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POETICHE / POETICS

ARTICOLI / ARTICLES

RECENSIONI / REVIEWS

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Stanton Mellick

Poems

The Jurors

In the square they sit
like an extended jury
on separate seats,
mute,
like an extended jury
on separate seats,
mute,
autumned,
each a book of yesterday's.
The unaware stream by
locked in docks peculiar
pressing petals and fragrance
into an unheeding pavement.

In the sun they sit,
age dumb and grey,
watching,
seeing only
last year's petals
last year's leaves.

Hill of Misery

This, *says James,*
is no ordinary hill
fire and friend
burned its sod
under my black pot
my life's warning
its sprint ash
sum of my days.

This, *says James,*

hill of misery
servant and bitch
was stoop of my back
each sod that I cut
one more block
for my tomb.

Query
(for JJM)

What was he like?
Very kind and
a strand of life, I said,
then lifted his old felt hat
from the peg and saw
a stain in the band
a mark from his being.

You trickled sand
felt the days
shivered the nights
sighed,
worked the thirties
night and day
coughed and died
and the wine of your being
was the rare wine of pressed days.

I lose the now
as yesterday's return
gold and red
fine and full flavoured
distilled from memory's flask.

But how could you tell them that?

Between

Only some on a road can walk,
only some on a theme can talk,

only the strong can smile apace
when an all around is a mad mill race.

When youth has set in a sun red glow,
and life's no longer a mistletoe
then distant fields aren't quite so green
and the ladder up doesn't seem to grow
for most of us are caught between
what has been done and the might have been.

When Plato Looked

When Plato looked for reality
in a world of forms
I wonder
if he wondered
what happened to the form
which took shape as madness
in the hearts of young lovers?

Did it vanish
into Stygian black
or float for ever
a blur
on the hard etching of Time?

Or did its misty symbols
come into blazing focus
when he saw
what you see
when you look
into the deep pinpoints
of another's eyes?

Or was he too busy
with Platonic love?

Stanton (JSD) Mellick, former Senior Lecturer at the English Department of the University of Queensland, and early President of the Friends of the Fryer Library. In 2005 he was awarded the Medal for the Order of Australia (OAM) "for services to the community, particularly through the restoration of St Paul's Presbyterian Church, and to Australian cultural studies". He was involved with the journal *Australian Literary Studies*, helping its

financial as well as its literary side. He is the author of several published literary works including: *A Centennial History of the Pharmaceutical Society of Queensland, 1880-1980*; *The Passing Guest: A Life of Henry Kingsley*; *Keeping Faith: A History of St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital, 1958-2003*. His poems have been published in Australia and in the US and he is an advocate for Queensland's early writers. His work as a research consultant after retiring appears in the *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*, the Academy edition of *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* and *Writers' Footprints*.
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Franca Cavagnoli

Water is Safe in Milan

Give me a thousand kisses, and then a hundred, then a thousand more, then a hundred again, and then one more thousand in a row, and then a hundred. *Da mi basia mille, deinde centum, | dein mille altera …*

Laura sighed, opened her eyes and looked at the book she was holding. *Margaret Torrence was fourteen; a serious girl, considered beautiful by a sort of tradition, for she had been beautiful as a little girl. A year and a half before, after a breathless struggle, Basil had succeeded in kissing her on the forehead.*

Tommy would never engage in a breathless struggle to kiss me on my forehead, Laura thought with a frown. No way. Hardly on my lips. And Tommy surely doesn't think he's wonderful, she muttered to herself.

No, Tommy wasn't at all like Basil. She put the book down on the little table by the armchair.

The first time she saw Tommy he was playing football, and that day he wasn't composed at all. He was running, shouting and even screaming. He was all red and excited and in a sweat, and when he scored he yelled and jumped, and was wonderful to look at. She had a crush on him at once.

Like Basil, she'd imagined a typical unwinding of facts: Boy and girl meet, fall in love, maybe have to fight some life's adversities, and live happily ever after. But after a couple of weeks, seeing him always so self-possessed, she realized, as Basil had before her, that *life for everybody was a struggle, sometimes magnificent from a distance, but always difficult and surprisingly simple and a little sad.*

You shouldn't get so fresh all the time!

She wished she could tell him so … but there was no chance – Tommy was never fresh: he was always so respectful. So composed. Sometimes after school she went to the bike stands and waited for him next to his bike.

Hallo, Tommy. Shall we ride home together? she asked him.

Tommy looked up and smiled. Sure, he said.

That was all: calm, composed, gentlemanlike.

She was waiting for Sabrina so they could work together on the Latin translation, as they did once a week. One week they met at Sabrina's place and the following week they met at Laura's. Laura lived near Porta Venezia, whereas Sabrina lived near Castello Sforzesco. It was just ten minutes away by bike. Sabrina knew Latin grammar better and Laura understood Latin better. She grasped the overall meaning while Sabrina checked with scientific rigour whether all the cases and declensions confirmed what Laura thought the text meant by reading it aloud a few times.

When she heard the bell ring, Laura shook her head clear of both Tommy and Basil. She went and opened the door.

Laura's mother came out of the bathroom, her face half white and half made up.

Hallo, Sabrina, how are you? Laura, I took away all my stuff from the lounge table so this time you'll have plenty of room for your dictionaries and books and the two laptops. The table in your room is too narrow. Then she disappeared in the bathroom again.

Laura led the way to the lounge.

What would you like to drink? she asked.

A glass of water, please.

Sabrina eyed the book on the little table near the armchair.

The Basil and Josephine Stories, she said. What's it like?

Good, said Laura. In the first few stories Basil is eleven but then he grows up and I know he'll be seventeen in the last stories. I'm looking forward to it, she said from the kitchen.

She came in and put the two glasses of water on the table.

In the story I'm reading now he's about our age, she said. Well, shall we start with the Catullus excerpt?

Their teacher at St. Louis International School was unconventional: she followed the programme – the usual Virgil and Cicero expected from her age group –, but she also liked go off the beaten path. Just a few lines – nothing extraordinary –; or a very short passage from a harder author. This time their translation was very similar, at least as far as the first lines of the *carmen* passage were concerned. They always did a first pass separately and then discussed it.

"*Da mi basia mille, deinde centum, / dein mille altera, dein secunda centum, / deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum*", read Laura aloud.

"Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then a thousand more, then a hundred again, then one more thousand in a row, then a hundred", read Sabrina aloud.

Mine isn't very different: I have "then" twice and "and then" three times.

Sabrina looked at her.

Yes, Catullus writes "*deinde … dein … dein … deinde … deinde*". There's variation: it gives rhythm to his lines. After that he has one more *dein* – *dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,* – that is, he changes again. I think it's important to keep the variation in our translation too: "Give me a thousand kisses, and then a hundred, / then a thousand more, then a hundred again, / and then one more thousand in a row, and then a hundred …"

Is that tap water? asked Laura's mother in the lounge doorway.

Yes, mum.

Why? There's fresh blueberry juice in the fridge, and mineral water if you'd rather have water.

Why do you drink mineral water, mum? Water in Milan is safe, Laura said watching her mother unflinchingly.

As you like, my dear. Well, I'm off. I have a meeting – Faculty Board. I'll be back by half past seven. Ciao, belle.

The door slammed shut.

Sabrina was still looking at Laura.

Variation, rhythm … I'm completely deaf to it. I tried to convey the meaning. By the way, when is your final cello recital?

Next Thursday. Let's not stray from this now. How did you translate "*conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus, /aut ne quis malus inuidere possit, / cum tantum sciat esse basiorum*?" This is the hardest part of the translation for me.

"… let's mix them up, in order not to know, or so that nobody will bring us bad luck, by knowing how many our kisses are", said Sabrina in a faltering voice.

Yeah, "mix them up", I like the spoken tone. That's very Catullus-like here; our teacher insisted on that. But there's more in that *conturbabimus* … In Italian there's the word *conturbare*. What I see is something shaking, violently shaking, like the wind does with sea waves. Rough waves. I think the meaning is: let's ruffle our kisses up so that nobody will know their exact number, especially people who are jealous of our many kisses.

Sabrina looked puzzled. Then she blushed and smiled.

And then, we're always being told about the power of the eye for Latins. Our teacher insists on that, too. The way one looked at other people. I agree – it's a question of bad luck; but we should say it in a different way, I think. Maybe "so that nobody will put the evil eye on us" or "nobody envious will put the evil eye on us", or do you think it sounds redundant if we add "envious"?

I don't really know. We do have *inuidere* in the text …

They went on discussing the meaning of *conturbabimus* and *inuidere* for more than an hour.

I need a break now, said Sabrina.

All right, let's have a break. Anyway, so far my translation sounds like this: "… let's ruffle them, / so that we won't know, / and nobody will put the evil eye on us by knowing, / how many are our kisses". But I still have to think about it. The best ideas dawn on me when I wake up. But one thing is for sure: I like the line ending with "kisses".

Sabrina didn't look puzzled anymore. But her cheeks were still flushed and she was still smiling.

Would you like anything else to drink? Laura asked and stood up.

I'll have a glass of juice, please.

Laura went into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of blueberry juice.

Last night I saw *The Little Princess* on Netflix, Laura said.

Not too grown up to see a movie for kids?

It was one of my favourite books when I was seven or eight. My mother insisted on me watching it. She had just seen a movie called *Roma* by the same director and she was enthusiastic about it.

Roma?

Yes, Roma – the Mexican one.

What do you mean?

La Colonia Roma. It's the name of a borough in Mexico City. That's what my mother said.

I wonder how you can like *The Little Princess*. I found it so boring and pathetic I had to stop reading it.

I envied her special relationship with her father. And the movie is moving, but not sentimental, Laura said languidly. He must be a good father.

Who?

The movie director. I'll see *Roma* too, now. Although my mother says I should wait a couple more years before watching it.

They sipped their juice. Silence fell for a while, interrupted only by the buzzing of a fly. Suddenly Laura jumped up.

She's stuck on the window pane.

Who?

The fly. We must act quickly if we want to get rid of her. Flies are a nuisance but I don't want to kill them.

Oh, right. Sister Fly.

Stop being sarcastic and help me.

Laura went into the kitchen and came back with a glass. Then she picked up a notebook, tore away the cover and crept to the window. She cupped the fly with the glass, and while the fly ran amok in it, she glided the notebook cover along the pane under the flipped glass, then lifted the glass and the cover from the pane.

Open the window, quickly.

Sabrina acted quickly. Laura removed the notebook cover and the fly flew away.

How do you know it was a she?

I don't, but I like to think she was.

Silence fell again. That was the problem with Sabrina, Laura thought. They weren't really friends, just classmates. They met only once a week for their Latin translation. It suited them both. But there was no room for conversation between them. No room for shared secrets. No real friendship. Every time silence fell, Sabrina would text madly. She was always chatting with someone on Whatsapp. That was her idea of having a break. Or she'd pop in her airpods and listen to 21 Savage, Post Malone, Drake, and occasionally Marracash on Spotify. Or Sabrina would stop for a couple of minutes and ask her about the very things she didn't want to talk about, like that stupid question about her final recital. She only asked questions that made her anxiety worse. Every year the cello recital threw her into a state of dejection. She didn't want to talk about it.

Once Laura had tried to tell her about the magic she felt when she was on the lake, especially on a misty day. The lake had charms and spells to enchant her, even incantations on a very windy day. Only 60 minutes from Milan, and everything was different. Eerie. But the chill it sent up her spine was so pleasant. An ordinary early morning seemed mysterious to her when she awoke before seven o' clock. It was just like being in a Leonardo painting. Right there, beyond Mona Lisa's shoulders.

She tried to convey all her awe and excitement that time, but Sabrina just looked at her and smiled. Then she began texting like mad. So, she didn't tell her more. She didn't tell her how late at night, just before turning out the light, she'd stare at the international space

station in the window frame, or maybe it was the European space station – she'd never found out – right in front of her, shining bright in her face, above the hills on the opposite lake shore, just above Onno, like a handful of stars huddling together. The last thing she gazed at before closing her eyes. A giant star, glittering with hundreds of bright points of light, each one shining with strong emotion in her heart.

Did you know that astronauts can sleep upside down? she told Sabrina once.

Huh? she said removing her airpods.

Astronauts can sleep lying down, standing, and even upside down – they lose all sense of position. I'll show you the video on YouTube.

Sabrina looked at it out of politeness, but she clearly wasn't in the least interested. Laura, on the contrary, was enthusiastic about it. It was a very interesting video made aboard the International Space Station. It was sort of a tour, given by a woman astronaut, with her hair floating around her head. She also showed how she brushed it, and it was very funny, because nothing changed – her hair stood astray and kept floating around her head.

And how could she possibly tell Sabrina about her dream. She had a dream. A strong desire to come across aliens in a field, while walking uphill among olive trees on her own. I'd go straight to them, she thought, welcome them, try to understand their language or at least their body language, make myself understood. I'd do my best, I'm sure – I wouldn't be scared. And she'd ask them to take her with them – not forever, just for a couple of tours around the Earth. How she wished to see it from space, especially Italy! Astronauts always said that it was so luminous, you could detect the many city lights of Rome and Naples in particular, glowing down below. The whole boot was gleaming, dotted with lights, but Rome and Naples were so dazzling that they were hard to look at. They would come from the North, of course, from above the North Pole and then down, over Scandinavia and Central Europe. All of a sudden a blank, no lights because of the Alps, and then suddenly there it was, the boot, slender, stretching in front of her, and quickly, too quickly, the radiant beauty of Rome on her right and then the scattered, scintillating, ravishing luminosity of Naples still on her right, and then ever so quickly the heel on her left with its little spur and the toe on her right playfully kicking Sicily, and then the plunge into the Mediterranean darkness.

She loved going uphill, but she also loved going down to the lake, following one of the many paths along it, and sit down near the Lucia, the traditional fisherman's boat with its three wooden arches, sometimes whispering Lucia's farewell to the mountains, rising from the waters. Was Lucia in *The Betrothed* inspired by the boat or was it the other way round? She had to find out. But she was glad that Manzoni only imagined Lucia's thoughts and meditations. So she was free to imagine Renzo's and Agnese's own thoughts, while the boat approached the right bank of the Adda.

And she loved having a plain croissant at the local *gelateria*, having it while sitting near the little pond and looking at the tiny goldfish swimming among the white and rosy water lilies next to the pots of rosemary, thyme and oregano. The woman there was a relative of the local canoe world champion, and next year he'd surely win a gold medal in Tokyo, she told her. The village would be full of white sheets hanging from windows and balconies, with the red and green words ANDREA IL NOSTRO CAMPIONE.

She especially loved her solitary walks along the little stone paths on the hills, lined with blackberry bushes, the fields dotted with olive trees and old farmhouses, the occasional donkey grazing in a pen. In spring and summer, she'd wear her favourite pants – one white leg and one colourful leg with yellow, pink, blue, purple and orange flowers in full bloom. More flowers flowering on her feet – flowering on her sneakers. Her mother had brought them from Brighton, back from a long weekend spent visiting her many friends and relatives. Her solitary walks with the lake shimmering on her right, hurting her eyes if she looked straight at it. At every bend she wondered whether she would meet the *bravi*, sitting on the little dry-stone wall, waiting for her and scowling at her. Would they make her aware of her sloth?

A gentle voice coming from the open kitchen window lifted her from her reveries. It was lovely, chanting, puzzling Maria next door. She was surely working on her giant puzzle. Maria was only two years old.

I thought you were sleeping, said Sabrina.

No, only daydreaming. Would you like anything else to drink, or to eat?

No, thank you.

Sabrina paused for a second.

I thought you might lie on the couch: daydreaming on a couch is much better. I have to text a few more people and then I'm off, she said.

Laura took her glass, went into the kitchen, turned on the tap, rinsed the glass and filled it once more with water. Then she went back into the lounge, put the glass on the floor and lay belly-down on the couch. Not a bad idea, she thought. Daydreaming on a couch is definitely better. But as soon as she lay down, she was caught again in the net that had imprisoned her for the past few weeks. *"You know something? You know you're the prettiest girl in the city?"* Just the thought that Tommy might say something like that to her was more than daydreaming – it was pure dreaming. And it was just ridiculous. Tommy might never say something so stupid. He wouldn't even say "in the school". That would be ridiculous too. And besides, she knew very well she wasn't the prettiest girl in the school. *Fifteen is of all ages the most difficult to locate.* Oh, Fitzgerald might as well have written "thirteen", or "fourteen", for that matter … Anyway, this steady competition between Tommy and Basil she'd engaged in her mind was absurd, and it was wearing her down.

Laura?

Yes?

Sabrina was sitting near her on the couch.

Just stay where you are and close your eyes.

Laura was puzzled but she closed her eyes. As soon as she did, a rain of little, light kisses poured down on her hair and then on her shoulders.

Don't move, Sabrina said in a soft voice.

She didn't move.

Presently, a new downpour of rain came down on her back, very slowly, very tenderly, then went up her back and down again. Not an inch of her back wasn't sprinkled with this

downpour of delicate little kisses. And then her shoulders again, her nape and head – light, soft kisses all over her hair.

What if they went behind the bike stands hut? Would he kiss her there? Nobody would see them. Would Tommy kiss her there? And would her eyes say: Again?

Laura didn't move but her mind was in ferment. Give me a thousand kisses, and then a hundred, then a thousand more … And down came the steady downpour of light kisses on her hair and shoulders … then a hundred again, and then one more thousand in a row, and then a hundred. And now on her back … Who would you rather kiss than anybody? Tommy, Tommy, and Tommy again. Yes, *da mi basia mille, deinde centum, dein mille altera … Have you ever kissed a boy? Have you ever been kissed? Pink but tranquil, she nodded, adding, "I couldn't help it". "Who by?" "I won't tell".*

The downpour stopped.

Did I hurt you? Why are you shaking your head, Laura?

Am I?

Laura opened her eyes.

Maybe it was a fly, she said.

I'd better go now, said Sabrina. Your mother will be back soon.

Sabrina stood up and packed all her things.

Laura stood up too, and waited for Sabrina to close her schoolbag. Then she saw her out. On the threshold she politely thanked her.

Thank you, Sabrina, for giving a structure to my vague sense of meaning in the whole Catullus passage.

It wasn't vague at all. The point is that you figure it out with your intuition, whereas I have to figure it out with grammar. We're just complementary.

Laura lowered her eyes.

See you tomorrow at school, she said without a smile, and firmly shut the door.

She went back into the lounge, packed her own things and took them into her room. Then she went back into the lounge, tidied up the table and the couch, picked up the glass of water from the floor, went into the kitchen and poured it out into the sink. Then she turned the tap, rinsed the glass and filled it again with water. She went into her room, and put it on the parquet near the carpet. Then she lay down on the carpet and shut her eyes. After a while, she took a sip from the glass. Presently, a tear streaked her cheek.

Maybe she misunderstood my reference to the fly as a she-fly. It's only a habit I have. I like to think of animals as "she". Maybe Sabrina is right. Sister Fly. Sister Wasp. Sister Butterfly.

She turned on her side and drew up her legs.

And then, all that talking about kisses …

She took another sip of water, and hunched her shoulders.

I enjoyed all those kisses, but I constantly thought of Tommy. All the time, I wished *he* was there, kissing me. Is that betrayal?

She turned again.

And what about Basil? she thought. Am I also betraying Tommy by constantly comparing him to Basil? Is this serious enough to be called betrayal?

A second tear streaked her cheek.

Oh, I am so ashamed of myself – not because of the kisses, but because of my thoughts.

She lay on her back and opened her eyes.

My mind was full of kisses, while my body was also full of kisses, she said to herself. But the kisses in my mind did not match the kisses on my body.

She took another sip of water.

Water is safe in Milan, but my thoughts are not.

Franca Cavagnoli has published three novels – *Luminusa* (2015), *Non si è seri a 17 anni* (2007) and *Una pioggia bruciante* (2000) –, and two books about Literary Translation, *La traduzione letteraria anglofona* (2017) and *La voce del testo* (2012, Premio Lo straniero). She published her first children's book, *La Bocca dell'Adda*, in 2022 (special mention Premio Gianni Rodari). She has translated and edited works by J. M. Coetzee, F. S. Fitzgerald, Nadine Gordimer, James Joyce, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul, George Orwell and Robert Louis Stevenson. She was awarded the Premio Nazionale per la Traduzione del Ministero dei Beni Culturali in 2014. She is a contributor to *il manifesto*, *Alias* and *L'Indice dei libri del mese*.
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Nicola Gardini

Continua, Luce

Grazie, Paolo

Grazie, Paolo, che bella fotografia.
Tutto bianco, tetti macchine piante.
Ci ho messo qualche istante per capire
che dalla neve spuntava un avanzo
del vecchio letto. Un giorno
dalla nostra stanza era passato
alla vostra. Adesso aspetta
sul marciapiede accanto ai pini
il camion che lo ritiri; forse aspetta
pure una poesia, una parola
che sospiri sul destino delle cose.
Guarda bene l'immagine, pensa
ad altro nevicare, ad altre pose.
Su quel letto che scompare,
che non ha materasso né lenzuola,
non vedi noi perduti che torniamo?
Non vedi che senza esserci dormiamo?

Una poesia

Una poesia è qualcosa che comincia.
Magari non continua, ma comincia.
Le mie finiscono soltanto, adesso.
Non mi vengono in mente, vanno via.
Trattengo un coro d'ultime parole,
le ripeto finché le impari il cuore,
ma non so farle diventare prime,
scoprire una promessa nell'addio.
Poi più niente, finisce anche la fine.

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Tu

Ho dipinto il mio quadro più grande
e l'ho intitolato TU
perché è per te
e tu torni dal fondo.

Sei ancora lontano, laggiù,
blu scuro contro blu chiaro,
riflesso nel violetto.
Ma presto passerai nel tratto

di rosa dove finisce il muro,
presto sarai sul vuoto pavimento
in primo piano – nostro niente,
mio autoritratto.

Adesso

Adesso il sole arriva alla poltrona.
Mi tocca i piedi, sale alle ginocchia.
Che dolce questo caldo! Chiudo gli occhi,
e suona il suono delle tue parole.
Continua, luce! Baciami, tua bocca!

Quest'anno

Quest'anno la rosa ha fiorito di più.
Vieni a vederla prima di sera,
la rosa stupenda, la rosa che
aspetta la tua mano come il sole.
Ma tu non verrai. Né non verrai.
Nessuna cosa è possibile.
Tu sei l'assenza, tu la rosa.

Io quando

Io, quando scrivo, scrivo te; ti faccio.
Sennò tu non ci sei. Ci sei, se sei scritto.
E finché potrò, io ci provo. Non è

facile. Le parole non esistono già.
Nessuna è conosciuta. Nascono sempre
adesso e sempre potrebbero fermarsi
a metà o anche prima, figurarsi
arrivare alla rima. Non so nemmeno
se tu voglia vivere di nuovo; se tutto
questo sia permesso e una poesia
sia una tua rinascita o mia.

Per quanti anni

Per quanti anni ancora
ci parleremo? I pochi soltanto
che restano a me adesso
e poi basta, poi non ti dirò
più niente né più dirai tu
niente a me, che mi parli
oramai attraverso me
unicamente? E quei pochi
saranno molti? Tu lo sai?
Io dico che non dobbiamo
preoccuparci. Parleranno
quelli che resteranno e dopo
quelli che verranno dopo,
parlerà l'aria, parleranno
le cose sconosciute e saremo
ancora noi che parliamo
tra noi, nessuno sarà più,
niente resterà e saremo
sempre noi.

La Nina

La Nina l'altra sera ho visto bene
che a un certo punto t'ha incontrato.
Ha smesso d'annusare dappertutto,
s'è seduta sul tappeto, ha alzato
il muso ed è rimasta ferma a lungo,
come non fa mai, tanto che lo stesso
padrone s'è chiesto che cosa all'improvviso
l'avesse resa così attenta. Cosa,

se lì non c'era niente? Io ho subito
pensato che stesse guardando te,
ma non l'ho voluto dire. Forse
le ordinavi di star buona come
l'avevi già ordinato tante volte
al tuo cane, e le spiegavi che
in quell'angolo della casa
per molti anni avevi suonato il piano
e il flauto, e ancora ti piaceva passare
lì qualche ora …
Secondo la mamma
è andata proprio così. Le nostre anime
non si comportano, ha detto, proprio
come la Nina? Non vedono quello
che noi non vediamo? Ci sto pensando.
Forse davvero sbagliamo a crederle
solo metafore, le nostre anime,
a scambiare quello che riescono
a trovare per finte del desiderio.
Sbaglio ad avere sempre paura
di illudermi. Dovrei fidarmi di più
di quest'anima cagna; obbedirti,
incantarmi…

Ieri, girando

Ieri, girando per la Normandia
con Roberto, ho scoperto a Orbec l'albergo
dove Debussy (il *tuo* Debussy) aveva
composto "Jardins sous la pluie". Lo dice
un'insegna di marmo; era il milleotto-
centonovantacinque. Guarda caso,
proprio allora cominciò a diluviare.
Un uomo aprì il portone e in un istante
vidi (l'albergo di quel tempo, pare,
s'è trasformato in casa) un bel giardino.
Sono a Orbec di passaggio, non avevo
nemmeno progettato di fermarmi,
faccio due passi sulla via centrale,
leggo la scritta per errore … Eppure,
come non credere d'aver trovato
un tuo messaggio? Ti piaceva tanto

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Debussy! Ormai io non so più dire se
mi ascolti né quando mi parlerai
nuovamente. Ormai mi parli così.

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Anselmo Roberto Paolone

Poesie

Nella foresta

Tra i faggi colpivo,
la scure nella destra,
quando un'ombra mi disse:
vai avanti.

Lasciai cadere
quel manico d'osso
e in silenzio
marciando
su
penetrai nell'ignoto.

Volevo guardare
negli occhi
quell'invisibile
prima che volgesse
le spalle
al mio mondo.

Chi sei?
Ti conosco? Chiesi.
Da quell'intrico oscuro
di foresta
solo silenzio,
o un suono di vento
forse sognato.

Scrutando
le profondità
tra i rami,
fissate da secoli vidi
che al di là
di esse
non vi era meta:

solo l'illusione
di una presenza,
e la mia
solitudine.

Rivelazione

Ti ho sognata,
giocavi in un prato
senza traccia di offese
o ferite,
sorridevi a Michele
come prima
che la terra
ti inghiottisse.

Mi dicevi papà,
piano piano le cose
si imparano,
e un poco alla volta
la persona
trova sé stessa.

E io stupito
ripensavo ai lustri
perduti,
spesi a rincorrere
il tempo
e ne coglievo
finalmente il senso.

E mentre quella
saggezza
giocava nel cuore
tu già correvi
verso il tramonto.

Il geco

Nel buio della stanza
ti avverto

risalire con garbo
da chissà quali meandri
e confonderti a tratti
con i miei
composti respiri,
in un dialogo
tra piccole voci
del crepuscolo.

Dai tuoi regni ctonii,
sprofondato
nel piancito
sotto il sedimento
del mio vivere
(che si accumula
come una coltre)
vedi la mia vita
dal basso,
la ignori, forse.

Il tuo occhio arcaico
sorride benevolo
per un istante,
poi si volge
altrove,
forse a cercare
un insetto
nella penombra.

Se tu tornassi

Se tu tornassi,
ancora un poco
mi troveresti
sul letto
in cui parlavamo
di erba, e di formiche

in cui asciugavamo
lacrime
odorose
di paesaggi interni

e di speranza
mentre un bosco
invisibile stormiva
di fronde
e il sonno, discreto,
esondava.

Se tu bussassi
alla porta
io sarei là,
ormai solo
in un mondo
dismesso.

Avvolto
in coperte
troppo grandi
e fisso con lo sguardo
al passato.

E prima di
incamminarmi
verso un sogno
sfocato
sbircerei dalla finestra
cercando l'aurora.

Yellow Flow

Beeches and elms
outside the church
are listening:
they promise you nothing
for the future,
they just stare at you now, frankly
with an innocence that dates back
to their earliest memories.

Trees are like that:
They are not pastors of souls
they have no rhetoric.
No false promises, no illusions.

Just leaves, trembling
in the wind of the incoming fall.

Like children in the playground at dusk
they let their branches rustle
greeting each other clumsily
lively in a sea of silky light yellow.

And ferns peep at their feet
Like eager chickens
heeding the call of a farmer
spreading seeds around the courtyard.

Nature

We have no words
for the unconscious
not the kind of precise theorems
we use to indicate reason.

The unconscious
is nature itself,
and its content is images,
sounds and smells
of hissing forests,
boiling oceans,
animals weeping
their impending deaths.

Poetry
is only the casual framing
in verses of music
of those images
and other wild sensations.

The poet is no different
from a branch
beaten by the storm,
and poetry
is nothing but the sound
of its core,
breaking.

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Things to Come

I have found my tomb
in a distant forest
not far from Jerusalem
but still
under the clouds of Golgotha.

Two wisemen came out
of the cypress grove
to meet me
bearing books and garments.

“These books”
they told me
“spread a light
that no nightingale can dismiss”.

“These garments”
they whined
“May make your trespassing
less uncanny”.

“And be aware,
under the bare earth
words continue:
an aimless dream of symbols
is bathing in the glare
of a silver lamp”.

“That will be
the shallow sea in which
you will put at stake your future!
That’s all, for now, farewell”
and they hugged me
swiftly hiding their pity
under demure glances.

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Isabel Alonso-Breto

"Only Sow Words": Cheran's *A Second Sunrise* as Postcolonial Autobiography*

Abstract I: Questo saggio discute l'antologia di poesie *A Second Sunrise* (2012) del poeta tamil in esilio Cheran come autobiografia postcoloniale, quale narrazione della vita del poeta e autobiografia comunitaria rappresentativa della comunità (diasporica) in Sri Lanka. La vita e l'opera di Cheran sono incentrate su un solido legame al luogo di origine e, sebbene fisicamente estraniato da quando è in esilio, egli non ha mai smesso di onorarlo attraverso il suo costante sforzo poetico e l'attivismo politico. Il senso di comunità e il legame con la terra animano *A Second Sunrise* e collegano concettualmente e tematicamente l'intera produzione poetica. Servendosi della teoria della *life writing* questa lettura vuol mostrare che l'antologia, pur sottolineando una necessaria continuità di senso per il sé esiliato, mette in luce le molteplici possibilità di riconfigurazione identitaria in contesti traumatici.

Abstract II: The article discusses the poetry anthology *A Second Sunrise* (2012) by exiled Tamil poet Cheran as a form of postcolonial autobiography. The anthology arguably constitutes a narrative of the poet's own life, reading also as a form of communal autobiography representative of the (diasporic) Lankan Tamil community. Cheran's life and oeuvre are styled around a consistent bond with the place of origin and, although physically estranged since he went on exile, Cheran has never ceased treading it imaginatively in terms of both poetic endeavour and political activism. The sense of community and the connection to the land thus inform *A Second Sunrise* and conceptually and thematically link the whole collection of poems. Using a set of propositions from the broad area of *life writing* theory, this reading intends to demonstrate that the anthology, while emphasizing a necessary sense continuity for the exilic self, throws light on the multiple possibilities of identity reconfigurations in traumatic contexts.

Keywords: postcolonial autobiography, Lankan Tamils, Cheran, poetry and war, poetry as autobiography, life writing.

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Introduction

This article discusses the poetry anthology *A Second Sunrise* (2012) by exiled Tamil poet Cheran as a form of Life Writing, specifically postcolonial autobiography. In reading this poetry anthology through this prism, the connections between the poet and the lives of those who underwent similar historical circumstances are foregrounded: on the one hand, the anthology arguably constitutes a narrative of the poet's own life; on the other, it reads as a form of communal auto/biography representative of the Lankan Tamil community. Further, the paper shows that Cheran's life and oeuvre are styled around a consistent bond with the place of origin and with the land – something which extends to the diasporic Lankan Tamil community. Although physically estranged from his place of birth since he started living in exile, Cheran has never ceased treading it imaginatively in terms of both poetic endeavour and political activism. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that the sense of community and the connection to the place of origin inform *A Second Sunrise* and link the whole sequence of poems conceptually and thematically – from the earlier ones written at the onset of the civil conflict, to those written during and after the war from diasporic locations. Furthermore, reading the anthology as a form of postcolonial autobiography, while emphasizing a necessary sense continuity for the exilic self, throws light on the multiple possibilities of identity reconfigurations in traumatic contexts.

Terminology and Genre Connections

Smith and Watson define *life writing* as "written forms of the autobiographical" (2001: 4). They see the concept as embedded in the notion of life narratives, which expands to include life representations also through other, non-written media, such as visual or digital. Kadar refers to *life writing* as "a kind of writing about the 'self' or the 'individual' that favours autobiography, but includes letters, diaries, journals, and (even) biography" (2009: 5), which shows that, like other scholars in the area, she does not contemplate poetry as a form of *life writing*. Martínez García, drawing from Shaffer and Smith (2004), uses *life writing* as "an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that take experiential history as its starting point" (2019: 254). Green synthesizes that *life writing* "extends the field of literature, covering what used to be thought of as autobiography or biography" (2008: 50). For our concerns here, it seems pertinent to briefly discuss the relationship between *life writing* and autobiography.

Maya Rota considers *life writing* and autobiography as two different genres, drawing a distinction between "the *descriptive* nature of autobiography and the *performative* one of Life Writing" (2009: 52, author's emphasis). This difference can be ascribed to autobiography's perceived origin and traditional association with the historically dominant subjectivity of the white man which originates in the Enlightenment (Whitlock 2015: 3). Following from this historical relationship, many autobiographies have been characterized by "self-absorbed individualism" (Maya Rota 2009: 52). The traditional, modern understanding of subjectivity is allegedly dominated by a sense of unity and stability, hence Maya Rota's (among others') attribution of a merely *descriptive* nature to the genre which characterizes it, namely autobiography. By contrast, *life writing* "can be seen as the best one for the purposes

of postmodern and postcolonial subjectivities to overturn and finally overcome this ideal" (Maya Rota 2009: 52). This perception of subjectivity takes us to understandings of the self as multifarious and contingent, hence the *performative* nature of *life writing*. While this distinction seems attractive, the views of Gusdorf's and other traditional scholars of autobiography that this genre "expresses a concern peculiar to the Western man" (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xii) have been superseded in our days. To more recent critics, autobiography encompasses "the widespread use of self-representation in both pre-literate and non-Western cultures" (Smith & Watson 2001: 84), that is, the exclusivity of autobiography as solely corresponding with stable notions of the Western male subject of European modernity has been abolished. In other words: the postmodern and the postcolonial also claim autobiography as a genre of their own.

The study of postcolonial autobiography emerges in full with our century, although some precursors like MacDermott (1984) already incorporated non-Western places and peoples when scrutinizing the development of a genre, autobiography, which in our days could never be understood without postcolonial contributions like those of Fanon, Gandhi or Mandela. Early on, Hornung and Ruhe (1998) describe the genre of postcolonial autobiography as 'communal autobiography', showing that concern with the community is a crucial element in it. One of its basic characteristics is the interconnection and mutual representativity of author and social group, a concern which applies to other genres in the postcolonial arena: "For postcolonial writers […] the individual is inseparable from the community, or in Salman Rushdie's words, 'to understand just one life you have to swallow the world'" (Bannerji 2019: 9). Gilmore corroborates this integration of the personal and the communal in postcolonial autobiography stating that "although it may present a close examination of one person's life, [postcolonial autobiography] is also a reflection of the larger networks, such as family, region, nation, that shape an individual" (quoted in Lo 2011: 12).

In the long run, the term *life writing* has been more successful than autobiography when it comes to representing the postcolonial. This probably occurs because, as Kadar claims, "'autobiography' is a loaded word, the 'real' accuracy of which cannot be proved and does not equate with 'objective' or 'subjective' truth" (1992: 10). Indeed, the concept of *life writing* seems to accommodate better the huge variety of forms and multiplicity of locations of postcolonial autobiographies, their distance from the allegedly unified and self-contained subjectivity of the Enlightened European subject, and their frequent mediation of "private intentions and social exigence" (Smith & Watson 2001: 18).

In any event, in times where all subjectivities are assumed to be felicitously disjointed and more often than not postcolonial, the terms 'life writing' and 'autobiography' get along on good terms. Gilmore contends that every autobiography is "an assembly of theories of the self and self-representation; of personal identity and one's relation to a family, a region, a nation; and of citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion)" (quoted in Lo 2011: 12), an assembly which applies to both postcolonial *life writing* and autobiography – as I intend to illustrate here. Before moving on to our case study, however, let us also briefly fix our attention on the idea of assembly put forward by Gilmore, as it is here where autobiography and *life writing* connect with poetry (Gilmore 2000).

According to Kadar, autobiography "is best viewed as a continuum that spreads unevenly and in combined forms" (Kadar 1992: 10), a view which justifies the reading of a poetry collection as an autobiography in syncopated form. MacHale's theory of segmentivity (2009), based on DuPlessis's ideas about forms of continuity and discontinuity in poetry (2006), supports such critical reading. As he claims, "far from being distinct, the two categories actually cut across each other: many poems are narratives, after all, and many narratives are poems" (MacHale 2009: 12). Further, the body of poststructuralist work deconstructing the Cartesian Enlightened subject carried out in the last decades of the past century amply justifies viewing the genre as "unevenly" and formally complex. The intimate character of both poetry and autobiography reinforce the connection between genres: "For a real poet, and moreover for a representative poet, life and poetry become one thing" (Menealou 2017: 5). Poetry and autobiography have thus much in common. Jackson draws parallelisms between the two genres: "Aesthetic proportions, precision, brevity, a simplicity of lines, gaps, leaps, and the revelation of character through the telling detail: the art of [auto]biography is already sounding indistinguishable of poetry" (Jackson 2016: 3). Following from this, the enterprise to read a poetry anthology as a form of postcolonial autobiography should seem sufficiently justified. The benefits of this reading are that emphasis is put on the idea of continuity and on the workings of memory as the backbone of a sense of exilic and/or diasporic identity, while it throws light on the multiple possibilities of identities to reconfigure themselves and of resilience.

A Poet Who Speaks for Many

If Maurice Halbwachs distinguished the self-explanatory concepts of "autobiographical memory" and "historical memory" (Olick *et al.* 2011: 19), in the case of Cheran's poetry these two forms of memory conflate[1]. Cheran's voice is completely original, and certainly his life is unique in many ways, but it is, and this is the case made here, simultaneously representative of that of thousands of political refugees from Lanka. In the last decades of the twentieth century, thousands of Tamils were obliged to take flight from their island of origin, where conditions had grown extremely harsh for them. Those voices were mostly silenced, but Cheran's poetry speaks for them, as his voice is inextricably bound to that of the collectivity. There seems to exist a recurrence of this pattern; Chelva Kanaganayakam explained that, when it comes to Tamil literature from Lanka, "tales of individual heroism are folded into a collective struggle for a Tamil identity" (2007: 197). This conflation of the personal and the communal is surely due to the debasement that Tamils have systematically suffered on an island where they are a numerical minority. In the absence of an institutional structure providing equal status *de facto* to all citizens, any sense of Lankan Tamil identity is bound to be complex. In dire political circumstances, often the writer's look turns to the past to reassert the sense of belonging in the territory, and therefore "it is […] not surprising that some [Tamil writers] resort to originary myths or historical narratives of conquest

[1] Cheran is the author of over fifteen books in Tamil, and he is the most internationally acknowledged Lankan Tamil poet at present. Recipient of several important literary awards, his work has been widely translated into English and other languages.

to reflect and legitimize the present" (Kanaganayakam 2007: 197). Although it is deeply anchored in the present, Cheran's poetry looks to the past in order to both mourn and claim a territory, geographical and emotional, deeply injured. His connection to the Tamil land is as paramount as his connection to the Tamil people. In different ways, Cheran's anthology *A Second Sunrise* (2012) reads as a poetic inscription of both Cheran's individuality and of that of the Lankan Tamil communities worldwide obliged to live in exile.

A Second Sunrise as Postcolonial Autobiography

Showcasing poetry written over more than three decades, *A Second Sunrise* comprises fifty poems translated into English by two outstanding specialists in translation and Tamil literature: Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling. In their introduction to the anthology they identify three narrative threads in the poem sequence: the narrative of war, which is closely intertwined with "an almost pastoral perception of the landscape in the early poems, and the devastation of the land seen thirty years later"; the narrative of love, "moving from the lyrical quality of the early poems, even then aware of love's fragility, to the later ones, more complex, at times ironic or self-mocking"; and "the narrative of exile, return, and the diasporic experience" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 124-125). These threads secure the collection's cohesion, as the translators explain: "So wide a range means that each poem has to be seen afresh and in its particularity, but also as part of the poet's entire oeuvre" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 125). A parallel argument is developed in the afterword, written by Sascha Ebeling, which revises momentous aspects of Cheran's life and work.

My discussion does not discard these insightful arrangements. Rather, using them as its basis, it seeks to adjust these topics (war, love and exile), as presented in the poems, to the chronological progression of a lifetime. As suggested earlier, the point can be made that any poet's life-long oeuvre can, as a whole, be read as a form of life narrative. The singularity of this particular author's oeuvre is that it is representative of thousands of subjectivities, like postcolonial autobiographies tend to do, but also, emphatically, that it illuminates crucial events of recent history. As the poet claims, "Someone who reads my entire poetry will have a clear picture of what happened to the Tamils from 1980 up until 2009, it's a kind of snapshot […] It's not like a political statement, because I lived through it […] In a sense I am a poet as a witness, a witness to history" (Ebeling 2012: 132).

Youth Poems: Land and Love, and the Sea

The sense of place (and with it, of displacement) is the point of departure to understand Cheran's poetry. In his youth, Cheran writes poems closely anchored to the territory, a feature which will not disappear later on in spite of distance. Precisely the deep connection to his home place in the north of the island, that he entertains since his early years, will make it possible for him to remain always in close contact with it, even when in exile[2].

In their comment about the translations, Holmström and Ebeling write about Cheran's attention to landscape. They begin by noting that his poetry is loaded with allusions to

[2] In spite of having temporarily moved south to Colombo for some time in his childhood because of his father's position as government officer.

Tamil classical texts, to then remark that "there is also, most importantly, a way of perceiving the landscape, often with the focus on minute detail, an image which is at once real and symbolic" (Hölmstrom & Ebeling 2012: 124). This attention to physical detail is not restricted to his early poems (in the collection represented by ten poems written between 1976 and early 1981), yet at this stage in the writer's life it appears as more pristine, not yet shrouded in the ominous mantle of violence. Thus, for the time being symbolic meanings, while not necessarily absent, are ancillary to a voluptuous yet realistic description of landscape, of a beauty which mesmerized the young poet. As he has explained,

> One of the things that really attracted me to the landscape of Jaffna was the red soil. We get greenery only for a few months in the year when there is rain. Beyond that, it was mostly very dry, but we had all sorts of different massive trees to which I was attached, in the backyard and beyond in the paddy fields. My fascination with the flora and fauna in our area was endless (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 90-91).

These aspects are present in poems like "Coolie women in the rainy season" and "A sea shore song", descriptive of traditional cultural practices such as cultivating rice or marriage. The second title provides the clue to the most important motif of this segment of early poems, and possibly of the whole collection: the sea. A malleable and expressive ocean is the traditional companion of Tamil life, as seen in its recurrent presence in these early titles: "The Sea", "An evening, as the boats are coming in" or "The Seashore: Three notes". In Sascha Ebeling's afterword, perceptively titled "Between love, war and the sea" (which to a great extent inspires this section's title), this foremost specialist in Cheran's poetry writes: "In the beginning, there was the sea" (Ebeling 2012: 138), a sea which he shows as ripe with metaphorical meanings[3]. The sea is paramount in the poet's whole oeuvre, and Cheran himself has conceded: "In the place where I was born, we had no rivers, no mountains, we only had the sea. So what defined my imagination when I became a writer and poet was the sea" (Ebeling 2012: 138).

At this point the forthcoming war is only intuited in some lines, which testify to the uneasy situation of Tamils – "In days to come […] a fire will break out" (Cheran 2012: 22-23)[4]. For the time being, love – together, of course, with the sea – is prominent, with titles like "Tonight, when you cannot be near", or in the romantic memories revised in "A rainy day". Land, love, and the sea will remain recurrent motifs through Cheran's poetry and life, later unfortunately overshadowed by bleaker ones.

The Loss of Innocence: "A Second Sunrise" and Black July

The burning of the Jaffna library on 1 June 1981 was one of the worst episodes of cultural genocide in the world's history (Cheran 2016) and originates the poem which lends its title

[3] Ebeling explains that the first poem ever published by Cheran was titled, precisely, "The Sea". This occurred in 1977, and the medium was the Tamil avant-garde literary magazine *Alai* (Wave) (Ebeling 2012: 138).

[4] All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

to the anthology. The poem "A Second Sunrise"[5] signifies the poet's fall from a dubious paradise. Historiography has convened in marking the July 1983 pogroms against Tamils on the island, an episode known as Black July, as the beginning of the civil conflict. Yet the catastrophe of the library destruction two years earlier cannot be overestimated. In the poem, while walking by the seashore, the poetic voice sees a light on the horizon, to discover with horror that the cherished library of Jaffna, built through communal effort and which treasured thousands of unique Tamil manuscripts (Knuth 2006: 85)[6], is ablaze. This has been qualified by the poet, a student at the time, as the most traumatic event in his life:

> I went to Jaffna University, and it was when I was there as a student that we heard about the burning of the library a few hours after it was set on fire. We saw that it was burning, and we tried to go there to help, but we couldn't because they started firing at us. It was the next day that was the most hurtful moment in my life. In the morning, we all went to see what had happened. It was totally gone. Right next to the library was the Duraiappah Stadium where the police and army were stationed. As people went to see what had happened to the library, the soldiers were standing there in the stadium mocking us. They would say, ''Aney, it's gone. Now what are you going to do?'' This was the moment when I felt that the only way forward was to wipe these soldiers out. We were angry, but we were helpless because we were just young students, and they were the armed forces (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 94).

The passage shows the impotence felt by those young students, and may serve to explain the steady rise in militancy of Tamil youth: "So this is the beginning of my political writing and my anger. Although it had been building over time, it erupted with the burning of the library", explains the author (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 94). However, instead of taking up arms, Cheran chose to serve through political journalism, an effort added to his poetry, increasingly political too[7].

The episode of the library and the increasingly damaging interventions of the army and state in Tamil land results in a change of tone in the treatment of the territory. "My land" is the poem which follows "A Second Sunrise", and it constitutes a necessary vindication of the place after the cultural genocide meant by the library felony: "Our roots go deep: / one footstep, a thousand years" (32). At this point the sense of community is strategically strengthened in the closing lines: "I stand on a hundred thousand shoulders / and proclaim aloud: This is my land" (33). From here on, the poems written between 1981 and 1983 show

[5] Besides the title of this poem and of the anthology, *A Second Sunrise* is also the title of Cheran's first collection of poetry, published in 1983.

[6] As Knuth explains, "the Jaffna Public Library served as a storehouse of materials that validated [Tamil] identity [in Sri Lanka]" (Knuth 2006: 80).

[7] In the interview he explains the division of the different armed groups which emerged, and his reasons for not joining any of them: "I was hoping that the ideal of liberation would be different. We couldn't simply mirror the image of the oppressing Sri Lankan state. The way they conducted the killing of innocent civilians, the massacres, the torture, we could not do the same thing. If we did, what would be the difference?" (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 97). He wrote about this contradiction in "A poem that should never have been written" (Cheran 2012: 59).

mounting violence, as it effectively occurred in Tamil lives: "But / who can prevent / the looting of Tamil houses?" (34), we read in the piece "When they shot him dead".

Two poems devoted to the looting and massacres of Black July conclude this group, which, after the loss of the youthful candour still breathing in the early poems, reflects the escalation of violence and the poet's growing anger and sadness. Cheran's equanimity regarding the conflict in spite of his position strikes the reader, though. In "Letters from an Army camp" (36), the poetic voice impersonates a Sinhala soldier, barely a child, stationed in the north. The murder of thirteen Sinhala soldiers, which signalled the beginning of the attacks on Tamils island-wide in July 1983 (Yogasundram 2008: 330; Sivanandan 2009; Perera 2015) is thus dramatised from an unexpected perspective. This is a subtle form of reclaiming accountability, while pointing out that ordinary people are sometimes made guilty of crimes they did not commit or were coerced to commit by the powers that be. After some time in the north, the soldier is transferred back home in the south and can reunite with his beloved, as he had yearned. But this does not mean any restoration of peace, rather the opposite: the next poem, "I could forget all this" (42), contains harrowing images, where the massacres of Black July are reflected in their full brutality. There is no way back; from now on, the state is one of war[8].

War-torn Selves and Landscapes, and First Exile

Between 1983 and 1987 Cheran wrote poetry and journalism[9], denouncing brutalities on both sides. His poems of this period speak of loss, such as "What have we lost?", and grief, as in "You didn't weep that day", or "Amma, don't weep". The gulf between the Tamil and Sinhala people has widened, as is sadly expressed in "A letter to a Sinhala friend", published in 1984. The poem is based on an actual collaboration of Cheran as a university student with a group of Sinhalese researchers in the uncovering of an archaeological site, which metaphorically points to a past shared by both communities[10]. Sascha Ebeling's reading celebrates that "what is also uncovered is the fact that both Sinhalas and Tamils are human beings with human emotions" (Ebeling 2012: 149), thus showing that Cheran, as always, intends to give a humane dimension to a conflict which is devastating to both parts. Unfortunately, eventually the poetic persona voices reality as it stands, summarizing the end of the inter-ethnic love relationship which had emerged in such auspicious surroundings with a cutting sentence: "you to the south / and I to the north" (49).

Cheran's writing these years, both journalism and poetry, was uncomfortable to both parts involved in the conflict, and the sense of impeding danger was pervading.

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[8] "Before 1983 there was only a handful of Tamil rebels or Tamil terrorists, depending on your bias, in Sri Lanka. The pogroms of July 1983 and the military and political support according to them by neighbouring India emboldened the rebels dramatically. By the end of 1984 there were thirty-five rebel groups espousing a wide spectrum of political ideologies from nationalism and Marxism to an unholy blend of both", writes Cheran (2000). See Wilson 2000 for a revision of the development of Tamil nationalism.

[9] As he explains in "Salad Days", he joined the *Saturday Review* in 1984, but before that he had regularly contributed journalism pieces to other media.

[10] In the context of literatures of Lankan origin, this trope was later used by Michael Ondaatje in his novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

He even survived a helicopter attack (Ebeling 2012: 135), which is reflected in the poem "21 May 1986", with an eloquent ending recounting the daily state of affairs: "the sound of the machine gun / remains in the air / now, as always" (55). In the words of Sascha Ebeling, in those years "death became a ubiquitous and everyday phenomenon"[11], and the scholar remarks on the impossibility of representing such dire conditions with ordinary, descriptive language: "the degree to which living in constant fear of being hurt, abducted or killed and seeing corpses and the terror of mass violence become part of everybody's life is difficult to recreate in the words of the historiographer" (Ebeling 2012: 133). In the face of this impossibility of re-presenting the events in a purely descriptive manner given the extremity of the situation, Cheran's poetry remains an eloquent testimony of the brutalities and, still more emphatically, of the general sense of desolation which had taken over the land and the people: "Among these graves / among these corpses / between the bloodstained clothes / among grief-stricken mothers / wailing for their dead sons / I wander […]" (58).

His fall from grace with the militant Tamil groups because of his refusal to join any of them plus his unsparing criticism of their means was worsened by an army attack on the modest headquarters of the *Saturday Review*, the journal he wrote for, and his subsequent detention by the army[12]. This is his explanation of those days, which seems opportune to reproduce in its length:

> I was forced into exile in 1986, partly by the government and partly by the Tigers. There were others – such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) – who were unhappy with my writing and activism as well. It's an interesting thing because everybody knew that I wasn't affiliated with any militant group; I was just a writer and poet with a big mouth. [...] Here was someone who wasn't against them, but not for them either; instead, I disturbed everything. […] This was a very serious issue for them, and I was asked to leave Jaffna by one of the leaders of the Tigers. […] I still stayed in Jaffna for some time with his permission, while not being too active, but then things became really difficult […] [and after the attack on the *Saturday Review*'s headquarters] my editor, Gamini Navaratne, finally said, ''Putha [son], this is not going to be good for you. You better leave" (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 99).

Cheran left Sri Lanka in 1987, and he would spend two years in the Netherlands. Three poems illustrate this first period away, and as will occur later in his permanent exile, they mix elements from the poet's present ("When I understood the meaning of love", 62) with the war in Sri Lanka ("Rajini", 1989). The third one, "Meeting and Parting" (66), explores precisely the in-between quality of the life of the diasporic person, as it reflects on what unites and separates his persona with a hypothetical addressee-lover, making nature and landscapes (among them oceans) simultaneously frame, testimony and metaphor of the

[11] The sentence ends: "[…] for thousands of Sri Lankans all over the island" (133). In those years, a leftist political insurrection in the south of the island was also brutally quelled by the Sri Lankan government (see Wickramasinghe 2006: 240).

[12] He explains this experience in his creative non-fiction piece "Salad Days" (2000).

lovers' feelings, a treatment of nature which applies to the whole of his love poetry and is drawn from the ancient Tamil Sangam tradition (Ebeling 2012: 136).

After completing an MA in Development Studies, Cheran returned to the island. The arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in 1987 had also contributed to precipitating his departure after he criticized their practices in his journalism. When he returned from exile in 1989 the IPKF troops were still there, and the *Saturday Review* had been closed down. Nothing had improved. He joined a Human Rights group in Colombo, keeping on with his journalism, but he suffered threats and two attempts on his life. Eventually, he obtained a scholarship to pursue doctoral studies in Canada. In 1993 he left for good.

Mature Quarters: On the Responsibility of Distance

Leaving the land does not mean forgetting the people. Rather the opposite: Cheran's activism is reaffirmed by distance, and his sense of responsibility is left untouched. Exile provides him, however, with new perspectives, and leads him to a better understanding of his role in the broader picture:

> Living in exile gave me lots of insight into politics, pain, dislocation and the importance, or the lack of importance, of location. It also changed the structures of my language; it changed the metaphors. How was I to express solidarity while being part of a struggle from a distance? We have heard of the irresponsibility of distance. This is a major issue in diasporic studies. But I've also learned that there is an idea of responsibility of distance, and I think that these are two sides of the same coin. I belong to the school that thinks that for the Tamil diaspora, or for any diaspora, the responsibility of distance will be the key to any sense of solidarity in the future (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 100).

A sense of responsibility towards his community undiminished by distance transpires Cheran's narrative of his own life, and also the poems he will write hereon. For starters, though, the first poem in the anthology published after his definitive exile, "Fire", shows a persona mesmerized by the landscape found abroad. It is easy to assume that those "leaves a thousand tongues of flame / in the countless colours of fire" (67) are recognisable Canadian maple trees and colourful forests. In this new context, nature is set alight "with Time's fire": this poem thus marks a transition in which the past is partially left behind, and where "[…] the future plays / its new music on the falling leaves" (67). The poetic voice, however, faces the void of a life to be remade in a moment of complete incertitude: "But what future for me / during wintry days / on a solitary island / of ice and stone?" (68). Like time, also the weather plays a metaphorical role in this allusion to the Canadian frost in winter. Once again Cheran accompanies and mirrors human existence with landscape: one cannot exist without the other.

After this transitional poem come a series of deeply sorrowful pieces completely focused on the war, with titles like "Epitaph", "War – a very short introduction" or "Sunset". In "The fisherman going hungry" (a title which confirms that the foundational trope of the sea has not been abandoned), the poet passionately reinforces his commitment

with his fellow Tamils back home in the conclusion: "I saw a hungry fisherman. / My face and my voice were his" (73). On its part, the poem "Apocalypse" mourns the need to leave of the poetic persona and of so many thousands, a forced exodus which has left the land empty and desolate: "We have all gone away; / there is no one to tell our story. / Now there is left / only a great land / wounded. / No bird may fly over it / until our return" (74-75). The reason for this massive flight is unequivocal: "In our time we have seen / the apocalypse" (74).

Understandably, in the new context a new *joie de vivre* seems to take over this sense of desolation. "Whirlpool", containing a conversation tinged with philosophical and amorous undertones, inaugurates a batch of poems dominated by a sense of normalcy, poems of love or human relations, like this one or the humorous "Kissing a woman with glasses in the summer", which yet in the context of diaspora are, as warned by Holmström and Ebeling, "framed against a sense of loneliness, uncertainty and loss" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 125). This is a period of discovery of realities beyond those on the island. New landscapes are found abroad, and the vindication of nature dominates also in this part of the anthology, in poems like "Journey to a volcano" and "The great tree in the forest", which dwell on the trope of the natural wonders of the American continent, as we saw it occurred in "Fire".

In this part of the anthology, two pieces instantiate more clearly the diasporic subjectivity. One of them, "Midnight mass", is a long narrative poem divided in three parts, each of them set in a different part of the world (Sri Lanka, Europe and presumably Canada), and which thus account for the shifting sense of location which accompanies the diasporic person and, in this case, reproduce quite literally the poet's life journey. On its part, the poem "The koel's song" also dwells on images of nature: to foreground the image of the koel, a bird which, as is known, lays its eggs in other birds' nests for these to raise its chicks. This species has been repeatedly used in postcolonial and diasporic literature as a metaphor for the sense of disruption between self and location, or self and tradition[13]. Here, the last stanza expresses this correlation with the poet's life (and by extension, as we know, of those in his predicament) with allusion to the silencing of Tamils in Sri Lanka: "Riding the wind a koel, / a koel made voiceless" (85), and then, "It flies across boundaries / to spread the roots of its tree", in a clear allusion to the dispossession of the community in the island of origin and their need to tread the world in a massive diaspora[14].

It is ironic that, since this thrust towards new places and imagery offers the poetic self a respite from the calamities of war, he should find himself immersed in a reality which is by no means always unhostile. The fallacies of Canadian multiculturalism and the latent or explicit racism which pervades Western societies are made patent in the poem "Colour". Here, an old and dishevelled white beggar, not casually donning "a small Canadian flag pinned carelessly / upon his ragged, drooping overcoat" (78), proffers an insulting remark connected to the perception of a certain ethnicity (incidentally mistaken, since the chosen epithet is "Paki"), when the poetic persona refuses to give him the coin he begs for. The old beggar's lack of empathy and his use of the ethnic Other as a scapegoat for his own

[13] See Morgan 1987 and Taylor 1998.

[14] See Burgio 2016.

frustration is symptomatic of a regrettable racism which, unfortunately, finds reverberation across Western societies at large[15].

Haunting Legacies: Trauma and Resilience

Unfortunately the respite of discovery is brief, and in the midst of the necessary reconstruction of life in new quarters, trauma returns in the form of disturbing nightmares. The very quality of trauma is that it appears in uncanny ways, and that it cannot be fully expressed, but takes "the form of a belatedness" (Caruth 1997: 208). As Debra Jackson formulates it, "through involuntary repetitions such as nightmares, flashbacks, and/or hallucinations, the survivor's reexperiencing of the traumatic event generates a voice that is released from the wound, which bears witness to the trauma" (Jackson 2016: 207). This is what occurs in "The trace of a dream". Here the poetic voice awakens from a nightmare remembering fragmentary images where a book is transformed into a coffin, which significantly has "draped over it / a national flag" (91). The coffin oddly moves by itself towards a cremation ground, followed by "faceless / bodiless, / a multitude of legs" – obviously suggesting the strength of the community which supports a common dream in jeopardy. The persona awakens to remember that the coffin "refused to burn / in the hottest furnace" (92), suggesting that the dream of a land free of oppression will not fade easily. The poem ends back in the present ("And so the day began"), with the image of "[…] a giant tree / which had not yet put forth / new leaves". This is a clear hint of hope for the dream of a Tamil nation-state, whose birth has been hampered, yet refuses to die out.

Another haunting memory is reproduced in the next poem, "Chemmani", a troubling description of a place of horrors. As is explained by the translators, Chemmani, a village near Jaffna, was "the site of a crematorium and cemetery used by Sri Lankan soldiers for executions and extrajudicial killings of Tamils. Hundreds of people who had 'disappeared' were later found buried there" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 121). The poem emphasizes how places are pregnant with unspoken history, in this case terrible memories which underlie and undermine any possible sense of normalcy in the present, and which can be breathed in the air itself: "The wind returns to the street / teeming with life and death" (93), in a place where "Under the bridge / the skulls and bones of all those / buried beneath the mud and mire / take wing, fill the air / with lies" (94). Those lies are the false promises of the politicians who have destroyed and stolen the territory: "[…] a demon face / […] willing to pour away the country's wealth / to sell the air and the water / and swallow up the land and its yield" (94), and the ontological fallacy of a ground full of bodies now covered "by advertisements for cell-phones" (94).

At this point, after these uncanny surges of troubled memories, the armed conflict takes again central place as the anthology's narrative thread. "On the banks of the river", as its title conveys, speaks of two confronted factions, set against each other across the water, in a poem full of tension, expectation and fear – the physical setting deployed in a forceful mixture of poetic and violent images. The poetic persona is, as always, conciliatory:

[15] See Brancato 2020, 2021.

"People, let us not make a bridge of corpses / to cross the river" (97), we read. Yet these sadly prophetic words will go unheard by those in power.

The Hope and Pain of Return

In 2004, a seasoned poet returned to Sri Lanka. In those years, after the peace process had been brokered in 2002, the situation was one of relative calm. Several poems dated this year seem to account for this situation. In "Three paths", for instance, the war is seen from the future, as something already in the past. It even begins in epic manner: "When the gods and the devils / fought their murderous ethnic war / a drop of blood splashed down […]" (98), with the result that "Three paths branched away / from that very spot". The three branches are then enumerated: those who chose to merge with the Sinhala majority in the south, those who went west in diaspora, and those who went "eastwards into the jungle" and returned "Shouting war cries" (99), that is, the militant dissidents. In turn, these three reactions gave way to "three hundred perspectives" which themselves gave way to "three million faces": This is a form of emphasizing the wide diversity of opinions and political views within the Tamil population, often homogenized according to the viewer's own political sympathies.

The next poem, "Midway", literally speaks of a return to the land of origin. The beautiful landscape which was praised in the early poems is now destroyed, a few resilient palmyra trees reigning lonely and landmines lying everywhere, "forbidding you to tread the earth" (100). In this crying land, the paths cannot be traced anymore, an image which reverberates into a plastic metaphor of defeat which ends the poem: "Even the earth isn't patient / to raise its voice" (101). And the people have certainly not been spared either in the conflict, as we read in "Cousin". This piece is devoted to a relative who has lived through the war, having suffered "six displacements / within nine years" (105). This cousin's words "are not punctuated / by sobs; they are taut / with sorrow", an eloquent image of the depth of her pain, which cannot even be expressed. Surrounding them, holed and felled Palmyra palms, "ripped and fragmented land" (106), ruins, dust, burning heat […] The people and landscape are scarred, and a sense of gloom pervades it all: "We whose hearts were moved with love / not only for humankind / but also for plants and trees and homes / endure in our time / only the scourge of human arrogance" (106).

"The dark sea" is also among the poems written in 2004, a year which, in spite of the relative calm allowed by the peace process, turned out to be fatidic for an unexpected reason: the tsunami, which tinged with further horror Cheran's visit to Sri Lanka. If the poet had survived two attempts on his life in his youth, he would now survive a new hazard. The sea, that inseparable companion of his youth and his people, becomes in this poem, as it did in reality, a dark force of nature eager to take a myriad lives. The poetic voice weeps at the sea's betrayal as if having lost a dearest relative: "A mother lost her magical beauty / the grace of excellence / the strength to support" (109-110). And together with the people, the territory remains, as ever, inveterate victim: "All that was left that day was fear, / the land destroyed / landscape changed / seascape become a vast desert" (110).

Another poem from the same year is "This poem has no end", which also returns to the matter of memory. "All memories refuse to be destroyed" (107), we read, and this does

not only refer to the memory of war, which as we see sadly persists in people and places. Crucially, what remains is also the political vision: "a dream persists / refusing erasure". The dream of a Tamil free land has not been abandoned, although there is a general sense of exhaustion. The poetic voice is detached, both present and necessarily distant, surely as a matter of survival: "Impermanence and ceaseless wandering / cast their own seductive light. / What can I send now / but this poem […]" (107). Poetry is the chosen weapon, the best gift Cheran can offer his people, while he yearns for some impossible distance from the source of his nightmares, or, as he hopelessly begs, "in the hope / of the sweetness of a solitude / untouched by bitterness" (107).

Distance grows real again in "A season of pervading light", already written from his place of exile some years later, in 2007. In 2006 the peace process was definitely broken, and the conflict recommenced. In Canada, surrounded by cedar trees and black squirrels, the poet's heart is heavy with sorrowful memories of his native land, definitely wrecked: "there is no one to return my homeland to me" (108). Out of pain, he feels numbed to feelings when he writes, "Let me close forever / the entrance to my heart's cave / […] / No one will ever come again" (109). Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, the wheel of violence is turning again at full speed.

A Lifetime to Mourn

The anthology closes with two poems written in 2009, both motivated by one of the most callous episodes of recent history: the end of the Sri Lankan conflict, brought about through the death of thousands of innocent civilians. "First, they burnt the books", says Cheran to Halpé in 2015, "and later in May 2009, they burnt the people!" (94)[16].

"After Apocalypse" picks on the title of an earlier poem, showing that the present plight is not new at all, although certainly the level of barbarism has now reached yet more devastating dimensions. This piece uses the traditional Tamil technique of *kilai kadai*, or "branch stories", which as the anthology editors explain, "are incidental stories or episodes, branching off from the main narrative" (Hölmstrom & Ebeling 2012: 122). The seven *kilai kadai* of this poem compose a fresco of destruction and despair, beginning with 'Warscapes', where a doctor is seen to amputate the arms of a toddler wounded in war without anaesthesia[17], to be followed by 'Homage', which denounces the silencing of the massacre in the world media. Upon this horror, "Someone inscribes empty words / upon the memorial raised by our tears" (111). The poet is not unperturbed by the brutal sense of murder and defeat, but is unwavering in his effort to keep record of it in poetic form. Decapitated corpses and the forgetfulness risked in the exile of whole generations populate the following verses, to eventually return to the land in the fifth branch story: "Here, in this land my story began /

[16] Details of the events of May 2009 and the previous months have been made known in spite of the Sri Lankan government's efforts to wage "a war without witnesses" (Boyle 2009; Harrison 2012; Weiss 2011).

[17] The same heart-wrenching motif appears in the opening pages of Anuk Arudpragasam's novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016), which dramatises the last days of the war in the so-called No Fire Zones. See Alonso-Breto 2021. First-hand witness of the appalling situation is provided in the documentary *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* (Macrae 2011), produced by BBC Channel 4.

[…] / A land where even in the height of summer / people strolled about with ease / has become, in a few days, a country / whose language is replaced" (112).

The long war has destroyed everything; notwithstanding, all but hope has been snatched, and "even though the branch stories are muzzled / the narrative will continue, endless" (112). Once again we see that there is faith in the future after all. "After Apocalypse" ends with two of the landmarks of Cheran's poetry, namely sea and language. Or rather, with their metaphorical absence: "The sea has drained away / Tamil has no territory / Kinships have no name" (113). Hope has not disappeared altogether as we saw above, yet at this point the pervasive mood is one of defeat. In the midst of chaos, again, the poet's mission is never forgotten. The very last poem of *A Second Sunrise* concludes with testimonial determination: "Cheran. / Fling away the footprints, the voice. / Sow only words" (117).

Conclusions

Jeffrey Alexander explains that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2011: 307). In the case of the Tamils from Lanka, there is not one single event, but a crescendo of horrors: decades of systematic discrimination, the burning of the library, Black July, the horrors of war inflicted on them by both warring sides, the final massacre. Alexander claims that often cultural trauma has "not been successfully broadcast to wider audiences" (2011: 310). This may be the case with the deep sorrow felt by this community, but certainly Cheran's poetry diminishes that failure. And though he is certainly the most outspoken Tamil poet in the global sphere, he reminds us that he is not alone in his endeavour:

> Tamil literary voices that have emerged from the ashes steadfastly refuse to be coerced in the official paradigm of closure, reconciliation and economic development. Numerous collections of poetry and several testimonies of survivors published in Tamil attest to this. Poetry now has become a vibrant expression and archive for the Tamil experience of genocide (Cheran 2016: 218).

Since the war ended years ago, poetry has maintained the responsibility of spreading the horrors of what occurred to the community, and bears the burden of carrying the cultural memory of the Lankan Tamil people. Poetry puts collective pain into words and thus contributes to healing, since "working through trauma […] ultimately becomes a narrativizing act, because the act of remembering and recounting structures *through* language what has occurred *beyond* language" (Wicks 2016: 135). Those harsher poems which provide witness of the apocalypse are a form of mourning and of denouncement, but also of personal reconstruction: "apocalyptic trauma must be recalled, reconstructed, and placed within narrative memory in order to help individuals regain a sense of identity and order" (Wicks 2016: 136). The collective and the individual are thus irredeemably entangled. Affecting a whole people in exile, the whole enterprise of Cheran's poetry, *his poetic autobiography*, is loaded with political overtones, and testifies to the fact that autobiographical texts can

indeed act as "potent weapons in political movements" (Jensen & Jolly 2014: 219, quoted in Martínez García 2019: 255).

Cheran's anthology of poems *A Second Sunrise* reads as a form of autobiography reflecting personal and communal history and memory. In the foundational study *Post-colonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self- Representation*, Bart Moore-Gilbert explores postcolonial *life writing* in the light of four modes of being: (de)centered, relational, embodied and located selves. All four can be traced when reading *A Second Rise* as a form of postcolonial autobiography: the syncopated and recomposed sense of the self as expressed in the different poems and periods; the deep connections with the community and the implications of the responsibility of distance; the necessary embodiment in the depiction of war casualties and in the construction of a new sense of being abroad; and the firm sense of locatedness surging once and again in the necessary reconstruction of a sense of home – in spite of difficulties. They can all be traced in a collection of poems which, as a whole, narrates the life of a poet and the trajectory of a community. It does so through a firm anchorage to land and language, poetically accompanied by the sea, and tarnished with a violence which the collection manages, if only partially in view of the brutalities committed on all sides, to exorcise.

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Voices of Reticence, Desire, and Resistance in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831)

Abstract I: Il saggio propone una lettura dell'io narrante in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831), *memoir* di una donna di origini africane che divenne schiava nelle colonie inglesi dei Caraibi. Il discorso critico ruota attorno alle questioni di *authorship*, *agency* e autenticità, concentrandosi, in primo luogo, sulla nozione di invisibilità del soggetto subalterno femminile, così come fu teorizzato da Gayatri Spivak. Dopo aver analizzato il binomio presenza-assenza di tale soggetto, il saggio affronterà le questioni suddette in relazione alla resistenza e resilienza espresse dal narratore e ricorrendo, in questo caso, al paradigma antifreudiano del desiderio e del corpo politico enunciato da Deleuze e Guattari.

Abstract II: The essay proposes a re-assessment of the multiple speaking voice in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831), the memoir of an Afro-descendant woman who lived most of her life as a slave in the British West Indies. The argument revolves around issues of authorship, agency, and authenticity, which will be first examined in relation to Gayatri Spivak's concept of the invisibility of the female subaltern subject – the latter flexibly wavering in the text between presence and absence. Secondly, these issues and the narrator's related discourses of resistance and resilience will be investigated through Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Freudian paradigm of desire and body politic.

Keywords: *The History of Mary Prince*, reticence, desire, resistance, resilience, agency.

1. Introduction: Why Re-assess *The History of Mary Prince*?

Brutal and deplorable manifestations of racial discrimination, inequality and intolerance have been recently on the rise in various parts of the world. These episodes cannot be regarded merely as extremist responses to contingent historical phenomena such as globalization, mass migratory fluxes or post-9/11 resurging anxieties about racial and ethnic otherness. Contrary to what one would expect, contemporary history is still remarkably marred by the legacies of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century colonial exploitation, plantation economy, imperial subjugation and aberrant myths of national supremacy. The rise, from 2013 onwards, of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) American and

global movement, denouncing acts of violence perpetuated (largely by the police) against African Americans and black people around the world, provides a telling example. On 12 June 2020 the President and Executive of the British Association for Romantic Studies (BARS) published a statement following the murders of black people in the United States, in which, referring to the responsibilities of literary scholars, educators and intellectuals, it is claimed that "privilege must be used to amplify Black voices" (BARS Blog 2020). Pointing to the Romantic-period coexistence of reactionary and revolutionary forces, pro- and anti-slavery campaigns, this statement forcefully reminds us that the legacies of these clashing behaviours are still with us today.

By the same token, the history of slavery and the slave trade, as well as the ideological discourses underpinning them, did not come to an end with the 1807 and 1833 Parliamentary Acts, but, as Paul Gilroy shows in his magisterial *The Black Atlantic* (1993), they have left indelible stamps on (post)modernity, testifying to the centuries-long interconnections between apparently distant cultural histories such as those of the European nation-states and the transatlantic world. In Homi Bhabha's words,

> The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity; and the reason for this is made clear in the stammering, drunken words of Mr. 'Whisky' Sisoda from *The Satanic Verses*: "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means" (Bhabha 1994: 6).

English, or, more widely, British history "happened overseas" – a statement which calls attention to the need for its continuous genealogical reassessment by taking into consideration what Michel Foucault defined as the "plural aspect of knowledge" (Foucault 2004: 4), which sets official narrations of history against the so-called "subjugated knowledges" of minority groups, subaltern subjects or all those who have remained voiceless, and whose stories have been marginalized and forgotten. The rescue of such voices implies a form of opposition against the hierarchizing practices and monopolisation of knowledge production, a "battle [which] involves resisting the 'omissions' and distortions of official histories, returning to lost voices and forgotten experiences, relating to the past from the perspective of the present in an alternative (out-of-the-mainstream) way" (Medina 2011: 13). Interestingly, Medina suggests important links between the present and the past, and therefore of memory, for a full understanding of how power relations and hegemonic practices have conditioned, often obstructed, the construction of historical knowledge and truth.

The present essay somehow participates in the aforesaid BARS's plea to "amplify Black voices", as well as in Medina's call for "returning to lost voices", by reconsidering and re-assessing a multivocal and complex text such as *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself*, one of the many testimonies left by former slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which were published as separate books or

pamphlets[1]. In her radio play *The Lamplighter* (2008), written in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, Nigerian-Scottish writer Jackie Kay has four former female slaves tell their experiences of deracination, sexual abuse and physical exploitation in the Caribbean plantations before emancipation – their voices are individual but also form a chorus of shared suffering. "The forgetting is maybe not what's important; it's more interesting what you still remember. How blazingly alive the past is" (Kay 2010: 87), writes Kay in her autobiography *Red Dust Road*, and suggests it is everyone's responsibility to retrieve it and "try and fill in the missing pieces" (Kay 2010: 141). Like Gilroy and Bhabha, she urges her readers to reflect on the fact that "the history of the slave trade is not 'black history' to be shoved into a ghetto and forgotten" but "the history of the world. It concerns each and every one of us" (Kay 2007). Hence her decision to make four exemplary 'subaltern' figures speak with their own voices, so as to rescue them from the oblivion to which numberless similar voices have been confined throughout history. Behind each of these fictional women slaves lies the factual 'herstory' of Mary Prince. One of the underlying messages of literary works such as Kay's epic play is that, in order to face the problem of today's racism and forms of discrimination based on ethnic difference, one must look back at eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history as well as at the counter-histories narrated by those who, to adapt Foucault's words, "came out of the shadows, […] had no glory and […] no rights", and who began "to speak and to tell of [their] history" (Foucault 2004: 70) – albeit in very complex and, at times, controversial ways, as this essay will try to showcase.

The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself (henceforth referred to as *The History*) is the first slave narrative published by a woman, in this case an Afro-descendant woman (1788-1833) who lived most of her life as a slave in the British West Indies – in particular, Bermuda, where she was born, Turk Island and Antigua. Prince's memoir was dictated orally to the English poetess and abolitionist Miss Susanna Moodie (*née* Strickland), affiliated with the Anti-Slavery Society in London, for which, apart from *The History*, she transcribed the slave narrative *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro. Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner*. Both texts came out in the same year, 1831, when the slave trade had already been outlawed both in the British Empire and in the United States, although slavery was still considered a legal practice in the colonies. Strickland compiled Prince's narrative when both women were living in London with Thomas Pringle, the Scottish poet who in 1827 had become the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Strickland was his guest during 1829 or 1830; while Prince, after abandoning her owners, Mr. and Mrs. John Wood, moved to Pringle's household and worked for him as a domestic servant possibly until her death and the promulgation of the Slavery Abolition Act, although the information about

[1] Well-known examples are, *inter alia*: *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa; Published by Himself in the Year 1787*; *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* (1789); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (1850); Solomon Northup's, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853); and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). A goundbreaking study on the genre of slave narrative is *The Slave's Narrative* (1991) edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

the last years of her life is rather scanty. What we know is that she would have liked to return to Antigua as a free woman and join her husband, the free black widower Daniel James she had married secretly in 1826, but, despite Pringle's political connections both in Britain and the Caribbean, the Woods refused to manumit her. The appearance of *The History* in 1831 was an attempt to stir public opinion about Mary's case, but not that only, since it clearly became an abolitionist tract in the hands of the Anti-Slavery Society.

As a memoir or "recollective act" (Olney 1984: 47), Prince's narrative retraces her life story from childhood to the present: that is to say, from when, at the age of one, she was bought, along with her mother, by Captain George Darrell to the moment in which she decided to collaborate with Strickland and Pringle, explicitly declaring her intention to unbury and pass on her personal history in order for it to serve as exemplum of the savagery and inhumanity – "the horrors of slavery!" (Prince 1997: 74) – which all slaves had to endure. "First and foremost", Fisch writes, "the slave narrative is a text with a purpose: the end of slavery. The slave narrative is a key artifact in the global campaign to end first the slave trade […], then colonial slavery" (Fisch 2007: 2). The dialectic of private and public dimensions, as will be later detailed in this essay, is a pervasive constitutive component of the narrative, which helps us understand why Prince often insists on specific details concerning her changeful but worsening experience in the service of several owners (Captain John Ingham in Bermuda, Robert Darrell on Grand Turk Island and Bermuda, and, finally, John Wood in Antigua).

In the first section of this essay, building on the work carried out by other scholars (mainly Allen 2012, Banner 2013, Baumgartner 2001, Olney 1984 and Todorova 2001), I will discuss the private-public dynamics characterizing *The History* by focusing on the issues of textual authenticity and authorship. These will be tackled in relation to the generic hybridity of a work which can be read as an example of 'minor literature', in the sense intended by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), and, at the same time, as a counter-historical document based on the assumption that all autobiographical work, though using "fictive techniques, […] is not false: it is fictive, not faithless" (Niemtzow 1982: 107). Section two of the essay will resume the discourse of authorship in order to show how Prince's voice – that of a female slave subject to both racial and patriarchal oppression – emerges out of a complex interplay of reticent attitudes and a bodily language expressing resistance. The structural dialectic of textual inscription and embodiment characterizing the narrator's voice can be examined through Gayatri Spivak's concept of the (in)visibility of the female subaltern subject. Mary Prince's silence on sexual abuse is interestingly meshed with her patent utterance of pain and disability derived from her being subject to constant physical violence. In the third and final section of the essay, adapting this time Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Freudian paradigm of individual desire, I will suggest how the aforesaid apparently contradictory mix of linguistic restraint and articulation can be explained by the existence in the text of a private-cum-public voice which makes Prince's agency dependent on the political significance of *The History* as an abolitionist pamphlet meant to reach a specific aim and audience.

2. Counter-history and Minor Literature: Mary Prince's Complex Authorship and Agency

Being an autobiographical text, *The History*, like all slave narratives and, more generally, any autobiographical work, crosses the border between fiction and real or historical accounts[2]. William Andrews' warning is significant in this sense:

> [T]he proven reliability of these narratives as sourcebooks of facts about slavery should not cause us to forget that as historical narratives they are subject to the same 'poetic processes' of composition as any other works of that kind. Even the most objective and unrhetorical slave narrative is still a 'fiction of factual representation'" (Andrews 1986: 16).

"Fiction of factual representation" is a quotation from Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), and it refers to the discursive nature of a slave narrative, whose presumably authentic diegetic account must be always linked to the extradiegetic context of production, its hypothetical reader and the principal aim it intends to reach. This is one of the reasons why Banner has defined slave narratives as a "dynamic literary genre", able to "highlight actual social injustices experienced by the authors" yet also marked by "literary capacities for play and complex signification" (Banner 2013: 301). As will be shown, *The History* is a stratified text in which the principal speaking voice must be assessed in relation to the role she is expected to perform. So, to borrow from Banner again, reading the text should not so much aim at "[apprehending] the truth of a former slave's existence by […] probing underneath its surface for the 'real' slave's voice" (301) as at understanding how that voice, without entirely denying its authenticity, plays with other actors moving in the narrative background but affecting its foreground – *in primis*, the editor Thomas Pringle, but also the amanuensis Susanna Strickland.

In other words, *The History* is a multivocal text and the 'I' speaking in it poses crucial questions of identity and self-definition for a number of reasons. First of all, one cannot overlook the fact that a slave was denied status as an autonomous subject and was treated as a reified object with an existence inextricably tied to that of his/her master. Thus, how is one supposed to read a text whose author, and autodiegetic narrator, was not recognized a social and legal identity in the world? (see Thomas 2000: 177). Throughout the narrative, Prince often highlights her being considered as a non-subject, for instance during the auction, before being sold to Captain I–:

> I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words – as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up for sale (Prince 1997: 62).

How did contemporary readers react to this speaking 'I'? Would they recognize the authorship of a subaltern with no right to speak, deemed unworthy of epistemic respect and as invisible to civil society as the black boy in Archibald McLauchlin's portrait of the

[2] On the historicity of slave narratives see John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972) and Eugene

Glassford family?[3] As will be later clarified, Prince's first-person narrative was published together with various paratextual materials meant to corroborate the reliability of her account, as if the slave's speaking 'I' alone were insufficient to produce the expected effects. In Banner's words, the "prefaces, introductions, and codas – that 'framed' a slave narrative most often functioned as an authoritative white verification of a black author's intellectual abilities and good moral character" (Banner 2013: 298).

Secondly, the identity and authenticity of the first-person narrator is complicated by the fact that *The History*, like other ex-slaves' life stories, is a ghostwritten narrative dictated by Mary Prince to Susanna Strickland and, even more importantly, edited by Thomas Pringle. "Even if an editor faithfully reproduces the facts of a black narrator's life", in Andrews' words, "it was still the editor who decided what to make of these facts, how they should be emphasized, in what order they ought to be presented, and what was extraneous, or germane" (Andrews 1986: 20). Pringle is such an editor, although in the Preface he states that "the idea of writing Mary Prince's story was first suggested by herself", "the narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips", and therefore, "no fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added" (Prince 1997: 55). The truth is that he knew how to turn "'a statement of facts'" into "a 'fiction of factual representation', that is, a readable, convincing, and moving autobiography" (Andrews 1986: 20) which would appeal to an audience sensitive to the contemporary debates pro- and anti-slavery. Pringle's deliberate insistence on Prince's agency is one of the strategies he deploys to respond to the generic requirements of slave narratives serving as literary vehicles of abolitionist propaganda and ideology. After all, his own words are revealing as regards the impact and scope of his interventions:

> [the narrative] was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards *pruned* into its present shape; retaining *as far as was practicable*, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. […] it is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, *so as to render it clearly intelligible* (Prince 1997: 55; my italics).

The History must be rendered intelligible for the specific white English audience Pringle has in mind: namely, potential supporters (financially, too) of the Anti-Slavery Society he presided over, and people who, after reading about Mary's first-hand experience of human atrocity, would be convinced of the impelling need to end the horrors of slavery. Given the justice of the cause and Prince's own personal interest in it, there is no reason to suspect that she objected to his manipulative editing or to his decision to add to the main text further

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Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974). For a treatment of the complexity of the autobiographical genre, see: P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (1989); J. Olney, *Metaphors of the Self* (1981) and S. Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987), and Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (1989).

[3] McLauchlin painted it in 1767. It is exhibited in the Glasgow People's Palace. A black servant was originally portrayed on the left behind his master, but in 1778, when it became illegal to own slaves in Scotland, he was painted over.

documents both meant to attest to its veracity (i.e. informative footnotes and appendices, such as paper excerpts and documents from the court cases involving Prince) and to arouse the readership's interest (i.e. a similar text: *Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, A Captured African*). On the other hand, in 1831 the Scottish pro-slavery statistician James Queen attacked *The History* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and accused Pringle of inventing a story for purely ideological reasons and personal interests. As has been noted, even the term "History" instead of "story" in the title may "[indicate] writing that has been verified and sanctioned by the Western apparatus for the production of knowledge" (Todorova 2001: 289) – a knowledge which undeniably served anti-slavery propaganda, while also satisfying the slave's own need to make his or her voice heard and accelerate the process of self- as well as collective emancipation. Prince's authorship, as it were, complicitly depends on Pringle's editorial control and choices.

Thirdly and finally, the identity of the speaking 'I' cannot be regarded as perfectly coinciding with the extra-literary Mary Prince, because it is an 'I' most often to be read as a 'we'. In the third section of the essay, I will elaborate on the symbolic, or synecdochic, value of the first person by focusing on the theme of desire and resistance. What I am concerned with in this context is to interpret this particular use of 'I' with the possibility to read *The History* as an example of counter-history and 'minor literature' – the latter in the sense intended by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), a concept more recently re-elaborated by French scholar Pascale Casanova in her study *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999), in which she takes issue with Deleuze and Guattari's "littérature mineure" and replaces it with "petite littérature". Despite Pascale's critique of what, in her view, is her predecessors' limited assessment of Kafka's political thinking, both phrases similarly refer to something which "a minority constructs within a major language" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 16), not a marginal literature but one written in a language that does not belong to the speaking I and produced by a minority appropriating the language of a majority in order to subvert its assumptions and monopolising vision. So, on the one hand, *The History* is a counter-historical narrative presenting the history of slavery from the point of view of one of its victims and using her individual story figuratively. On the other, it is a 'minor' literary artifact exploiting the possibilities offered by a 'major' language – not least widespread circulation – yet appropriating it in Calibanesque fashion, as it were, to write back to and, albeit implicitly, 'curse' the system which legitimized slavery.

Interestingly enough, some critics have identified typically Creole or Caribbean features in Prince's language, that 'peculiar phraseology' Pringle mentions in the Preface. For instance, Pouchet Paquet observes that "[w]hatever the degree of authorial control Mary Prince exercised over the published narrative, her voice is a privileged one in the text as a whole, and it speaks out of a distinct West Indian particularity" (1992: 136). Allen regrets that Pringle's pruning "disrupts Prince's Creole voice by removing repetition from her narrative" (2012: 512) – what the editor considers "redundances" [*sic*] (Prince 1997: 55) are in fact, as Allen explains, a typical characteristic of the Antiguan Creole that Prince would speak. However, some of those repetitions are preserved in the text and, as I will clarify in section two of the essay, they are relevant to Prince's deployment of a language apt to represent extreme bodily experiences. As an example of both counter-history and minor

literature, *The History* presents an agentic narrator whose identity is collective rather than individual. I therefore agree with William Andrews, when he points out that "the most reliable slave narrative would be one that seemed purely mimetic, in which the self is on the periphery instead of at the center of attention, looking outside not within, transcribing rather than interpreting a set of objective facts" (Andrews 1986: 6).

Both Prince and Pringle certainly "look outside" the text, and collaboratively construct an authorial subject who must reach out to the contemporary readership, so that the publication of *The History* might be functional to their common objective of increasing public awareness about the ignominy of the slavery system – in Prince's case, also to her need to raise money to buy her manumission from the Woods. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the narrator "participates in earlier, eighteenth-century discourses about virtue in which virtue was associated with male sentiment or 'feeling'. […]. This emphasis on feeling forms the basis of Prince's appeal to her readers' sympathy" (Santamarina 2007: 233). In fact, the rhetoric of sentiment as well as the legacy of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) provided the ethical and moral foundations on which abolitionists built their campaign (cfr. Carey 2005). "Reaching the 'hearts of men'", writes Andrews, "was the rhetorical aim of practically all black autobiography in the first century of its existence" (Andrews 1986: 5), and, as has been previously observed, black autobiographers and anti-slavery champions shook hands as far as this aim was concerned. Such a commonality of purpose is confirmed by Prince's (or by now we should say her narrator's) reiterated use throughout the narrative of the image of the 'heart', a main trope of sentimental rhetoric, in order to confute the prejudice that slaves were unable to feel, while at the same time underscoring English colonizers' lack of sympathy and compassion. Here are some significant examples, the first two of which refer to the moment in which Prince was sold at an auction and snatched from her family, while the last one is a portrait of one of her five cruel owners:

> Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day, – it is too much. – It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind, whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children. I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thought of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these (Prince 1997: 61).

> Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! […] many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us aloud, though their light words fell like cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts (Prince 1997: 62).

> Nothing could touch his hard heart – neither sighs, nor tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to our cries, and careless of our sufferings (72).

From a literary perspective, the rhetoric of sensibility pervading the whole narrative allows *The History* to be analyzed *vis-à-vis* representative works of Romantic-period

sentimental literature, many of which were significantly written by women abolitionists, such as, among others, Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, Amelia Opie, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth. However, one crucial distinction needs to be made.

Moira Ferguson has extensively studied the anti-slavery writing produced by white British women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ferguson 2014), showing how they gendered abolitionist discourse in order to encourage a re-evaluation of typically feminine (and proto-feminist) concerns – such as family relations, domesticity, love, separation and sexual abuse, all of them key-themes in Prince's narrative, too. By intersecting or juxtaposing racial, gender and class issues, on the one hand, they used abolitionist activism to advance white British women's socio-political self-emancipation. On the other, though, they risked obscuring or misrepresenting the peculiar condition of black women slaves, depicting them as if they formed an "undifferentiated mass" (Ferguson 2014: 4), and overlooking how both race and class determine unbridgeable differences among women. "These writers", Ferguson argues, "displaced anxieties about their own assumed powerlessness and inferiority onto the representations of slaves" (Ferguson 2014: 3), retaining a line of continuity with Mary Astell's and Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas about women's social and legal status respectively in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). They spoke *about* and *for* the Other in order to speak about themselves. On the contrary, however complex or controlled Prince's authority and agency are in *The History*, the narrating "I" is that of a female West-Indian slave speaking both *about* herself and *for* others sharing her traumas. Hence, *The History* presents a different kind of representation, that is, one based not on displacement or the projection of a Self onto an Other, but on the exemplary, synecdochic role of a subaltern who "can speak", albeit through the language of her victimizers.

3. How Can Mary Prince Speak? The (In)visible Subaltern

Contrary to the subaltern subjects in white women's writing about slavery, Prince speaks in *The History*, even if through a *dramatis persona* that appropriates the language of empire in order to tell the truth about slavery

> Oh the horrors of slavery! […] what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free (Prince 1997: 74).

However audible, Prince's voice can still be relevantly examined taking into account Gayatri Spivak's concept of the invisibility of the female subaltern subject. Indeed, in the narrative, Prince, as author and narrator, is simultaneously visible and invisible. Not being able to speak her Creole language, her cultural identity remains shadowy; but her idiosyncratic English, partly emulating the rhythms of her native tongue, cannot be seen merely as an abolitionist stratagem to mimic authenticity. In other words, the real person Mary Prince transpires through the mediating language of both amanuensis and editor, notwithstanding their intrusive cooperation.

As is well known, in her challenging essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak suggests that when intellectuals and academics give visibility to a subaltern, they do not necessarily allow them to speak with their own voice, nor do they directly recognize them as knowledge-producing subjects. On the contrary, speaking *for* the subalterns, they manipulate their independent agency and construct their consciousness according to Western, mostly essentialist and patriarchal, ideologies of cultural hegemony. Therefore, it is more urgent to acknowledge why and how social groups excluded from socio-economic and political power have always been invisible in official historical accounts than to attempt to fill in that gap by speaking about and for them. Spivak argues that the forced silence of the subaltern prevents Westerners from listening to them, so how can they possibly be represented and heard? By the same token, the critic Rachel Banner has taken issue with those scholars who compulsively tend to identify "the 'hidden voices' of [slave] narratives as recognizably real manifestations of the 'true' speakers behind white abolitionist machinations" (Banner 2013: 300). More relevantly, as regards the unveiling of identity behind the speaking 'I' of *The History*, she comments:

> There is or was a referent, so to speak. Yet, I contend that it should no longer be imperative to locate that referent in continuing studies of slave narrative. Instead, to fulfill an ethical scholarly imperative of respect for the historical voices of abused, enslaved, and oppressed people of color, critics should acknowledge that the "truth" of the people who spoke in these voices is, in some sense, forever lost (309-310).

In fact, the truth of many facts and people Prince refers to is not completely lost, since they can be verified by inspecting contemporary documents such as *Slave Registers*, letters and legal acts (cfr. Maddison-MacFadyen 2013). Nevertheless, the authentication of the *whole* truth of Prince's account is as hard a process as the full identification of the speaking "I" with the non-fictional former slave. *The History*, as has been previously illustrated, is not the work of a single writer but a multi-authored text whose narrator is the result of a series of discursive negotiations between Prince, Pringle and Strickland.

One of such negotiations concerns the way in which Prince's voice alternates between silence and utterance: on the one hand, a reticence mostly dictated by the generic conventions of abolitionist texts; on the other, an explicitness that reflects both staple *topoi* of slave narratives and Prince's own purpose to act as spokesperson of all the victims of slavery. On one particular topic, for instance, she must be silent and leave it inscribed or latent in the text. Andrews notices that sometimes the gaps or encrypted allusions we find in slave narratives may reveal "a deliberate effort by the narrator to grapple with aspects of his or her personality that have been repressed out of deference to or fear of the dominant culture" (Andrews 1986: 8). Although there is incontrovertible evidence that female slaves were victims of sexual abuse on the part of their masters, Prince never explicitly refers to this traumatic experience, since the 'dominant culture', which in her case is represented by the Anti-Slavery Society and its press organs, prohibited the treatment of themes which might put in jeopardy the support of white Christian readers – black women's sexuality was one of them. As Ferguson remarks, the Antislavery Society sponsoring *The History*

> won public support by detailing atrocities and portraying female slaves as pure, Christlike victims and martyrs in one of their major organs of propaganda, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. Women whose cause they sponsored could not be seen to be involved in any situation […] that smacked of sin and moral corruption. Christian purity, for those abolitionists, overrode regard for truth (Prince 1997: 4).

Prince *cannot* speak about sexuality, not even about the sexual violence she certainly suffered, because the pro-slavery advocates would use it against her and turn it into a proof of the woman's moral promiscuousness and depravity. Ironically, therefore, the theme of black female slaves' sexual behaviour was central to both pro- and anti-slavery public debates. It became a hotly contested issue shortly after the publication of *The History*, and especially in one of the two court cases following it in 1833, in which Prince's former owner, John Wood, brought an act for libel against Thomas Pringle. Prince was called to witness and details emerged of her life which she did not report in the narrative. In fact, only once does she imply that she was sexually abused, when she gives us the following portrayal of her owner Mr. D–:

> He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. […] he was a very indecent man – very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh (Prince 1997: 77-78).

The truth is, "Prince's testimony in court […] confirms that the evangelical editors had censored several accounts of sexual activity from her narrative" (Prince 1997: 28). The year in which the Emancipation Bill passed through the House of Lords, Prince could publicly speak with her own voice and reveal the truth about the sexual harassments and physical violence she endured.

Prince's forced reticence about sexuality contrasts with the verbal explication of the hard work she did and of the corporeal pain inflicted upon her by her barbarous masters. One of the documents appended to the third edition of *The History* is a letter written by Pringle's wife to Mrs Townsend, one of the Secretaries of the "Birmingham Ladies' Society for the Relief of the Negro Slaves". Mrs. Pringle provides a shocking description of Prince's body, which becomes another text graphically reproducing the effects of floggings and torture reported in the narrative:

> [The] whole of the back part of her body is distinctly scarred, and, as it were, *chequered*, with the vestiges of severe floggings. Besides this, there are many large scars on other parts of her person, exhibiting an appearance as if the flesh had been deeply cut, or lacerated with gashes, by some instrument wielded by most unmerciful hands (Prince 1997: 130).

The author adds that she has observed "similar cases at the Cape of Good Hope" (131), where she lived with her husband from 1820 to 1826. This statement is further evidence of the fact that *The History* and its attached documents became vehicles of anti-slavery propaganda. The private and public discourses are interlaced throughout it. In fact, "the genesis of Prince's narrative can be seen as an extension of her bodily pain and a rewriting of the slaveholder's script of tyranny and ill-usage" (Baumgartner 2001: 266). Undeniably, even the violence written and exposed on Mary's violated body as well as her *embodied* language should be considered in light of the political significance and aim of the slave narrative. These, however, do not invalidate the truthfulness of Prince's psycho-physical pain, which is textually reflected in the use of repetitions meant to "construct a specific narrative" (Banner 2013: 305) concerning the fatiguing daily routine ("work, work, work"; "I was sick, sick of Turk's Island"; "I was very sick, very sick indeed", 73-74, 75, 88), the traumas caused by the separation from her mother ("it is sad, sad", "oh my mother, my mother", "weep, weep, weep", 61, 64, 68), physical distress, endurance, and the struggle to survive ("oh the trials, the trials!", "lick-lick", "clatter, clatter, clatter", 64, 66, 69). Anaphora becomes for Prince a linguistic mode to express resistance as well as "an indirect critique of her owners and the system of slavery" (Baumgartner 2001: 260). The fact that this critique reflects not only her point of view but also the intentions of the Anti-slavery society subsidizing *The History* does not diminish the power of her voice. Nor does it reduce Prince into a passive tool of abolitionist propaganda. On the contrary, she is made visible and audible by a narrator who expresses collective resistance and desire for freedom.

4. Desire, Agency, and Collective Identity

Freud was notoriously against any women's emancipation movement and believed that women's lives were ruled by their sexual reproductive functions. If, on the one hand, he acknowledged their sexual desire or libido, on the other, he associated it with passivity and penis envy – therefore, a lack. Any form of desire or vital energy in a woman is, according to him, to be related to her biological nature and passive sexual drive. In fact, generally speaking, in both Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalysis desire arises from lack, a concept that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari confute in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). Here desire is represented as a collective, productive force and active agent which does not exclusively depend on one's past and childhood experiences but changes throughout an individual's life owing to factors lying outside the boundaries of the family. Instead of leading desire back to the confined world of child-parent relationships and sexual discourse, Deleuze and Guattari regard it as the source of a broader mechanism involving social, political and economic dynamics. As it derives from lack, in Freud desire belongs to the realm of the subconscious and imagination, whereas in the Deleuze and Guattari's vision, it interacts with the material world, is real and even produces reality. Consequently, desire is not something isolated in an individual's experience but may influence an entire body politic.

In her narrative, Mary Prince expresses an affirmative desire for freedom that reflects Deleuze and Guattari's politics of desire. Rather than being self-directed attempts to change her individual situation and achieve personal emancipation, all her acts and words of resistance must be read, in Ferguson's words, as "a microcosm of black opposition, an

individual expression of the collective consciousness that sought an end to illegitimate domination" (Prince 1997: 19). Although she knows that in England she could live as a free woman, while in Antigua she would still be treated as a slave, Prince is tormented by a dilemma: "I would rather go into my grave than go back a slave to Antigua, though I wish to go back to my husband very much – very much – very much!" (95). It is indeed to condemn the horrors of slavery everywhere and claim for general emancipation rather than personal legal freedom that Prince confronts her masters with various forms of resistance. These include: the *petit marronage* whereby she temporarily runs away from Captain I– to return to her mother; her defense of Mr. D's daughter against his violence; various requests to move from one owner to another; her secret marriage to a former slave; and her involvement in the Moravian church in Antigua. All these acts are charged politically and allow her to acquire progressive self-awareness, until she finds the courage to express her suffering: "I then took courage and said that I could stand the flogging no longer" (Prince 1997: 70). Her bodily pain, therefore, becomes an allegory of the traumatization and agony experienced by all black slaves. The torture that her mistress Mrs I– inflicts on two young slaves is also her own: "my pity for these poor boys was soon transferred to myself; for I was licked and flogged, and pinched by her pitiless fingers in the neck and arms, exactly as they were" (66). The narrative provides innumerable examples of Mary's shifting "from the private self-consciousness of a child to the politicized, public self-consciousness of an enslaved woman speaking on behalf of all slaves" (Pouchet Paquet 1992: 138). Hence, she encapsulates in her own account other slave narratives of the so-called 'Black Diaspora' (Gilroy 1993), speaking about dislocation, dispersal, and human ignominy – such as the stories of the 'mulatto' Cyrus, of Jack from Guinea, of the pregnant house-slave Hetty, and of old Daniel. "In telling my own sorrows", Prince avows, here as elsewhere emulating sentimental rhetoric, "I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves – for when I think of my own griefs I remember theirs" (Prince 1997: 75).

Because of the collective nature of a desire projected into future change and emancipation, the 'I' of the narrative gradually shades into a 'we' representative of an imagined community of Afro-descendant women and men who address the white audience to call for a more equal society and universal freedom:

> All slaves want to be free – to be free is very sweet. […] I have been a slave myself – I know what slaves feel – I can tell by myself what other slaves feel […]. They hire servants in England; and if they don't like them, they send them away: they can't lick them. […] They have their liberty. That's just what *we* want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like English servants. […] But they won't give it, they will have work – work – work, night and day, sick or well, till we are quite done up; and we must not speak up nor look amiss, however much we be abused. And then when we are quite done up, who cares for us, more than for a lame horse? This is slavery. I tell it to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore (Prince 1997: 94).

This appeal to the English with the purpose of engaging their sympathies is another example of the multivocal narration characterizing *The History*, both reflecting the requirements of a genre appropriated by the contemporary abolitionist agenda and providing an early example of Edouard Glissant's idea of 'Relation' – what binds together people who experience something 'exceptional' yet 'shared', such as the Middle Passage and slavery:

> Peoples who have been to the abyss […] live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies. For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge (Glissant 1997: 8).

However, either as a treatise backed by mainstream anti-slavery politics or as a "collective utterance" within a "minor literature" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 65), *The History*, to adapt Andrews' words, has a deliberate "didactic intent" achieved through "its treatment of life as representative or allegorical, its unifying sense of calling and vocation, and its stylistic sensitivity to the arts of persuasion" (Andrews 1986: 17). In other words, it is marked by a strong performative and illocutionary force: the 'speaker' wants to do something specific in saying what she says – as *dramatis persona* of a slave, as the mouthpiece of a community, and as the public voice of the abolitionist campaign.

In conclusion, *The History* involves the narrator in a very complex task. She retrieves from memory and relates a story of personal misery, struggle and resilience which ends with the reconstruction of her Self. In other words, "the devastating force of pain that she first experiences becomes her most important means for the creation of a new order of experience, a new subject position from which to speak" (Morabito 2019: 144). Thus, as has been observed, despite "the cruelty, callousness and injustice meted out to her by her slave-owners, she is victorious in the end" (Maddison-MacFadyen 2013: 660). At the same time, she is patently aware of the political symbolism of her account, of its cultural and historical importance as a document participating in emancipationist and anticolonial movements as well as in a collective struggle for racial, gender and social equality. Because Mary Prince's memoir was conceived and had to act as a persuasive, direct attack on the system of slavery, the narrator's voice inconsistently wavers between reticence and utterance, strategic repression and graphic description, in order to acquiesce to the moralistic views and horizon of expectations of her British readership.

However, there is also a third discursive level in which the speaking 'I' and especially the 'we' emerging at the end of the narrative are involved – beyond both the personal and historical dimensions. That voice manages to transcend chronotopic coordinates and bears testimony to how the human being, even when powerless, silenced and ignobly humiliated, can show active desire as well as build resilience in the face of psycho-physical traumas and use both as tools of resistance, survival and eventually freedom. Thus, listening to that voice, as well as to its silences, means resurrecting a 'subjugated knowledge', to return to Foucault's

critical genealogy, which enables a deeper and broader understanding of humankind's past and present history.

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Indigenous Activism and the Healing Power of Storytelling*

Abstract I: Nelle culture orali dei popoli indigeni lo *storytelling* svolge un prominente ruolo epistemologico, pedagogico e terapeutico assicurando sia la trasmissione del sapere ancestrale che le interrelazioni comunitarie. Il saggio esamina come le scrittrici indigene nord-americane Jeanette Armstrong e Lee Maracle incorporano le tradizioni orali dei loro popoli nei loro romanzi con l'intento attivista di promuovere la decolonizzazione dell'ideologia patriarcale e spronare l'umanità ad abbracciare un'etica di 'ecologia relazionale' che ristabilisca il rispetto per la Madre Terra. Le loro storie possono aiutare il pubblico indigeno e non ad intraprendere un processo collettivo di guarigione dalle molteplici forme di violenza coloniale.

Abstract II: Storytelling is a foundational element of Indigenous oral cultures, where it has a key epistemological, pedagogical and healing role and assures knowledge transmission and community relationality. This essay examines how Indigenous writers Jeanette Armstrong and Lee Maracle use their traditions of orature as part of their activist agenda to promote a decolonization of the patriarchal mindset and prompt humanity to embrace an ethics of 'relational ecology' which restores reverence and respect for Mother Earth. Their stories can help both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers to embrace a collective process of healing from multiple forms of colonial violence.

Keywords: Indigenous women, storytelling, healing, J. Armstrong, L. Maracle.

Stories are keys to the national treasure
known as our knowledge
(Lee Maracle 2018).

1. Storytelling as Activism & Healing

Indigenous women are today among the most fervent members of global activist movements aimed at promoting decolonization, environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty. In

* This article expands some of the topics previously addressed in Saidero 2022.

North America, as in other parts of the world, they are drawing on their holistic worldview of interdependence, reciprocity and kinship with Mother Earth to oppose destructive neocolonial practices and promote more sustainable economic and social relations which can contrast the overexploitation of nature, the current climate crisis, and racial and sexist violence[1]. They are also involved in healing Indigenous youth from the intergenerational trauma and cultural genocide caused by colonization by reuniting them with their ancestral cultures and languages.

Central to their activism is their reliance on storytelling, a foundational element of their traditional ways of life and community relationships. Grounded in Indigenous epistemology, philosophy and pedagogy, oral stories are a primary educational tool through which elders have passed down ecological and relational knowledge about the natural and spiritual world and the need for interrelatedness to future generations. As Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi state, these oral stories "are not fairy tales or entertaining stories for children – they are lived values that form the basis of Indigenous governance and regeneration"; they are "the experiential knowledge and living histories" of core Indigenous teachings (2009: 138). Sto:lo scholar Jo-ann Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem) explains that stories are also healing ceremonies which "remind us about being whole and healthy" because "[s]tories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together" (2008: 11-12). Not surprisingly, storytelling is thus increasingly used as a performative and therapeutic tool for "the cultural and political resurgence of Indigenous nations" (Corntassel *et al.* 2009: 137) in a collective effort to heal from the fractures produced by colonialism. For Indigenous people who have been disconnected from their land-based cultures, storytelling is, indeed, a means for "regaining a sense of belonging and identity" and for engaging in self-representation to counter the colonial process of being "storied by others" (Chan 2021: 171)[2].

When Indigenous women writers resort to their traditions of orature and translate them into their English texts, they thus do so with the self-conscious political and activist aim of decolonizing the patriarchal mindset and Western research methodologies which have misrepresented and misused Indigenous stories to subjugate Indigenous peoples within the imperialist master narrative. Among them are Sylix writer Jeanette Armstrong from the Okanagan nation and Salish writer Lee Maracle from the Sto:lo nation, both located in the Pacific Northwest of Canada, in current British Columbia[3]. In spite of their cultural distinctiveness, both writers are committed to Indigenous cultural survival[4] and

[1] They have, for instance, been active in staunchly opposing fracking and the construction of pipelines, in safeguarding water and the land, and in advocating Climate Justice and the Rights of Nature. Likewise, they have countered gender violence through initiatives such as the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls campaigns and participated in the Red Power Movement to reclaim Indigenous lands and self-determination.

[2] Chan's recent study witnesses how storytelling is used as a counselling tool in projects with Indigenous youth to facilitate the process of healing and prevent suicide. See also Archibald (2008).

[3] The traditional Okanagan territory occupies the interior of British Columbia and stretches into Washington state, USA. The Sto:lo nation is located in the Fraser River Valley, BC.

[4] They are founders of the En'owkin Centre and its International School of Writing aimed at educating Indigenous youth.

value the transformational and healing power of storytelling. They also share a heightened environmental concern for the endangered ecosystems of the West Coast and the ecological crisis our planet is facing.

This essay examines Armstrong's novel *whispering in shadows* (2000) and Maracle's *Celia's Song* (2015)[5] to show how these activist-writers incorporate traditional oral stories into their narratives with the performative intent of propounding their environmental ethos and a model of 'relational ecology'[6] based on reuniting with family, community, and the land. Indeed, both use ancestral stories and tricksters to give voice to multiple perspectives from the human and non-human world, thus spurring us to reconsider the connective spaces between them and to value the world's ecological diversity. Defying the rigid categorisations of Western individualistic traditions, they posit an Indigenous epistemological paradigm of relational subjectivity which is grounded in the spiritual and in the belief that "knowledge is shared with all of creation" (Wilson 2001: 176), including animals, plants, the earth, the winds and the cosmos. Their aim is to teach both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers how to heal our relationships with the Earth and all her creatures by listening to the voices of the land and embracing an ethics of reverence and respect. Indeed, as the trickster Mink says in *Celia's Song*, all stories deserve to be told, "[e]ven the waves of the sea tell a story that deserves to be read" (7).

In order to understand their teachings, Indigenous stories and healing ceremonies cannot be read within the oppositional and dialectical discursive approaches of the Western tradition. Instead, as Western readers, we need to decolonize, as Smith suggests, our research methodologies (2012) and embrace what de Ramirez calls "conversive literary and scholarly strategies", which are linked to the principles of interconnectedness, relationality and inclusivity. As she explains,

> [t]he term *conversive* conveys both senses of conversion and conversation in which literary scholarship becomes a transformative and intersubjective act of communication. Here the scholar becomes a listener-reader of literary works (like a listener participating in an oral storytelling event), and in turn becomes a storyteller-guide to assist others in becoming listener-readers of those literary works (1999:1).

2. Jeanette Armstrong: "The land is what gives us stories"

A conversive approach begins with acknowledging that "the sacred is manifested in the relationships between each person and all other parts of creation" (de Ramirez 1999: 100) and that storytelling is thus an act of spirituality by virtue of its power to weave those relations among and within the human, natural and spiritual worlds which are interdependent. It also entails acknowledging the intimate connection between storytelling and Indigenous knowledge, language, ecology, and foremost with the land. In fact, as Armstrong explains,

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[5] All references are from these editions.

[6] The term 'relational ecology' refers to the links between the human and non-human world. It provides a new way of thinking about our relationships with other living beings beyond Cartesian dualisms and helps us reconsider human-nature relationships in a more holistic perspective (see Deville & Spielewoy 2019). It is thus "consistent with Indigenous epistemology" (Chan 2021: 181).

"the land is what gives us stories", which "are about our knowledge, our right relationship with the land"; they are "a way to be able to engage in our identity, of being *of* the land, of viewing ourselves as a subset of relatedness with other systems" (2021: n.p).

This Okanagan land- and language-based worldview, which emphasizes land as kin and interrelatedness against the Eurocentric land-as-property view, is the core of the storytelling process in *whispering in shadows*, where prose, poetry, letters, diary entries, oral stories and songs commingle to chart the protagonist's web of interrelationships with the Okanagan land, her community, and an international network of environmental activists. In her essay "Land speaks", Armstrong explains the intersubjective relation which ties her to language, land and story as a listener-teller: "language was given to us by the land we live in … it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death" (1998: 176). The Okanagan language is thus an ongoing storytelling process in which she is "being spoken to … and is not the one speaking"; she is simply "a listener to the language's stories" which her words are "merely retelling … in different patterns" (1998: 181). Armstrong also acknowledges that as a writer she is "claimed and owned by this land", because it is N'silxchn, the Okanagan language, that "permeates my experience of the Okanagan land and is a constant voice within me that yearns for human speech" (1998: 176). Her narrative is thus a conscious decolonizing attempt to bend the rigidity of the English language to fluidly accommodate the symbiotic sensibilities of the Okanagan worldview, to make the Okanagan way of life and of being speak through the acquired colonial language. In the following passage, for instance, "the borrowed tongue" (18) is used to convey the Okanagan precept of inseparability between humans and the cosmos through visual patterning and "boundary-busting poetic imagery" (Haladay 2006: 37) which establish a fluidity between earth, sky, language, women, body, rhythm, sound, motion and song, thereby debasing Western visions of reality as grounded in dualistic divisions and asserting the Okanagan view of reality as transformative, changeable, animated and alive:

> *Sky and breath*.
> One and the same in her language. Once said as word, she feels the sky images form. Dressing. Putting its dress on.
> She sees it that way. A billowing garment covering the female form, moving with the body. In seeing sky, seeing also the warm earth-female it covered. Finding herself in that. Finding peace. Knowing its meaning as her own breath, her own body. She feels light now. Able to dissipate. To move into that vaster rhythm. The song of wings brushing wind (291).

In the novel, Penny Jackson, the activist-artist who is "constructed as a self-image of Armstrong" (Sorflatten 2006: 387), is also claimed by the Okanagan land language, which inspires both her art and her environmental consciousness. Like Armstrong, Penny is a listener-teller of its stories, which she has learned mainly through her great-grandmother Tupa. As an artist, she can hear the voices of the colours speak to her and translates those voices into visual paintings so they can be seen by others. As Tupa says:

> "Paen-aye! You made some painted faces out of the flowers on my shawl. And those white and grey pebbles they make pretty colours. You and the colours can talk, I see. They tell you things. Listen to them. They never lie. Come now … look! There's a turtle now, swimming toward the shore. It comes from the dark down deep. It comes into the light and the colours. It swims the song you were singing" (46).

The colours are here "animate, speaking persons" (Haladay 2006: 34) as are the trees, animals, wind, water, sun and all the other spirit beings of the non-human world which she considers her relatives, and whose brotherly voices/stories she yearns to listen to throughout her life in a relation of holistic interconnectedness that allows her to partake in mystical knowledge. It is, for instance, through the dove's cooing, the squirrel's chattering, the whispering sound of the pine needles, the clicking of grasshoppers and the glorious rising of the sun that she "can hear the mystery" (38) of cosmic perfection and thereby "achieve the power to become serene and calm within and so to make good decisions" (34).

Thanks to the land's stories, Penny's artistry and sense of self develop along the Native paradigm of inseparability, relationality and reciprocity, which provides a counter-narrative to Western individualism, dualisms and hierarchies. Indeed, it is the disassociation between the human and non-human world that Penny identifies as being responsible for environmental degradation and human disease. In the novel's more overtly political sections, Armstrong denounces the desecration of the land as a consequence of colonial reasoning and globalisation, which is "a global design/of conjure and conquer" (151). Free enterprise and capitalism are, for instance, seen as having severed familial connections with the land (and within communities) in favour of money and power, which equate to exploitation, mass production and pollution:

> Shit, is what is happening, that's what. The resources are getting plundered and everything polluted. Do you know the extent of damage that free enterprise has caused? Never mind the fact that there is a rigid class system, as a result, keeping the rich powerful and the poor powerless … It's effecting the environment and it's getting worse. It's got to effect the people in the end (81).

The effects include "systematized racism" (185), compromised food security (228), and unethical behaviours like "[p]utting human genes into pigs and tobacco plants … making new bacteria and killer viruses for weapons … And growing human tissue to sell" (138). Ultimately, these individualistically-based socioeconomic systems have created an imbalance between "body human" (84) and spirit that mars human health, as Penny's cancer diagnosis attests. Comparing her cancer to the flesh-eating monsters of Indigenous creation stories, Penny indeed admits that: "Now everything is out of balance … We put the things out there which was not meant for our bodies to have to deal with. Our bodies are part of the natural world" (247)[7]. In order to heal, therefore, "[w]e have to try to restore the balance

[7] The monsters are all those things that breach the balance with the natural world and have to be rid of, if we want to survive.

in the natural world" rather than "think we can escape by making newer better drugs" (247-278) which just make us weaker.

In *whispering in shadows* Armstrong's belief in the sacred power of story to transform and heal the world[8] is reclaimed in contrast to modern science's veneration for drug-based therapies which fail to cure the body/spirit divide. Woven into the fabric of the text are, for instance, Coyote trickster stories, which remind us that the world undergoes constant change because the demonic flesh-eaters shapeshift and come back in different forms, but also that "the spirits of the earth can tip the scales" (239). Coyote can, indeed, transform those monsters and "redraw them. Towards nature's way" (192) so as to re-establish "a golden connection/to the big mother" (152). His presence is a reassurance of hope in the eternal possibility to achieve reconciliation and unity with creation because the knowledge about how to do that is contained in stories. As he tells Penny in her final dream, "it's in the story. Every story. It's just the same old monsters again. I'll take care of them bastards" (287).

Armstrong also honours Okanagan *captikwl* (oral stories) by associating Penny with Shining Copper Woman, the planetary First Mother of ancient creation stories who "shone so bright people thought she was like the sun. And when she died they loved her so much she became a mountain that people went to for a vision" (280). Like Copper Woman, Penny has "a vast love for humans" (294), which fuels her life-long commitment to the activist cause. While evoking matriarchal strength, wisdom and nurturing, the association also connects Penny with her grandmothers – the great-grandmother she is named after and Tupa who left copper pennies "buried beneath the ground when she wanted medicine" (294)[9]. It thus reinstates the inseparability between the living and the dead, as well as the validity of Indigenous medicine and curative methods, which do not separate physical and spiritual healing, but rather adopt a holistic approach that addresses the body, mind, spirit and emotions. To achieve such a wholeness, individual healing cannot be disjoined from family and community. Thus, after her cancer treatment at the clinic, Penny – and her sister Lena who is recovering from drug-addiction – feels "full inside" (281) only upon returning to the mountain (named Copper) and partaking in community-based activities like planting, harvesting and singing on her ancestral gathering grounds. Filled with the warmth of family and with the spirit of the land and of Tupa, both women are finally able to dissipate the shadows that had carved a hole inside them and Penny is ready to accept her imminent death as a cyclical return to the earth that loves her.

Rather than material wealth, Armstrong claims, "it is the people and the community that secure and sustain you" (2020: 168). The importance of community healing and of ceremonies that place the individual within a sacred circle of sharing, caring and mutual support is asserted throughout *whispering in shadows*, which draws on Sylix teaching stories

[8] The power of stories to inform about the world is also opposed to modern technology – i.e., "television as teacher … Computer as guardian of information" (92) – which traps us into virtual life and contributes to "the witchcraft culture of destruction" (192).

[9] Haladay notes that the gesture is "a spiritual and material transaction with the Okanagan land" which upholds a relation of reciprocity. It is opposed to the association of Penny's name with another "form of currency" which is "a manifestation of copper whose worth is valued on a different scale in the colonial marketplace" (2006: 46).

to put forward the Okanagan view of community as a cooperative and harmonious unit, in opposition to the Eurocentric model of community as a collection of "unrelated strangers" (274). The very word *Sylix*, she explains, conveys the idea of a sustaining community through its central image of many strands twined together to make one strong strand (2007: 6-7). For community to function as "a whole healthy organism", however, we have "to be able to sustain community" and bring it "continuously in balance with all of the other living life forms" (2007: 8-9). Community practices that involve working together on the land, self-sufficient communities that rely on organic food production, and pan-Indigenous fair trade cooperatives based on spiritual work, trust and mutual assistance are, for instance, posited as a model of sustainability against the capitalist exploitation of global corporations and NAFTA. Ceremonies and rituals like dancing, singing and smudging, which are performed at the environmentalist gatherings Penny attends, equally celebrate a relational ecology within and among communities, while symbolic associations like the bear[10] who transforms into Tupa, into "the Aztec man from Mexico", and into the constellation of the Great Bear (287) establish "an ecology of relationships" (Chan 2021: 181) along the circular trajectories of Armstrong's story, reminding us that every last piece must be in place to restore wholeness.

3. Lee Maracle: "We start with an old story and…tell it back different but the same"

Restoring unity and wellness to the community through storytelling is also imperative for Sto:lo people because story is governance, culture, identity and relationship. Indeed, story transmits transgenerational memory thereby ensuring the survival of Indigenous epistemic traditions. As Maracle explains, storytelling connects the listeners with the elders who told stories "so we knew what a Sto:lo was, and how we came to be who we are and will always want to be" (2020: n.p). Storytelling is interrelational and interconnective also because it relies on participatory listener-teller interaction and dialogic engagement:

> when we listen, [we] seek to add to the story, to shift the direction of the story and challenge the teller to create a new one from our interventions … We form a circle and insist each of us respond to an aspect of the story, poem, play or the scene that struck us. We take it on a journey through our lives, our history, our sense of self, and engage each other in discussion of that (Maracle 2020: n.p).

Furthermore, storytelling is a collective and reciprocal process in which the listener is summoned to tell the story back. Maracle clarifies how in the mythmaking process of story creation "we start with an old story and … tell it back different but the same" (2018: n.p), thereby allowing different perspectives to be introduced and understanding to be broadened. In this process, the storyteller contributes creatively to tribal culture by creating new stories from old ones to accommodate the changes of modern times, while preserving ancient teachings.

Conjuring "a new story different but the same" (Maracle 2020: n.p) to disrupt colonial

[10] The bear is a Native symbol for healing, family, health and protection.

attitudes is what Maracle does in *Celia's Song*, where she retells the Salish flood story about the double-headed sea serpent who fights itself and causes an underwater earthquake that destroys Indigenous villages in the Pacific Northwest. Retold mainly by Mink[11], the shape-shifting trickster and "primary witness" (5), the story of Restless and Loyal, the battling heads of the serpent, is intertwined with the vicissitudes of a contemporary Sto:lo community who is facing the transgenerational effects of colonialism and cultural erasure. In Maracle's retelling, the double-headed snake, which symbolically reminds us of the spilt between mind and heart, body and spirit, and masculine and feminine, can be read as a metaphor for the dualistic mindset that generates opposition, division, war and violence. As Maracle explains (2016), the two-headed serpent is, indeed, about the split mind (a condition similar to what is known as bipolar disorder in the West) which results from the inability to grieve and accept unspeakable events, like the mass deaths resulting from natural catastrophes and epidemics. The split mind is what Indigenous peoples experienced after the colonial encounter with Europeans and is the source of implosion of their families, societies and nations, because of the destructive and self-destructive violence it upholds.

Maracle's creative reworking of the old story is used to both deconstruct colonial oppression and reclaim storytelling and stories as Indigenous methods of healing and resurgence; it thus responds to her dual intent to decolonize and reconcile. Indeed, the need to remember and retell old stories which preserve Indigenous knowledge is asserted against the neglect for the old ways, which is identified as what caused the breach between humans and the serpent and in turn triggered the natural disaster that devastated the land and the people, leaving both "bent" and "crippled" (3). As Restless contends, after the colonists' prohibition laws which forbade singing among the Natives, the people lost their spirituality and stopped honouring the serpent through ceremony and song. This granted him permission "*to slide from the house front and return to the sea*" (2), thereby depriving the people of his protection. The humans' disrespect for old ceremonies also justifies Restless' hunger for mischief and fuels his "plans to consume the spirit of humans" (27). Opposed to Loyal who is "obsessed with his commitment to protect" (22) and to find someone who will bring back reconciliation and unity, Restless upholds violence and spurs horrific human behaviours like war, rape, incest and pedophilia by returning to the land to devour broken human spirits. He, for instance, feeds on the drunken workers of a pig farm, one of whom kills a woman, chops her body up and feeds her to the pigs (41); he feeds on the "white men who used to come on to the reserve, grab a girl walking down the road, rape her, and return her" (9); and he also slides into Amos, a dislocated survivor of the residential schools who perpetrates the desecration of the land by shamelessly clearcutting trees and, most abhorrently, rapes a five-year-old girl.

It is this violence against women and complete disrespect for the feminine that Maracle denounces as the root cause of Indigenous implosion and of all human and environmental tragedy. The intertwining of gender violence and violence against the land is, for instance, made clear in the novel's opening pages by Celia, the "delusional" seer (11) who witnesses

[11] In line with storytelling as a collective enterprise the story is fleshed out through the accounts offered by Celia and her grandmother Alice, which create a more comprehensive narrative.

the storm's destruction of Nuu'chalnulth territory in a vision. As the ribbon of seaweed braided with "beer bottles, chip bags, hamburger wrappers … underwear and condoms" washes up on the shore, she wonders if "this debris began as an insult to women" and is abhorred by the thought that "the woman's panties are so small" she may have not been old enough to consent (12-13). Again such violence is seen as a by-product of colonialism and the loss of Indigenous value systems which have resulted in the spiritual malaise of the people. As Maracle writes in *I Am Woman*:

> Sexism, racism and the total dismissal of Native women's experiences … result from the accumulation of hurt sustained by our people over a long period of time. Our communities are reduced to a sub-standard definition of normal, which leads to a sensibility of defeat, which in turn calls the victim to the table to lateral violence … On this table of lateral violence sit the violence of men and women against children and the violence of men toward women (1996: IX).

The violation of women's and young girls' bodies and the implicit loss of connection with the feminine is what needs to be addressed by the characters in the novel in order to start their process of reconciliation and healing. As part of the "struggle to clear the table of lateral violence" (1996: IX), Maracle's tale prompts a decolonization of the feminine which restores value to women and their traditional roles in Sto:lo matriarchal societies. In the novel, it is, indeed, the women who will "*find a way to reconcile the new life with the old story*" (62-63) so the people may rediscover who they are and heal from their anger, hurt and disconnectedness. It is the women who are the knowledge-keepers of traditional Indigenous herbal medicines, who provide care to the sick, and who administer community healing through storytelling and other ceremonies, which are thus revalorized as foundational to Indigenous epistemologies, in contrast with non-Native views of oral stories as make-belief legends and of their rituals as "witchcraft, mumbo jumbo, voodoo" (258). Stories are, indeed, exchanged to foster nurturing community bonds, which can resurrect traditional ways of life based on a participatory sharing of experiences and on working together to find release from trauma and pain. They are shared to provide relief in moments of enormous emotional and physical distress, such as when Stacey recounts her sexual affair with a doctor to the women while they nurse little Shelley after her brutal torture and abuse:

> The women responded with deep acknowledgement. Except Celia, who isn't sure if she should laugh or be horrified. She wonders what kind of people think about sex while tending a dying child … The women have relaxed into Stacey's story. They seem to need to be relaxed to keep up the madness of tending Shelley (199).

Consensual sex and love, which Maracle believes has "the power to heal" (1996: 23), are here counterpoised to sexual violence and embraced as forces that can restore respect for women and feminine values. Finally, stories are shared to provide guidance. Jacob, the would-be shaman who can potentially restore the balance with the serpent, is, for example, told stories about Ravensong by Celia and her mother that provide him with the knowledge

he needs to face his own terrible fear – the fear that he might allow his masculine side to predominate and become disrespectful of the feminine like child-abusers and rapists. The women's stories also teach him the value of empathy and the need to restore the relation of reciprocity with the land, so he can embrace his role as shaman and resist being swallowed by the snake.

By embracing storytelling as "an act of ceremony that seeks to undo and re-imagine" (Sium & Ritskes 2013: VIII), *Celia's Song* also attempts to heal the horrific transgenerational legacy of the residential school system and to prompt re-indigenization against the loss of Indigenous culture it occasioned. Like story, song and dance are thus reclaimed as valuable agents of spiritual healing, which restores connectivity and holism to the individual and the community. As Mink remarks:

> *Songs are about light. They teach our children to adore the light inside. They tantalize the musculature and restore cellular movement in that easy way that the breath of the four winds has of tantalizing the earth, dragging sound through trees, and haunting the world with the beauty of breath's power. Breath on vocal cords … can inspire humans to resist tyranny … can settle the fears of a child. Song's breath across vocal cords can excite the love of a woman for a man … restore peace of the body after the agony of divorce … heal the sick, raise the dead, and encourage the living to go on in the face of terror* (215).

During the comeuppance clubbing ceremony, dancing, for instance, releases Amos from the many "horror stories his body collected" (254) due to the physical, sexual and psychological abuses he suffered in residential school, while the singing of his dead ancestors allows him to free his spirit from "his toxic insane life" at the mercy of the serpent and from "the deep toxicity of the memory of hate, of hurt" (255). Singing is, likewise, used by the old bones in the mountain – those of the original people who fell out of the sky before the newcomers arrived – to guide Jacob on his vision quest and to soothe the angry uninterred younger bones of the longhouse who had shared Restless' hunger for revenge against the people's negligence. As a symbol of ancestral Indigenous culture and resilience, the old bones seek to overturn Restless' anger, hurt and fear and restore Loyal's protection, caring and courage. The unison of song between the old and new bones at the end of the novel bears hope that the "the threat of the serpent" (62) can ultimately be removed and the crazy, split-minded people healed.

4. Conclusion: Conversive Listening

Indigenous stories, Sium and Ritskes state "are the continuing fire that keeps Indigenous being alive and dynamic" (2013: vi). Indeed, as Armstrong tells us, *captikwl*, the Sylix word for 'story', contains the image of the ember flying off after the fire is dying out, so that the knowledge we have can be split off in the stories and breathed on to the future generations to shed light to darkness. In this dark age it is important, she claims, to listen to these stories and "rekindle a new fire from the small embers" (2021: n.p).

In the novels discussed Armstrong and Maracle have indeed breathed new life into old stories, rekindling those embers to fit the needs of our modern times. By sharing their

stories with us, they are making us all participant of their Earth-honoring worldviews and are summoning us to become participatory conversive listeners of the land's voice. It is our call now to unite in a global, pan-human effort to heal Mother Earth and free humanity from violence of all kinds. As Mink concludes: "*You know what to do with the story now*" (269).

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Soil-searching: Grief and Healing in Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling* (2019)

Abstract I: La frattura nel rapporto tra gli esseri umani e il mondo naturale necessita di essere sanata. La prospettiva antropocentrica inscritta in gran parte della codificazione occidentale della dinamica natura/cultura si basa sull'idea errata della preminenza dell'uomo sul resto del mondo naturale, che si è tradotta in azioni largamente sprezzanti e/o apertamente distruttive perpetrate entro i confini di una mentalità dominatrice (Eisler 2002) e nella (spesso intenzionale) noncuranza o mancanza di consapevolezza rispetto alle interconnessioni, alle influenze e alle interdipendenze che legano l'umano e il non umano (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020). Il presente articolo si propone di contribuire allo sviluppo di tale linea di indagine esaminando come la relazione umano/non umano sia messa in discussione, ridisegnata e ricostruita in *The Grassling* di Elizabeth-Jane Burnett. Difatti il testo, memoir ecopoetico imperniato sull'idea di lutto, sia personale sia ambientale, si serve della creazione, tramite metamorfosi, di un organismo ibrido uomo/pianta (il *Grassling* eponimo) come strumento di trans-corporeality (Alaimo 2010) per colmare e sanare la frattura esistente tra umano/non umano.

Abstract II: The rift in the relationship between human beings and the natural world necessitates healing. The anthropocentric perspective inscribed in much of the Western codification of the nature/culture dynamic is based on the misplaced idea of the pre-eminence of humankind over the rest of the natural world, which has resulted in largely dismissive and/or downright destructive actions perpetrated within the confines of a dominator mindset (Eisler 2002) and the (often wilful) disregard for or lack of self-awareness in regards to the environmental interlinkages, effects, and interdependencies which tie the human and the non-human (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020). This article seeks to investigate this specific topic by examining how this conflicting relationship is challenged, redrawn and restored in *The Grassling* by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett. The ecopoetic memoir, centred around a sense of grief both personal and environmental, employs the trans-corporeal (Alaimo 2010) device of a metamorphosed human/plant hybrid (the eponymous Grassling) to bridge, and ultimately heal the human/non-human fracture.

Keywords: Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling*, ecopoetic memoir, trans-corporeality, human and non-human relations, healing, nature/culture.

If the land, like a body, can hold a trauma […], it can also, perhaps, hold a healing
Elizabeth-Jane Burnett (2019: 149, *Elk-sedge*)[1].

1. "Reading transcriptions of soil song"

The nature/culture divide accounts for a large portion of the Western understanding of the world, the backbone of its modern constitution (Latour 1993) and it involves the pitting against each other of what have been deemed two separate ontological domains. Convention regards nature as a combination of mechanical and preordained processes, which operate independently of our human social life – an uncontested, hollowed background for our development (Alaimo 2010; Barad 2007). Culture, by contrast, is the product of man's uniqueness, a reified, past-tense catalogue of norms and conventions, devised by and for humans as a social group (Jones 2009b; Murphy 1992). Their separation has resulted in a wide range of ontological and empirical implications; chief among them is the outright dismissal of the existence of natural or non-human agency, followed by the exclusion of all but the dominant human perspective from "historical, political, and ethical formulations" (Jones 2009b: 309).

It can be argued that man's purported belief in his own uniqueness, the Enlightenment-born and all-human need to hold on to "a core identity as though it were a possession" (Haraway 1991, quoted in Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020: xvii), combined with his reliance on nature to survive, is reminiscent, to some extent, of the Hegelian master-slave dynamic (Brennan 2007) which is yet to be solved. Mankind is, for its most part, still tightly attached to the dominator mindset (Eisler & Fry 2019) and to the power, control and profit it provides (Sullivan 2013)[2]. It is no surprise, therefore, that the preservation of its supremacy is still largely privileged over the embracing of cooperation and prosocial partnership models with nature (Eisler 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019), needed "for the attitude of domination to cede to the attitude of respect" (Brennan 2007: 525). The repercussions of this deliberate fracture are becoming evident in our present time, as several of "the perilous situations many sectors of global society appear to face in terms of ecological, economic, and cultural sustainability are, in part, caused by the nature/culture schism" (Jones 2009b: 309). Even today the existence of such a dichotomy has been largely criticised, altered, if not downright overturned[3]. However, it remains generally widespread (whether by denial, ignorance or design) and blatantly clashes with the current developments, in both natural and social sciences, that explain and support the need for a renewed understanding of the world as

[1] All quotations are taken from the 2019 Penguin edition of Burnett's book. Chapter titles are cited within brackets along with page numbers.

[2] The dominator mindset can be traced back to another pillar of modern thought, Descartes' mind/body (matter) dualism splitting the mind (capable of thought and language) from the natural human body as two different entities. Trickling down from this, the related dualisms of subject/object and agency/structure, made it easy to regard the cultural (the mind) as the agent and nature (the body) as the passive recipient of that action (and of the control that comes with it; Jones 2009a).

[3] One of such reworkings is Haraway's nondualistic concept of "natureculture(s)", which places nature and culture on a continuum, highlighting their inseparability, hybridability and interconnectedness (2003; 2008).

the "ongoing outcome of myriad entanglements of elements and processes" (Jones 2009a: 295) straddling both sides of the divide, and of life as the result "of complex interplays, or entanglements, between all manner of processes and elements – bio-physical, economic, cultural, technological, human and non-human" (Jones 2009a: 294).

A reverberation of the nature/culture divide can be detected also within the Western literary tradition. Amitav Ghosh contends that the divide is particularly visible (and still somewhat ongoing) in the novel, which starting from the late nineteenth-century, has been gradually sanitised of nature in its active, agency-driven capacity. Despite encountering a measure of resistance, the endeavour was particularly successful in the expunging of "every archaic reminder of Man's kinship with the nonhuman" (Ghosh 2016: 70). A suppression, Ghosh adds, born out of a myopic way of thinking in "discontinuities", which intentionally excludes entities and forces that fall outside the scope of contingent problems and, in turn, makes thinking in interrelations unconceivable (2016: 56). The exercise in spatial, temporal and existential parcelling and restricting down to human terms what is narratable (sometimes what is *worth* narrating) comes with the exclusion of anything that might elude such operations (De Cristofaro & Cordle 2018; Ghosh 2016). What the Anthropocene[4] has shown is the shortcomings of this mindset, demanding an immediate amendment to man's philosophical and practical dealings within the world (Lucci 2018). With long-believed inanimate entities and forces coming alive and demanding attention comes the reckoning for the nature/culture divide, as well as the impossible-to-ignore "awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself" (Ghosh 2017: 63). Such systematic and deliberate marginalisation or exclusion from literary discourse leads to the discounting and silencing of the non-human voices (and agency) that inhabit the planet alongside man.

It is in restoring their agency that lies the crux of finally embracing the notion that the basis of life on Earth is relational rather than autonomous (Jones 2009a) and that humans are unceasingly participating "in crisscrossing sociocultural and ecological webs or life" (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor 2020: xvii). The surge in critical discourse regarding the question of non-human agency, its definition and conceptual underpinnings has followed a parallel route with the considerable increase in literary works, both concerned with decentring the human and envisioning alternative, post-human, multispecies, new materialistic, trajectories[5]. As Amitav Ghosh asserts stories and man's ability to tell them are "signs of our animality rather than our uniqueness", vestiges of humanity's "pre-linguistic selves" (2022), and have been used to comprehend the world and channel that understanding (De Cristofaro & Cordle 2018). It seems crucial then, for it to be the same instrument that would help humankind reach a deeper and wider understanding of it.

Both the refranchising of the non-human and the healing of the fracture between the

[4] The term Anthropocene is as widespread as it is contested. It should be noted, however, that several alternatives have been proposed: the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Chthulucene, the Oliganthropocene, and the Homogenocene (Vermeulen 2020).

[5] For a foray into the multifaceted critical discussion, see, among others, Alaimo 2010; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Kirksey 2014; Haraway 1985; 1991; 2003; 2008; 2016.

natural and the cultural are at the core of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling* (2019). An ecopoet and an academic, Burnett dedicates her critical and creative work to the topics of nature and the environment. Her experimental poetry, appeared in poetry collections (i.e. *Swims*, 2017; *Of Sea*, 2021) as well as in several anthologies, fits in-between the "environmentalists who write paeans to the natural world and issue warnings", and the "historian-poets who plough up the mists of our folklore to be rehashed with the hyperlocal" (Sy-Quia 2019). Indeed, *The Grassling* interweaves the seemingly irreconcilable perspectives of the (eco) political, scientific sense of the activist and the aesthetic, almost reverent eye of the poet. Inspired by the Devonshire landscape surrounding the village of Ide, where the author was born and raised, *The Grassling* is a multifaceted and hybrid text, an unconventional memoir which combines nature with life writing, and poetry with science. The interlocking, sometimes conflicting, juxtapositions deployed by the author are ensconced into the *The Grassling*'s subtitle – "a geological memoir" – which testifies to Burnett's commitment to the subversion (and enmeshing) of conventionally unrelated domains. By using a profoundly human and human-centred narrative form such as the memoir, while shifting its focus on the geological sphere (a *natural* science), Burnett bridges the gulf between nature and culture, binding the two into a single text. Thus, *The Grassling* is at once a "nature memoir" (Pollard 2020), part of the recent flow of nature writing aimed at restoring the bond with nature humans have slowly disengaged with and responding to the "capitalism-fuelled climate crisis" (Pollard 2020). It is a "document on grief" (Pollard 2020), revolving around her visits to her ailing father (whose death closes the narrative flow), their conversations, and Burnett's effort to connect with his past. *The Grassling* is also a dictionary of the soil, a taxonomic effort aimed at mapping, through language, both the personal and the relational, the human and the non-human. It is in this way that the poet and the woman explore and articulate her twofold ancestry[6]. And in such terms, writing becomes an environmental act, with storytelling enabling a healing process of the fracture between the human and the non-human.

Thus viewed, Burnett's exploration of the acreage and Redland fields her paternal family has resided in and farmed for generations is not a mere pastoral walk of remembrance among trees and gurgling streams. Rather, *The Grassling* departs from "human-centred life writing to encapsulate the geological biography of the land" (Cousins 2020a) and delves further inside the natural dimension, first by unearthing, then by trans-corporeally (Alaimo 2010) reaching a place of renewed awareness of the interconnectedness of all life and all things. The gradual, material, metamorphosis into the eponymous Grassling, turns Burnett into a half-human half-vegetal hybrid entity, which effectively encapsulates and harmonises the human and the non-human. By inhabiting both dimensions at one and at the same time

[6] Half white British, half black Kenyan, Burnett's mixed-race ancestry ascribes *The Grassling* to the genre of Black British writing. Helen Cousins, however, notes that her exploration of heritage and roots is distinct from the more usual search for ancestry in Black British fiction. What hurts Burnett is the alienation that derives from her invisibility, in the light of her strong sense of belonging, both by merit of occupancy and of heritage. As such, Burnett's depiction of race in rural settings subverts the more usual representation, which would be characterised by a state of hypervisibility in an alienating landscape (2020a; 2020b).

the narrator manages to heal her personal and relational wounds; she eventually mends the nature/culture rift.

2. "It was a time of becoming, of beginning, bepersoning, begrassing"

On the surface, *The Grassling* chronicles Burnett's visits home to her ailing father as well as her mapping the fields of her youth and exploring "both the present life to be found there, predominantly the invertebrates found in and under the fields, and the past life that had passed through it" (Burnett & Thomas 2019: 258). At its core, the book provides a narrative of kinship – it is about the presence, the absence, the search for and the disappearance of it. Burnett's search for past and present life in the soil is essentially a multi-layered search for a sense of connection. Her exploration of the fields flows in interlocking routes of history, language and nature: as she follows a map of the area hand-drawn by her father, found at the back of his *A History of the People and Parish of Ide*, a book about those same fields, Burnett focuses on the way walking there might connect her to the places described by her father and to her paternal ancestors, she searches the language and local place names and how these came to be, she seeks to gain access to the spiritual and the natural legacy of those fields (Burnett & Thomas 2019).

The charting of heritage, language, and natural life into a single map occurs under the sign of grief, since her father's declining health prompts Burnett's visits home – this endeavour she recounts with the instinct of a migratory bird: "Just as a bird feels the moment to fly […] I feel the time when I must leave what I am doing and come" (Burnett 2019: 70, *Ritual*). Her father's health condition epitomises the unravelling of her connection to the land where she grew up – a land, a *soil*, which he embodies by virtue of a heritage going back generations, and which Burnett, despite sharing, perceives as "a mixed motion" (47, *Kulungu*), a push-pull between "all that is deeply knotted" (47) in her and the alienation she experiences on the part of "those there now, who cannot see into me" (47). British and Kenyan by origin, Burnett seemingly occupies an in-between space in her encounters with people[7]: her skin sometimes still makes her "unfathomable" (47) in Devon, despite having grown up there, *belonging* in her village and in its landscape through her father's lineage. The banishing of the "mixed motion" takes the shape of physically retracing her father's steps, using his map, his words, and his book as a guide, to feel closer to him "through being in a space that he has been in. A space where his father has been, and his father too" (147, *Elk-sedge*). Yet, her "return to this soil" (9, *Acreage*) becomes not only a way for her to walk along the length of her genealogy, but it turns into the chance of crossing a threshold into a different sort of kinship[8]. As physically as she perceives herself walking in her father's

[7] It is worth noting, however, that not all encounters Burnett has with people are marked by alienation or her perceived "unfathomableness". For example, although the Teign Valley museum employee appears to scrutinise her, so much so that, as she did when encountering the Ide villager, she longs for "a cyborg attachment making external form match internal" (79, *Teign Valley*), he "brightens" when she tells him her grandmother is from the area and does not question the notion (Cousins 2020a; 2020b).

[8] The imagery of boundaries in Burnett's relation to the landscape is recurring (Cousins 2020a) and it engenders in/out perspectives deeply rooted in the question of both natural and human belonging. In man-made maps the boundaries shrink and expand, overlap and separate mirroring the shifts in ownership and

footsteps, she gradually senses a change occurring in the fabric of her being when she begins to "dissolve into her environment" (Cousins 2020a) and the environment to integrate itself into her body.

At the start, Burnett experiences nature as a human would: she crosses fields and paths, noting colours, textures and sounds, she tracks animals and takes little handful of flowers back to her father. Not before long, her experiencing of the natural grows multi-sensorial and it deepens as she burrows her bare hands and feet into the soil or lies down on the forest floor under the rain. She thus knocks "on the door of the earth" (Burnett & Thomas 2019: 264); standing under the pouring rain, she leaves "bits […] that sank into the soil to decompose and channel nutrients through intravenous roots" (45, *Kulungu*). Her human substance becomes "ultimately inseparable from the environment" (Alaimo 2010: 2), to the point that she begins to challenge her own anatomy: "What do I need a body for now? Only to pass its nutrients on to another who needs them more" (46, *Kulungu*). Eventually, she decides to "draw the earth to my tongue" (84, *Under Wood*), so that soil-searching turns into soil-tasting. It is after this almost communion-like crossing, a literal incorporation, that the birth of the "Grassling" takes place through gradual metamorphosis: a hybrid both woman and plant, no longer a *she*, but a *it,* which "pushes up from the soil" (and this is how part Two of the book begins; 91, *Warren*).

The Grassling shifts and morphs over time, as Burnett's awareness of the flimsiness of the confines between herself and the soil sharpens. When, at first, her understanding of herself remains anchored to her human anatomy, "the organs that resist" (45), so is the Grassling's: "First its forehead […]. Nose, lips, chin […]. Shoulders, breasts, back" (91). Yet, once the metamorphosis reaches its peak, the Grassling (and Burnett) begin to share a single, hybrid anatomy:

> I feel my internal circuitry change: I am plant as well as animal. My blood transports oxygen; my chlorophyll produces it. Oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus surge along tissue, torso, culm, to my blades. Blood blends magnesium as well as iron. I am grass made flesh. Grassling (148, *Elk-sedge*).

As one single entity at once human and non-human, the Grassling has its own blended anatomy (the *blades* both shoulder *blades* and *blades* of grass), a body which epitomises the profound interlinkages and interdependencies and which in and of itself subverts the nature/culture dichotomy. Its hybridity, the coexistence of human and non-human inside the same living form, the agency ensconced in the shift in pronoun, all challenge the idea of human exceptionality, of its right of precedence over all other living entities. Furthermore, with its own agency, the Grassling rejects the dominator mindset; all he yearns for is to find a piece of land in which to lie "in the dense gathering of organism, of processes" (96, *Warren*) and "not to fight the badger or the bird or the weasel, but to lie alongside them, to coexist" (94), joining in into a prosocial partnership mode of relations (Eisler 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019).

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belonging. An idea carried over in man's conceptualisation of nature: "The hedge delaying our admittance like somebody checking we are on the guest-list" (Burnett & Thomas 2019: 263).

Because it is "grass made flesh", the Grassling engenders a new understanding of the interlinkages between man and environment. With Burnett's metamorphosis, the natural world becomes part of her own self, effectively entangling the two on a physical level. The metamorphotic movement is not merely metaphoric but corporeal, a shift that "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2010: 2). Inasmuch as the new materialistic perspective considers the body as being an "intra-active materiality" (Alaimo quoted in Kuznetski 2020; Barad 2007), the hybrid body of the Grassling can be rightfully viewed as an enhanced iteration of the transcorporeal, the conflation and continued interaction inside the same material body of the natural non-human and the cultural human, which brings about the subversion and healing of the nature/culture schism. As an entity, the Grassling embodies Alaimo's idea that "'the environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves" (2010: 4).

The shifts in language and style mark the interweaving of nature and culture. In *The Grassling* language is a route Burnett takes while searching the soil: what ties her to her father is her fascination with the interrelatedness of places and language – a shared research interest[9]; being a poet, a self-proclaimed ecopoet, she uses language to convey the environment in her work. At first, the "etymological mining" that "draws me and draws him" (70) and "the language of the fields" (9) are forms of cultural iteration, however conscious of their own pitfalls. As Burnett progressively enmeshes herself into nature, her language changes, she becomes aware that words can serve to amplify the non-human.

The focal role of language in *The Grassling* is embedded into the very architecture of the text. On the surface, the title may seem a mere reference to the metamorphic entity emerging in the course of Burnett's explorations: a new-born, small, young sprout of grass. Yet, delving deeper into the word – mirroring Burnett's own interrogations of language – one can unveil another side to the Grassling, both title and creature. The suffix -ling, presumably derived from the Proto Germanic *-linga-, is used to form noun-derivatives linked to the concept of belonging to, coming from, descending from either places or people; for example, it was consistently utilised in Anglo-Saxon to designate origins or lineages[10]. The Grass-*ling* then, is not simply a small grass sprout, but it also forms part of a *natural* lineage: descended from grass, belonging to grass. Such considerations find an echo in Burnett's own search within her *human* heritage as well as her hunting for meaning in the stratifications of language in names and toponyms – both aspects which tether her to her father.

Similarly, the epigraphs Burnett uses to open her memoir contribute to the enmeshment. The three excerpts – from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Monica Gagliano's personal website and Enid Blyton's children's book *The Magic Faraway Tree* (1943) – each represent a

[9] In relation to this sharedness Sy-Quia argues that *The Grassling* entertains an ongoing dialogue with the *History* Burnett's father authored, picking up from where he left off with the inclusion of a new outlook concerned with pinpointing how climate change and urban-dominant societies have impacted farming in the area. It maintains "a native reverence for our Anglo-Saxon forebears, but married with Snyder's sense of geological time-spans and elevation of the non-animal" (2019).

[10] "-ling", in https://www.etymonline.com/word/-ling.

thread in *The Grassling*'s tapestry, while simultaneously playing into the interlinkages the memoir encompasses. Carson's words on the centrality of the soil in the interplay of life are a testament to Burnett's ecological concerns and objectives; Gagliano's description of plant's bioacoustic mode of communication allows Burnett to introduce not only an allusion to non-human forms of language (the Grassling's voice), but also to "the astute scientific nous" (Sy-Quia 2019) which she weaves through her evocative ecological reflections. Lastly, Blyton's words feed into the channelling of non-human voices ("whisha-wisha-wisha-wisha") as well as Burnett's experimental *poiesis* in bringing them onto the page. Also present is a reverberation of Burnett's multi-sensorial, almost primal, search into the soil to decipher nature's secrets in the whispers of the trees by "pressing our left ears to the trunk of the trees" to "*really* hear what they say". Burnett's italicisation of "really" tells of her own aims: the promotion of a renewed understanding of those largely ignored voices.

The book is structured like a dictionary, with chapter titles in alphabetical order (from *Acreage* to *Zygote*) interspersed with three short interludes titled "Soil memoir of"[11] – Burnett's attempts at mapping with words specific, meaningful places. The construction of a dictionary-like memoir allows the author to slowly thin out the boundaries between the natural and the cultural. Even though both memoir and dictionary are manifestations of the human (and therefore the cultural) there is a profound difference in scope and aim: if the dictionary is meant for ordering and categorising an entire system or field of knowledge, the memoir, as a genre, is interested in relating the intimate, touchstone moments of a personal existence. Taking advantage of the discrepancy, Burnett employs the authoritative veneer associated with the codifying powers of a dictionary to structure her geological memoir and expands the intimate, human connotations of the memoir to include the depiction of the life of the not-exactly-human Grassling. The use of the dictionary configuration is particularly consequential not only because a *Dictionary of the Soil* was the author's working title for *The Grassling*, but also because, by exploiting the seal of legitimacy a dictionary can provide, Burnett is able to fulfil one of her objectives: "the soil needs its own dictionary" (66, *Protozoa*).

Burnett's dictionary pushes at the boundaries of convention: each entry has the form of an episodic chronicle or a pseudo-short story (Cousins 2020a) occasionally featuring experimental verses. The dictionary quality of the memoir is further bent out of shape and partially subverted by Burnett's approach. If part *One* (letters A-V) is composed of one chapter per letter, part *Two* is stretched out with 24 chapters for letters W-Z. Such an

[11] The soil memoirs are structured as a soil volume, which is "the basis of soil study by pedologists […] represented by a soil profile with its constituent horizons and layers. […] The character and arrangement of these horizons within the profile provide the morphological information which is the basis for distinguishing one soil from another and which enables soils to be classified and mapped" (Bridges 1990: 3). Burnett herself, in a note on *Soil memoir for Druid's Hill*, mentions that the concept of soil memoirs is based on the one described in B. Clayden, *Soils of the Exeter District* [*Sheets 325 and 339*], that is to say a combination of maps showing the distribution of soils, and memoirs, bulletins, and documents describing the characteristics of the mapped soils, from both a scientific and agricultural perspective. In *The Grassling* Burnett pairs her words with different horizons in an almost burrowing-like effect, as if her words are penetrating the soil. Moreover, the structure of the soil memoirs reinforces what the *The Grassling*'s subtitle purports, namely the juxtaposition of the geological (the scientific, the natural) and the human (the emotional, the cultural).

asymmetry undercuts the rigorous classification one expects from a dictionary. As Burnett morphs into the Grassling, her awareness expands and so does the dictionary of the soil she is compiling. And in expanding, she progressively goes deeper into both nature and language: chapters 37-45 all bear Anglo-Saxon titles (*e.g. Ymbgedelf*, digging around; *Yr*, the rune for bow, relating to the "perfect application of skills and knowledge to natural materials", 167, *Yr*), and the last two terms (and chapters) both pertain to the core of the natural world either geologically or biologically: *Zoic* and *Zygote*. This final shift right into the natural is especially revealing if one considers that the first chapter is entitled *Acreage* and is thus linked to the cultural sphere – a measurement for land is but a human convention (and one associated with ownership).

As the metamorphosis gains momentum, so does the shift in the very structure of the language, which steadily begins to incorporate elements no longer attributable to human norms. "The voice of the grass […] scorns punctuation" (95, *Warren*) and flows in a *continuum* (all words are joined when the voice is non-human): "whoisitwhatisitsbodyitsechoingspace-isithollowisitstrungisitgrassorwomanisitoneofussprungfromusorwhoisitwhatisit" (95). The trees have their own typography, seemingly arbitrary spaces and capital letters (Cousins 2020a; Bekers & Cousins 2021): "Shhhh sloe shhhh slow sOAK shhhh shhh will" (131, *Xylology*); the Grassling slowly discovers its new voice by imitating the birds in the fields, having "to forget what it has learned" (139, *Xylophone*) about speaking[12]; when the Grassling appears on the page, the layout shifts, the inside and outside margin are narrower; finally, the chapter *Elk-sedge*, where the metamorphosis reaches its peak, and Burnett acknowledges her transformation, momentarily interrupts the alphabetical order of the book – the birth of the hybrid disrupts man-made categorising.

This new language is made to "think outside the human" (17, *Culm*), and so the "densely wooded speech" (111, *Withy*) of the soil becomes both a bridge and a buoy, its words "the joins that graft" (120, *Words*). And graft they do. Her new language, the Grassling's new awareness, the book she is writing, each page "fleshy" (144, *Xylotomy*), are the scion on the stock of her father, his history and the soil they share. The grafting in Burnett's case coincides with writing herself into the soil of her father, in writing herself "into him" (149) and, "through a shared space and a shared narrative" (149), growing into an entity which contains them both, as well as the soil, and the Earth, to which they belong. Burnett's efforts at grafting herself onto her father, however, are also fueled by a second undercurrent, grief.

3. "Grief would break from its head like a bird from its shell"

The connection between Burnett and her father is layered in soil and language. The emotional undercurrent of her visits is mutable: as he edges in and out of health, so does her attitude shift from hope to a prescient sort of mourning. And he is so embroiled with the land and

[12] The creation of a new language, a hybrid just like the entity that first learns, then employs it, is part of the process of becoming, of becoming-with as Haraway (2003; 2008) and multispecies ethnography term it, as "the new kinds of relations emerging from nonhierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents […] often involve the development of hybrid, embodied and multisensorial languages to communicate across species boundaries" (Wright in https://www.multispecies-salon.org/becomings/).

the soil that "the fields call when he does" (70). There is always a sense of hope, at the start, for him to be beckoning her home, it must mean he is well enough to talk, to be left for a time as she explores the acreage he embodies. When she arrives, the fields "hold a sense of hope" (70), they are a place of resilience, of "holding on" (70). As she wanders, the deeper she goes into his history and into the soil, the more frequent the thoughts of her father "teetering on this side of the ground" (106, *Wills*) become. It appears evident how much her fieldwork, her research and her writing are an exercise in holding onto him: "*a moment more*, I whisper to him across the fields: *and for as many moments as you can*" (106). So pervasive become the thoughts about her father's impending death that they even start to seep into the Grassling's own consciousness: "it imagines itself without him. It has to" (110, *Withy*).

The inextricability of human and non-human, daughter and plant, from the Grassling's fabric even when it comes to something personal, and considered profoundly human like grief, is evident as the alchemy of hope and despondency soaks into the soil. Indeed, the grief and mourning she feels towards her father is slowly paired with an earthly sense of impending doom. As she explores, as she writes and metamorphoses, Burnett is slowly filled with a sense of bereavement for the nature of her youth she finds drastically altered by human action. She acknowledges with growing consternation the negative effects that farming has had on the state of the soil, causing its degradation and in turn the displacement of wildlife, pollution, and the upending of ecosystems. "One disappearance triggers another" (38, *Indigo*), she notes gazing at wild flowers, and thinks "how many more summers will the scene before me play out, as pollinators struggle to navigate extreme weather, the depleted flower habitats caused by intensive farming and urbanization, and harmful pesticides?" (38). The solastalgic (Albrecht 2005) scrutiny of a beloved place slowly vanishing relates to the other forthcoming bereavement: "It is a strange sensation to be watching something coming to an end" (38).

The twofold witnessing is what solidifies this connection: "Things are leaving and things will not be the same. He is leaving and it will not be the same" (111). Burnett's twofold grief is personal and planetary, and it triggers an equally intimate sense of mourning. The human and the non-human are thus once again intertwined. In grief-borne kinship both are presented as equally mournable subjects, a subversion of the widespread propensity to derealize the non-human from the realm of the grievable (Cunsolo Willox 2012; Cunsolo Willox & Landmann 2017). The only discrepancy lies in the degree of culpability the human carries when it comes to non-human loss. Ecological grief combines grief and guilt, a mourning for both what has been lost and for what has been destroyed (Menning 2017). "We lurch from hero to demon" (68, *Quarter*) within crises of our making "often overlooking the value in […] being neighbourly" (68); in essence, disregarding what is to be gained from espousing a prosocial, partnership-driven approach when relating to our environment (Eisler 2002), while experiencing the full brunt of the dominator mindset we have enacted in its stead.

The two threads of grief follow analogous trajectories towards further entwining and reaching to their culminating point. At her father's funeral, encapsulated in the last interlude, *Soil Memoir for St. Mary's Churchyard*, Burnett initially registers the silence in the wake of the severance: "When one voice falls away, they all do" (181). As the man is laid

to rest, all the connections he embodied rupture along with his ability to maintain them: "Where there are no words there is no join" (181). Subverting the words of the *Psalms* 103: 15-17 (KJV) recited at the funeral – "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place shall know it no more" – Burnett declares that "this place knows him" (181). Her father's connection to the soil is remarked even in death as "the grass takes to him like a part of itself returning" (182). The Grassling, a mourner at the funeral, "bends into its end" and lets itself be "carried down into the falling ground", not knowing "how to get back up" (182). Born out of connectedness, the Grassling has reached the point of breaking as well as its highest achievement – it has accomplished its mission, relinking the human and the non-human right into the soil. In the aftermath, "it has begun to feel, without bitterness, that it may have served its purpose" (184, *Zygote*) and the metamorphic state (yet not its effects) starts to ebb.

A similar abrupt rupture takes place just before Burnett's father dies, when she goes wild swimming in Appledore. In waters that are tied to her family history, her own self "slips" (178, *Zoic*); she feels "expanded", part of a larger system, breath-bound to her ancestors. Burnett feels the environment breathing in its entirety and variety: animals and plants, stars and planets, the fields and the soil, chemicals and bacteria, all of them united in a choral and communal inhaling/exhaling. She settles and indulges in a current that is simultaneously physical and cosmic. Yet, as she "reverberate[s]" she is abruptly pulled out of the joint exhalation of life: "But I nudge a plastic bottle, and I stop. I end. How do I go on, when there is nowhere to come back to?" (179, *Zoic*). The contact with plastic, a pollutant, an inert, out-of-place material, breaks the human/non-human flow, the communal movement of expansion, plastic being the tangible proof of man's disruptive action upon the environment.

The encounter recalls Rachel Carson's words on groundwater pollution[13], and, in reciting them, Burnett, *transfert*-like, becomes Carson, first, and then she becomes polluted water: "I am that water. […]; I float on and in myself. […] will I ever, ever be clean?" (180, *Zoic*). Yet, Carson's words are able to defeat "the plastic spectre made manifest", having enough potency to rally Burnett to hope: "I am damaged, but it's not quite over. […] Here is a space for salvaging". Reminded of her "zoicness", her inextricable connectedness, Burnett becomes a vessel for a multitude of entities. Latching onto hope, her voice, the same that turned into Carson's, thickens and multiplies into "all the voices of the advocates. All the voices of my family. All the voices of the sea. There is still time" (180). The sublimation of voices marks both an intentional re-embracing of the holistic connection with the non-human and a purposeful foray into advocacy.

[13] "I hear the words of Rachel Carson pass through me as fluidly as my own. 'This groundwater is always on the move', I say. And I am Rachel Carson. 'It travels by unseen waterways until here and there it comes to the surface … all the running water of the earth's surface was at one time groundwater'. And I am that water. I hold not only my own fluid but all of the rocks' of all of the earth; I float on and in myself. I am zoic: containing fossils, with traces of animal or plant life. 'And so, in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere'" (179-180, *Zoic*).

4. Conclusions: "all field, all dew, all hope"

The space for salvaging whose existence Burnett unhesitatingly acknowledges is to be understood as a space for action and hope, fostered by the restoration and amplification of non-human agency. Burnett's metamorphosis, born out of the need of accessing a deeper understanding of herself both as part of her family and of the landscape, conflates the natural and the cultural dimensions inside a hybrid body with its own agency, and bridges over the rift between the two, simultaneously disavowing the dominator mindset: "'What is it the Grassling leaves here?' That awful earthly clinging, that desperate human need to say 'mine' and fence in what that was never yours to fence" (186, *After*).

The space for salvaging can also be regarded as a place for storytelling, the *locus* of our interconnectedness from which that vestige of man's silenced animality can be reached. And Burnett effectively becomes an *advocate*[14] – for she can hear the non-human "language secrete under her feet a secret sequence" (60, *Osteoporosis*), amplify and replicate it. A mirroring which never subordinates it to a human understanding, nor does it try to make it digestible, therefore never discounting its significance or its legitimacy. Even when wondering "what do words add up to" (67, *Quarter*), she remains aware that "there may be a value in this amplification, in the bringing of these characters into the foreground, in changing the way they are looked, or not looked, at" (68-69, *Quarter*).

After her father's death, Burnett traverses the fields "uphill, for it will always now be uphill" (186), aware that "there is nothing left to fear" for the worst, his passing, has already occurred. What is left is his imprint on the landscape around her: "A skylark's flight, the flooding white, the glistening light: my father" (186)[15]. During her walk she dons his coat. The wearing of it becomes an adamantine statement on her part: "My father's coat stays on", she says. On the one hand, this may suggest her reluctance to let go of her father and what he represents – the tradition, the cultural *logos* he embodies. Yet, on the other hand, by using his pen to write his name on a blade of grass, by imprinting her touch on it, and leaving "a part of us there", Burnett quickly comes to a different understanding. The human now connects with the non-human, the time of "becoming, of beginning, of bepersoning, begrassing" is now a time of letting go:

> And as I have processed these multiple convergences, my shape, and the language of my shape, has changed. […] My blood has changed. As my DNA carries along stem, along stolon, along leaf, along rhizome, I am zygote, a cell formed by fertilization. But I have always known that to continue, part of me must break. I have felt the cracks form along my spikelets and moved with the strain, though only part of me has been prepared to let go (184).

The ebbing away of the most corporeal, visibly hybrid elements of the metamorphosis,

[14] From the Latin *advocatus* "one called to aid (another); a pleader (on one's behalf)". In Middle English "one who intercedes for another and protector, champion, patron" https://www.etymonline.com/word/advocate.

[15] The skylark's flight Burnett associates to her father's (now spiritual) presence in the natural world around her is reminiscent of P. B. Shelley's own parallel between Bird and Spirit in *To a Skylark* (1820).

however, does not entail a loss of the awareness gained in this newfound form. The spikelets detach, but the Grassling remains a "wider thing with strange beatings" (184). The term "zygote" is especially telling – and being also the last word/chapter of the dictionary, it is particularly crucial. The zygote is a cell resulting from the union of two distinct gene pools[16], Burnett's identification reveals how the experience of morphing into the Grassling has turned her into the synthesis of two differing domains, the natural and the cultural, a potential foundation for a new way of living, a healed, mindful one. It is no coincidence that her declaration: "I am zygote, a cell formed by fertilization" echoes the "I am grass made flesh" (148) of her metamorphosis. Thus, the moment of "unending, unbeginning, unravelling, unpersoning, ungrassing, unbuttoning" though bittersweet, becomes a time of healing and new realizations, of hope: "I had the joy of coming near […] and that is what does not end" (186). The reframing of possession and loss as deceptive notions and the attainment of a healing, both in personal as well as in planetary terms, through a new transcorporeal understanding of the continual profound human/non-human interactions, is in truth, the subscription to a partnership, a "coming near" in circular coexistence, one that does not end: "I have not lost him, because I never had him. People are not ours to own, we coexist if we're lucky" (186).

The notion of "that great continuing" (187, *After*) Burnett places at the end of both *Before* and *After* (respectively the first and the last sections of her soil dictionary) *de facto* opens and closes Burnett's soil-searching, and marks a time before and after metamorphosis, a pre- and post- healed understanding of all-encompassing interconnectedness. "It is no longer about what I know but what I have the capacity to feel" (187). And Burnett, in writing the name of her father and her family with the man's pen into the soil, in calling out to her father, to her family and "to the ground that gives and takes them" (187) finalises the inception of a new way of looking at and of advocating for the non-human. Her soil-searching, the voyage which brought her under the surface of her landscape and the heritage it safeguarded, and deeper still, into the depths of the Earth and its plight, delivered her of her grief, providing healing through the understanding of interconnectedness. From the ashes of (eco)grief "more than the day is beginning" (187).

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Topografie dialogiche nella narrativa di Abdulrazak Gurnah

Abstract I: Le migrazioni sia all'interno del continente africano che tra l'Africa Orientale e la Gran Bretagna sono al centro della produzione narrativa di Abdulrazak Gurnah. Andando oltre la rappresentazione di ambienti interconnessi fra loro, lo scrittore britannico originario di Zanzibar crea topografie dialogiche che implicano anche reti intertestuali e spunti metanarrativi. Le geografie anfibie raffigurate nelle opere di Gurnah interagiscono e "dialogano" attraverso le storie multiple di cui i personaggi dei romanzi si fanno portatori. In particolare, *By the Sea* (2001) e *Gravel Heart* (2017) insistono sulla connessione fra spazi, in cui passato e presente si incontrano, e mostrano il superamento della dimensione monologica in nome del racconto, che ha un valore terapeutico e plasma le identità dislocate delle figure migranti.

Abstract II: Migrations inside the African continent and between East Africa and Great Britain are at the core of Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction. Going beyond the representation of intertwined environments, the British writer born in Zanzibar creates dialogic topographies, also implying intertextual references and metanarrative strategies. The amphibian geographies displayed in Gurnah's works interact and "dialogue" through the multiple stories told by the characters. In particular, *By the Sea* (2001) and *Gravel Heart* (2017) insist on the connections between spaces where past and present meet and show the overcoming of the monologic dimension thanks to storytelling, which has healing power and contributes to shaping dislocated migrant identities.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea*, *Gravel Heart*, storytelling, topography.

I have no choice but to speak out.
I shall create a space in the world with my story,
a space of honesty, compassion and rebellion.
I shall re-invent a place which I can call home
(Jamal Mahjoub, *Wings of Dust*, 1994: 5).

1. Ri-creare gli spazi

La produzione narrativa di Abdulrazak Gurnah, che mette al centro esperienze di migrazioni e di spostamenti sia all'interno del continente africano che tra l'Africa Orientale e la Gran

Bretagna, permette di cogliere, a prima vista, la contrapposizione spaziale fra il luogo di partenza e quello di arrivo, un motivo ricorrente nelle letterature postcoloniali. Tuttavia Gurnah sviluppa, in maniera originale ed efficace, "topografie dialogiche": nella maggior parte dei suoi romanzi, lo scrittore britannico originario di Zanzibar, vincitore del premio Nobel per la Letteratura nel 2021, rappresenta una significativa interazione spaziale. Infatti i luoghi in cui dimorano i suoi personaggi non si contrappongono fra loro ma si intrecciano e si completano a vicenda, e inoltre 'dialogano' nel tentativo di superare le lacerazioni prodotte dalla dislocazione, in modo da arrivare a una pur provvisoria stabilità identitaria. Le figure di migranti che popolano i romanzi di Gurnah non sono mai a loro agio nell'ambiente in cui vivono e nello stesso tempo appaiono abitanti di mondi diversi; la capacità di raccontare la molteplice appartenenza linguistica e culturale permette loro di lenire la sofferenza e di vincere la solitudine e la marginalità. In questa prospettiva, la dimensione traumatica del discorso postcoloniale, con il suo carico di alienazione e di dolore, grazie alla scrittura e alla narrazione viene resa almeno più accettabile.

Obiettivo di questo articolo è, dapprima, mostrare il forte spessore spaziale delle opere di Gurnah[1]; attraverso due esempi particolarmente rilevanti, il suo romanzo di maggiore successo, *By the Sea* (2001), e un'opera narrativa più recente, *Gravel Heart* (2017) che non ha ancora ricevuto una adeguata attenzione critica, viene esaminata la funzione della strategia narrativa dello scrittore, basata sul "dialogo geografico"[2]: infatti la topografia ha impresse in sé l'emozione e la memoria, che vengono recuperate attraverso il racconto.

La rappresentazione del mondo offerta da Abdulrazak Gurnah attraverso l'ambientazione costiera (il litorale che si affaccia sull'Oceano Indiano) implica innanzitutto la raffigurazione di un variegato arcipelago di popolazioni, lingue e culture. L'autore, stabilitosi in Inghilterra all'inizio degli anni Sessanta, si concentra sui movimenti transnazionali e transculturali che caratterizzano la contemporaneità, senza mai distogliere lo sguardo dalle dinamiche storiche: i suoi personaggi comprendono spesso riferimenti autobiografici; con le loro esperienze riconfigurano un ambito geopolitico che comprende i movimenti migratori non solo verso il contesto occidentale, ma anche entro il continente africano e più in generale nel Sud del mondo.

Gli spazi, nelle sue opere, sono inestricabilmente connessi alle storie, e la funzione narrativa ha un valore terapeutico, conducendo non solo alla comprensione del presente attraverso il recupero del passato, ma anche al superamento dell'alienazione attraverso il dialogo. Le topografie anfibie delineate da Gurnah sono determinate dai loro confini oscillanti: le linee immaginarie che separano il mare dalla terraferma sono fluide, e le loro risonanze

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[1] Lo spazio è la matrice primaria della dinamica storica e sociale, non solo un mero contenitore o uno sfondo degli eventi (Soja 1989). Il paradigma spaziale, nelle sue varie manifestazioni (territoriali, acquatiche) è centrale storicamente poiché produce valori economici e simbolici. Lo spazio plasma le identità e genera gli incontri.

[2] Dialogismo e polifonia sono concetti chiave elaborati da Michail Bachtin. Infatti, per spiegare cosa intenda per polifonia, Bachtin ricorre al concetto di dialogicità. Dostoevskij, secondo il critico russo, ha fatto del romanzo una struttura dialogica, in cui i personaggi dialogano con altri personaggi, i diversi episodi dialogano con altri episodi e le idee raffigurate nel romanzo dialogano con le idee fuori del romanzo. Bachtin (1968, 1975) non può non costituire un riferimento essenziale per questo articolo.

simboliche vengono continuamente riscritte. Il paradigma sviluppato dallo scrittore si può leggere a partire da alcuni modelli elaborati nell'ambito degli studi postcoloniali, quali per esempio le "contact zones" di Mary Louise Pratt (1992) e il "third space" di Homi Bhabha (1994)[3], ma ha caratteristiche uniche a causa dell'incrocio delle relazioni sviluppatesi in questa rete spaziale: le rotte ("routes") marine e oceaniche si intersecano alle radici terrestri ("roots"), mentre la costa è porosa, crea storie che proiettano il passato sul presente e viceversa. Shanti Moorthy (2009) ha significativamente collocato l'opera di Gurnah all'interno del "framework" che denomina "littoral cosmopolitanism". Questa forma di cosmopolitismo è caratterizzata dalla interconnessione fra popolazioni e luoghi entro il cosiddetto "Indian Ocean rim", contraddistinto da secoli di commerci regolati dalla stagione dei monsoni; senza mai raffigurarle in termini idilliaci, Gurnah offre una lettura assai articolata di queste comunità economiche, sociali e famigliari.

2. I luoghi e le storie

By the Sea e *Gravel Heart* rivelano varie modalità con cui le migrazioni hanno trasformato le identità individuali e collettive, nel passato e nel presente, a livello locale e globale[4]. I personaggi migranti di Gurnah incarnano la visione di Achille Mbembe (2017) che considera l'Africa come emblema dei "worlds-in-movement", e invita a riesaminare la storia africana, e specialmente quella del litorale dell'Oceano Indiano, contrassegnata da una rete di scambi culturali che spiegano le complessità del presente (Hofmeyr 2010). *By the Sea* narra la vicenda di Saleh Omar, un sessantacinquenne proveniente da Zanzibar che, un grigio pomeriggio di novembre, atterra all'aeroporto di Gatwick con l'intenzione di chiedere lo status di rifugiato. Il suo racconto in prima persona oscilla fra la descrizione della sua esperienza recente come richiedente asilo in Inghilterra e i suoi ricordi giovanili, quando era proprietario di un negozio di mobili a Zanzibar, poco prima della rivoluzione che ha sconvolto il paese nel 1964, e si intreccia con la storia di un altro esiliato, Latif Mahmud. Gli andirivieni della memoria connettono varie relazioni transculturali. Il romanzo è ricchissimo di riferimenti alla realtà cosmopolita della regione dell'Oceano Indiano, come Saleh nota:

> For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt, made the annual journey to that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent, which had cusped so long ago to receive the musim winds. They brought with them their goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers, and just a glimpse of the learning which was the jewel of their endeavours (Gurnah 2001: 15).

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[3] I riferimenti bibliografici in questo ambito sono assai ampi e si sono notevolmente arricchiti negli ultimi decenni, con i contributi di studiosi quali Ashcroft (2001) e Thieme (2016). Una rassegna di studi significativi si trova in Brazzelli (2018: 21-31).

[4] Il percorso narrativo di Gurnah comprende dieci romanzi, *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrims Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2004), *The Last Gift* (2011), *Gravel Heart* (2017), *Afterlives* (2020), oltre ad alcuni racconti. La scelta di concentrarsi su due soli romanzi di Gurnah non esclude la presenza, anche nel resto della sua opera, di temi e motivi elaborati in modo tale da confermare, pur secondo angolature diverse, l'ipotesi attorno a cui ruota questo articolo.

I discorsi monologici basati su opposizioni binarie vengono sostituiti da prospettive più complesse del mondo che, mentre criticano le brutalità precoloniali, ma anche coloniali e postcoloniali, riconoscono il ruolo delle potenze europee nella ri-definizione dell'identità africana. Nel caso di *By the Sea*, la sensibilità estetica che mette al centro una peculiare forma di dialogismo, caratterizzata dall'intersecarsi di mondi diversi, si realizza in due maniere principali. Innanzitutto, attraverso la fitta rete di riferimenti letterari perfettamente inseriti nel tessuto narrativo, che trasmettono il senso della connessione interculturale; fra i principali troviamo *Le mille e una notte*, la cui struttura è richiamata in termini molto riconoscibili, *Moby Dick*, visto come il racconto di un'ossessione, con cui il romanzo istituisce una serie di analogie, l'*Odissea*, dal momento che i due personaggi viaggiano per poi ritornare a casa con la memoria grazie alle reciproche conversazioni. In seconda istanza, il dialogismo si manifesta attraverso l'intreccio di diverse narrazioni riguardanti il passato, ambientate a Zanzibar, sotto forma di incontri fra Saleh Omar e Latif Mahmud, che nel presente narrativo è un accademico che vive a Londra e viene contattato come interprete, prima che Saleh riveli di aver nascosto la sua conoscenza dell'inglese.

Il personaggio che costituisce l'anello di congiunzione tra le famiglie dei protagonisti è Hussein, un mercante persiano del Bahrain. Saleh Omar aveva conosciuto Hussein nel 1960, nel negozio di mobili di cui era proprietario, quando egli aveva acquistato da lui un prezioso tavolino di ebano, pagandolo per metà in denaro contante e per metà barattando un incenso pregiato, l'*ud-al-qamari*: entrambi gli oggetti assolvono una funzione importante nel romanzo. In seguito, il protagonista viene accusato di frode, arrestato e imprigionato per undici anni, al termine dei quali, sentendosi in pericolo, fuggirà in Inghilterra. Latif, da parte sua, sin dal suo arrivo in Europa, taglia completamente i ponti con la famiglia di origine: la dislocazione da lui esperita è assai dolorosa, in quanto la sua personale esperienza migratoria si configura come un esilio volontario, un atto intenzionale di allontanamento dagli affetti domestici, poiché gli era impossibile gestire, in termini emotivi, l'eredità familiare, fatta di dispute, rancori e recriminazioni.

A ridosso dell'epilogo, i due protagonisti instaurano un'amicizia che si estende anche a Rachel Howard, avvocato dei rifugiati. Lo "storytelling", ossia il tessuto costituito dai reciproci racconti, assolve una funzione catartica, poiché consente ai personaggi di fare i conti con le memorie individuali degli eventi e permette di aprire una negoziazione fra passato e presente: attraverso il dialogo, i protagonisti riescono a dare un senso alla loro storia e a fronteggiare il loro "displacement" diasporico. Una metafora rilevante è formulata da Latif Mahmud, secondo il quale: "It's a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend times rifling through abandoned goods" (Gurnah 2001: 86). La "terra della memoria" è rappresentata come un cupo magazzino ormai in disuso: il soggetto, in questa struttura sventrata, si ritrova a rovistare tra oggetti abbandonati.

È interessante notare, inoltre, come venga creata un'analogia tra il passato e il presente di Saleh Omar grazie all'esperienza del mare: egli ha infatti trascorso più della metà della sua vita nell'arcipelago di Zanzibar e si stabilisce in una cittadina marittima inglese di cui non viene rivelato il nome. In questo modo, l'autore intende sottolineare l'inizio del

processo di 'guarigione emotiva' del suo personaggio, una evoluzione che comincia con l'identificazione di un elemento di continuità nella sua esistenza. *By The Sea* fa della narrazione "autobiografica" il suo perno, nonché lo strumento grazie a cui i due protagonisti possono riconciliarsi tra di loro e con le rispettive biografie: il romanzo si caratterizza dunque come una storia di sopravvivenza che, come accade anche per la Sheherazade de *Le Mille e una notte*, viene ottenuta tramite la strategia narrativa. La ricorrenza degli incontri fra l'Africa Orientale e l'Oceano Indiano, nel corso dei secoli, è diventata, come Gurnah afferma, "like a story telling tradition, like *Arabian Nights*, rather than real events" (Mirmotahari 2006: 26). Tutta l'opera di Gurnah può essere considerata come una continua esplorazione di questo archivio dell'immaginario.

Gravel Heart enfatizza il dialogo fra la mobilità del presente, la dislocazione dalla propria casa (e dalla madrepatria) e la necessità di riconnettersi alle origini, articolata nel tropo del ritorno. La narrazione di Salim stabilisce il legame inscindibile fra le storie del suo passato africano e il presente inglese. Il romanzo si focalizza sull'esperienza di migrazione del giovane Salim da Zanzibar a Londra e sui segreti che consumano l'esistenza del migrante. Proprio alcuni eventi a lungo occultati sono la causa del suo abbandono della casa della famiglia d'origine. Come si evince dall'*incipit* della narrazione, l'infanzia di Salim a Zanzibar è funestata dalla separazione dei genitori e dall'isolamento che il padre si autoimpone. Queste circostanze – verrà svelato nella parte finale del romanzo – sono determinate dall'infedeltà "obbligata" della madre di Salim, che si verifica significativamente nell'atmosfera politica turbolenta degli anni settanta, in cui alla donna vengono lasciate poche possibilità di scelta se non quella di sottomettersi alle pressioni del potere patriarcale.

Il romanzo critica la 'disfunzionalità' degli stati postcoloniali, dovuta in gran parte alla transizione complicata dal colonialismo all'indipendenza. La casa della "Organisation of African Unity" a Londra (come la chiama Mr Mgeni), dove Salim si rifugia, raccoglie una grande varietà di migranti provenienti da parti differenti del continente africano, dalle diverse personalità, origini, motivazioni, affiliazioni politiche e religiose. L'enfasi sulla diversità di questa casa della "African Unity" sfida ironicamente l'idea dei migranti dall'Africa come entità etnica e culturale omogenea. Salim arriva a Londra dopo essere stato chiamato dallo zio materno, un diplomatico, che lo abbandona a se stesso quando viene meno alle sue aspettative, e deve sopravvivere da solo nella metropoli, ancora molto giovane e privo del sostegno finanziario a lui promesso che avrebbe dovuto permettergli di completare agevolmente i suoi studi superiori. Con il suo racconto, Salim serve anche come "reminder" che la migrazione in Europa di giovani individui alla ricerca di un miglioramento delle loro condizioni di vita è un fenomeno molto vario e complicato. In questo senso, l'enfasi che il romanzo pone sugli aspetti storici della mobilità transnazionale africana riveste un ruolo cruciale. La storia di Salim stabilisce il legame fra il passato e il presente delle migrazioni africane, promuove una sorta di attitudine afropolitana suscitando una "awareness of the interweaving of the here and there" (Mbembe 2017: 105).

Come in *By the Sea*, la strategia dialogica è centrale in *Gravel Heart*. Mentre in *By the Sea* il dialogismo svolge un ruolo fondamentale poiché rivela l'interazione di 'modi di vedere' distinti, *Gravel Heart* presenta due forme diverse di dialogismo. La prima viene elaborata

tramite la forma epistolare. Due sono le tipologie di lettera che Salim scrive alla madre dall'Inghilterra: da una parte ci sono missive effettivamente inviate, mentre dall'altra epistole scritte ma mai spedite e tenute nascoste (tuttavia rivelate al lettore). Questa forma narrativa serve ad articolare i segreti che, come Gurnah ribadisce, sono parte integrante dell'esperienza della migrazione, che comprende anche, come sentimento ricorrente, la vergogna: "You keep your stories, the slightly miserable background of your life to yourself. And letters offer the chance for that imagined conversation you wish you could have" (East 2017). Sovrapponendo sulla pagina due voci, quella privata e quella pubblica, la narrazione scandisce l'esperienza conflittuale del migrante che viene condivisa da chi è privilegiato (gli intellettuali, per esempio) e da chi non lo è. In effetti Salim rappresenta tutti e due i tipi di migrante, in diversi momenti del romanzo. La seconda forma di dialogismo viene perseguita attraverso il protagonista che incarna ciò che Knudsen e Rahbek (2017) hanno definito come "the contemporary signification of Africa as a complex place of relocation and reconnection" (115). Lo stile letterario e i tropi narrativi che vengono identificati come tipici di questa estetica sono legati a varie elaborazioni contemporanee che riguardano "ways of seeing Africa and ways of being African in the contemporary world" (15).

3. Trame intertestuali

By the Sea e *Gravel Heart* invitano il lettore a esplorare e a mappare i territori interstiziali che si possono raggiungere attraverso una comprensione dialogica degli scambi interculturali[5]. In questo processo, gli individui e le comunità imparano a condividere il senso dell'estraneità, della marginalità e della differenza, ad accettare la complessità come parte integrante della propria esistenza. Utilizzando intertesti della tradizione sia occidentale che orientale, Gurnah ritorna ripetutamente sul racconto del flusso dei viaggiatori che hanno attraversato l'Oceano Indiano per raggiungere il litorale africano per migliaia di anni, portando con sé, insieme alle merci, "their hungers and greeds", e lasciando "some among their numbers behind for whole life-times and taking what they could buy, trade or snatch away with them" (Gurnah 2001: 15). Mentre rende omaggio alla vocazione cosmopolita della società costiera, il tono dello scrittore è ironico e, nello stesso tempo, malinconico e decisamente critico rispetto alle depredazioni che questa parte del mondo ha subito e di cui conserva, ancora, tracce evidenti e dolorose.

Questa "ristretta" prospettiva costiera coesiste con la consapevolezza, da parte di Gurnah, di essere un "world writer", che appartiene a un "wider world" piuttosto che a vari e pur specifici contesti africani ed europei (Steiner 2010). Scostandosi dalle definizioni troppo rigide di stampo (post)colonialista e nazionalista, Gurnah cerca di ridefinire l'Africa attraverso sguardi multipli sugli spazi relazionali che rifuggono l'esclusione. Del resto, le nozioni utilizzate per interpretare la narrativa di Gurnah, principalmente "entanglements" (Falk 2007: 25-63), ma anche "links", "negotiations", "interchange", "mingling" enfatizzano il fatto che lo scrittore esplori le relazioni sia fra le culture zanzibarine sia le modalità attraverso

[5] Su *By the Sea* è disponibile una notevole bibliografia critica: si possono segnalare, tra i molti contributi, Brazzelli (2013), Samuelson (2013), Rickel (2018). Su *Gravel Heart* sono comparsi finora pochi studi: Zamorano (2020: 85-105) e Bosman (2021), che sono stati fondamentali per questo articolo.

cui esse sono reinventate entro gli spazi insulari 'limitati' della Gran Bretagna. Gurnah costruisce narrazioni sovrapposte e, nelle sue opere, il processo dinamico che caratterizza gli spazi interstiziali è di natura sia geografica che testuale (Brazzelli 2018: 35-36).

In *By the Sea* e in *Gravel Heart* le storie famigliari dei protagonisti, con i loro silenzi e gli approcci molteplici, generati dal ricordo soggettivo, rispetto agli eventi passati, funzionano come sineddoche per sottolineare l'importanza dell'asse temporale, oltre che spaziale, riguardante ricostruzioni identitarie marcate dal superamento dei margini culturali e nazionali. In *Gravel Heart*, pubblicato dopo la crisi dei rifugiati del 2015, Gurnah si concentra sulla "ontologia della mobilità africana" (Knudsen & Rahbek 2017: 292), insinuandosi negli aspetti e nelle cause delle esperienze migratorie dai paesi africani all'Europa. Il romanzo enfatizza il dialogo tra la ricollocazione lontano da casa e la necessità di riconnettersi alla madrepatria: il ritorno al luogo di nascita non riguarda evidentemente soltanto un sito fisico. Il racconto in prima persona di Masud, padre di Salim, che ritorna a Zanzibar da Kuala Lumpur solo dopo l'improvvisa scomparsa della madre, funziona come modello. Il rientro temporaneo di Salim a Zanzibar conduce all'inserimento di Salim entro una storia famigliare contraddistinta da culture, tradizioni e geografie che riflettono il cosmopolitismo precoloniale ma anche l'inferno della rivoluzione del 1964, con le sue terribili conseguenze.

Quando, al termine della narrazione, in coincidenza con la fine del soggiorno di un mese di Salim sull'isola natale, gli si chiede se vuole rimanere oppure ritornare in Inghilterra, la sua risposta riecheggia *Measure for Measure* di Shakespeare, di cui egli rivela al padre le analogie con la sua storia personale. In questo caso, la replica di Salim lo collega al personaggio di Barnardine, il prigioniero ubriaco che il Duca vuole costringere a fare lo "head trick," sostituendo Claudio all'esecuzione. Come Barnardine, che non accetta di seguire i piani del Duca, Salim rifiuta di sottomettersi ai modi dispotici delle strutture di potere, perché "if I stayed it would be to stop my ears and cover my head so that I should not be compelled to join the other scavengers living off the rich people's garbage" (Gurnah 2017: 252). Dunque, la posizione di Salim è paragonabile a quella di Barnardine descritta dal Duca: "Unfit to live or die, oh gravel heart" (IV. 3, 55). Di fronte a questo dilemma, Salim opta "to go back to that incomplete life I live there until it yields something to me, or not" (Gurnah 2017: 253).

L'esistenza incompleta del personaggio non può non richiamare *Half a Life* (2001) di V. S. Naipaul, con il quale Gurnah intrattiene testualmente un costante rapporto, evidente nella maggior parte delle sue opere. Si tratta di una relazione conflittuale ma importante: in questo caso, Salim rievoca certamente Willie Chadram, che si muove dall'India all'Inghilterra a un paese africano non specificato proprio nel momento del passaggio dalla colonizzazione portoghese all'indipendenza. Ma non si può nemmeno dimenticare che un altro Salim, migrante disilluso, è il protagonista di *A Bend in the River* (1979) di Naipaul, e che alle spalle di Naipaul e di Gurnah si staglia la potente narrativa conradiana, con le sue rappresentazioni della violenza coloniale e dell'oscurità che essa genera.

Il racconto di Melville *Bartleby the Scrivener*, con la sua continua negazione dell'azione, viene esplicitamente utilizzato da Gurnah in *By the Sea* per tracciare il processo attraverso cui Omar si libera, passando dall'invisibilità muta alla narrazione che lo rende visibile e,

di fatto, anche parte integrante di una comunità. Il fantasma di Bartleby che sceglie di ritirarsi dal mondo aleggia su gran parte della narrazione. Utilizzando Latif Mahmud come controparte, Omar ricorre allo "storytelling" nella speranza che esso possa "explain and redeem the folly and malice" dei suoi "younger years" a Zanzibar (Gurnah 2001: 145). Salim Yahya e parimenti il padre in *Gravel Heart* riconoscono la loro alienazione rispetto alle strutture politiche e socioeconomiche di Zanzibar successive alla rivoluzione. Nel romanzo e nel suo intertesto, *Measure for Measure*, i personaggi cercano di stare lontani da coloro che detengono il potere, e tentano di farsi strada "by the hideous law/As mice by lions" (I. 4, 62-63). Questi riferimenti intertestuali diventano espliciti solo alla fine: a questo punto, Gurnah ha già presentato ai suoi lettori una raffigurazione dell'Inghilterra come il paese d'arrivo in cui Salim è incapace di ottenere il successo, e dove tuttavia decide di continuare a vivere la sua esistenza.

4. Dialogare oltre la parola

Nei due romanzi (come del resto nelle altre opere di Gurnah), termini arabi e parole o espressioni kiswahili non tradotti si accompagnano all'inglese e ne interrompono la posizione privilegiata, sottolineando con forza la differenza linguistica e culturale. Anche in questo senso, le narrazioni enfatizzano la relazione dialogica: infatti non si costruisce solo una corrispondenza fra gli spazi e i testi, ma anche fra l'autore e il lettore. Questo scambio esplora la pluralità e solitamente predilige sequenze narrative non lineari. La mancata linearità della narrazione, del resto, è direttamente connessa all'esperienza della migrazione. L'esilio, per lo scrittore (e per gli autori postcoloniali in generale), è la condizione esistenziale ed epistemologica che genera diversi strati spaziali e temporali. La narrazione proietta i personaggi in una posizione transculturale che risulta in una oscillazione strategica tra momenti del passato e del presente, aspetti locali e globali (Steiner 2009: 4).

Anche se in maniera incompleta e provvisoria, in *By the Sea* i personaggi riescono a sviluppare nuove relazioni che permettono loro di acquisire un senso di stabilità. In effetti la vera casa si identifica nelle pratiche del racconto più che in una specifica località. Alla fine si (ri)trova una dimora accogliente proprio nella narrazione: raccontare la propria storia è un mezzo e un modo per ritornare in patria, almeno attraverso un viaggio immaginario. In effetti Gurnah "gioca" con le storie, alternando la parola al silenzio, e inserendo nella pratica discorsiva anche la menzogna: attraverso l'esilio i due protagonisti maturano uno sguardo distante dall'ambiente d'origine, fino a oltrepassare il muro del silenzio. La solidarietà etnica, prima, l'amicizia che fiorisce lentamente, poi, innescano il processo narrativo: il racconto non è un passatempo, ma è legato alla sopravvivenza del migrante come soggetto transnazionale.

D'altro canto, in *Gravel Heart* è interessante considerare la posizione ambigua di Salim, uno studente di letteratura che cerca il significato dell'esistenza nei testi (Boparai 2021: 19). I personaggi che studiano o insegnano la letteratura hanno un ruolo importante nelle opere di Gurnah, non solo a causa della componente autobiografica, ma anche poiché rivestono una funzione metanarrativa. La desolazione del migrante viene enfatizzata dal giovane Salim, che afferma:

> I learnt to live in London. To avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness, to avoid curiosity, not to feel desolate at hostile stares and to walk purposefully wherever I went. I learnt to live with the cold and the dirt and to evade the angry students at college with their swagger and their sense of grievance and their expectation of failure. […] I tried but couldn't join the city's human carnival (Gurnah 2017: 66).

Le microstorie non hanno spazio negli archivi ma alimentano le vicende intime e famigliari dei migranti, e riemergono attraverso i racconti: questo accade nel caso di Salim ma anche dei due personaggi di *By the Sea*. Gurnah presenta vite spezzate che cercano di ricostituirsi, anime inquiete che ambiscono a ricongiungersi.

Una spazialità frammentata e interstiziale caratterizza entrambi i romanzi: i subalterni e gli oppressi vivono in mondi oscuri, mentre il flusso della memoria rivela la "darkness" nel momento in cui cerca di contrastarla, e il racconto trasforma gli spazi istituendo un dialogo fra di essi. Attraverso l'interazione emotiva ed affettiva si riesce a raggiungere maggiore consapevolezza di sé e della propria esistenza. Sia per Saleh che per Salim, gli scenari di desolazione interiore si stemperano solo attraverso il dialogo. Il dolore genera le storie, e le tecniche narrative che Gurnah dispiega per confrontarsi con la sofferenza rivelano la fragilità, la marginalità, la solitudine dei personaggi. Le trame lente e le rivelazioni tardive dei segreti non mettono in discussione la grande storia ma cambiano la vita degli individui, che hanno una collocazione spaziale indiscutibile: il loro radicamento e sradicamento fanno la differenza.

Le narrazioni sono modulate spazialmente; l'autorità narrativa viene mediata attraverso voci multiple; i vuoti nella storia dell'Oceano Indiano e nelle esperienze individuali si riflettono nei silenzi, tematici e formali, dei romanzi. L'interesse di Gurnah nel raccontare la geografia litorale è, nello stesso tempo, autobiografico e storico: essa funziona come un paradigma che crea un sistema di relazioni. Questi temi vengono affrontati da Gurnah in uno scritto autobiografico ampiamente noto e citato, *Writing and Place* (2004), in cui il suo intento etico ed epistemologico è esplicitamente connesso alla dimensione spaziale. Il dialogo costante che si instaura fra gli spazi è evidente:

> I do think about Zanzibar every day and I'm not quite sure, even after all these 40 years, how comfortable I am here. I work very comfortably, very successfully here, but in my imagination, I live somewhere else (citato in Murray 2013: 151).

Zanzibar diventa per lo scrittore quasi un'ossessione che riporta continuamente a una cittadinanza difficile e inquieta: anche le sezioni dei romanzi ambientate in Europa collocano al centro Zanzibar come assenza, rimarcando che i personaggi vivono in un esilio perpetuo, in un ambiente diasporico mai del tutto riconosciuto e accettato come tale. Del resto, non si può considerare solo la centralità di Zanzibar: i numerosi siti dislocati lungo la costa oceanica sono parte di ampi territori che si estendono verso l'interno, brulicanti di popolazioni, lingue, culture (West-Pavlov 2018: 36). Facendo riemergere le contronarrative soppresse dalle storie ufficiali, Gurnah mostra come gli abitanti del suo paese natale, più che pensarsi come appartenenti all''Africa Orientale', si percepiscono e si rappresentano

come parte di uno spazio più vasto, cosmopolita. Riposizionando Zanzibar nel sistema dell'Oceano Indiano, lo scrittore contesta anche la retorica del nazionalismo africano: anziché descrivere l'Africa in termini nazionalistici ed etnici, egli mostra come il continente debba essere reimmaginato come uno spazio ibrido ed estremamente composito, ma armonico e coerente nella sua pluralità.

L'epilogo brutale di *Gravel Heart* svela il senso dell'impossibilità, che spesso funesta l'immaginario marino e oceanico, di una creolizzazione liberatoria. Personaggi come Salim non hanno un posto nel mondo postcoloniale: egli è talmente creolizzato che non si inserisce più in nessun luogo. D'altra parte, in *By the Sea* i due protagonisti finalmente connettono le loro storie e ricominciano a vivere la loro nuova vita in Inghilterra, ma perpetuamente oscurata dalle precedenti esperienze zanzibarine.

Queste narrazioni offrono alternative rizomatiche alle storie utopiche di identificazione con le proprie radici. Andando contro gli universalismi della dominazione coloniale e i nazionalismi africani, Gurnah narra vicende che enfatizzano la relazionalità con l'altro. Édouard Glissant definisce l'alternativa alla "root identity" come "identity of relation", che non è "linked to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures" (1997: 144). L'identità relazionale è prodotta "in the chaotic network of Relation", e vede "a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps" (144). Nel tentativo, comune agli scrittori postcoloniali, di ri-creare, attraverso la propria storia di migrazione e di esilio, uno spazio di appartenenza alternativo, Gurnah affida una funzione centrale allo "storytelling", una pratica che diviene sovversiva e salvifica. La "fiction" ha una funzione cruciale, in termini psicologici, sociali, nazionali, perché le storie intrecciano i fili del tempo e dello spazio e creano legami indissolubili fra sé e l'altro, fra il testo e il lettore. Il costante interesse narrativo di Abdulrazak Gurnah per l'Oceano Indiano, dove per secoli si sono intrecciate lingue e culture, modella la creazione dei suoi racconti; essi permettono di ascoltare voci molteplici che affermano l'importanza della condivisione e del dialogo nel contesto delle gerarchie di dominio caratterizzate, sia storicamente, che nel presente, dalla violenza e dall'ostilità nei confronti del diverso. Il recupero delle storie individuali e collettive è l'unica àncora di salvezza e produce una consapevolezza che permette di affrontare le dolorose problematiche dell'esilio con pacatezza e responsabilità. L'apparente ottimismo finale di *By the Sea* tuttavia sembra lasciare il posto, in *Gravel Heart*, a un tono più cupo che mette in discussione e sottopone a una revisione significativa il desiderio di empatia e il dialogo fra sé e l'altro nella Gran Bretagna contemporanea.

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Slam to Heal. A Poetic Inquiry Reflection

Abstract I: In termini generali, la slam poetry può essere descritta come poesia competitiva recitata/letta in spazi pubblici da poeti in erba. Nei tornei di slam poetry, i giovani concorrenti affrontano argomenti come intersezionalità, violenza di genere, storia, traumi, ecc. di fronte a folle attente e partecipative, catalizzando la loro attenzione e la loro energia in luoghi carichi di emozioni. Tuttavia, a causa della sua forma problematica e della sua insistenza sulla performance piuttosto che sulla scrittura, la slam poetry è anche uno degli argomenti più controversi all'interno dei dibattiti che si svolgono su temi quali letteratura, società e cultura popolare: da una parte, si trovano i detrattori, che la liquidano frettolosamente, sostenendo che sia una carnevalizzazione della poesia; dall'altra ci sono i praticanti e amanti dello slam, che lo considerano un'espressione artistica innovativa, in gran parte emancipata dalle convenzioni prosodiche e dalle 'norme' linguistiche dell'accademia. Utilizzando la poetic inquiry come metodologia di ricerca, questo articolo offre un'analisi comparativa di testi che sostengono entrambi i punti di vista e riassume la loro tesi centrale in found poems. Inoltre, attinge alle teorie della poetry therapy, al fine di arrivare a una posizione di sintesi che sia capace di offrire una visione complessa della slam poetry in Sudafrica e altrove.

Abstract II: In very general terms, slam poetry can be described as competitive poetry performed by budding poets in public spaces. In slam tournaments, young competitors engage with topics like intersectionality, gender-based violence, history, trauma, etc. in front of attentive and vocal crowds, catalysing the attention and the energy of the urban youth in emotionally charged venues. However, because of its problematic form and its insistence on performance rather than writing, slam poetry is also one of the most litigious topics within discussions on literature, society and popular culture: on one side, one finds detractors who dismiss it by claiming it is a carnivalisation of poetry; the other side is occupied by slam practitioners and lovers, who consider it an innovative artistic expression, largely emancipated from the prosodic conventions and linguistic 'norms' of the academia. Using poetic inquiry as a research methodology, this article offers a comparative analysis of texts that support both views, and summarises their central argument in found poems. It also draws from poetry therapy theories, in order to arrive at a synthesis position that can – hopefully – facilitate a nuanced understanding of slam poetry in South Africa and elsewhere.

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Keywords: Slam poetry, poetic inquiry, poetry therapy, narratives, arts-based methods, found poems.

Introduction

Slam poetry is an oral, narrative type of storytelling that occurs within a competitive event (the 'slam') at which participants recite (or rarely read) original pieces in a standard time limit of three minutes per round. Each act is judged on a numeric scale by a panel of poets or, exceptionally, by randomly picked members of the audience. The judging criteria can vary, but mostly revolve around writing skills, content/subject matter, delivery and audience response. The poets with the best cumulative scores advance in the draw, until one competitor is crowned king/queen of the mic at the end of the tournament. The structure usually assures that the winner is the poet who has best impressed both the judges and the audience.

Stylistically speaking, slam poetry is dramatic verse, i.e. a distinct form or application of verse, and in slam spaces what counts as admirable poetry is not (only) determined by the participant's talent as a writer, but by his/her ability to give the spectators an all-around emotional experience, thus breaking down the traditional academic barriers that exist between poet/performer, critic and audience. Slams are events in which both the performers and the listeners are in search of something different from mere literary appreciation: what they are in search of is the topic under scrutiny here.

The article begins with an overview on slam poetry and its reception in the literary spaces; it goes on by presenting a case study (i.e. an examination of a prototypical 'slam poem') followed by a discussion on South African poets' views on the strengths and weaknesses of slam; the final section broadens out to consider its significance as a therapeutic tool for young people living in urban, neo-colonial contexts.

'Stage Fever' vs 'Text Anxiety': Slam Poetry in South Africa and Beyond

I have charted elsewhere the genealogies of South African spoken word poetry (of which slam is one of the most dynamic expressions) and its indigenous and exogenous influences (d'Abdon 2016); the specific origins of slam are examined in the seminal works of Marc Kelly Smith, one of the founders of the slam movement (Smith & Kraynak 2009a; 2009b), and in many other studies[1], including South African poet Mphutlane wa Bofelo's *Bluesology and Bofelosophy* (Bofelo 2008). In South Africa slam was pioneered by Qhakaza Mbali Mohare, Thabiso Mohare, Mutinta Bbenkele Simelane and the other members of the Johannesburg-based Word N Sound poetry collective, who started organising the first organic slam tournaments in circa 2010. In the last decade, Word N Sound has been emulated by other organisations across the country, most notably Hear My Voice (Pretoria), Current State of Poetry (Johannesburg) and, recently, Poetry Africa, one the most prestigious poetry festivals

[1] The bibliography on slam is too vast to list here. See the bibliography section for some recent research on the topic.

in the continent, held annually in Durban. All these platforms are curated by young black wordsmiths: driven by their passion for poetry and their creative impulse, these innovators have used the 'classic' slam format, but also developed it into unexplored spaces (including the digital one, especially during the Covid pandemic) to create massive events.

The article focuses on the South African slam scene only (Johannesburg and Pretoria, in particular), because this is where my field work experience in spoken word poetry is rooted, but also because South African slam possesses peculiar features and characteristics that, in many ways, differentiate it from the slam practiced elsewhere; however, it acknowledges the diversity of the slam communities both within the country and outside of it.

As a poet with an academic background in literature, and a participant researcher in spoken word spaces with an interdisciplinary approach to poetry, I am intrigued by this research question: is slam poetry a topic that deserves the attention of literary scholars?

Frassen has argued convincingly that the poetics of modernism still dominates literary criticism, and its preference for ambiguity and poly-interpretability has blocked the critical views on "performance poetry"[2] (Frassen 2011: 35). Slammers are misjudged by critics because the former "do not operate according to the classic avant-garde scenario, which requires that the young revolutionary first has to relate to the previous generation of poetic innovators" (35). These poets, Frassen claims, "refrain from defining their position in relation to the literature of preceding generations" and therefore, "the work of these performers lacks the "literary frame of reference" that most critics rely on" (35). Indeed, one distinctive trait of the slam community is the severance with the previous generations of poets, since the sole poets slammers are in conversation with are fellow slammers[3]; while the critics look for "literary references" and a "complex interweaving" with literary history (characteristics of modern poetry), slammers normally refrain from engaging with the conventional (written/literary/academic) spaces of literature: they do not publish their poetry in print altogether, and opt for self-referentiality and "the immediacy of the performance" (35). Needless to say, these criteria are for the most part incompatible with written poetry criticism, and contribute to the fossilisation of a Manichean scenario, which sees critics suffering from "stage fever" (33) disapproving slammers suffering from "text anxiety" (34), and vice versa. This major source of miscommunication is what this article tackles, and seeks to overcome.

Case Study: Analysing an Emblematic 'Slam Poem'

"O Christ, my craft, and the long time it is taking!" wrote, famously, Derek Walcott (Walcott 1984: 23). This prudent approach to writing goes against the ethics of slam, according to which everyone can join the competition, as long as he/she is able to deliver a convincing act. This 'open door' philosophy, if on one side 'democratises the verse' by making the stage accessible to a vast array of amateurs, on the other side places trained performers in

[2] For a critical analysis of this problematic definition, see d'Abdon 2018.

[3] In this 2014 interview, when asked which poets he looks up to, slam champion Mutle Mothibe mentioned only fellow slammers. According to my experience, this is a recurrent response by young poets active in the slam circuits, *Mutle Mothibe to perform at the Apollo Theatre*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NPpjNMRRRw.

the position to excel, and even win poetry competitions, irrespective of their writing skills. Naysayers point at this idiosyncrasy of slam, denouncing the fact that for the slammer-persona, the performer is more important than the writer: indeed, slammers spend a considerable amount of time perfecting the text-external elements of poetry that increase their chances to win a tournament (memorisation of poems, study of videos of other slammers, rehearsals/dress rehearsals, studio recording, video production and post-production, social media promotion, etc.), at detriment of reading, writing and editing, the core activities of writers, which refine the text-internal elements of it.

Concentrating on the singularity of slam, this article maintains that the poems presented in competitive arenas should be studied as written, theatrical, visual, sonic, and spatial interventions, and that the imbricated concepts of body, place, and rhythm should be placed at the centre of the analytical framework(s) employed to study them; it suggests that an in-depth examination of slam poetry produces new theoretical approaches, and exposes the inadequacy of the extant ones; it contends that the text-external elements of slam poems should not be seen as categories that are developed elsewhere and applied to the poem by way of analysis, as characteristics that are bestowed on the poem by its context, or as supplementary to the poetic text; they should be considered intrinsic to the poem in its performed form, and scrutinised as such.

In order to illustrate what stated above, a succinct textual and contextual analysis of the poem "Dear Dad" by former Word N Sound champion Bella Cox is given hereby. The piece, shortlisted for the 2015 Word N Sound Perfect Poem Award, is presented as a blueprint of slam poetry, since it was praised by the judges, and provoked an enthusiastic response from the spectators[4].

The poem's irregular, yet steady structure is framed by an ordinary anaphora, which creates parallelism and rhythm, aids the performer's mnemonic efforts, guarantees a basic musicality, and sustains the storyline by spotlighting a villain, described stanza after stanza with increasingly trivialising epithets ("Dear dad … Dear You … Dear Donor … Dear 23-Chromosome-Giver … Dear Betrayer … Dear Abandoner … Dear Stranger"). The repetition acts as a sort of chorus within the poem, and annunciates the words that are most integral to it; more importantly, it keeps the listeners constantly reminded of the subject, strengthening the link between their life experience and that of the poet. Rhythm is also enhanced by randomly distributed full- and half-rhymes (noose/lose … sun/one … protect/neglect … her/caregiver/mother/sister), magnified in the anti-climactic stanza:

> And the distance is pushed wider by the addition of 'biological'!
> On fire-fuelled days, I reduce your role to the mere functional
> […] perhaps if the process were clinical the abandonment would not seem quite so pitiful!

This roughly-crafted work would most likely be rejected by journals or magazines,

[4] A video of the performed poem and its transcription are available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNqxhfm1cJU.

since it explores a cliché topic from an uninspired angle, is overwritten ("your love for me / did not even extend to the purchasing of an English dictionary!"), burdened by trite similes ("She turned my head like a sunflower to the sun") and devoid of inventive images and linguistic innovations. This hypothesis is irrelevant, though, since slam poems are not conceived for written publications, but calculated to court specific audiences: the poet knows that in slam arenas pleasing the crowd is *the art*, and the audience's passionate reaction to this piece is evidence to its effectiveness in a live competition. The success is explicable if one considers the importance of the cumulative extra-textual aspects of the poem: firstly, in a country where paternal abandonment is a social pathology, its chosen subject matter connects the speaker to the listeners by enhancing the latter's compassion; secondly, its rhetorical devices are designed to sustain a performance aimed at deepening this emotional synergy. In the piano accompaniment, minor chords and downward motion combine with a slow tempo to create an atmosphere of loss and despair; the controlled body gestures, the modulation of oral and aural expressions, the regular alternation of high-pitch and low-timbre, interrupted by a broken voice and crocodile tears, confer expressive depth and amplify the melodramatic tone and feel of the piece, giving it an aura of tragedy and drawing the viewers in to an even greater extent. Despite the lack of literary merits, a triangular relationship between performed poem, author/performer, and the audience is established, and the perlocutionary and illocutionary force of slam poetry has created a community: the poem has wholly served its purpose.

In conclusion, sustaining a three minutes recital without sounding prolix is a mammoth mission, even for experienced poets who know how to structure long texts without compromising the economy of language; it becomes an almost impossible one for novices, with the result that the poems one hears in slam events are often redundant, verbose and overstretched, in other words, non-poetic or even anti-poetic. In order to make the act appealing, the text has to be pushed into the background of a performance in which the aural and the visual become the prevailing aspects. The cursory analysis offered above confirms that the way the audiences relate to poetry has changed, and that there is no longer a transcendental connection to writing and its quality. In slam it is not the poetry that matters, but what the performance can offer in terms of mutuality, solace and relief. Slam is about the glamour, the posture, the appearance, but above all about emotional connection: it has values, it teaches to hold space together, and to respect the effort the youth puts into personal and collective conscientisation and healing; it is a language that represents liberation because it makes young performers and spectators feel good (or, at least, better) about themselves. Nonetheless, slam undeniably remains a litigious topic within debates on literature: a comparative discussion on the reception of slam in South Africa is the focal point of the next section.

Slam Critics vs Slam Supporters

Are the current views on slam fine-grained enough to account for such a specific and complex phenomenon? Rejecting both the unimaginative argumentations of the poetry purists and the equally deceptive encomiastic narrative, typical of slam enthusiasts, this

section provides a modest dose of sober disenchantment: it builds up from the self-evident argument that slam occupies a vital space in South African popular culture and, using poetic inquiry as a research methodology and poetry therapy theories, arrives at a synthesis position that aims at offering a balanced, and hopefully more nuanced view of it. It presents selected testimonies by South African poets and poets-researchers with divergent opinions and angles on slam, and carves found poems out of them to magnify the strengths and weaknesses of this art form.

The Critics

Late Yale Professor Harold Bloom, who in a 2000 interview to *The Paris Review* (in)famously claimed that slam is "the death of art" (Bloom *et al.* 2000: 379), is the leading proponent of a list of conservative critics, alien to the spoken word community, who have brutally dismissed this movement; amongst them is Cape Town-based poet and scholar David Tyfield who mimicked Bloom's pronouncement in a controversial piece published on the Stellenbosch Literary Project website (Tyfield 2013). However, this article places little attention on the opinions of these and other doctrinaires speaking from the bastions of the (white) literary establishment; in order to facilitate a necessary shift in tone, mood and emphasis, it engages with the grounded views of poets who are fully immersed in the South African spoken word/slam scene.

In South Africa, contestants in slam competitions (slammers) are young or very young people, mostly black, living in urban areas. Their cultural and academic background is assorted and multi-layered, but their experience with poetry commonly consists in what is (often insipidly) taught in the classroom, in what they see/hear in live poetry events and public ceremonies, and in what they consume (mostly in form of videos) in the digital space[5]. In general, one can safely argue that the average participant at a slam event is not an avid reader (if a reader at all) of poetry, and is devoid of a solid literary background: he/she is a consumer of poetry performances, a skilled entertainer, and an apprentice writer. This is noticed by poet, performer, editor end event organiser Kyle Allan:

> The [slam] scene likes to posture itself as all forward thinking and radical, but many in the scene have got their own boxed ways of thinking […] it's extremely upsetting when people call themselves poets and legislate for others, and yet know nothing of Motsapi, Nyezwa, Muila, Dladla and so on. They have created their own little world, carrying on as if poetry started with them (Allan 2017).

"Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge" writes Césaire in his seminal essay "Poetry and Knowledge" (1990: 17): a manifestation of this poignant thought, poetic inquiry – or the use of poetry in research – is an art-based approach that emerged as a critique to positivistic paradigms of much traditional qualitative research (Glesne 1997; Richardson 2002; Prendergast 2004; Furman *et al.* 2006; Davis 2018; van Rooyen

[5] Audiences are also composed by urban youth with a specular background, and little or no interest in literature *per se*.

2019; van Rooyen & d'Abdon 2020; Johnson 2021). Found poems are used frequently in poetic inquiry studies, and the one offered below was written out of Allan's quote, in order to magnify the essence of the author's standpoint. The same methodology has been applied to the other testimonies used in this article:

posture poets
legislate for others
yet know nothing of
motsapi,
nyezwa,
muila,
dladla.

in their own world
poetry started with them

In an interview published when South African slam was still an embryonic movement, iconic poet, scholar, editor and political activist Vonani Bila hit hard on the slammers of the nation:

> They slam, and in their slam jam there's little poetry. They mimic some of the worst US thugs and choose to ignore rich and unusual voices. To generalise is not fair, but those who appear to have become celebrities, whether (that status is) self-constructed or acquired, are worshipped by the youth because their faces are visible on TV and from time to time they are invited to perform at government and corporate functions (Bila 2010).

slam jam
mimic thugs
ignore rich voices

celebrities worshipped by
government and corporate

Eleven years later, with slam having emerged as a force to be reckoned with within the poetry community, his opinion remained highly critical. In his words: "Sadly, post-apartheid poetry […] is facing serious challenges of authenticity, influence and originality because of the advent of Slam" (Bila 2021: 68); he also quotes poet and scholar Tony Medina, co-author of the volume *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*, according to whom:

> The Slam pits poets against one another in gladiator-like scenarios where they compete for chump change and prestige judged by a select group of audience members (sometimes consisting of other poets, most time not). Too often in this arena poetry is not what matters, but performance – how well one can recite a line or two, no matter

> how backward or banal. A cat could read the phone book and, if his or her voice hits the right note, their facial expression caught mid-strain in the glare of the spotlight, as if in mid-shit, they just may slam their way to the top of the (dung) heap. Here, poetry is cheap, is cheapened. This kind of poetry […] is in sharp contrast with Langston Hughes' notion that "the prerequisite for writing is having something to say" (Bila 2021: 68).

in the gladiator arena
poetry is not what matters

performance is in the spotlight

slam is cheapened
kind of writing

The problem addressed here is: if literary appreciation is a secondary factor (or no factor at all) in slam, what pushes massive audiences of young people to attend slam sessions and take part in the competitions? The reasons why young South Africans do treasure slam poetry are multiple, but – this article argues – the fundamental push-factor is its healing power. How I arrived at this conclusion is explained in the paragraphs below.

The Supporters

For its practitioners and supporters, slam is an avant-garde movement challenging the presumed authority of the academics who sanction 'from the top' what poetic excellence is (or is supposed to be); in their view, the advent of slam poetry has brought forward refreshment, revitalisation and novelty in the stagnant post-apartheid poetry scene. This is the thesis expressed by Durban-based slam champion MC and event organiser Page in an article published in the special issue of *Imbiza. Journal for African Writing*, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Poetry Africa festival.

According to him, slam is a "fast-paced […], radical", versatile, original and inclusive movement in which "[r]anting hipsters, freestyle rappers, bohemian drifters, proto comedians, mystical shamans and gothy punks have all had their time at the top of the […] food chain". In big slam tournaments poets take to the stage "like warriors" to recite lines "flung with precision"; snap-seeking competitors are seen as disingenuous by the audiences, who ultimately reward "those who truly write"; the slam scene, he argues, is "dominated by brilliant writers" (Page 2021: 17)

radical shamans
at the top of the big stage
warriors who recite with precision
truly brilliant writers

These hyper-masculine, celebratory and perhaps too generous statements are recurrently uttered by leading (male) members of the slam community, who present

themselves and their fellow slammers as fast-n-furious, game-changing writers capable of unprecedented wordplays, and bearers of revolutionary stylistic innovations.

Pretoria-based slam champion Busisiwe Mahlangu on the other hand, provides a less muscular (and therefore more sophisticated) explication on the significance of slam poetry for young people, particularly for young black women. In her moving TEDx presentation, titled "Slam poetry is building a dream world", she describes the discovery of slam events as an epiphany, and how entering that space allowed her to embrace her vulnerability, and to escape from the prison of shame and silence in which she grew up as a child. "When I started writing, I started speaking … I write because it helps me speak" she admits. And, she continues:

> When I first found out about poetry slams that were happening around Pretoria and Joburg, that was the first time I actually got to speak and share what I was writing, and that was a way of undoing my silence, which was very important *in my journey of healing* […] Now I know that speaking out really does help, and *it has helped me in my healing journey dealing with depression and post traumatic stress disorder*… The poems I am doing today are dedicated to the child I was a few years back, the child that is still crying right now, and I want to tell that child that it is ok to cry, it is ok to feel pain. *This is a way of healing* (Mahlangu 2018, my italics).

The found poem fashioned out of Mahlangu's speech appears in the closing section of this article; for now, her breath-taking confession is used as the entry point to the next section, in which it is argued that slam events are venues that are "specifically designed to be a non-pathologized, social environment" (Maddalena 2009: 226), i.e. liberated zones (Schimke 2017), holding spaces, and therapeutic communities created by and for the traumatised urban youth of South Africa, grappling with the tribulations of their everyday life, and with the effects of local and global injustice.

Slam Events as Holding Spaces

Slam poets care unselfishly for the art they serve, and have created a holding space for themselves and their admirers that must be studied, understood, supported and protected from the pernicious (mis)representation of both malevolent critics and phony idolaters.

Slam poetry is both a performance and performative: it is a performance in the traditional theatrical sense of poets reciting in front of assembled audiences, and performative in the sense that slam events are happenings, performative utterances calling diverse practices into being. As aptly observed by Dill (2013: 1-2), the experience of performing has often be described as therapeutic (Lerner, 1997; Camangian 2008), empowering (Maracle 1996; Bell 1999) and liberatory (Stepakoff 2009), and slam poetry has been studied extensively as a site of agency, resistance, activism, identity construction, literacy development and self-expression in performance spaces, in the classrooms, in prisons, etc. (Bruce & Davis 2000; Hoffman 2001; Somers-Willett 2005, 2014; Simon 2006; Boudreau 2009; Fields *et al.* 2014; Cullell, 2015; Muhammad & Gonzalez 2016; Rocchio 2017; Lems 2020); a few studies have also stressed the accent on the healing power of slam (Maddalena 2009; Ayosso Anignikin

& Marichez 2010; Dill 2013; Alvarez & Mearns 2014; Ávalos & César 2015; Ruchti *et al.* 2016; Davis 2018; Schucker 2021). These descriptions coincide with my experience as a poet and researcher in the South African spoken word community, which dates back to 2007.

According to my observations, the literary aesthetic and the political philosophy of the South African slam movement have been historically shaped by black female and non-binary poets. The textual and performing practices of Busisiwe Mahlangu, Mandi Vundla, Siphokazi Jonas, Katleho Shoro, Zizipho Bam, Vuyelwa Maluleke, Koleka Putuma, Ashley Makue, Nova Masango, Belita Andre, Emmah Mabye, Pakama Mlokoti, Yamoria and others are typically grounded in anti-oppressive and emancipatory frameworks (Drake-Burnette *et al.* 2016; Few *et al*. 2003; Holiday 2010; Lorde 2007), and very often their stated mission is to increase liberation and healing because of current constructs which are oppressive and harmful to themselves and other marginalised groups. In addition, one common trait shared by the most acclaimed male (or non-binary) South African slam poets (veteran Afurakan, plus Mutle Mothibe, Xabiso Vili, Mjele Msimang, Masai Sepuru, Vus'umuzi Phakathi, and Solly 'Soetry' Ramatswi, just to name a few) is the commitment to eradicate toxic masculinities (Ratele 2016; Hart 2019) from the slam community and from patriarchal society at large. In other words, the most charismatic figures of the slam community are invested in the taxing job of liberating themselves and their peers from the shacks of neo-colonial subjugation, and are leading the movement towards individual and collective emancipation and healing.

Poetry therapy is a form of expressive arts therapy, which involves the curative use of poems, narratives and other spoken or written media to promote individual and collective well-being and healing (Leedy 1969, 1973; Harrower 1972; Lerner 1978. 1997; Longo 1999, 2008; Mazza 1999, 2003. Furman *et al.* 2002; Campo 2003; Stepakoff 2009; Wakeman 2015; Xerri & Xerri Agius 2015).

Generally, poems rich in therapeutic value directly address universal emotions or experiences, abjure obscurity, lack literary references, offer some degree of hope, and contain plain language: these are the stylistic features typical of the poems offered on South African slam stages, and they point in the direction indicated by Maddalena, according to whom "poetry slam has many similarities to poetry therapy" (2009: 223). Thematically speaking, as deftly suggested by Mahlangu, the healing power of poetry is the topic that has occupied the centre of slam stages (quite literally) in the last decade or so, and influential slammers nowadays use storytelling to articulate mental health concerns, including borderline personality, suicidal ideation, identity issues, abuse, depression, grief, etc.

As the 30 years-long on- and off-stage activity of South African poet Malika Ndlovu has amply proved, researching and practicing poetry, performance and therapy in South Africa puts at the centre of one's imaginary map the indigenous concept of 'medicine', the curative properties of words, and the transformative and inspiring power of poetic narratives. As a narrative form of storytelling, slam poetry taps into forms of oral literature like hip hop and rap, but above all into the local Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and various traditions of oral folklore, in which medicine poetry occupies a central position. Poetry is used by South African slammers in creative, non-linear, and liminal ways, as a resource to heal colonial and neo-colonial wounds, and historical and everyday trauma: seen under this lens, it can be encoded as a twenty-first century 'Indigenous System of Healing'.

"My core work has been healing", says Xabiso Vili, winner of the 2022 World Poetry Slam Championship[6], and arguably the most successful competitor in the history of South African slam (Vili 2021). His words are echoed by Johannesburg-based Zimbabwean old school poet and slammer Linda Gabriel who, in her poem "Mad Slam but not war" writes:

> We beat box therapeutic beats that soothe and mend broken communities
> We channel our anger and energies into slams
> Turning them mad yet it's not war
> Breathing life into dying souls
> […]
> poet
> Tend ye to the suffering
> […]
> Remain akin to the pulse of pain (Gabriel, n.a.).

Gabriel's verses, like most of the verses one hears in slam events, are not impeccably constructed. Yet, poems conceived for healing and self-healing purposes, and to captivate non-academic audiences and activate their empathy, do not necessarily seek artistic or writing quality; rather, they explore the meaning and significance of painful stories in one's life.

With regards to this, poetry therapy theory and practices have actually concluded that insisting on creating a 'brainy' literary poem, may even interfere with the healing quality of the text. The poem "Go to the Limits of Your Longing" by Rainer Maria Rilke, hereby translated by Joanna Macy (Barrows 2005), can help clarifying this principle, central to poetry therapy:

> God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
> then walks with us silently out of the night.
> These are the words we dimly hear:
> You, sent out beyond your recall,
> go to the limits of your longing.
> Embody me.
> Flare up like a flame
> and make big shadows I can move in.
> Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
> Just keep going. No feeling is final.
> Don't let yourself lose me.
> Nearby is the country they call life.
> You will know it by its seriousness.
> Give me your hand.

[6] His biographical note on the WPSC website reads as follows: "Xabiso Vili is a multi-award-winning writer, performer, social activist, new media artist and producer *obsessed with how to use innovative creativity for healing and therapy*", https://www.worldpoetryslam.org/wps-championship-2022.

In terms of literary imagination, one can safely state that this is not the most accomplished piece written by the great German poet. Yet, it is an uplifting, empowering, soothing text, embellished by scintillating thaumaturgic images: a fitting piece for contexts in which poetry is used as a therapeutic tool (as I witnessed in my poetry therapy workshops, in which it is always well received).

Slam events are "a forum for shared experience" (Alvarez & Mearns 2014: 263): they are inclusive, because participants do not need to have any prior academic experience with poetry, and communal because slammers explore their expressions with trusted peers, inviting their reflections on the meaning or significance of their life stories. Young people battling with emotions find a holding space in slam events, and benefit from engaging in these healing rituals (Mazza 2003). In these non-clinical spaces, young traumatised South Africans find that poetry restores and makes them whole; they feel that they are not alone in the struggle for everyday survival, that their story is a shared one, and that they are all part of the same family, the poetry family. Slam poetry validates their emotional experiences and improves group cohesiveness by helping them realise that many of their aching experiences are parts of a collective story. It has community-building capacities, since narratives poems facilitate personal growth, healing, and greater self-reflection and self-awareness**.** Ultimately, it allows the disillusioned youth to redefine their pressing situation by opening up empowering ways of perceiving reality. According to Maddalena:

> In order to positively impact an audience, a slam poem must be a narrative that shows that the original painful experience can be borne and does not extinguish the spirit of the poet. Thus, a successful slam poem written "for an audience" will tell the poet that he or she is not extinguished, exists, and can bear the story (2009: 227).

Conclusion

Like many other literary scholars who approach slam from the misleading perspective of textual analysis, I too – initially – fell into the trap of 'stage fever'. 15 years of field work research in slam spaces have helped me readjusting my focal point, and doubting the value of my early views on the phenomenon. As the analysis of Cox's poem reveals, I still think that the majority of pieces shared in slam events do not stand the test of the written page; nevertheless, I am convinced that the process of untangling the relationships between literature, society, performance and therapy lies at the very heart of understanding this divisive expression of poetry. The general lack of interest in literature (and therefore on poets past and present that do not belong to the slam scene) implies that the only 'literary' references for the average slammer is fellow slammers; in this self-imposed imaginary and formal context, it is difficult for young writers to experiment with the complexities of poetry, let alone develop innovative writing styles. Considering this, it is now possible to address the Hamletian dilemma: to slam or not to slam? Or, to rephrase it: is South African slam poetry a topic that deserves the attention of the literary scholar? The answer to this vexed question is tripartite, and depends largely on the scholar's priorities and approach to literature:

1) For the literary scholars focussing on New Criticism and practical criticism, uninterested in the intersections between the text, orality, performance and other non-literary

domains, the answer is: 'no'; the vast majority of written transpositions of slam poems are unlikely to titillate their critical palate.

2) For the literary scholars in search of intersectionalities and edgy post-/de-colonial/gender discourses articulated in the works of young writers habitually ignored by the Western canon, the answer is: 'maybe'; textualized slam poems rarely satisfy the eye of the consummated critical reader, yet they are a rich testimony of the challenges, dreams, aspirations and triumphs of South Africa's historically oppressed groups.
3) For the literary scholars engaged in the study of poetry as a multimodal genre and in its therapeutic applications, the answer is: 'yes'; South African slam poetry is a vault that has just been discovered, and its treasures are yet to be fully catalogued, studied and valued. I hope that this article represents a step in the right direction, towards the accomplishment of this gargantuan task.

In conclusion, it is necessary to ponder slam's debatable literary offerings in view of the circumstances in which they are written: this will engender greater recognition of the complexities, diversity and contradictory nature of slam poetry, and help scholars to grasp the extent of the slam-driven revolution of taste and practices that has shaken up the poetry community; it will also enable them to understand the peculiar agenda pursued by the most prominent slammers; Mahlangu's words elucidate this agenda powerfully and evocatively:

undoing my silence
my journey of healing

speaking out does help me dealing with depression and stress

poems to the child I was
the child crying now

cry child, cry
it is a way of healing

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Mattia Mantellato

A Prayer for Life: Water, Art and Spirituality in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Abstract I: Questo saggio analizza *La terra desolata* di T. S. Eliot da una prospettiva "ecocritica" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996; Garrard 2004) e "blu" (Hau'ofa 2008; Ingersoll 2016; Mathieson 2021) ovvero inerente al significato dell'elemento acqua nel poema. Partendo dalle innovazioni estetiche e dall'elemento magico che Eliot ci presenta accanto alla sterilità e al degrado della vita dopo la Prima guerra mondiale, l'articolo si focalizza su tre episodi chiave del poema. Questi presentano le rivoluzioni artistiche di quel periodo e le forze evocative e spirituali provenienti dall'eredità americana di Eliot, nonché dal suo interesse per le religioni e filosofie d'Oriente. La lettura delle carte di Madame Sosostris diventa così una danza moderna di archetipi 'liquidi'. Tiresia, il profeta e veggente, evoca una pittura cubista e richiama la necessità di visioni 'fluide' e positive nella nostra vita. La ripetizione della preghiera dello *Shanti* celebra il ritmo delle gocce d'acqua, unico elemento che potrà guarire e riconnettere gli abitanti de *La terra desolata* con la Vita – 'the One life'. In questa mia lettura "indisciplinata" (Benozzo 2010) considero il poema una preghiera per l'acqua, una richiesta collettiva di "partnership" (Eisler 1988; Eisler & Fry 2019) per una rigenerazione e trasformazione del reale, nel riconoscimento che gli esseri umani rappresentino solo una parte della melodia cosmica del mondo.

Abstract II: This article reads T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from an "ecocritical" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996; Garrard 2004) and "blue" (Hau'ofa 2008; Ingersoll 2016; Mathieson 2021) or 'water' perspective. It focuses on Eliot's magical and aesthetic (r)evolutions depicting the sterility and degradation of life after World War I. I focus on three episodes that mix modern expressions and arts with highly evocative and spiritual forces coming from Eliot's American heritage and his interest in Eastern religions and philosophies. Madame Sosostris's reading of the 'wicked' cards becomes in this way a Modernist dance of 'liquid' archetypes. Tiresias, the prophet and true 'seer' evokes a Cubist painting while substantiating the need for fluid and more positive encounters in our life. The three-time beating refrain in the *Shanti* prayer epitomises the rhythm of water-dropping, the expected coming of water that will heal and re-connect humanity with the 'One life'. In this "undisciplined" (Benozzo 2010) interpretation, I read *The Waste Land* as a prayer for water, a communal and "partnership" (Eisler 1988; Eisler & Fry 2019) claim for regeneration and transformation, in the acknowledgement that we, humans, are just one side of the spiralling and cosmic music of the world.

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Keywords: Eliot, *The Waste Land*, bue humanities, spirituality, art and literature.

Introduction: An Undisciplined Reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Almost a hundred years have passed since the first appearance of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, one of the most evocative and complex poems of English literature and Western literary 'canon'. Eliot published his masterpiece in October 1922 in *The Criterion*, a literary review he founded with the intent to revive Western civilisation after the painful experience of World War I. Eliot's achievement was the result of a close collaboration with the poet and critic Ezra Pound, his mentor, 'il miglior fabbro', as Eliot called him in the dedication of the poem. Pound was not only a source of inspiration for the young Eliot but also the authoritative voice of an entire generation of writers and artists who were willing to change the world, or better participate in the re-fashioning of Western European aesthetics.

The Waste Land is considered one of the pillars of the Modernist movement and its literature. Indeed, apart from recalling autobiographical occurrences of Eliot's life, it sketches and simultaneously interrogates the tangible forces and fluctuating processes that brought about an 'involution' or rather collapse of the modern world. The inhabitants of *The Waste Land* are torn by a general feeling of precariousness. They are unable to communicate, love or express themselves. They loathe established beliefs, narratives and myths, in both the cultural and spiritual domains. They rather accept a 'life-in-death' in a destabilising, fragmented and alienated reality. Through *The Waste Land* Eliot wanted to depict the "falling down"[1] of Western-European dominator hegemony and 'faith' in rationality. He foregrounded the need for a new epistemology that would help humans to re-emerge from the debris of incomprehension, madness and fear. In this regard, as I will demonstrate in my analysis, Eliot evokes the premises of Riane Eisler's "partnership approach" (Eisler 1988, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007; Eisler & Fry 2019), a thought-provoking lens that highlights the need for love, care and respect between individuals, partners, and family or community relations[2].

In the appalling and unstable scenario of *The Waste Land*, eerily parallel to what we are experiencing nowadays, Eliot re-discovered the importance of the irrational, the primitive, and the ancestral traits of humankind. He understood that the 'modern' man/woman did not need to repress their incongruities, but rather embrace the power of complexity and constant re-shaping of their identity, culture and history. For Eliot, the path towards peace was determined by a comprehensive understanding of the contrasting forces that govern the world (and the self), in a constant re-mapping of our certainties, views and opinions.

Given this perspective, I intend to approach Eliot's masterpiece from a different point of view. I want to read the poem 'in reverse' or better in an undisciplined way in order to

[1] This quotation comes from the verses "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (Rainey 2005: 70, v. 426). All subsequent page references from *The Waste Land* are to this edition.

[2] The Partnership Studies Group (PSG) based at the University of Udine and founded by Antonella Riem is an internationally renowned research group that applies the premises of Eisler's partnership model to the field of the humanities. For more information, see the PSG official website: https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/.

distinguish and highlight some of the unifying forces that allowed Eliot to assemble the fragments and symbols of Western society through a spiralling continuum of life-death-transformation-rebirth.

This process is similar to the "emotion of meeting with texts and words" (Benozzo 2010: 1) for the first time, as the scholar and poet Francesco Benozzo has suggested. It is a disinterested or neutral way of re-possessing or better re-experiencing the power of the poetic word, thus recovering the quality of its rhythms and pace, in an undisciplined journey that the critic may undertake in order to record unnoticed features, correspondences, fluctuations and imaginaries[3].

Reading Eliot's work through an undisciplined lens may substantiate an urge that Brook already pinpointed in 1939 when he stated that critics have tended to focus "on large sections of the poem in detail" while "there has been little […] attempt to deal with it as a unified whole" (Brooks 1968: 128).

In response to this claim, I intend to focus on the significance of the water element in the poem, in order to propose an "ecocritical"[4] (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xv-xxv) reading of its thematic function through a selection of emblematic episodes. At the same time, I will show how Eliot, who was known for his conservative ideas, has aptly relied on native and indigenous' wisdom and traditions, which he had most probably absorbed during his youth in America. As Crawford has pointed out:

> Eliot's own birthplace, St Louis, contained traces of a primitive past, and in that city Eliot was haunted by various voices, some from the pages of books, some from the stories of his own ancestors. [About twelve miles from St Louis,] was a series of those prehistoric Indian mounds which are scattered in groups throughout the alluvial plain of the Mississippi […] and the largest of which is the Cahokia Group. […] In Eliot's youth the Cahokia Mound was famed as the largest terraced earthwork in the United States (Crawford 1987: 5-14).

Even though these aspects may seem marginal, *The Waste Land* is indeed a poem that embraces the power of irrational, shamanic, and mystical experiences connected to

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[3] Francesco Benozzo applied this 'undisciplined' approach to interpreting texts in philology, thus founding what he named as the "indiscipline" of ethnophilology (Benozzo 2010). In his premises, Benozzo argues that ethnophilology "aims at extending the opportunities for free thought for generations to come, hoping they can welcome and disseminate them, refusing any resurgence of authoritarian thrusts" (Benozzo 2021: 108). In their introduction to *Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English*, Antonella Riem and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth have significantly suggested how "ethnophilology thus is an invitation to manifest the capacity not to 'fix' or imprison living traditions within a 'canon', established by an 'authority', within defined margins and crystallised static interpretative schemes. It is a poetic call to be open to challenges, to explore the different lyrical dimensions of words and texts and the emotional vibrations they create in us" (Riem & Hughes-D'Aeth 2022: xxviii).

[4] As a methodological framework, ecocriticism is interested in highlighting the relationship occurring between humans and more-than-human within literary texts. Garrard suggests that perceiving nature as a vital force of agency in literature means showing "the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production" (Garrard 2004: i). See also: Buell 2005.

water, whether they manifest in ironic or highly symbolic ways or in more familiar and direct occurrences. This approach dialogues with the recently established field of the "blue humanities" (Hau'ofa 2008; Ingersoll 2016; Mathieson 2021), a theoretical and ecological standpoint[5] that Campbell and Paye define in these terms:

> The Blue Humanities is a field that, by definition, seeks the dissolution of terrestrial bias in critical outlooks and methodologies, [thus] outlining how concepts of flow, fluidity, and mobility can oppose strategies of imperialist containment and hegemonic enclosure. The adoption of an oceanic [and sea or water] lens has proven fruitful for inspiring new theorisations of world history and culture (Campbell & Paye 2020: 1).

The first episode I wish to analyse is Madame Sosostris's reading of the "wicked pack of cards" (46). In this section, I will show how Eliot heavily relied on the image of water to forewarn the common destiny of the peoples of Europe. Madame Sosostris represents the figure of the fake clairvoyant or prophetess of the modern world. At the same time, she is able to introduce a plethora of distorted images, movements and transformations that will be paramount in the unfolding of the poem. From my point of view, this is a highly structured dance of archetypes[6], which has the aim of introducing the theme of transformation through relevant allusions to water. Indeed, Eliot recalls here the power of intertexts that significantly rely on corporeal re-configurations, alluding to the dance aesthetic revolutions he experienced in London for the first time in those years. I concentrate on the analysis of the cards, as magical key-elements for the understanding of the poem, and on the parenthetical intertext coming from *The Tempest*: "(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (48), which Eliot considered fundamental in the final version of the poem, despite Pound's demand to eliminate it.

The second episode I discuss concerns the central figure of Tiresias, who appears in the middle of section III, "The Fire Sermon". Tiresias is the true prophet of *The Waste Land*, the shamanic figure capable of gathering in his/her persona the globality of life, thus epitomising humans' need to recover the ancestral and spiritual bonds that connect all existence with nature. In my analysis, I claim that Eliot's 'vision' of Tiresias derived primarily from the figurative arts and from Picasso in particular. Moreover, I show how this figure is inevitably connected to the malleability of water, and to its function as an element which allows change, transformation and recovery.

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[5] In explaining the "oceanic turn", DeLoughrey and Flores suggest that we need to stop thinking about the ocean as "blank space or *aqua nullius*" but rather as a "viscous, ontological, and deeply material place, a dynamic force, and unfathomable more-than-human world" (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020: 133).

[6] As Jodorowsky explains: "The majority of authors of Tarot books are content to describe and analyse the cards one by one without imagining the entire deck as a whole. However, the true study of each Arcanum begins with the consistent order of the entire Tarot; every detail, tiny as it may be, begins from the links that connect all seventy-eight cards. To understand these myriad symbols, one needs to have seen the final symbol they all form together: a mandala. According to Carl Gustav Jung, the mandala is a representation of the psyche […]. The initiatory work consists of gathering together the fragments until the original unit has been restored" (Jodorowsky & Costa 2009: 20).

The last part of the analysis focuses on the prayer appearing at the end of poem, the famous Sanskrit word *Shanti*, coming from the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, which is repeated three times. In this section, I claim that Eliot's opening towards an-*other* comprehension of life is an attempt to embrace what the scholar and critic Franco Fabbro called a joyful and needed acceptance of a "multi-religious spirituality" for the future (Fabbro 2020). In this respect, I show how Eliot's drawing inspiration from Eastern religions can be interpreted as a proposal for peaceful partnerships between individuals, peoples and faiths. From my perspective, this is why in this last section Eliot refers to the power of music, and in particular to a three-time beating refrain that evokes the awaited falling of water-drops. Eventually, I suggest that the poem is a prayer for water, which constitutes the essential element for survival, and more importantly the only chance for humanity to regenerate from the arid and devastating landscape of *The Waste Land*.

The Fluctuating Exchanging Dance of Madame Sosostris's Pack of Cards

Eliot's *The Waste Land* opens with a section titled emblematically "The Burial of the Dead", which presents the general setting and themes of the poem. Apart from recalling an Anglican rite, the title evokes an image of desolation and grief since it is connected with the act of celebrating the end of life. In reality, this is the condition in which the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* live and mostly want to live, as *Hollow Men* (the title of another of Eliot's works), because they have 'lost' their sense of existence, and are not able to distinguish, decipher and appreciate the beauty that surrounds them.

Eliot does not begin his poem by introducing a particular character but rather focuses on the chaotic state of nature. Thus, "April is the cruellest month" (1) because it "[stirs] dull roots" (4) out of the dead land. The lack of water, the essential element that allows human and more-than-human life, is immediately foregrounded. "Spring rain" (4) and "a shower of rain" (9) are not enough to provide substance and nourish a corrupted landscape. In *The Waste Land*, people have lost their spatio-temporal coordinates because they have destroyed nature in favour of a more barren and sterile reality:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water
> (19-24).

In the progressive description of the poem's scenario, Eliot focuses first on lonely figures – such as the "hyacinths girl" (36) and second on couples who do not comprehend themselves (Madame Sosostris and her client) or who are prevented from communicating and relating to each other (Tristan and Isolde). Finally, he presents the real dwellers of *The Waste Land*, who have become hordes of people, running and moving in unclear and 'sightless' ways, as we see in the references coming from Baudelaire – "Unreal City" (60),

and Dante – "A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many" (62-63).

I intend to read this threefold structure of the first part of *The Waste Land* as a "tidalectic"[7] movement of recurrences that gives meaning to the "heap of broken images" (22) through a rhythmical crescendo of states that show the 'fluid' condition of modern life. From a solitary seemingly state of quiet, through the surfing of accidental and incomprehensible encounters, until the revolving or crashing of non-linear and unresolved masses of identities. "The Burial of the Dead" shows the travelling of a big wave that crosses the arid landscape of *The Waste Land*, gathering all the fragments of the old world, in order to overflow them on to the shores of new realities, and constitute the basis for a renewal or restarting of existence.

From an imaginative and creative point of view, Eliot's beginning of *The Waste Land* is finally to be connected to the ground-breaking 'involution' that the art of dance was able to achieve in those years. I think the poem moves in the pattern of an early 20th century modern-dance piece, which was usually structured in three movements: the presentation of an apparent calm setting, the introduction of a solitary and troubled couple or soul, and the final tribal ensemble dance of the *corps de ballet*, or group of dancers. I am referring here primarily to the work of the Russian impresario Diaghilev and his destabilising dance company named the *Ballet Russes*. Drawing from the disrupted and fragmented forms of figurative artists of that time, Diaghilev and his troupe dismantled the principles of the incorporeal dancer of the 19th century in order to propose a return to a ground-based atavistic and primordial movement. This unexpected revision in the highly structured and typically formal art of dance was going to change forever the aesthetics of movement and gestural representation in ballet. Nevertheless, as Terri A. Mester has emphasised:

> Only a handful of critics have written at any length on the impact of dance on literary modernism, even though dance, too, met the new century with some profound innovations. Ballet was revolutionized and a totally new genre – the modern dance – was invented (Mester 1997: 1).

The greatest achievement of the *Ballet Russes* was certainly Vaslav Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, a scandalous representation of a Slavic ritual for the renewing of life, through the killing of a young girl[8]. This occurrence was disrupting the archetypical symbol of the

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[7] This concept draws from E. K. Brathwaite's "tidalectics" (Brathwaite 1992), a challenging perspective that upturns the Hegelian dialectics in order to focus on the flowing and recurrent movement of water/sea/ocean discourses. Brathwaite foregrounds the need to re-consider the strict linearity of existence in order to ponder on the ever-recurrent flowing of events, encounters, dialogues. This perspective embraces the power of a more cyclical view of life and therefore it is suggestive for the reading of Eliot's *The Waste Land* from an undisciplined view. The adoption of this framework was also inspired from a paper titled *Indoceanic Tidalectics: Aquatic Embodiments and Metaphors in Lankan Literature*, which was delivered by Isabel Alonso-Breto at the International Conference "Aquatic Cartographies: Oceanic Imaginaries, Histories and Identities" held at the University of Lleida (Spain) on 21-22 July 2022, and soon to be published. See also: Amideo 2021: 6.

[8] As Halberstam explains: "*The Rite of Spring* is now a well-established symphony and ballet, firmly a part of the Western canon […] and once [considered] a runaway performance of madness, queerness, the feral and exhaustion. The original performance […] in Paris in 1913 drew such ire […] that the performances were

female/mother who has the power of bringing life to this world, thus connecting with the overturning reality of *The Waste Land*. Indeed, as Mester suggests:

> Interestingly, *Le Sacre*'s graphic depiction of a ritualized female sacrifice had no precedent in either Slavic mythology or ballet tradition. Even in Frazer's descriptions of universal vegetation rites, the male gods (like Attis and Osiris) are always the ones slain and sacrificed. […] Nijinsky's ballet […] did set a precedent for modernist literary texts. […] More generally, *Le Sacre*'s dark vision of a primal past, like *The Waste Land*, was a figure for modern life, especially its barbarism and savagery. It anticipated the evils of war and a depersonalized society ruled by the machine (Mester 1997: 7).

Eliot saw the performance and was most impressed by the power of Stravinsky's music. Indeed, in one of his "London Letters" written for *The Dial* on the cultural scene of the city between 1921 and 1922, he argued:

> Looking back upon the past season in London […] it remains certain that Stravinsky was our two months' lion. He has been the greatest success since Picasso. His advent was well prepared by Mr Eugene Goossens […] who conducted two *Sacre du Printemps* concerts. […] The spirit of the music was modern, and the spirit of the ballet was primitive ceremony. The Vegetation Rite upon which the ballet is founded remained, in spite of the music, a pageant of primitive culture. It was interesting to anyone who had read *The Golden Bough* and similar works, but hardly more than interesting. […] In everything in the *Sacre du Printemps*, except in the music, one missed the sense of the present[9].

Despite Eliot's belief that Nijinsky's dance failed to portray the "sense of the present", I claim that the choreography was in reality a structural and well-thought revision of the foundations of centuries-long 'traditional' ballet. The intent was to portray the irrationality of the human mind, drawing in particular from revised myths and rites so as to propose a new and yet needed order of movements, gestures and interpretations.

I read the episode of Madame Sosostris's "wicked pack of cards" (46) from this perspective. In my interpretation, the dance occurring between these archetypes needs to be connected with Eliot's challenging re-reading of the traditional meaning of these symbols. In more than one way, the cards recall the irregular flowing steps of Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Eliot presents them through the character of a "famous clairvoyante" (43). They are in succession, "the drowned Phoenician sailor" (47), whom Madame Sosostris claims to be

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halted after only a few nights. […] What made audiences respond negatively to Nijinsky's choreography […] must be some combination of the awkwardness of the stance (pigeon toed), the performance of broken embodiment rather than a body in flight, and the way the dance exhausts its dancers to the point of near collapse […]. *The Rite of Spring* broke many of the established repertories of ballet […], it unleashed an aesthetic of bewilderment and […] marked the necessary failure of modernity" (Halberstam 2020: 52).

[9] For an overview of a selection of the "London Letters" written by Eliot for the magazine *The Dial*, see the following link https://theworld.com/~raparker/exploring/tseliot/works/london-letters/london-letter-1921-10.html#navigation.

her client's card; "Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, the lady of situations" (49-50); "the man with three staves" (51); "the Wheel" (51); "the one-eye merchant" (52); a "card, which is blank [and that she is] forbidden to see (52-54)"; and the "Hanged Man" (54), which Madame Sosostris cannot find.

Together with the more traditional meanings that these tarots evoke[10], they are all connected to water-elements and the power of the sea. I read the "Phoenician sailor" and "the one-eye merchant" as dwellers of a new world order we should aspire to, the liquid reality of the sea. "Belladonna, the lady of the Rocks, the lady of situations" and "the man with three staves" are mythical symbols of wisdom that show us the 'way' when we get lost. In general, these cards request a change of events, forms, structures and modes of being, in tune with the transformative power of water. In this respect, as Brooks has rightly reminded:

> Miss Weston has shown [that] the Tarot cards were originally used to determine the event of highest importance to the people, the rising of the waters. Madame Sosostris has fallen a long way from the high function of her predecessors. She is engaged merely in vulgar fortune-telling […] but the symbols of the Tarot pack are still unchanged (Brooks 1968: 133).

In this panoply of interpretations, the figures of "the Wheel" and that of the "Hanged Man" are probably the most important ones because they foreground the need for changing the cultural paradigm. I claim that they are related to the revolutionary choreography of *The Rite of Spring* and to the water-calling prayer of *The Waste Land*. The Wheel in particular is known to be stationed on water, waiting to be activated and start turning in the infinite possibilities of life. Moreover, this is a card associated with the need to redeem and re-start, which is very close to the image of the Hanged Man, who needs to die in order to be reborn in a different shape and with a different mind.

The verse at the beginning of Madame Sosostris's reading "(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (48) manifests this same dancing flow of transformations. The quotation from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* recalls the visions of Ariel's song, precisely the images of 'change' that the spirit is willing to instil into Ferdinand's mind in order to convince him of the drowning of his father Alonso. As Serpieri suggests:

> Pound crossed out the verse 'Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!' but Eliot kept it in the final version of the poem, v. 48: it is the first quote coming from Shakespeare's

[10] Three cards can certainly be associated with tarots. First, the Wheel, which according to Martin "does not invite us to action, because it speaks of 'change' all around us, and asks us to meditate on the path we have crossed so far" (Martin 2021a: 336, my translation). The Fool is associated with the "card which is blank, is something is carrying on his back, which I am forbidden to see" (53-54). It is "everything and nothing. […]. The sack he carries […] on his shoulders is full of objects. These are the experiences he has collected in his previous life cycles. [Indeed,] he is suspended between two cycles and it will be […] the cosmic energy to drive him in one direction" (Martin 2021a: 175, my translation). Moreover, the card is connected to the Hanged Man, which Martin explains "not looking anymore on the world but on himself. [Everything with this tarot] becomes slow, heavy, as if we were walking under water. Step by step, we discover what we have become, how many dresses we wear" (Martin 2021b: 63, my translation). For more interpretations of Madame Sosostris's tarots, see: Pearson 1991; Kaplan 2003 [1970]; Auger 2004 and Wirth 2006.

> *The Tempest* and it was inserted […] precisely after the announcement of the death by water of the Phoenician Sailor, and it served to introduce the important paradigm of the metamorphosis (Serpieri 2014: 158, my translation).

Recalling *The Tempest*, Eliot merged the aquatic images in Madame Sosostris' cards with Prospero's transformative magic occurring on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. Eliot emphasised how drowning in a sea of possibilities and metamorphosis, in order to come back anew, could bring life back to *The Waste Land*. Likewise, *The Tempest* represents a journey of redemption and change, and exemplifies a utopian world in which people struggle in order to re-unite in a communal and spiritual partnership existence.

Even more interestingly, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is also a text that is connected to the art of dance. The play was a *masque*, a specific type of entertainment made of music, dancing and mime, which was particularly famous in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. These were highly stylised short plays or performances, and sometimes plays within plays, which allowed any type of spectators, from nobles to monarch, to common people, to be on the stage, usually using masks, in order to revolutionise the world-order. In this sense, Prospero organises his play within play as a series of mini-masques, thus allowing his audience to ponder on his brother's betrayal and final punishment. For the aim of this article, I suggest that the precise dancing structure of Shakespeare's masque may have inspired Eliot to see a close connection with the potential transformative ability of the "Phoenician Sailor" (47). In this respect, Ariel's song is truly immersed in the gestational and amniotic power of the sea, thus emphasising the need for water and sea-elements, in the search for a new transformation. In this perspective, I agree with Mentz when he suggests:

> Ariel's famous 'sea-change' imagines the combined physical-and magical powers of the ocean transfiguring human bodies. The song, like all of Shakespeare's diverse and fragmentary figurations of the ocean, isn't just a metaphor or even a description of how dramatic poetry works. It's a poet's attempt to match and figure the great waters (Mentz 2009: x).

A Tidalectic Sketch of Tiresias, the Mythical Modern Hero

If section II of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess", sketches the consequences of a 'life-in-death' at a microscopic level, first in a rich and opulent setting and second in a vulgar and low scene in a London pub, in "The Fire Sermon" (section III) Eliot begins to propose a different view and proactive reality for his poem. The section begins with references to water, which is seen as opposed energy to fire, even though these elements are also complementary because they allow 'death' and transformation. Eliot focuses in particular on the degraded image of the "Sweet Thames" (176), thus forewarning the authentic condition of today's world rivers:

> The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
> Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
> Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed
> (177-179).

This scene introduces the theme of death, epitomised in the appearance of a "rat" (187) and in the inability of humans to survive on fishing. The only figure who will atone for the harshness of this degraded reality is Tiresias, the shaman-like character who will be able to encompass the entirety of individuals crossing paths in *The Waste Land*, in order to redeem and transform them into new id-entities, voices and hopes for a better future.

I analyse the character of Tiresias from a threefold perspective. First s/he is a powerful symbol of medicine man/woman, the only one able to transmute what s/he sees through the sacred elements of water and fire. Second, s/he is one of the most reliable points of reference of the entire poem[11], precisely because s/he is not afraid to embrace the indefiniteness and fluidity of existence, which is evoked through constant referencing to the element of water. Finally, s/he can be seen as a tidalectic picture of the modern individual, because to portray this powerful protagonist, I sustain that Eliot drew inspiration mainly from the revolutionary figurative arts of the time.

As I have pointed out in my introduction, Eliot did not disdain to go back to his beloved American heritage and setting. The Mississippi Valley and St. Louis provided him with lots of material to draw from, especially while examining the tribal and indigenous landscape of his youth. Moreover, as Crawford has argued, Eliot was intrigued by the work of the writer Thomas Mayne Reid, and in particular by one of his Jamaican tales titled *The Maroon*, where Reid talked about the "'horrid art' of the 'Obeah-man' who specialized in the resurrection of the dead" (Crawford 1987: 17).

Shamanism is one of the most ancient and acknowledged forms of spirituality on earth. It is a sacred path towards the perception and knowledge of the 'unknown', namely the spiritual world, which is the gateway for reaching the cosmic energy of existence. Shamans are preachers or better custodians of native ancient traditions. Throughout their practices, which are different for each culture, from the playing of drums to rites towards mother-nature, they are capable of restoring and recentring the energetic power of lost individuals, in order to help them remember that they are only one of many elements allowing existence[12].

Eliot's Tiresias is a sort of a modern shaman for he 'sees' or better foresees the corruption and shameful decay into which humans have fallen, especially in love. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement will allow Tiresias, and indirectly Eliot, to ponder a solution for the pain of humanity and also propose a transformation of reality.

The redeeming energy that Tiresias proposes is the magic of poetry, which is one of the most spiritual and healing powers of imagination. Through the encounter with Tiresias, happening right in the middle of *The Waste Land*, readers can grasp the real challenges of the poem, which are an attempt to revise and re-read their own lives and stories through a new and empowering perspective.

Another view to consider while examining the figure of Tiresias is that of his/her

[11] Williamson argues that: "'I Tiresias' is the only explicit identification of the speaker in the poem, and there is a reason for it. He is not a character in the fortune; but he is the supreme metamorphosis that brings together all the metaphoric transformations and thus is qualified to summarize their experiences" (Williamson 1967: 142).

[12] See Stutley 2003: i.

undisputable connection to the element of water. Indeed, the hero/heroine is presented in an unmarked and almost oneiric dimension:

> I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
> Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
> At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
> Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
> The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
> Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
> […]
> I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
> Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest –
> I too awaited the expected guest
> (218-230).

Tiresias emerges from the obscurity of the mythical past to predict and eradicate the future of modern life. S/he comes out from the depths of the sea towards "homeward", meaning reality, while also perceiving "the sailor [coming] home from sea". Her/His forms are undefined, because s/he lives not a 'life-in-death' but "[a life] between two lives". S/he defines him/herself as an "old man with wrinkled female breasts [and] dugs". Tiresias substantiates Eisler's idea of "partnership" (Eisler 1988, 1995) because s/he comprehends, understands and is able to resolve the agonies of human existence. Tiresias is the saviour of her/his people, who knows precisely what brought humanity to take wrong directions, especially by disconnecting themselves from the embodied joy of physical love. Tiresias is the firelight element that will burn and destroy the decadence of modernity invoking its fluid quintessence, for water and fire are the cooperative forces that will allow humans out of *The Waste Land*.

Tiresias is the turning point of the poem. Indeed, after his/her episode Eliot will start introducing the path towards regeneration, which occurs first through a "Death by Water" (the title of section IV) and finally by an attentive listening to the thunder prayer, in the section titled "What the Thunder Said" (the V and final section of the poem). In my opinion, accepting the "wet ontology" (Steinberg & Peters 2015) of Tiresias is therefore paramount in the poem, for the final aim of Eliot was re-establishing our communal and partnership scope in this world, which is only possible through our recognition of being part of water. In this respect, as Steinberg and Peters suggest:

> A wet ontology [is needed] not merely to endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also to propose a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world ever on the move (Steinberg & Peters 2015: 2).

It is important to link Tiresias with the revolutionary impact that painters achieved in the same direction in those years. Indeed, if one considers the distorted representation of women that Picasso provides in his famous painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, one may

easily draw a line of associations that Eliot achieved only through the depiction of his protagonist Tiresias. Whether Eliot or Picasso were inspired by the work of one another is not the purpose of this study[13]. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that in those difficult years, painters, poets, choreographers and artists were all very much in need of new systems of representation and models of reference for sketching the chaos and complexity of the modern world.

Just as Picasso's women constitute a group of undefined, fragmented, disjointed and yet coherent images, *The Waste Land* represents a well-structured and focused palimpsest, a text that encompasses the images, sounds and embodiments of other groups of texts – apparently without meaning. For Eliot, the final aim of literature, and the arts in general, is that of assembling the "ruins" (430) of life, trying to find a way out of disorder and chaos, and propose a collective and positive sense of partnership belonging.

Shantih Shantih Shantih or The Music of Water

"Death by Water", section IV of *The Waste Land*, is the shortest part of the poem and it depicts the drowning of "Phlebas the Phoenician" (312), the card that Madame Sosostris presented in section I, and which by now stands as symbol for "Gentile or Jew" (319), meaning humanity at large. In my reading, Eliot presents the necessary departure of the people of *The Waste Land* from terrestrial and physical life, in the acceptance of the cyclical energy of the world, the "whirlpool" (318) of existence, which will allow humanity to go from transformation into regeneration. This is, at the same time, the prelude for the last section of the poem, "What the Thunder Said", which Eliot considered the most prophetic and well-written part of his masterpiece.

If most critics have focused on the role and "influence […] that Indic philosophy […] with its allusions to Buddhist and Upanishadic texts" (Kearns 1987: viii) played on Eliot's mind for the writing of this section, I want to emphasise how *The Waste Land* is revealed here to be a highly cryptic and metaphysical prayer for water. In my interpretation, part V represents a redemptive and quiet song, a chant for liberation in the intangible dimension of a spiritual meditative journey. For Eliot though, the sounds of water-drops are only discernible by those who are truly capable of listening carefully, people who are willing to move away from their ego and step into the understanding and acceptance of our human condition as being part of the One life. In this sense, returning to section IV of the poem, Kearns suggests:

> Phlebas's death may be read […] not as a merely natural or fated one but as sacrifice, the final sacrifice of the individual ego that must precede the full release of insight and liberation. […] This death may be read as the poem's essential preparation for the peace and unity of Part V (Kearns 1987: 210-211).

[13] Tomlinson provides an important detail when he suggests: "however various the impulses which led to *The Waste Land*, Eliot first settled to serious work on it in the months immediately after the Picasso exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London during January and February, 1921" (Tomlinson 1980: 66).

Phlebas' death epitomises the final destination of all the protagonists of *The Waste Land*. In this sense, his figure is connected to the murder of the young girl in Nijinsky and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Their departures from this life are nevertheless 'needed' in the transformation of the world-order. Death is part of life, and also a gateway towards another dimension.

> He who was living is now dead
> We who were living are now dying
> With a little patience
> (328-330).

As most critics have pointed out, Eliot's connection with the figure of Christ is evident in these verses[14] as much as in changing tone of the poem. Indeed, *The Waste Land* moves from a detached and external point of view, until now represented by a division between reader and narrator/Eliot ("You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère") (76), to a more intimate and interior whispering, a communal voice of belonging that connects all existence to the same fate and destiny.

The first passages of *What the Thunder Said* are evoking a general atmosphere of loneliness and solitude. An arid landscape, silent "gardens" (323), "stony places" (324), "rock" (331), "sandy road" (332) and "mountains" (333), but no sound of water. These are spaces for no relief because "here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit" (340) and everything appears to be very sterile and dry. Very few presences inhabit this empty world[15]. Amongst these, Eliot concentrates on the animal figure of a "hermit-thrush" (356)[16]. This is a very specific bird that the poet allows to "[sing] in the pine trees / Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop / But there is no water" (358).

This is by contrast the prelude for the dropping of water. I claim that Eliot is playing here the sound of nature, the music that humanity has forgotten because of its selfish and self-centred attitude towards life. Eliot is skilfully introducing the coming of water through the image of a rhythmical crescendo of repetitions. In this sense, the first verses of this section of Part V are mostly a continuous recalling or re-uttering of the same words:

> Here is no water but only rock
> Rock and no water and the sandy road

[14] Consider, for instance, Serpieri's interpretation when he explains: "These opening verses are references to the events that will lead to Christ's death" (Serpieri 2014: 123, my translation).

[15] One may notice here the correspondences between the beginning and ending of the poem in terms of descriptions of the landscape or scenario. This confirms the claim that everything in *The Waste Land* is circular, recurrent, fluid and perpetual.

[16] As Kearns explains: "Eliot invokes […] an ornithological entry in Chapman's *Handbook of the Birds of Eastern North America* which states that this bird is *turdus aonalaschkae pallasii*. *The Waste Land*'s thrust […] is no literary or derivative songster, but a real bird in a real wood. The illusion is of a return to some original or primary immediate experience, unmediated by the knowledge of intervening texts, which have been suppressed or repressed […] in this strange metalepsis" (Kearns 1987: 218).

> The road winding above among the mountains
> Which are mountains of rock without water
> If there were water we should stop and drink
> Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
> (331-336).

And again, a few verses later:

> If there were water
> And no rock
> If there were rock
> And also water
> And water
> (345-349).

I suggest that at this point of the poem water is already falling on *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless, water-falling or water-drops are only heard by those who are capable of grasping the imperceptible rhythms of repetitive musical sounds and words. In a seemingly incoherent and puzzling reiteration of letters, syntagms and forms, Eliot is here connecting poetry with music, and sounds with poetry. Eliot arouses a "maternal lamentation" (367) which later transforms itself into a "falling [of] towers" (373). In my interpretation, this stands for the falling of our certainties and beliefs, when at peace with ourselves, we finally realise that what we need is to embrace a more of a partnership communion with existence. In this regard, the Babel of the "unreal" (376) cities of *The Waste Land* collapses because humanity has understood the much-needed possibility of encountering and accepting other traditions, views and religions. As the scholar Franco Fabbro has suggested in an interview:

> In the world we have at least 10.000 religions and 7.000 languages. […] If a child is educated in different languages […] s/he will start observing different perceptions and views of the world. […] The same thing is true for religions, because religions indeed are very similar to languages. If you educate a child to different religions (not only in theoretical terms but also on practical ones), and so for instance in Christian religion, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and shamanism, […] you are going to see that s/he will be able to distinguish the pro and cons of other visions and ultimately of his/her own. [At the same time], if we all agree on early plurilingual education for children, it is also true that multi-religious education is not accepted[17].

This idea of a desired plurality of voices, directions and epistemologies is also evident in the very last part of the poem where a cacophony of speeches manifests into the disturbing acknowledgement of other 'realities', peoples and more-than-humans worlds.

[17] This is a transcript extract of an online interview that the youtuber Marco Montemagno conducted with Prof. Franco Fabbro in June 2020. It is possible to view the talk titled *Neurosciences, mindfulness and a multitude of other things* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TwD_cEAlOE&t=789s.

Eliot has finally been capable of "[shoring] these fragments […] against [his, and indirectly our] ruins" (430). He has understood that spiritual wholeness and acceptance of different perceptions of life will be the ultimate path towards collective redemption and peaceful partnership regeneration.

What the Thunder suggests in the three words uttered – "Datta" (401), "Dayadhvam" (411) and "Damyata" (418) – are unclear responses to the voyagers in search for the Grail. Nevertheless, as Eliot has previously pointed out: "the chapel [is] empty, [and it has become] only the wind's home" (388). The message of the poem is finally revealed because the Chalice of Life that humans are looking for resides only within themselves, in the acceptance and comprehension of being part of a larger cosmic energy of possibilities and truths. This spiritual and ultimate understanding of reality is only possible through the practice of meditation or calm recovery from the brutality of existence. It is a detachment from the material world, money, corruption and many other human faults and wrongs, in order to finally accept and completely focus on the 'here and now':

> Like many metaphysical poems, *The Waste Land* is also in part a mimesis of the process of the mind in the early stages of meditation. It proceeds from random, scattered, and disparate thoughts, a profusion of intrusive voices and images generated by conscious and subconscious operations of memory and desire, through what Pound, in a letter to Eliot, called 'cogitation, the aimless flitter before arriving at meditation' (Kearns 1987: 196).

In my undisciplined reading of *The Waste Land*, I simply suggest that "DA" (400-410-417), the real response and voice of the thunder, stands there to determine the beginning of this revision of intentions, as if it were a booming or opening sound towards another dimension. Meanwhile, the three-repetitive words coming after it, despite my acknowledgement of their different and yet connecting meaning, are in reality a repetition at a higher level of existence of the water-dropping of rain, which readers have heard since the beginning of this section. As I have already explained, I believe that *The Waste Land* is foremost a song of praise for water. In these terms, I again agree with Kearns when she remarks that this final section of the poem is in reality a meditative song:

> It mediates between the poem's esoteric and exoteric levels, its metaphysic and its mediation, and is associated with the shamanistic functions of healing, making rain, and raising the wind, as well as with singing, chanting, and prayer. The water-dropping song works by a kind of sympathetic magic. […] It is in some sense *The Waste Land*'s 'rain mantra', helping to inaugurate both a poetic and a cultural renewal of creativity (Kearns 1987: 218).

The idea of the raining mantra connects the three injunctions of the Thunder with the final closing prayer of *The Waste Land*, which is symbolically defined and framed once again by a three-tone repetitive melodic song, *Shantih shantih shantih* (432). Apart from recalling, once more, the falling of the redeeming water over the landscapes and inhabitants of *The*

Waste Land, I believe that Eliot's reference here is suggesting a final human acknowledgement of his lesson. This is humanity's final acceptance of the One life, in its most authentic understanding of being the communal and spiritual energy of possibilities that enables existence. It is also humanity's tolerant and caring response towards other humans and more-than-human forms, beings, entities and presences. *Shantih* is a powerful prayer of surrender, acceptance and control. It points to our innate human capacity to love, dream, create and respect. It is a very much-needed path towards life, it is a very much needed path towards ourselves, it is a very much needed path towards the world.

Concluding Remarks

If the element of water and the need for water, are some of the most relevant aspects that critics and scholars examined in *The Waste Land*, few readings have considered these objectives as positive and proactive features for a renewal of life. In order to focus on the theme of water, Eliot uses different strategies, which range from allusive intertextual references and explicit narratives (the Fisher King), passing through the representation of tidalectic identities (Tiresias) and ending with implicit and imperceptible sounds of water-drops.

At the same time, Eliot connected his water-quest with other idiosyncratic features that were governing the aesthetics at the beginning of the 20th century. I am referring in particular to the turbulent revolutions of the avant-garde movements and arts of those years, artistic expressions that brought forth innovations in all cultural fields. The arts constituted Eliot's reservoir for imagining and trying out new concepts in order to substantiate the social and cultural chaos of his world. Incorporating the aesthetic innovations that Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky and Nijinsky brought to the fore, these revolutions epitomised a refusal of the past, allowing the 'irrational' order of the present to emerge, in an evocative, impressionist and highly corporeal experience of reality.

Just as happens when we watch an open ocean of possibilities, *The Waste Land* has no individual voice. It is a communal narrative of existence that works on discontinuity, tidal movements and cyclical spiralling narratives. As Pollard suggests:

> On the one hand, Eliot believed that to be true to his age, his poetry must reflect the cultural fragmentation of modern life, which could no longer affirm a sense of historical progress. On the other hand, he believed that to be true to his convictions about art, his poetry must also embody some ordering principle to suggest the possibility of cultural wholeness (Pollard 2004: 46).

From a spiritual point of view, *The Waste Land* draws inspiration from Anglican and Christian rites, passes through Buddhism in "The Fire Sermon", embraces the power of cyclical pagan ceremonies in "Death by Water" and concludes with a meditative prayer coming from Hinduist tradition. The poem thus emphasises the need for a comprehensive acknowledgement of the spiritual visions and voices of the world. According to Eliot, this is the only way to build up a new and more peaceful reality, which will be based on partnership values and ideals of love, care, respect and understanding.

As the new and exciting project of the blue humanities suggests, water plays a significant role in human and more-than-human survival on this planet. As occurs in *The Waste Land*, today we need a collective and restorative journey towards a fresh baptism, in the clear and unpolluted waters of understanding. After a hundred years from its publication, Eliot's *The Waste Land* speaks again to our generation. We live in a world that is threatened by the inability to listen and communicate, a world that limits peoples' liberty and wisdom. Today we live again in a sort of 'life-in-death'. It is our duty to come back to Eliot's poem and words in order to re-empower humanity with a more beneficial, positive and communal path of existence, out of *The Waste Land* of incomprehension, in a healing process that connects all humanity, ourselves and the world.

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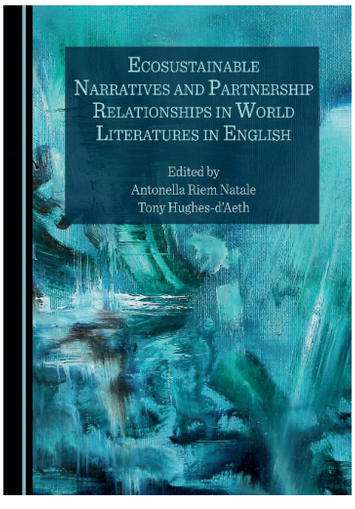
John Thieme

Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English

Antonella Riem Natale & Tony Hughes d'Aeth (eds). 2022. Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 185 pp., £ 64.99, ISBN 1-5275-8228-0



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Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English adds to the growing body of essay-collections curated by the Partnership Studies Group of the University of Udine, which, drawing on the work of Riane Eisler, proposes partnership models of culture and society to dismantle dominator paradigms founded on asymmetrical binaries. In the present volume, the extent to which the partnership paradigm is central varies and several of the essays extend the focus beyond world literatures in English, but overall *Ecosustainable Narratives* offers a series of stimulating case-studies of ways in which discourse can be re-envisioned in non-hierarchical ways.

The Introduction by the two editors outlines the main contours of the partnership approach and provides a summary of the volume's various contributions. It leads seamlessly into Antonella Riem's opening essay on Coleridge's organicism and ecosophy, which reinforces the Introduction, before moving on to a reading of Coleridge's poem "This

Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". The Coleridge discussion reworks material from Riem's 2005 book, *The One Life; Coleridge and Hinduism*, but in this new incarnation, it demonstrates the relevance of Coleridge's organicist thinking to the partnership paradigm, albeit while using the work of Eisler and Raimon Panikkar as a frame for the discussion of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" rather than integrating it into the essay's close reading of the poem. The bringing together of these two strands of Riem's work should prove especially valuable for those who have not read *The One Life*.

Coral Howells' essay on Margaret Atwood's poetry and her *MaddAddam* trilogy and Mattia Mantellato's re-reading of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* both take major world writers whose work readily lends itself to a partnership reading as their subjects and give nuanced accounts of how the texts discussed embody this. Howells shows how the dystopian aspects of Atwood's trilogy are countered by the ecosustainable sect of the God's Gardeners, especially in *The Year of the Flood*, the second part of the trilogy, and argues that it holds out the possibility of renewal through a non-anthropocentric approach. Mantellato traces how *Waiting for the Barbarians* breaks down dominator-dominated binaries through a careful examination of the Magistrate's developing encounter with alterity in the form of the nomad girl, showing how this erodes barriers between self and other, as he comes to internalise what it is to be 'An-Other'.

The discursive construction of culture is central to the partnership project and so it is refreshing to see a departure from conventional academic analysis in Paul Kane's meditative "Essay on Water". Written in poetic couplets and allowing itself to range across a spectrum of subjective emotions, this contribution focuses on the transformative fluidity of water. In so doing, it moves beyond the animist challenge to the Anthropocene, which is explicit or implicit in several of the volume's other essays, and takes the book into the realms of the hylozoist. If, initially its focus may seem slightly tangential to the volume's theme, for this reader at least, it came across as the piece most likely to promote ecosustainable activity.

In contrast, Janet Todd's fine essay on Jane Austen's Chawton novels and her own recent fiction seems less at home in this particular volume. It treads familiar ground by focusing on the pictorial framing that characterizes Austen's view of landscape, reinvigorating this approach by demonstrating how worlds are perceived through words. Thereafter, Todd provides excerpts from two of her own novels which bring her protagonists into dialogue with Austen. Both sections of the essay read well, but their connection with ecosustainable partnership remains tenuous.

Three of the essays move beyond literature to deal with linguistics and pedagogy in ways that contribute to the overall remit. Maria Bortoluzzi's "Environmental Crisis and Pandemic Emergency: News Stories of Erasure and Awareness" looks at media reporting at the height of the Covid pandemic and shows how the dominance of 'Coronaspeak' effectively erased coverage of the climate crisis. Bortoluzzi itemizes the various types of content that are believed to make stories particularly newsworthy, among them novelty and personalization, which it is suggested may have led to the pandemic's taking precedence over environmental issues. In a not dissimilar manner, Valentina Boschian Bailo explores the relationships between humans and ecosystems, focusing on migration and the ways

in which 'climate is represented as an active agent that causes environmental change' and environment 'as a passive recipient that is subject to such change', and suggesting that a change in outlook that values partnership is needed to better understand environmental migration. Elia Bertoldi quietly illustrates the use of partnership narratives in teaching English as a second language to children.

Two essays deal with major Australian writers. Nicholas Birns offers a probing reading of Judith Wright's relational poetics, which particularly focuses on the poetry of her middle period. The essay comes alive when Birns discusses poems such as "To Another Housewife", in which the partnership paradigm is writ small, with Wright foregrounding the titular character's co-optation into the 'male meat-eating economy', without exempting women from complicity in such activity. The essay is also especially interesting when it shows how Wright's friendship with Oodgeroo bridged the settler/Indigenous divide. Gillian Tan and Lyn McCredden's "The Postcolonial Sacred in the Fiction and Memoirs of Tim Winton" confronts the same issue, focusing on the 'deepening austerity' in Wintons's representation of landscape. Their contribution wrestles with the discomfort that many 'non-Indigenous' Australians feel, when faced with their supposed unbelonging, and suggests that Winton's novels 'reveal the brokenness of non-Indigenous Australians' and their need to address their past arrogance in the hope of achieving transformation. This sentiment, familiar in recent years, is, of course, unexceptionable, but it leaves one feeling that there must come a point when the 'non-Indigenous', whether they are the descendants of Anglo-Celtic settlers or convicts or more recently arrived migrants, may also lay claim to a sense of belonging. This, though, is addressed here in passages that discuss Winton's 'sympathies for an Indigenous ontology of place'.

Deborah Saidero's essay "Heal the Earth" looks at writing from the opposite side of the settler/Indigene binary, considering work by two of Canada's finest Native writers, Lee Maracle and Jeanette Armstrong. It offers an approach that is a salutary foil to Tan and McCredden's contribution and works rather better in terms of the partnership paradigm. The focus is on ways in which age-old Native wisdom is instructive for contemporary society: Maracle has the traditional figure of Raven spreading a flu epidemic to shake people out of their spiritual paralysis; Armstrong demonstrates how the land and people's bodies are part of the same integral whole. Again this promotes a hylozoist vision that represents an extended version of the partnership approach.

From first to last, *Ecosustainable Narratives and Partnership Relationships in World Literatures in English* is a thought-provoking volume, which challenges anthropocentric perspectives and further disseminates the call for collaborative work at a time when the climate and environment are threatened as never before, and as Margaret Atwood has said, in an oft-repeated mantra, 'Everything change'.

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Literatures, Postcolonial Studies: The Essential Glossary, Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place and studies of Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul and *R. K. Narayan*. He was Editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* from 1992 to 2011 and is General Editor of the Manchester University Press Contemporary World Writers Series. His creative writing has been published in Argentina, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Italy, Malaysia, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA.
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Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology

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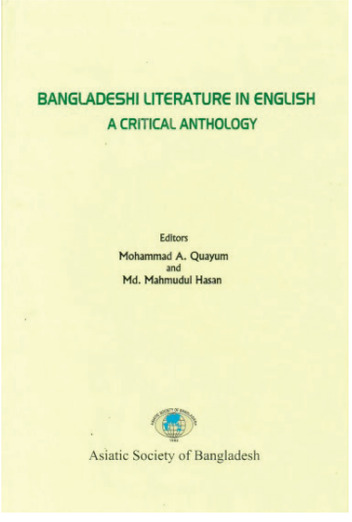

https://www.asiaticsociety.org.bd/publications/

From the colonial era and the Pakistani regime, many writers from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) wrote in English quite prolifically. In post-independence Bangladesh, this practice has gained renewed dynamism, as a significant number of Bangladeshi native and diasporic writers have produced literary works in English. Despite this, Bangladeshi literature in English has not received deserving critical attention. However, following the sweeping eminence of Anglophone literature in the neighbouring countries such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Bangladeshi literature in English is being included in academic studies; many universities have already incorporated a course on Bangladeshi Literature in English in their syllabi of English studies. Against this background, Mohammad A. Quayum's and Md. Mahmudul Hasan's edited book *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* (2021) that anthologises significant critical insights into the Bangladeshi

English writings has been recently published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Hence, it can be considered a timeous as well as valuable contribution in the burgeoning academic discourse of Bangladeshi literature in English (hereinafter BLE).

Arguably the first compilation of this kind, this anthology covers many BLE writers whose works are "worthy of serious critical and analytical consideration" (5), incorporating divergent literary themes such as feminism, gender stereotypes, (post)modernism, postcoloniality, diaspora, transnationalism, and trauma and memory. Carefully chosen "on the critical merit of the items" (6), the fifteen chapters of the book are divided into four sections – "A Pre-Independence Pioneer", "Writings from Bangladesh", "Writings from the Diaspora", and "Interviews". Apart from these critical essays, the "Editors' Introduction", providing the historical details of Bangladeshi English literary tradition from the emergence to the present, can be studied as a grounding resource for students, teachers and researchers of this field. What is particular in the "Introduction" is that the editors duly recognise the contribution of the country's English medium schools, often seen pejoratively by many, the English language dailies and some literary festivals behind BLE's recent growth. However, since I will focus on the articles based on the predominant themes explored in them, a chronological chapter-by-chapter reflection may not be important.

A good bulk of the chapters reflect on the role of women writers as well as their female characters in numerous literary and historical junctures of Bangladesh. The opening two chapters – "Muslim Bengal Writes Back: Rokeya's Encounter with and Representation of Europe" by Md. Mahmudul Hasan and "The Influence of Rokeya's Islamic Identity in Sultana's Dream" by Ayesha Tarannum – delve deep into Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain's life, her struggle to emancipate Bengali (Muslim) women and her literary works. While Hasan explores how Rokeya used in her works European culture and literary spirit to inspire and emancipate Bengali women from their "animal state" (7), Tarannum offers an allegorical, Islamic interpretation of Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*. Tarannum, using some textual terms and references, compares the Sultana's dream journey with the Islamic Prophet's journey to heaven, commonly known as *Mi'raj*. Sabiha Huq's "Images of Bangladesh in Niaz Zaman's Novels" discusses Niaz Zaman's three novels *The Crooked Neem Tree*, *A Different Sita* and *The Baromashi Tapes*. Despite the title's implication on Zaman's distinctive portrayal of Bangladesh in the novels, the chapter overarchingly broods on the feminist awareness of the three female protagonists of the three novels – Seema, Shabina and Sakina – and their diversified sacrifice in historical, political and familial situations.

The woman issues have also been further extended in chapter eight by Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi titled "The Blame Game: War and Violence in Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame*". It portrays how the female protagonist Laila in Ara's novel *Blame* manoeuvres through a multi-layered blame and disgrace because of her fighting against Pakistani Army and the resultant loss of her chastity. However, in the teeth of this trenchant blame Laila remains in a brave aplomb thinking that she did what her conscience told her to do in that terrible situation. By extension of this feminist query, in the last chapter of the third section "Negotiating the Politics of Power: Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* and Women's Role in War and Nation-building", Farzana Akhter exhibits how the Bangladeshi women's active

role in war and contribution to the formation of the nation are either obliterated or relegated to subordinate status in the post-war masculine historiography. The author rounds off her discussion reaffirming that the independence of the country has not regrettably been "the autonomy and liberation of women" (255).

The only chapter on the Bangladeshi English poetry titled "Reading Kaiser Haq: A Bangladeshi Transnational Poet in English" by Tahmina Ahmed probes into Bangladeshi famous poet Kaiser Haq's transnational worldview in his poems and interviews. Ahmed discusses numerous critical issues regarding transnationalism, from definition to its growing theoretical prominence, in contemporary literature. Her arguments, on the one hand, familiarise Haq in the translational studies, and her exploration of the poet's inherent translational outlook, particularly in "Ode on the Lungi," may, on the other hand, inspire young researchers to vet other works of Bangladeshi literature from this theoretical prism.

It is well known that Partition scholars are critically preoccupied with Indian writers focusing on the odysseys of the Hindus who migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal during the 1947 Partition and disregard the corollary migration of the people of West Bengal Muslims to East Bengal. Considering this historical background, the chapter "Homed, Unhomed and Rehomed in Partition Stories of East Bengal / East Pakistan" by Rifat Mahbub and Anika Saba is particularly ground-breaking because it examines the Partition literature by East Pakistani/Bangladeshi writers – Syed Waliullah, Abu Rushd, and Ashraf Siddiqui – who otherwise remain unrecognised in Partition discourse. In an intricate interpretation of home and homing desire, the authors have admittedly endeavoured to counterbalance the critical indifference to these writers, drawing a sympathetic attention to the settling travails of the West Bengal migrators.

Several chapters investigate extensive issues of diasporic identities, subjectivities and sensitivities in the fiction by well-known Bangladeshi diasporic writers such as Adib Khan, Dilruba Z. Ara, Monica Ali, Zia Haider Rahman and Tahmima Anam, "who were born in Bangladesh but have since found a home elsewhere, but still identify with Bangladesh, consider Bangladesh as their original homeland, and write about Bangladeshi life and culture or on its uprooted variations" (6). In the chapter "Re-storying the Past, Re-imagining the Future in Adib Khan's *Homecoming* and *Spiral Road*", Stefano Mercanti underscores the tensions of displacement and investigates the role of the memory of the past in the lives of Adib Khan's protagonists Martin and Masud that help them psychologically negotiate the orthodoxies of rigid culture and social hierarchical systems.

In fact, almost all the critical essays on the diaspora draw, apparently or thematically, from James Clifford's "overpowering paradox of diaspora", that is "dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*" (qtd. in Hasanat 193 & in Friedman 222). For example, in "Religion, Diaspora and the Politics of a Homing Desire in the Writings of Zia Haider Rahman, Tahmima Anam and Monica Ali", Fayeza Hasanat examines "the positioning of a good Muslim" (186) in the diasporic context from the perspective of what Edward Said defined as "overlapping territories and intertwined history" (qtd. in Hasanat 186) in his *Culture and Imperialism*. The remarkable commonality that Hasanat discovers in the protagonists of these novels – Chanu in *Brick Lane*, Sohail in *The Good Muslim* and Zafar in *In*

the Light of What We Know – is that they all are "consumed by an unconquerable horror" (199) in the diasporic world which ultimately leads them to the desire of (an imagined) home in their homeland.

Ali's *Brick Lane* and Anam's *The Good Muslim* are further explored in subsequent three chapters of this section. Mahmudul Hasan in "Transplanted Gender Norms and Their Limits in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*" investigates the paradox between the diasporic men's inherent urge to marry *deshi* women and bring them to Britain in order to translate and "re-institute" a home domesticity against all social and cultural inhabitations in immigrant existence, and their women's transition from nativity to self-identity against the patriarchal confinement in a diasporic domestic atmosphere. In a fascinating analogy between *Brick Lane* and two great modernist novels James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Susan Stanford Friedman in her "Migratory Modernisms: Novel Homelands in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*" uses Ali's intertexts to reveal modernist trope in the novel in "diaspora space" (237). Her arguments may evoke a vibrant debate whether a diasporic novel like *Brick Lane* is a forward-moving new literary genre or merely tracing back to the European modernist novel as its precursor.

The last section of this anthology contains three intriguing interviews, the first two with Niaz Zaman and Kaiser Haq, the country's best-known English writers, and the third with Sanchita Islam, a British-born writer and artist with Bangladeshi heritage. These interviews may be a significant reservoir of academic references, for young researchers, which bring forward the real challenges in writing in English in Bangladesh and the marginalisation that these writers continually encounter in both academia and society for choosing English language for their creative expressions. Moreover, these interviews encompass numerous autobiographic anecdotes and experiences of the writers that may be imperative in research arguments and critical interpretations of their works.

Throughout the book, the contributors investigate the predominant themes of Bangladesh Anglophone literature. Albeit far from being exhaustive, these issues include the issues of class, the rural-urban divide, tradition and modernity, gender differences, dislocation and displacement, diasporic sensitivities, overseas and internal migration, transnational and transcultural spaces, homing desire, and religio-cultural tensions, which may create a fascinating relevance to the themes of the contemporary Anglophone literature of global reach. In fact, one can hardly disagree with the editors when they maintain that the research articles in this anthology "intrigue, induce and enable interested researchers to delve further into this literary tradition" (5). To conclude, *Bangladeshi Literature in English: A Critical Anthology* is certainly a significant reading experience in terms of Bangladeshi English literary tradition and its establishment in the academic and research arena.

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Giuseppe Serpillo

Poeti della Marea: Canti bardici gallesi dal VI al X secolo

Francesco Benozzo (a cura di). Poeti della Marea: Canti bardici gallesi dal VI al X secolo. 2022. Udine: Forum Editrice, 2022, 227 pp., € 30.00, ISBN: 978-88-3283-322-5

https://forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/poeti-della-marea

Questo bel volume di grande formato, pubblicato all'interno della collana ALL, acronimo di Associazione Laureati / e in Lingue, per iniziativa di Antonella Riem Natale che vi contribuisce con una postfazione, offre la prima edizione italiana di testi gallesi alto-medievali curati da Francesco Benozzo, professore di Filologia e linguistica romanza all'Università di Bologna. Benozzo, che oltre che coordinatore del dottorato di ricerca in Studi letterari e culturali è anche poeta e musicista, ha trascorso molti anni in Galles per compiervi ricerche, ma soprattutto per vivere a contatto con i luoghi e la gente, che di quella cultura e storia sono testimonianza viva e reale. Il risultato dei suoi studi e di quelle esperienze è testimoniato dalla traduzione di ampie porzioni di tre dei "Quattro antichi Libri del paese di Galles", secondo la denominazione che ne diede il loro primo editore nel 1868: il *Libro di Taliesin,* il *Libro rosso di Hergest* e il *Libro nero di Camarthen.* Tali traduzioni, accolte per la prima volta nel 1998 nella rivista *In forma di parole* diretta da Gianni Scalia, che vi appose pure un articolato

e dotto promemoria, qui riproposto, compaiono in questo volume in forma di ristampa anastatica, in un formato elegante, come scrive nella premessa Francesco Benozzo, "quasi da manoscritto antico" (8).

L'antico gallese presenta differenze rispetto al gallese moderno, rese ancora più evidenti dalla grafia medio-gallese, che Benozzo ha voluto ripristinare rispetto alle traduzioni in inglese moderno; ciò può a prima vista causare qualche sconcerto, che però lo studioso si premura di dissipare dedicando un'intera pagina a indicazioni per la pronuncia dei testi.

Naturalmente il traduttore ha operato una scelta fra questi canti bardici risalenti a un periodo altomedievale di cinque secoli; tale scelta antologica è divisa in sezioni, a cui – coerentemente con la definizione che dei bardi Benozzo ha offerto nella premessa, di "uomini del mare e delle scogliere" (7), ovvero di "poeti della marea" – dà il nome di "tavolati" (23-30), intendendo con ciò i "tavolati rocciosi di arenaria e granito" (23), che "il calare della marea libera all'aria" (23). A ciascuno di questi "tavolati" è dato un titolo, che, come le tappe di un viaggio o peregrinazione, ne rivela aspetti e condizioni: "Il viaggio del poeta negli elementi", "Il paesaggio come fonte di conoscenza", "Il tempo dei paesaggi e le durate degli uomini".

La figura del bardo è presente in tutto il mondo celtico delle isole britanniche. Si trattava di una vera e propria casta di specialisti della parola, di 'poeti', un termine che aveva un significato più ampio rispetto a quello che ha assunto nel mondo moderno. Il bardo infatti aveva la funzione di conservare e trasmettere il sapere e i valori della società di appartenenza. Protetti da un membro della casta militare, un condottiero, ne cantavano le lodi, ne ricordavano la genealogia, ne piangevano la morte. Essi tuttavia avevano anche una certa autonomia, conferita loro dal rispetto, ma anche dal timore che la loro arte e la loro sapienza, acquisita attraverso anni di studio e di pratica potevano garantire. Il loro rapporto col territorio quindi non era solo di natura ufficiale, ma si innestava nei ritmi della natura, una natura vivificata e forgiata dalla presenza umana: gli eroi, i saggi, i condottieri, i 'difensori dei bracieri'. Il paesaggio, dunque, per questi poeti-cantori è ben più che oggetto di contemplazione estetica: è un atto di identificazione con il mondo che li circonda, che viene attraversato, vissuto, appreso e accolto nella sua cangianza e infinita varietà – alberi, fiumi, colline e gli esseri viventi che lo popolano, pesci, uccelli, cervi, e poi il gigantesco mare, le sue maree che scoprono e ricoprono terra e rocce, il grande sole che sorge e tramonta:

Fui un cinghiale e fui capriolo
[…]
fui un ruscello sul pendio
fui un'onda sulla pianura
fui una barca sulla corrente
(36-37).

O ancora:

Fui un salmone blu
fui un cane, fui un cervo,

fui un cerbiatto sulla montagna
fui un tronco, fui una spada,
fui un corno nelle mani di chi beve,
fui un germoglio che nasce
(56-59).

Il bardo è natura, diventa natura e dalla natura apprende ciò che la comune esperienza umana non sarebbe in grado di garantire; per questo può affermare di sapere:

Io so le cose che vivono
tra il cielo e la terra,
perché c'è un eco nel vuoto,
perché un clamore si dissolve,
perché l'argento brilla,
perché un ruscello si oscura,
il respiro, perché è nero,
perché il fegato sanguina,
una mucca, perché ha le corna,
una donna, perché ama,
Il latte, perché è bianco
(42-43).

I bardi cantano, ripetendo in formule fissate dalla tradizione eppure capaci di continua innovazione all'interno della struttura, la bellezza e la forza di una natura creativa, se stessa eppure sempre diversa. I bardi non scrivono: cantano, dicono, trasmettono conoscenza attraverso le regole dell'oralità primaria, che richiede competenze che si acquisiscono nel tempo e col tempo. I loro canti troveranno una collocazione scritta solo molto più tardi. Questo tipo di recitazione richiede strutture linguistico-ritmiche che si ripetono in sequenza con piccole variazioni:

Belli i frutti nel tempo del raccolto
bello anche il grano che cresce sulle spighe

Bello il sole quando viaggia nel cielo
bella anche la luce dopo il tramonto

Bella la criniera dei cavalli nel branco
bello anche un puledro che resta fermo
(66-67).

Si procede per coordinazione più che per subordinazione, per sostenere la memoria, ma anche per garantire che il messaggio giunga chiaro. Questa modalità della comunicazione rende i testi estremamente musicali, incantatori, e Francesco Benozzo nelle sue traduzioni ne conserva la magia. Benozzo, peraltro, oltre che ricercatore e studioso, è anche musicista.

Su una scelta di questi versi ha composto musiche che egli stesso esegue su un'arpa celtica fatta costruire appositamente da un artigiano a partire da alcune miniature del X secolo che raffigurano lo strumento nella foggia gallese antica. Nel CD allegato l'autore canta una scelta di versi tratti dal Libro di Taliesin, creando nell' ascoltatore una sospensione magica, un'immersione totale in un'atmosfera di paesaggi inconsueti e lontani.

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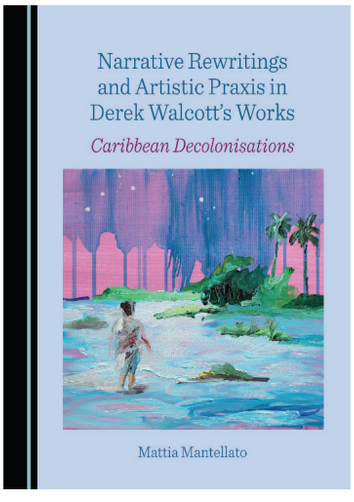
Maria Cristina Fumagalli

Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works: Caribbean Decolonisations

Mattia Mantellato. 2022. Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works: Caribbean Decolonisations. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 344 pp., £ 69.99, ISBN 1-5275-8806-8



https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-8806-6

In 1992, when the St Lucian writer Derek Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Nobel committee famously described his work as "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment"[1]. Arguably, therefore, no critical reading of Walcott's work could be either valuable or illuminating without fully engaging with these three major features of his oeuvre. Happily, Mattia Mantellato's *Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works: Caribbean Decolonisations* not only competently pays tribute to, and creatively engages with all three, but it forcefully reasserts, more broadly, the value of interdisciplinarity for the

[1] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/summary/ (consulted on 25/10/2022).

formulation, expression, and dissemination of critical thinking. This is particularly true if this intriguing monograph is read in conjunction with the remarkable intersemiotic dance-theatre adaptation of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" that Mantellato has directed, co-choreographed and co-interpreted[2].

The monograph's primary exemplifications are extremely well chosen, namely two plays (*The Joker of Seville* and *Pantomime*) and two major poems ("The Schooner *Flight*" and the book-length *Tiepolo's Hound*) produced at different times in Walcott's career (the 1970s and the late 1990s). Mantellato is therefore simultaneously able to put Walcott's poetry in dialogue with his theatre production (which are often approached separately by critics), and to highlight important continuities and discontinuities in the poet/playwright's overarching vision. Honouring Walcott's unique way of foregrounding the local and a localised perspective when negotiating, exploiting, and, ultimately, subverting different (colonial) cultural legacies in the Caribbean (Spanish, English, French), Mantellato approaches the works in question from a variety of relevant theoretical perspectives (i.e. the Decolonial model, as theorised by Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano in particular, but also Postcolonialism, the works of Martinican theorists Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial stance, and Riane Eisler's partnership model). The multimodal and intermedial web of references woven into the fabric of Mantellato's analysis (from Caribbean Carnival to the Music Hall and Broadway, from Impressionism to the Afro-Caribbean folk tradition, from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla*) chimes well with Walcott's own ability to always engage, simultaneously, with a multiplicity of perspectives.

Mantellato's critical stance, moreover, also prepares readers (and viewers) well for the last chapter, the highly original "The Dancing Wor(l)d of The Schooner *Flight*, an Intersemiotic and Multimodal Translation/Adaptation". Building on the thoughtful and persuasive examinations of the importance on the body and music in Walcott's plays conducted in previous chapters, here Mantellato offers invaluable reflections on the production of his own dance-theatre adaptation of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*". Mantellato's decision to capitalise on what he calls the 'urgent desire to decolonise the rigorous, academic Western stage' of different female choreographers (i.e. Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, and, particularly, Pina Bausch) who reconfigured expression and movement to better relate to societal problems and contemporary issues, results in a production which premiered in June 2019 at the Teatro Verdi in Pordenone and confronts the here and now of audience and interpreters alike. Walcott's Caribbean concerns and context(s), in fact, are intriguingly translated into a contemporary local setting: multi-ethnic, multi-racial and culturally diverse Trinidad, 'becomes' the desert-like area of the *Magredi* in multicultural Friuli Venezia Giulia; in the same way, the struggle towards self-understanding and self-acceptance of Shabine, the protagonist/narrator of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*", a living compendium of different legacies and heritages, is made to resonate with the need to cautiously negotiate multiple identities experienced by those living and operating in the broader society in which the theatre is located.

[2] Video abstract: https://youtu.be/58SO1aFmH08; video production: https://youtu.be/jEB0nxBxZI0 also available to readers with a QR code at the end of the book.

Mantellato's aesthetic choices as director, co-choreographer, and co-interpreter constitute the backbone of the dance-theatre adaptation and demonstrate his outstanding ability to translate his knowledge and critical analysis into the dance medium. Mantellato, however, also shares the stage with his co-choreographer Raffaele Simoni, with whom he dramatises Shabine's divided self through skilfully intertwined movements and gestures, but also with a group of young dance students from a local ballet school who embody Shabine's previously silenced and marginalised ancestors. Mantellato's production thrives on an inventive and fascinating choreography that also gives a special role to the complex triangulation of gazes exchanged between the hybrid Shabine (as Mantellato and / or Simoni), the young dancers, and, crucially, an audience invited to 'participate' rather than simply 'spectate' in a move that recalls Walcott's Shabine directly addressing readers, involving, and implicating them in what he describes and reveals. Further displaying Mantellato's in-depth knowledge of Walcott's texts and his profound (and, arguably, embodied) understanding of Walcott's overarching vision, as both readers and audience are reminded of the value of collectivism, collaboration, solidarity, and partnership – key words in Mantellato's approach and, as this book forcefully argues, in Walcott's works – this concluding, innovative final chapter not only brings the monograph to a very dynamic close but, crucially, it urges us to ponder the different ways in which praxis, far from being derivative or ancillary to more traditional forms of critical engagement, can illuminate and guide our understanding in peculiar and compelling ways.

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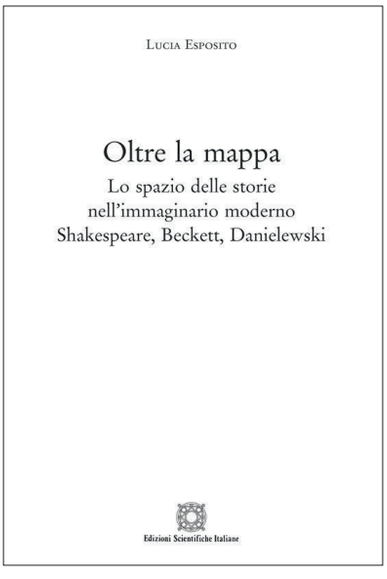
Claudia Cao

Oltre la mappa. Lo spazio delle storie nell'immaginario moderno. Shakespeare, Beckett, Danielewski

Lucia Esposito. Oltre la mappa. Lo spazio delle storie nell'immaginario moderno. Shakespeare, Beckett, Danielewski. 2021. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 156 pp., € 19.00, ISBN: 978-88-495-4606-4



https://www.edizioniesi.it/pubblicazioni/libri/letteratura_-_1/letteratura_straniera_-_1_-_01/oltre-la-mappa.html

Tra le numerose 'svolte' che si sono verificate nell'ambito delle scienze umane e sociali dalla fine del XX secolo, ve ne sono due che hanno avuto un impatto di particolare portata sugli studi letterari: lo *spatial turn* e il *cognitive turn*. Il primo ha assunto diverse declinazioni, dalle mappature di fenomeni e delle tendenze letterarie alla più ampia area di ricerca geoletteraria; il secondo ha portato in primo piano l'importanza delle neuroscienze nell'indagine sulla prassi creativa e sulla fruizione letteraria anche dalla prospettiva dei suoi effetti sulla mente. Al contempo, tuttavia, come evidenzia Lucia Esposito, gli studi più recenti sono sempre meno inclini a enfatizzare il senso di rottura che il termine '*turn*' comunemente suggerirebbe,

per valorizzare invece la gradualità del cambio di paradigma e di modelli epistemologici verificatosi a partire dagli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso.

Il lavoro *Oltre la mappa. Lo spazio delle storie nell'immaginario moderno. Shakespeare, Beckett, Danielewski* pone in dialogo i due ambiti di ricerca e applica una nuova prospettiva su alcuni testi molto eterogenei tra loro. Il gioco di parole del sottotitolo anticipa quali saranno i due binari su cui si muove l'impianto metodologico dell'analisi: "Lo spazio delle storie" rimanda, infatti, da una parte, all'innata necessità degli uomini di tutti i tempi di creare narrazioni e di fruirne, in quanto mezzo indispensabile alla sistematizzazione e ordinamento delle esperienze, e si riferisce pertanto alla letteratura come strumento di mappatura degli eventi e del reale; dall'altra, richiama la centralità che gli spazi – e soprattutto l'esperienza della soglia – assumono nelle opere prese in esame. Tutti e tre gli autori esaminati nel corpus, infatti, si confrontano con momenti di passaggio: il "nascere della prima modernità, quella transizione delicatissima tra episteme magico-religiosa e razionalistico-scientifica" (15) che trova espressione da un punto di vista spaziale nell'isola di *The Tempest* (1610-11), allegoria della "sofferta esperienza del passaggio al nuovo" (15); il primo Novecento e il suo relativo "indebolimento del rapporto io-mondo", alla luce del quale viene letto *All That Fall* (1957) di Beckett; la riflessione sull'ontologia letteraria sullo sfondo della rivoluzione digitale, focale nel "tecno-testo" (104) di Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000).

Queste le direttrici seguite dai tre capitoli principali, introdotti da un inquadramento teorico che chiarisce e argomenta il nesso tra le immagini spaziali di attraversamento individuate all'interno di queste opere e il loro allegorizzare l'esperienza dell'irruzione della modernità intesa come "coraggiosa navigazione verso l'incognito" (16) e come momento di superamento di limiti. L'immagine del labirinto, ad esempio, – emblema dell'incertezza e dello spaesamento, ma anche, nelle sue radici mitiche, dell'"incontro con l'altro da sé" – diviene figura che suggerisce con i suoi meandri anche "percorsi fluidi e metamorfici" (17) che possono condurre a un esito "costruttivo, come implica il secondo significato della figura suggerito dall'abilità ingegneristica di Dedalo" (17). In altri casi l'esperienza della frontiera si metaforizza nella landa desolata, priva di punti di riferimento e pertanto "del tutto impossibile da mappare" (17), come il *King Lear* shakespeariano.

L'indagine su *The Tempest* pone in primo piano una lettura in relazione alla nuova scienza e alla filosofia di Bacon a partire da alcuni nodi lessicali e concettuali cruciali per una piena decodifica dell'opera, che illuminano la dialettica tra magia e scienza e la transizione che vede "l'invenzione e l'intervento dell'uomo sulla natura diventare centrali in un nuovo modo di intendere la conoscenza come qualcosa di *utile*" (56).

La sezione dedicata a *All That Fall*, dopo un inquadramento teorico a partire dai concetti di spazio e di luogo e intorno alla relazione tra la procedura di *emplotment* e quella di mappatura, esamina il processo di "*deplotment*" (76) del dramma radiofonico beckettiano alla luce del logoramento delle categorie gnoseologiche ed ermeneutiche verificatosi a partire dal primo Novecento, che ha impedito di "riutilizzare le stesse mappe cognitive – e narrative – e continuare a raccontarsi le stesse vecchie storie" (75).

L'immagine del labirinto da cui prendeva le mosse l'analisi dell'opera shakespeariana chiude ciclicamente questo volume: lo studio sulla casa-labirinto di *House of Leaves* è

introdotto da una riflessione teorica intorno al processo di "rimediazione" da cui hanno origine le ibridazioni del testo fluido di Danielewski, la cui "organizzazione *tipografica* […] lo rende un volume palesemente *topografico*" (105). Il carattere onnivoro di questo testo che assimila tipologie testuali eterogenee – "copioni cinematografici, articoli scientifici, memorie personali, lettere, collage, fumetti, illustrazioni, immagini e poesie" (105) – è solo uno dei livelli in cui si esprime la sua natura labirintica. La complessità della trama, le sue stratificazioni, la costruzione a scatole cinesi trovano il proprio centro ermeneutico e fulcro unificatore nel labirinto, che diviene "figura analogica fondamentale" (109) per la decifrazione dell'opera.

Il lavoro di Lucia Esposito ha il merito di individuare un *fil rouge* attraverso alcune delle opere più rappresentative di tre importanti momenti di transizione epistemologica dalla prima modernità alla 'surmodernità'. Oltre a proporre un'ampia disamina delle più recenti teorie sorte nell'ambito degli studi geoletterari e di stampo neurocognitivista, sperimenta un fertile paradigma di indagine nella decodifica di alcuni dei *topoi* cardine dei secoli esaminati, quali la soglia, la mappa, il labirinto.

Claudia Cao è Docente a Contratto di Letteratura Inglese all'Università di Cagliari. È autrice dei volumi *I contro-spazi della narrativa di Ian McEwan. Teatri, carceri, giardini e altri luoghi* (Aracne, 2022), *Sorellanze nella narrativa femminile inglese inglese tra le due guerre* (Morellini, 2018), e *Le riscritture di Great Expectations. Sei letture del classico dickensiano* (Mimesis, 2016). Nel 2021 ha curato il volume *Intertextuality. Intermixing Genres, Languages and Texts* con M. G. Dongu, L. Fodde e F. Iuliano (FrancoAngeli, 2021).
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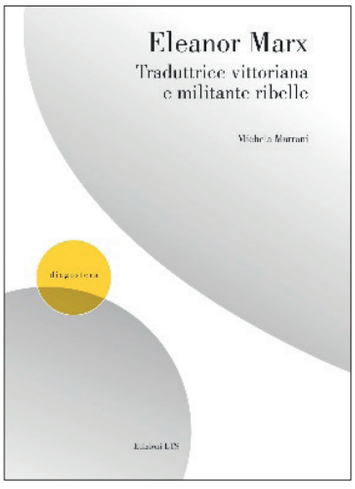
Elisabetta Marino

Eleanor Marx. Traduttrice vittoriana e militante ribelle

Michela Marroni. 2021. Eleanor Marx. Traduttrice vittoriana e militante ribelle. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, Collana: diagosfera, n. 24, 160 pp., € 16.00, ISBN 9788846761798



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Il volume di Michela Marroni si pone quale obiettivo quello di condurre lettrici e lettori in un viaggio straordinario alla scoperta dell'evoluzione intellettuale e artistica di una donna altrettanto eccezionale, Eleanor Marx (Londra, 1855-1898), o Tussy, come amava farsi chiamare, la cui menzione in troppi testi critici si è spesso limitata al ruolo di figlia prediletta di Karl Marx. Ponendosi sulla scia di quanti, prima di lei, hanno desiderato affrancare figure femminili di rilievo dall'ombra degli uomini celebri cui erano legate per nascita o elezione (si pensi al caso di Mary Shelley o di Elizabeth Barrett Browning), Marroni ricostruisce, con acume e passione, la fisionomia e le vicissitudini personali e letterarie di una fine traduttrice (dal tedesco, francese e norvegese), militante socialista, *artiste engagée*, vissuta in un'epoca di transizione e profondi mutamenti sociali.

Il primo dei cinque capitoli si cui lo studio si compone si concentra sull'infanzia di Eleanor, sull'influenza determinante che su di lei esercitò il padre (con la sua visione di un

mondo ideale, in cui ingiustizia e sfruttamento avrebbero presto ceduto il passo a uguaglianza e solidarietà) ma anche la madre, Jenny von Westphalen, dotata di un bagaglio culturale non comune e di un talento singolare per le lingue straniere. La prima, importante infatuazione, osteggiata dai genitori, per Hippolyte Prosper Olivier Lissagaray (un intellettuale francese di origine basca) e il conflitto lacerante tra dovere filiale e attrazione carnale, sono anche oggetto d'indagine, così come l'approdo iniziale all'attività traduttiva, collaborando con *Rouge et Noir*, il settimanale di politica lanciato da Lissagaray.

Il secondo capitolo esplora il forte interesse di Tussy per P. B. Shelley, figura sulla quale inclinazione letteraria e militanza politica della giovane Marx paiono convergere. Le numerose istanze di emancipazione di cui il poeta romantico si era fatto promotore, il suo desiderio di sottrarre ogni creatura vivente alla morsa della sofferenza (parafrasando l'auspicio del protagonista del suo *Prometheus Unbound*), facevano di lui un autentico "precursore degli ideali del socialismo" (39). La comune predilezione per Shelley contribuì a consolidare il legame tra Eleanor e l'attivista Edward B. Aveling, con il quale iniziò una convivenza nel 1884, ritenendosi a tutti gli effetti la sua consorte, pur nell'assenza di un vero contratto matrimoniale. Michela Marroni si sofferma anche sul doloroso fallimento di Tussy come attrice di teatro (sogno lungamente accarezzato, che non riuscì mai ad abbandonare completamente) e sulla preparazione, assieme ad Aveling, di una serie di conferenze sul socialismo di Shelley, presentato come precursore delle idee di Darwin, "una sorta di padre spirituale dell'evoluzionismo" (56).

I capitoli tre e quattro si focalizzano rispettivamente su Eleanor Marx traduttrice di *Madame Bovary* e dei testi teatrali di Henrik Ibsen. La versione inglese del capolavoro di Flaubert si rivelò una sfida dalle molteplici insidie per Tussy, considerati il perbenismo imperante (che ne avrebbe osteggiato il successo) e, soprattutto, lo stile e la tecnica realista adottati dall'autore francese, ai quali i lettori inglesi non erano ancora avvezzi: nelle parole di Michela Marroni, "il *reading public* britannico non sopportava un narratore che scomparisse del tutto dal testo" (63). A seguito della sua assidua frequentazione del romanzo, Madame Bovary si trasformò per Eleanor in una sorta di alter-ego, un "fantasma che ogni tanto bussava alla porta" (70) e che sarebbe tragicamente tornato nel momento estremo della sua esistenza, conclusasi prematuramente. Lavorando con onestà e coscienza, Tussy affinò i suoi strumenti traduttivi, scagliandosi contro chi *tradiva* l'opera artistica e ne sminuiva portata e spessore limitandosi alla sua resa letterale, rifiutando quel ruolo di mediatore culturale nel quale, al contrario, lei credeva fermamente. Il suo rapporto con gli scritti di Ibsen fu animato dagli stessi intenti e condotto con la medesima serietà: si gettò con slancio nello studio del norvegese e, arrivando a padroneggiare la lingua, fu in grado di cogliere anche le "zone oscure" (107) nelle eroine ibseniane (pure osannate da molte femministe coeve), illuminandone i limiti con sagacia e ironia.

Nell'ultimo capitolo prende forma la relazione duratura di Eleanor Marx con Shakespeare, sostenuta da quell'entusiasmo per il teatro che mai, nella sua vita, venne meno e che la portò a fondare, nel 1877, il Dogberry Club (dal nome di uno dei personaggi minori di *Much Ado About Nothing*), assieme all'amica Clara Collet. Scopo del circolo era promuovere la conoscenza delle opere del Bardo, anche attraverso rappresentazioni private.

Tradita nei suoi affetti e nei suoi ideali dall'uomo in cui aveva riposto speranze e fiducia (Aveling si era segretamente sposato con un'altra), Tussy non esitò a togliersi la vita, in un atto estremo di coerenza con sé stessa. Ma il suo spirito continua a vibrare, intatto, nel volume di Michela Marroni. Con una prosa fluida, serrata e, al tempo stesso, accattivante, ci restituisce il profilo di una donna e di un'artista dalla quale abbiamo ancora molto da imparare.

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