta o dello sciamano [...] (Benozzo 2025: 8-10).

Bene. Qui il legame tra amore per la libertà e poesia è chiaramente esplicitato. Nell’aforisma 93 dell’opera, si parla del “perdurante innamoramento per la libertà” come della condizione in cui vive quotidianamente il disertore (Benozzo 2025: 108). Quindi Francesco è stato un poeta e filologo, o meglio: un poeta-filologo, come i nostri grandi della tradizione sette-ottocentesca (penso a Foscolo, Leopardi e Carducci, su tutti), anche, anzi *proprio* in virtù del suo anarchismo.

Credo poi che ci si possa spingere ad affermare – ed è questo il secondo presupposto

fondamentale – che non ci sarebbe stata Etnofilologia senza l'opera di Mario Alinei: il suo nome e quello di studiosi legati al PCP da lui fondato ricorrono costantemente nelle diverse opere etnofilologiche di Francesco e si intrecciano anche, significativamente, con la sua biografia poetica, sancendone in qualche modo un primo riconoscimento di rilievo internazionale con la candidatura al Nobel nel 2015, resa pubblica con evidente intento celebrativo.

E allora potremmo chiederci perché Alinei sia stato così importante nella formazione intellettuale e culturale di Francesco e quali concetti Francesco abbia desunto da lui. Provo ad abbozzare qui una risposta che non potrà che essere parziale e anche forse parzialmente elusiva, in assenza del diretto interessato. Credo che lo studio dell'opera di Alinei abbia sollecitato Francesco a riflettere sull'importanza che riveste, per ogni ricercatore, il dichiarare la propria epistemologia: chi non lo fa – o chi dice di non avere nessuna epistemologia – ha in genere una pessima epistemologia (Benozzo 2010a: 29-32). La cornice epistemologica del PCP ha consentito a Francesco di legare insieme tanti aspetti della propria personalità poetica, del proprio amore per la libertà e dei propri interessi scientifici che già prima della lettura dell'opera alineiana iniziavano a convergere nella sua riflessione per assumere forma unitaria. Rileggiamo un brano dalla recensione all'opera di Alinei del 2002:

È mia intenzione [...] verificare nel senso della “continuità” alcune ipotesi che mi è accaduto di formulare in questi anni, circa gli archetipi remoti delle letterature medievali romanze (Benozzo 2002: 252).

E gli articoli cui Francesco si riferisce qui sono tutti del 1997. Questa promessa è stata mantenuta con la pubblicazione della *Tradizione smarrita*, nel 2007, che di fatto riprende e approfondisce, collocandole per l'appunto in una nuova cornice epistemologica, ricerche già intraprese un decennio prima (come confermato nella prefazione dell'opera)¹⁸.

E allora quali sono questi concetti di matrice alineiana che Francesco accoglie, integra e in molti casi contribuisce, anche in collaborazione con Alinei stesso, ad approfondire notevolmente?

- L'importanza della teoria motivazionale (“iconimia”) e del concetto di “iconimo” definito come “l'elemento concettuale o associativo fondante, anche se destinato a scomparire nel tempo, di ogni parola nel momento in cui nasce, fondamentale per la ricerca etimologica”¹⁹ e il principio dell'autodatazione linguistica, “strumento – come ha scritto Rita Caprini – proposto da Mario Alinei per superare il problema della datazione delle voci del lessico” che risulta generalmente basata solo “sulla prima attestazione scritta, che ovviamente costituisce soltanto un *terminus ante quem* per la vita del lemma, che viene trascritto proprio perché esiste da tempo” (Caprini

¹⁸ “Questo libro è un primo esito monografico di indagini ancora *in fieri* incominciate all'incirca dieci anni fa” (Benozzo 2007a: 5).

¹⁹ Traggio questa citazione di Alinei da Caprini (2021: 446). Sull'importanza dell'iconimia e dell'iconomastica alineiane nella teorizzazione etnofilologica di Francesco, cfr. il già più volte citato Benozzo (2010a: 59-63); riferimenti analoghi erano peraltro già presenti in Benozzo (2007b).

2021: 446); il principio dell'autodatazione si fonda "sulla possibilità di collocare la nascita del termine in un preciso contesto storico o preistorico" (Caprini 2021: 446).

- Dalla fusione tra l'iconimia di Alinei, applicata in campo culturale, e la Cultural Virus Theory dell'archeologo Ben Sandford Cullen (Benozzo 2010a: 51), derivano alcune delle teorizzazioni più ardite e interessanti sulla cosiddetta "epidemiologia culturale" (Benozzo 2011a)²⁰, che si potrebbe considerare quasi una branca o comunque un banco di prova privilegiato dell'Etnofilologia.
- L'idea che sia il vivo a dare senso al morto (e non viceversa), altro concetto fondamentale, più volte ripreso e riaffermato in diversi lavori di ambito etnofilologico²¹.

Dai presupposti precedenti trae origine l'idea di rifondare la filologia e riportarla al centro del dibattito accademico e pubblico – là dove si trovava nell'Ottocento, al suo apogeo, quando era la più importante delle discipline accademiche e non aveva ancora rinunciato al proprio statuto di scienza dissidente (altro termine caro ad Alinei); una filologia che ambisca ad essere quindi scienza sociale, passando, come già detto, "dall'edizione all'azione" (Benozzo 2010a: 35-39).

Ce n'è abbastanza, come capite, per fare storcere il naso alla maggior parte dei filologi (romanzi e non solo). Non si tratta solo di un enorme – e spaventoso – allargamento del campo d'indagine e del nuovo rilievo che l'Etnofilologia intende conferire a discipline che poco o per nulla s'intersecano, per tradizione accademica, con le competenze di un laureato in Lettere. C'è di più: poesia e scienza, poesia e filologia sono mondi che non possono né debbono (più) comunicare: bisogna scindere nettamente la razionalità del metodo scientifico dalle visioni, dai sogni, dalle chimere del poeta²² ... Qual è, del resto, la qualità tradizionalmente associata al filologo? L'acribia.

Acribia, scrupolo, meticolosità, affidabilità, esattezza (Benozzo 2010a: 24-28). Verità? Ma Francesco ci metterebbe subito in guardia: vi state trasformando in custodi dell'ortodossia, in "agenti dell'impero" (Benozzo 2012b: 34-36); state rinunciando a quell'anelito di imperfezione che accoglie il dubbio e l'incertezza come elementi costitutivi di ogni sapere autenticamente scientifico e non dogmatico. Rileggiamo allora adesso le parole programmatiche che chiudevano, in *Etnofilologia*, il capitolo intitolato "La più eversiva delle discipline?" – e ricordiamo che sono parole scritte quindici anni fa, nel 2010:

La vastità dell'opera che attende il nuovo filologo è in questo senso sconcertante. Ciò che dovrebbe aiutarlo è una specie di ansia di imperfezione, nutrita dalla consape-

²⁰ Contributo poi ripubblicato, col titolo *Memorie di epidemiologia culturale. Appunti su una leggenda agiografica* anche in Benozzo (2012b: 133-158).

²¹ Per un'applicazione-esemplificazione di questo concetto in un contesto di Etnofilologia comunitaria, si veda, ad esempio, il già citato Benozzo & Gazzotti (2011: 32-ss).

²² Nella bella premessa che Franco Cardini ha scritto per il già citato *Poesia, scienza e dissidenza*, l'illustre medievista ha giustamente sottolineato che Benozzo "parla come filologo e come poeta, da una prospettiva in cui la filologia e la poesia – la "diligenza" e la "voluttà", come avrebbe detto Gianfranco Contini – coincidono" (Benozzo 2020: 9). È forse proprio questa inconsueta *coincidentia oppositorum* che è risultata in passato, e risulta tuttora per molti, motivo di scandalo.

volezza che il desiderio di certezze è la peggiore disgrazia che si possa abbattere sui nostri talenti (Benozzo 2010a: 19).

“Il desiderio di certezze è la peggiore disgrazia che si possa abbattere sui nostri talenti”, da confrontare con la citazione, tratta da *Into the Wild* di Jon Krakauer, che costituirà, quindici anni più tardi, nel nostro 2025, il 22° aforisma del *Piccolo manuale di diserzione quotidiana*:

C'è tanta gente infelice che tuttavia non prende l'iniziativa di cambiare la propria situazione perché è condizionata dalla sicurezza, dal conformismo, dal tradizionalismo, tutte cose che sembrano assicurare la pace dello spirito, ma in realtà per l'animo avventuroso di un uomo non esiste nulla di più devastante di un futuro certo (Benozzo 2025: 30).

E a proposito dell'“ansia di imperfezione” di cui l'etnofilologo dovrebbe essere desideroso e fiero – ansia che consuona singolarmente con la “nostalgia dell'imperfezione” considerata “embrione di ogni scelta di diserzione” anarchicamente intesa (Benozzo 2025: 71) – si leggano, da ultimo, anche i versi di *Autoktonia IX*, pubblicati nel 2021 (Benozzo 2021: 20), che suonano oggi tristemente, tremendamente profetici:

Io non voglio la gioia
di chi sempre ha ragione
voglio solo l'errore
– errare, errabondare –
di chi ha moltiplicato
frammenti di se stesso
a vanvera, nel vuoto.
È solo il vuoto che cerco
il vuoto vasto e sincero
dove fare ritorno:
la terra che sempre tace
senza canneti e voci
oltre la vita breve.

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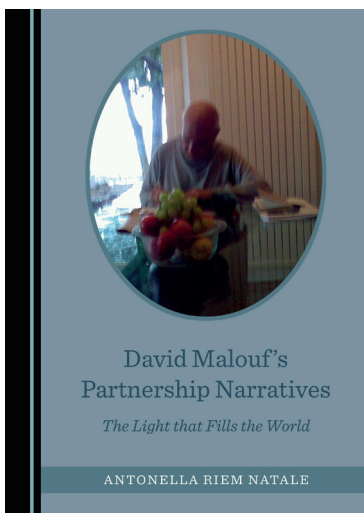
Gabriele Sorice è dottore di ricerca in Filologia romanza. Ha pubblicato articoli di filologia e critica testuale, con particolare riferimento all'epica e al romanzo medievali e ha curato l'edizione critica di una *chanson de geste*. È socio di diverse società scientifiche internazionali ed è membro del comitato di redazione di riviste e collane editoriali di ambito romanistico e medievistico. Attualmente insegna Discipline letterarie e latino nei licei ed è docente di Etnofilologia al Master MaPS dell'Università di Udine.
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Coral Ann Howells

David Malouf's Partnership Narratives: *"The Light that Fills the World"*

Antonella Riem Natale. 2024. *David Malouf's Partnership Narratives: "The Light that Fills the World"*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 228, £ 67.99, ISBN: 978-1-036403157



<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-0364-0315-7#gallery>

This book as its title promises is a luminous study of the work of David Malouf, one of Australia's major writers, which explores a wide selection of his novels, short stories and poetry from a new critical perspective. The key words here are "partnership" and a phrase from one of Malouf's stories, for they spell out both the distinctive features of his creativity and of Antonella Riem's critical methodology. It is designed to reveal under-represented aspects of his work, highlighting the visionary dimension at the core of Malouf's writing: "This use of the creative word is a constitutive element of his oeuvre and it manifests the essential connection between body, nature and spirit through a distinctive language, revealing deep spirituality within the physical and natural realms" (23-24). That concept of interrelatedness is the foundation of the Partnership model which Riem employs in her 'conversations' with Malouf's texts over more than thirty years.

Antonella Riem's name is synonymous with Partnership Studies throughout Italy and

internationally, ever since she founded the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) at her home university of Udine in 1998 which has become a research network of scholars promoting intercultural dialogue, based on the principles of Riane Eisler's Partnership paradigm¹. She is also a distinguished scholar of Australian literature and was appointed in 2021 as an Honorary Member of the Order of Australia for distinguished service "through the promotion of Australian literature internationally" (x). Her book *A Gesture of Reconciliation: Partnership Studies in Australian Literature* (2017) is witness to this. Interestingly it does not feature Malouf for, as she explained, she was already writing this book which we are reading now.

The book is arranged in six chapters. In Chapter 1, Riem sets out her position, outlining her main themes and topics, and acknowledging her critical foundations in an alternative field of scholarship to that used by most Australian literary critics: Eisler's biocultural model, Raimon Panikkar's concepts of 'dialogical dialogue' and the 'creative word', and Francesco Benozzo's *Ethnophilology*, supplemented by studies of archetypes and myths. Her eclectic bibliography extends over twenty pages, plus a list of Malouf's works.

Chapter 2, "Partnership Language, Dialogical Dialogue and Ethnophilology" offers an in-depth analysis of Malouf's creativity focused on the language of his poetry and prose: "I think I really learned to shape a novel the way I'd learned to shape a poem" (26). Riem demonstrates how his language becomes an instrument for reading (inventing?) reality as a system of correspondences via metaphors and analogies which put us as readers "in a particular relation and dialogical dialogue with texts and characters" (34). Malouf insists on the coexistence of multiple points of view, on the reconciliation of differences, on the importance of the spoken word, and the value of oral cultures. His sympathy with Aboriginal culture is beautifully illustrated in Riem's reading of "The Only Speaker of His Tongue", an elegy for dying and lost languages as a consequence of white settler colonisation. Chapter 3 continues the exploration of partnership through Malouf's historical novel of colonial Australia, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. This is a chapter on Partnership Doubles, framed by a scholarly discussion of the Double, that archetypal figure which consistently features in his fiction from his first novel *Johnno*. *Curlow Creek* is very much a 'dream history' or 'myth history' which ends with reconciliation and redemption. Malouf's visionary perspective is comparable with Patrick White's *Voss* – Malouf wrote the libretto for that novel as an opera in 1986.

Chapter 4 on Malouf's short stories in *Every Move You Make* and *Dream Stuff* is for me the central chapter in this book – coincidentally its title quote comes from one of these stories "Great Day". In her discussion of many stories Riem brings us close to the core of Malouf's writing with its poetic and imaginative 'Dreaming' which reveals affinities, partnerships and moments of vision, always embodied in ordinary existence. His enterprise of remapping Australia is akin to Aboriginal 'Dreaming', emphasising the importance of geography, the history of the land and its myths, where "every shape, outline and sign of the landscape are imbued with sacred and ancestral vibrations" (105). Malouf's stories are his way of redeeming Australia's imperial legacy as a white settler colony by giving it a new mythology resonant with its past. Dreaming opens the way to imaginative and mythological thinking

¹ <https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/> (consulted on 08/07/2025).

where boundaries between conscious and unconscious, civilisation and wilderness, become permeable. It is the site of transformations and visions which are basic to Malouf's ecological ethic in his postcolonial criticism: "a land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times. One of those forms of writing is the shaping of the landscape" (159).

With Chapter 5 "Journeying towards Peace" Riem completes her narrative arc with studies of *Child's Play*, *Ransom* and *An Imaginary Life*, all of which trace the arduous movement from a dominator approach to a partnership ethic. Consonant with these values and though all the main protagonists are male, it is through the 'feminine' attributes of empathy, forgiveness and caring that reconciliation is achieved, either between characters (*Ransom*) or within the Self (*An Imaginary Life*). Not surprisingly, given her interest in Malouf's creative word and the visionary dimensions of his art, Riem ends with his poet's novel *An Imaginary Life*, where Malouf recasts Ovid's classical text *Metamorphoses* as a story of individual spiritual transformation. Ovid dies far from Rome up in the wild grasslands of the Steppe, disappearing into the ground to become one with the universe, "continuous with the earth" and "continuous with the sky" (203) in a final perfect moment of transcendence when his soul is freed "as if space itself were its dimension" (203).

Riem's illuminating book shares with readers significant new insights into how imagination, vision and myth are foundational to his art and to his partnership ethics in this heartfelt tribute and scholarly assessment of David Malouf's writing.

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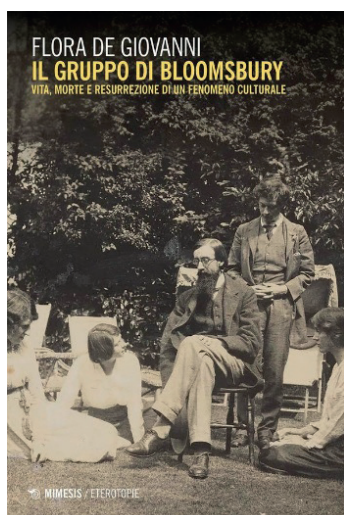


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Claudia Cao

Il gruppo di Bloomsbury. Vita, morte e resurrezione di un fenomeno culturale

Flora de Giovanni. 2024. Il gruppo di Bloomsbury. Vita, morte e resurrezione di un fenomeno culturale. Milano: Mimesis Edizioni. Collana Eterotopie, 266 pp., € 25.00, ISBN: 9791222313672



<https://www.mimesisedizioni.it/libro/9791222313672>

Per chi, negli ultimi anni, si sia avvicinato a letture e dibattiti sul gruppo di Bloomsbury, è evidente la molteplicità di stereotipi e pregiudizi che nel tempo si sono stratificati attorno a questa nota cerchia di intellettuali. L'ampiezza e la contraddittorietà delle definizioni attribuite loro nel corso dei decenni hanno dato vita a rappresentazioni contrastanti: da snob eccentrici, appartenenti a un'élite borghese disimpegnata e distaccata dalle questioni sociali del tempo, a intellettuali attivi nel rinnovamento di una società ancora legata ai modelli culturali vittoriani e nello scardinamento del suo rigido sistema di classe; da promotori della democratizzazione del sapere – basti pensare al loro contributo nel campo delle arti figurative – a esponenti di una produzione letteraria elitaria ed ermetica.

Ricomporre le fila del complesso intrico di prospettive che si sono incrociate su questo circolo di intellettuali è impresa ardua, complice la scarsa strutturazione del gruppo che non si è mai riconosciuto né in un manifesto programmatico né in un movimento unitario ma

in cui, come evidenzia Flora de Giovanni sulla scorta di Raymond Williams, “individuo diventa [...] una delle parole chiave per capire cosa sia stato Bloomsbury” (140). A rendere più difficile una classificazione univoca è l’eterogeneità degli ambiti e dei settori culturali in cui i suoi componenti hanno operato e il diverso grado di partecipazione alle attività di quello che si identifica più come “un gruppo di amici” che non “una setta” o “consorteria” (141), come sostenuto negli anni di maggiore influenza per screditare la forza dirompente di valori e ideali da loro propugnati. A rafforzare il carattere pluralistico del Bloomsbury Group è, infine, la “fitta rete di scambi, discussioni, recensioni incrociate che determinano un clima di vicendevole influenza alimentato dal rispetto e dall’interesse per le competenze dell’altro, [...] ma non [...] dalla incondizionata mutua ammirazione” (147).

Il volume di Flora de Giovanni, *Il gruppo di Bloomsbury. Vita, morte e resurrezione di un fenomeno culturale*, non solo riesce nel difficile compito di fornire un quadro ricco e aggiornato degli studi sull’affascinante gruppo londinese dalle origini al più recente ritorno in auge, ma si pone anche come bussola tra le varie prospettive che hanno contribuito a rendere inafferrabile la portata di questa cerchia di intellettuali. Come il sottotitolo stesso metaforicamente suggerisce, il principio organizzativo che soggiace a questo studio è anzitutto quello cronologico combinato con una ricca ripartizione tematica delle sezioni. Il criterio cronologico consente di attraversare la storia del gruppo dagli albori al tramonto, passando per il suo ‘assedio’ negli anni tra le due guerre e al successivo revival nel secondo dopoguerra. A chiudere il percorso è infatti il capitolo “Bloomsbury dopo Bloomsbury” che prende le mosse da una rivalutazione del gruppo “dopo decenni di critiche, censure e disinteresse” (203), favorita dal nuovo clima culturale degli anni Sessanta, di cui pure il gruppo aveva anticipato la spinta al rinnovamento soprattutto in riferimento agli ambiti del matrimonio, dell’omosessualità, della libertà sessuale, ma anche a quelli del cosmopolitismo e del pacifismo.

A intervallare le sezioni su cui si struttura l’asse cronologico delle loro attività e della loro eredità sono due capitoli di affondo storico e culturale – “Questioni identitarie” e “Cultura d’élite e cultura di massa” – che consentono di inquadrare il posizionamento politico, sociale e intellettuale del Bloomsbury Group nella società del primo Novecento. Queste sezioni costituiscono anche un utile viatico per esaminare più in profondità i mutamenti sociali ed estetici che hanno caratterizzato l’età d’oro di Bloomsbury e le interconnessioni fra queste dinamiche.

Poiché, come già osservato, “individuo” è la parola chiave per comprendere il gruppo, un ulteriore valido criterio di consultazione del volume è anche l’analisi dei contributi delle singole personalità nelle diverse fasi storiche e nelle varie aree di intervento culturale: la combinazione tra approccio cronologico e suddivisione tematica consente di portare in primo piano di volta in volta le figure più influenti senza sacrificare la coraltà degli scambi interni al gruppo né i rapporti con altri grandi intellettuali nazionali e internazionali. Conferma la validità di questo principio di lettura il quadro riepilogativo conclusivo destinato a “Protagonisti e comprimari” (229-234), consultabile prima, durante e dopo la lettura del volume, e atto a riordinare ruoli e attività delle figure ricorrenti in questo studio.

Ripercorrere le fila della nascita del Bloomsbury Group significa, pertanto, ritornare alle serate del giovedì organizzate da Thoby Stephen con le sorelle Virginia e Vanessa, per risalire a quel nucleo originario che già dallo stesso 1905 era andato gradualmente espanden-

dosi, ma significa anche soffermarsi sulle cesure segnate da grandi eventi come la celebre mostra *Manet and the Post-Impressionism* del 1910 e sul peso di Roger Fry e dei coniugi Bell nel lavoro di scardinamento di forme, gusti, convenzioni che da quel momento prenderà piede negli ambienti londinesi, e che nell'arco di dieci anni si estenderà dalle arti figurative alla riflessione estetica tutta, complice la forza magnetica esercitata degli Omega Workshops, vero epicentro della sperimentazione di quegli anni.

L'impatto del gruppo non si limita tuttavia al solo ambito artistico, e a registrare altri importanti momenti di svolta sono ulteriori lavori di rilievo quali l'uscita di *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) di John Maynard Keynes o l'ambiziosa impresa di divulgazione psicoanalitica della Hogarth Press, che dal 1924 iniziò a rendere accessibile Freud al pubblico inglese con la pubblicazione dei suoi *Collected Works*. All'impatto di queste e altre importanti operazioni culturali il volume dedica approfonditi paragrafi che consentono di contestualizzarle e comprenderne la risonanza nel tempo.

Come si sarà potuto evincere fino a questo momento, uno dei meriti del volume è anche quello di aver saputo riequilibrare la narrazione del Bloomsbury Group rispetto al consueto sbilanciamento in relazione alla sua figura di punta, Virginia Woolf. I suoi scritti e la sua riflessione estetica vengono infatti riletti in una chiave corale alla luce delle prospettive degli altri componenti del gruppo che come lei hanno arricchito il fitto dibattito culturale: la sua posizione estetica assume così preminenza accanto a quella di Lytton Strachey nella sezione dedicata al romanzo moderno e al dibattito sul modernismo, così come a essere valorizzata è anche la sua statura paradigmatica nella revisione di modelli di genere e di condotta sessuale, condivisa con la sorella Vanessa Bell: a partire dal trasferimento a inizio Novecento in un quartiere ben distante dagli standard sociali della loro formazione, alla definizione di una nuova idea di domesticità, di relazioni pubbliche e sociali allora inaccettabili per due giovani donne dell'alta borghesia, fino alla ridefinizione delle relazioni sentimentali in un'ottica 'triangolare' e promiscua, le due sorelle e il circolo di Bloomsbury hanno sicuramente dato impulso a un processo di emancipazione dai modelli familiari coercitivi e repressivi tipici dell'epoca vittoriana.

Il lavoro di Flora de Giovanni si configura come un importante studio culturale capace di fornire un punto di riferimento solido per chi desideri approssimarsi allo studio del gruppo di Bloomsbury o fare chiarezza su alcuni nodi ancora insoluti in merito alla sua identità, ruolo e ricezione critica. Al contempo, il volume aggiunge un tassello significativo al dibattito italiano sul modernismo e sull'eredità della sperimentazione artistica del primo Novecento, snodo imprescindibile per la comprensione della produzione letteraria e artistica del XX secolo.

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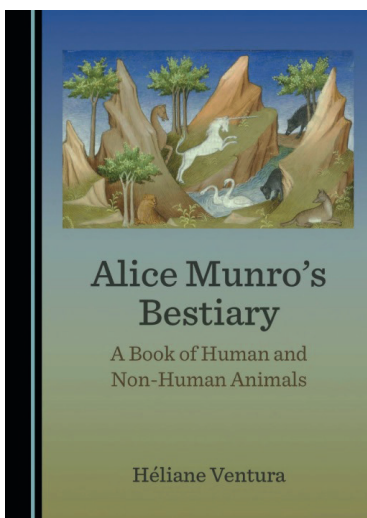


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Elena Bastianoni

Alice Munro's Bestiary: A Book of Human and Non-Human Animals

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https://books.google.com.au/books?id=aTwpEQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Alice Munro's Bestiary: A Book of Human and Non-Human Animals, by Héliane Ventura explores the interdependence between the human and the non-human through the lens of Alice Munro's fiction.

Building on Ventura's previous work and her long-standing expertise in Canadian literature and women's short fiction, the volume completes her research into the presence and function of the animal imagery in Munro's writing. Structured as a bestiary, the book catalogues the many animal representations in Munro's work, including literal animal characters as well as symbolic and linguistic allusions to the animal world. The organizing principle of the book is relationality, as each entry is selected for its resonance with the human characters.

The animals – both real and mythical, literal and metaphorical – from Munro's entire body of work offer a rich depiction of cross-species relations and symbolic interactions.

Rather than arranging the sixty-three entries in chronological order, Ventura presents them alphabetically, a strategic choice that highlights non-human agency and improves the accessibility of the book. Visually evocative, each entry begins with an illustration of the animal and a quote from Munro's writing referring to that creature. The images evoke a series of synaesthesias underlining the intertextual nature of the images, enriching the reading experience by mediating between the literary representation of the animals and the broader historical and social context affecting their symbolic value.

This book fills a gap in Munro's criticism by highlighting the fluid boundaries between humanity and animality, emphasising the reciprocal bond between the human and the non-human. Ventura demonstrates that Alice Munro's references to animals are marked by liminality and ambiguity, evoking a kinship between the self and the non-human other, and suggesting a non-anthropocentric understanding of the human experience. Although other critical studies have suggested ecocritical readings of Munro's fiction, none of them has investigated the representation of animal subjectivity so thoroughly as Ventura's book. Munro's fiction emerges as a universal narrative interlaced with intertextual and transnational references to poetry, prose, visual arts, and Canadian cultural memory. Ventura interprets the animal figures as rewritings of the literary canon drawing on myth, classical literature, and even Early Christian texts.

Ventura's investigation into the intersection of humanity and animality is both engaging and insightful, offering close readings of Munro's short stories. The book opens with a powerful subversive image: the "ADDER". Though absent in physical form in the short story "Rich as Stink", from *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), the snake is evoked through an anagram, proving Ventura's argument that animal imagery serves as a tool to challenge androcentric and anthropocentric norms. Munro's use of alliteration, onomatopoeia and subversive metaphor strengthens the blurring of ontological boundaries between humans and animals, revealing the complexity of human identity. In line with Donna Haraway's posthuman ethics, Ventura's book reveals the kinship between humans and animals as a bond shaped by indeterminacy, as the non-human references range from realism to the uncanny.

The volume also uncovers a web of interspecies relations built on reciprocity and mutual dependence, in contrast to hierarchical modes of life. Ventura traces parallels between the fictional characters and the animals referenced in the stories. One significant example is "Boys and Girls" from *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), which appears in multiple entries. Ventura highlights Munro's critique of speciesism by aligning the oppression of the female protagonist with the subjugation of her animal counterpart, the horse Flora. This ethical stance, grounded in the "reversibility and the interchangeability of opposites" (xix), is further explored in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" – *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) – where the metaphorical links between humans and animals disclose the ambiguous nature of human subjectivity.

Ultimately, Ventura unveils Munro's "poetics of allusion", a literary mode deeply informed by intertextuality and what she defines "a poetics of relationality". This poetics is grounded in reciprocity and symbolically rendered through animal figures. For instance, in "The Shining Houses", from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, a group of Plymouth Rock hens

serves as a metaphor linking private concerns to larger issues of colonial exploitation, stressing the intersectionality between self and other, local and global.

Alice Munro's Bestiary makes significant contribution to Canadian literary studies by offering an original perspective on Munro's representation of interspecies relationships. By combining Posthuman theory with close textual analysis, Ventura challenges normative conceptions of otherness and invites readers to reconsider human identity in terms of reciprocity and ecological entanglements. The volume paves the way for future research on cross-species kinship in Canadian literature, a framework that could be adapted to other literary traditions. Ventura unites tradition to innovation by adapting the form of the bestiary to our posthuman present, encouraging the development of a deeper critical engagement and understanding of complexity.

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