





**IN THAT VILLAGE  
OF OPEN DOORS**  
**Le nuove letterature  
crocevia della cultura  
moderna**

Atti del I Convegno

Associazione Italiana di Studi  
sulle Letterature in Inglese

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A cura di Shaul Bassi, Simona Bertacco  
e Rosanna Bonicelli

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A cura di Shaul Bassi, Simona Bertacco e Rosanna Bonicelli

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## FOREWORD

**A**ISLI (Associazione Italiana di Studi sulle Letterature in Inglese) was created in the year 2000 to coordinate the rich and multiple energies that Italian scholars have employed in investigating and divulging the new—and by now not so new—English literatures written in the postcolonial scenario. The neutral and ecumenical definition of English literatures was privileged over more controversial designations such as the obsolete Commonwealth literatures or postcolonial literatures, mainly because, as the plenary speakers show in their contributions, to draw geographical or theoretical boundaries today might be just another outdated gesture.

This volume brings together the proceedings of the first congress of AISLI, which was held in Venice (1-3 November 2001) under the sign of “openness”, as its title suggests. The board of the association decided not to impose a single theme, but to invite scholars—academics and non academics, young and experienced—to submit papers on any relevant topic. The result has been a rich and diverse array of contributions which, without any pretension of exhaustiveness, maps the situation of the research on the new English literatures in Italy. The need of such mapping also suggested that these contributions should be published as soon as possible. This accounts for the diverse format of the papers collected in this volume. The editors are happy to acknowledge that there was general agreement on the decision to favour celerity—not to the detriment of accuracy, we hope—over a more complex editorial work of uniformation which would have condemned these proceedings to see the light in a not so near future.

Although it has become a sort of pious ritual, the scope of our subject renders inevitable to recall that our congress was held less than two months after the watershed events of September 11. During the conference there was no direct debate on them, but indubitably the papers offer many ideas to interpret the international situation in a more complex and articulate way than the political and journalistic discourse has lately been doing. Beyond the stereotype of the ‘clash of civilizations’ or old-fashioned forms of Third-Worldism, what the literatures that we study demonstrates is that geo-political differences certainly exist—let alone inequalities—, but that civilizations are far less monolithic than facile slogans imply and that fundamentalist phenomena such as kamikaze terrorists may be the perverse product of cultural contact rather than the visceral expression of any one civilization. Beyond the equally simplifying, specular slogans “it’s all *their* fault” and “it’s all *our* fault” that have been

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volleyed from all sides of the political and cultural spectrum, these literatures can give a precious contribution to understand the responsibility (as opposed to the glorification and to the demonization) of globalisation. Also, they can represent the political and social dilemmas of neglected areas which can be far (Africa) or close (Ireland) to us, but that are frequently ignored by the media. At the same time let us not flatten aesthetics to politics: the texts analyzed here are rich and beautiful texts that testify to the vitality of anglophone literatures.

The volume opens with the inaugural speech of the President of AISLI with the four plenary lectures. Then follow the papers presented in the eight workshops. We regret that the wonderful performances which closed the conference—the reading and talk by the Indian poet Sujata Bhatt, the scintillating performance of the Canadian playwright Thomson Highway, Armando Pajalich’s inspired reading of Tito Laviera’s poetry,—could not be captured on paper. Likewise, it was impossible to record the intense debates that arose in all sessions, especially the final one devoted to the future perspectives of our discipline. We can just hope that the papers here can provoke further debate, coming to bring new members to the association.

Shaul Bassi, Simona Bertacco, Rosanna Bonicelli  
Venezia, May 2002

## *“In that village of open doors”. Le Nuove Letterature crocevia della cultura moderna*

Giulio Marra

**È** doveroso in primo luogo da parte mia dare una spiegazione dell'immagine scelta per rappresentare questo Congresso. Il paesaggio che si vede non esiste più, ritrae il District Six di Cape Town abbattuto negli anni '80 durante l'apartheid. Sulle sue rovine si è da alcuni anni costituito un piccolo museo una saletta del quale è riservata alle espressioni di sgomento, di nostalgia e di speranza dei sopravvissuti. Si tratta di poesie scritte sulle piastrelle del pavimento ed è giusto che sia così: sono simbolo di diritti umani e civili calpestati e al tempo stesso stanno alle fondamenta della costituzione del museo. Da una di quelle piastrelle è tratto il titolo del convegno, “In That Village of Open Doors”. È stata la poesia il mezzo a cui gli abitanti del District Six si sono affidati – alcuni direbbero ingenuamente – nella sua capacità di farsi principio dinamico nel mondo. Mi viene alla mente un verso del poemetto *Whylah Falls* (1997) del canadese George Elliott Clarke – al quale è stato in questi giorni conferito il Governor General's Award per la poesia – nel quale ancora, davanti a una brutale ingiustizia, s'invoca l'intervento della poesia con le seguenti parole: “No death – or poem – is neutral anymore [...] Poetry come among us”. In termini pressoché analoghi, ricusando ogni neutralità, l'opera teatrale *The Cake Man* (1978) di Robert Merrit, drammaturgo aborigeno australiano, indicava la necessità di interpretare ciò che veniva rappresentato a teatro alla luce di ciò che accadeva al di fuori di esso, facendo dello spazio teatrale non una entità estetica autonoma ma un luogo che viveva di un processo di osmosi con l'esterno.

Questi vari riferimenti mi offrono l'opportunità di parlare seppur brevemente dell'estetico e del piacere estetico, e di fare alcune considerazioni rilevanti, credo, per il Congresso che stiamo celebrando quanto per l'Associazione che abbiamo fondato. Che cosa il piacere estetico indichi e dove si collochi sono questioni sulle quali si soffermò qualche anno addietro, non senza suscitare un vivace dibattito, F. Jameson (1984; 1986). Distinse tra letteratura europea e letteratura postcoloniale introducendo una contrapposizione tra l'arte e la politica, tra Freud e Marx, tra il privato e il pubblico, e

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propose una distinzione, volutamente provocatoria, tra due modi d'essere della letteratura: la letteratura europea avocherebbe a sé il privilegio d'essere estetica e di produrre piacere, mentre la letteratura postcoloniale sarebbe consacrata all'impegno politico, alla morale, all'azione, alla verità della bellezza piuttosto che alla bellezza estetica. Affermazione, quest'ultima, si fa notare, alquanto discutibile poiché il criterio della verità, risultando troppo locale, temporaneo, storico perderebbe di validità universale (Karamcheti 1995: 61). F. Jameson fece una distinzione che di fatto rendeva i testi postcoloniali diversi da quelli europei, superati, poco interessanti, collocati tra arte e propaganda. Polemicamente richiama quanto scrive in "An Elegy for the Canon" Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon* (1994).

Le posizioni di F. Jameson offrono tuttavia lo spunto per fare alcune considerazioni. È indubbio, in primo luogo, che l'esclusione delle letterature postcoloniali dall'estetico comporta delle pericolose conseguenze poiché l'eccellenza estetica nella tradizione occidentale viene fatta coincidere con l'eccellenza morale e le letterature postcoloniali si pongono, come si è detto, anche il preciso impegno morale di provocare un cambiamento sociale e politico.

È opportuno, in secondo luogo, tenere presente le diverse interpretazioni che si possono dare del termine di "estetico". Esso viene, come si è detto, associato al piacere letterario della tradizione occidentale. È dimensione personale ed individuale, si colloca al di là della capacità del linguaggio di descriverlo: si pensi al sublime, al *je ne sais quoi*. Oggi si ribadiscono le stesse categorie: la proliferazione delle tecnologie, dei beni e dell'informazione rende il mondo "sublime", ovvero complicato oltre la comprensione umana. L'ineffabilità dell'estetico ne cancella pertanto la discorsività, facendone qualcosa di trascendentale (de Man 1986). L'estetico risulta conservatore da un punto di vista ideologico ed epistemologico, non può essere decostruito, non può essere analizzato, non cambia il mondo, lo reinscrive come giusto. Sono considerazioni che si potrebbero associare al postmoderno nella sua ambizione neo-conservatrice di esteticizzare il mondo (Birringer 1991: 4-44), di esteticizzare il politico preferendo la contemplazione a discapito dell'azione, favorendo un "prestito" artistico generalizzato senza nessun impegno verso qualcosa di specifico.

Per converso, Terry Eagleton (1976), rifacendosi ad Althusser, osserva che l'estetica occidentale è un discorso socialmente costruito, una "education of desire" che crea un soggetto ideologicamente definito. L'estetica è legata ad aspettative politiche. Il potere e l'estetica vanno assieme (come d'altro

canto già Aristotele diceva nella *Poetica*). Ci si sposta, in questo ambito speculativo dallo storico e dall'estetico, ovvero da discorsi sul significato e sul valore, alle modalità di produzione e di ricezione del significato e del valore (che sono precedenti ad essi).

Infine si può osservare come il termine estetico venga usato oggi in termini molto ampi. Si usa per descrivere, ripetendo le parole di V. S. Naipaul, "a way of being in the world" o, come scrive Rustom Bharucha, si tratta di capire "where we see ourselves in 'the world'"(1990: x): è usato in espressioni come ad esempio "female aesthetics", "African-American Aesthetics" (Karamcheti 1995:62), con ciò indicando un modo di stare al mondo in relazione a problematiche relative alla razza, al genere e alla classe. Il concetto di piacere si mostra capace di destrutturare forme sociali obsolete, sfuggendo al controllo della ragione e della religione. Karen Finley, ad esempio, con il disgusto provocato dall'estremismo delle sue rappresentazioni individua nell'estetica una trappola ideologica usata per contenere la posizione femminile (Forte 1990). E Frantz Fanon si sente lacerato dinanzi ad un concetto di bellezza che non riesce a fare proprio anche perché è consapevole che essa dà significato al mondo:

All around me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me... I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is? ("The Fact of Blackness", in *During* 1993: 324)

Riprendendo la domanda posta all'inizio riguardo alla definizione e alla collocazione del piacere estetico, si può forse rispondere con Augusto Boal il quale, sostenendo che l'essere nel mondo è collegato alla politica, si chiede se esistano delle leggi che possano distinguere un'arte puramente contemplativa da un'arte profondamente politica: "are there certain laws that make art either a purely contemplative phenomenon or a deeply political one?"(1979: 9).

Ritengo che quando noi, membri di questa Associazione, ci chiediamo di che cosa stiamo parlando dovremmo avere domande come queste ben presenti, poiché hanno a che vedere sia con la natura dei testi di cui trattiamo sia con l'atteggiamento che si assume nell'atto del "parlare di" qualcosa. Che cosa significa parlare di qualcosa? La domanda si pone subito. È una domanda che pone a sua volta immediatamente la necessità di distinguere tra modi diversi di "parlare" (MacDonald 1993: 170ss). Da un lato sta "il parlare di o il parlare per" che significa (come spiega Said) definire quello che abbiamo

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di fronte in termini di opposizione. Questo di per sé dovrebbe indurci ad essere sospettosi di teorie ombrello come il post-strutturalismo e di approcci antropologici che tendono a considerare gruppi etnici, minoritari e marginalità tradendo pur sempre la tendenza a distinguere tra il “noi” che parla e l’oggetto di cui si parla. Come scrive Rey Chow, dinanzi all’esigenza di dare voce a tutti ci si chiede una serie di domande (“Who speaks?”, oppure “Can X speak?”, “What does it mean to speak?”, “Who has been silenced?”, “How to speak?”) essendo ben consapevoli che la capacità di fare una domanda è già una forma di privilegio esercitata da chi può permettersi di vedere il mondo dall’esterno. È una patente disegualianza quella che si evidenzia tra la sofisticata teoria dell’antropologo o del critico e il silenzio dell’oppresso. Rimane quindi una questione sempre aperta quella di capire a chi si riferisca il “who” in “who speaks?” (“Listening otherwise, music miniaturized: a different type of question about revolution” in *During* 1993: 383-4).

Come scrive ironicamente David Dabydeen:

The exhalations of the aborigines

Are esoteric notes in a scholar’s curious book. (*The New Poetry*)

È inevitabile che la posizione dalla quale uno sceglie di parlare e le motivazioni (accademiche o personali) per le quali lo fa influenzano in maniera determinante il modo di ragionare; mettere quelle ragioni in qualche modo in evidenza diventa una questione di onestà intellettuale.

Dall’altro lato sta il “parlare con” (in senso non dialettico ma dialogico) e con ciò si indica un progetto letterario e critico che lasci da parte sistemi globali onnicomprensivi, che dimentichi, come ironicamente si dice, l’ombrello, (“I” hope to “forget my umbrella”, espressione usata da J. Derrida il quale a sua volta la trovò – “I have forgotten my umbrella” – leggendo i manoscritti di Nietzsche a margine di un foglio). “Parlare con” significa ascoltare e rispondere nel contesto del singolo testo tenendo presente che ogni contesto in cui il critico entra è irrimediabilmente riconfigurato dalla sua presenza. Non si tratta di spiegare un testo sostituendosi ad esso, quanto piuttosto di trovare collegamenti e connessioni avendo in mente che ogni forma di produzione culturale va vista in relazione ad altre pratiche culturali. Si tratta di sentire la necessità di usare una lingua che destabilizzi l’identità del soggetto che scrive o che parla, un soggetto che, come dicono sia H. Gadamer che M. Bakhtin, non domina i propri enunciati, si tratta di avvalorare un processo che non permetta all’io di procedere senza il non-io, che non permetta una conversazione

in cui l'interloquuto rimanga in silenzio, o in cui il silenzio serva puramente ad indicare l'alterità e la differenza. Si legga quale esempio di questa relazione comunicativa deficitaria la poesia "Somewhere in the Dark Continent" di M. Nourbese Philip:

He – Livingstone – and I copulate like two beasts – he rides me – his word slipping in and out of the wet moist spaces of my silence – I take his word – strong and thrusting – that will not rest, will not be denied in its search to fill every crevice of my silence – I take it into the silence of my mouth and in a clearing in a forest he sits and weeps as Stanley comforts him – [...] – I groan and grunt like the animal I am, keening and wailing I try to birth the monstrous product of his word and my silence-conceived in the silence of my own, my very own womb.

Una necessaria e costante auto-riflessività deve mantenere viva la relazione tra il soggetto di cui si scrive e il soggetto che scrive, anche fosse nella incolmabile differenza indicata dal *differend* di J-F. Lyotard. E questo mette immediatamente in crisi termini come "molteplicità" e forse anche multiculturalismo che tradiscono la loro origine platonica. Come scrive Linda Hutcheon, le colonie possono parlare "unreflectingly", ma il "post-colonial" ha a sua disposizione varie strategie, quali l'ironia, l'allegoria, la riflessività per mettere in discussione posizioni culturali dominanti. ("Circling the Downspout of Empire", in *During* 1993: 135).

In genere noi privilegiamo un "master plot" di carattere romantico, che tende a ciò che Frank Kermode definisce "a sense of an ending", una fine, una soluzione, per la nostra gratificazione emotiva. Indubbiamente i "master plots" con il loro inizio, mezzo e fine sono uno strumento di strutturazione del mondo (Ledbetter 1996: 4ss.). E tutto va nella direzione di definire la propria identità, anche permettendoci di giocare con i nostri molteplici modi d'essere, ma va soprattutto a toccare un'altra questione fondamentale che ha rilevanza diretta con quanto ho appena detto, ovvero la necessità di fissare il canone entro il quale il soggetto si colloca.

Quando si parla di canone si apre immediatamente un conflitto su quali siano gli autori rappresentativi. Il canone ha a che vedere con la definizione del campo letterario nei confronti di altri modi di discorso e ogni modifica della definizione canonica di un corpus letterario produce reazioni più o meno violente. Commenta Paul de Man che in questo campo "the theoreticians of literature ... do not quite know what it is they are talking about" (1986: 17). Si avvertono, come nel caso di Harold Bloom, delle forti resistenze di carattere estetico. Come si può ovviare a queste resistenze? Come si fa a introdurre

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una diversa prospettiva? Con buona pace di Bloom, è inevitabile integrare l'attività ermeneutica del lettore all'interno di un progetto puramente formalistico. È necessario, di nuovo, porre una serie diversa di domande. Alla domanda "quale sia la cultura più importante" si risponde dicendo che tutte sono importanti; alla domanda "quale voce si debba ascoltare" si risponde quante voci siamo in grado di ascoltare e con quali metodologie le possiamo ascoltare. Da un punto di vista metodologico si tratta di insegnare come leggere piuttosto che quanto leggere. Si tratta di entrare in scelte culturali che riescano a determinare i tratti di una persona colta nella prospettiva di sostituire l'idea (elitaria) di una comunità di persone con l'idea di una comunità integrata di persone. Questo non per eliminare autori e testi in un conflitto di potere, ma per vedere i testi in conversazione tra di loro senza preclusioni, per permettere alla letteratura stessa (e non ai critici) di rispondere a questioni di canone (Ledbetter 1996: 7ss.).

Emanuel Levinas descrive il modo d'avvicinarsi ad un testo. Non si definisce "in terms of and in itself, nor by and for itself, but rather through a forgetting of the self in the 'fear and trembling' for the other"(Ledbetter 1996: 86). È con questa sensazione di vicinanza e di compresenza dell'io e del non-io che oggi ci avviciniamo alle Nuove Letterature, ed è con la disposizione del "parlare con" che si rilegge la letteratura europea, e allora non è senza una dose di fatica e di disagio intellettuale che se ne rileggono i testi, uno tra i molti, ad esempio, *Mansfield Park* di Jane Austen. In questa "sofferenza" di lettura si concretizza l'esigenza del "parlare con", una esigenza che deve trovare un linguaggio anche in ambito accademico. È dal rispetto per la sofferenza umana in generale che si arriva ad un'etica universale che legittimi una letteratura che si ispira ad un umanesimo postcoloniale diverso da quello essenzialista, modernista e postmodernista, radicandosi nella sfida contro la crudeltà e il dolore. In termini letterari si tratta di attuare una "lettura etica", che coinvolga l'intera questione della presenza deresponsabilizzata del soggetto nella civiltà occidentale. Una lettura etica non si concilia con le tendenze del mondo contemporaneo le quali tendono a sottacere il problema della responsabilità individuale preponendo ad essa fattori impersonali, nella storia, nella società, nella psicologia; significa andare contro l'istinto naturale teleologico a cui prima si accennava che ci porta a ricercare "a sense of an ending" per soddisfare l'ansia metafisica.

Scrive Eavan Boland, poetessa irlandese,

a new language  
is a kind of scar

and heals after a while  
into a passable imitation  
of what went before. (*Mise Eire*)

riconoscere le “ferite” non coincide con l’ossessiva, patologica ricerca del significato e del fine. Sembrano più consoni con questa sensibilità di lettura i suggerimenti dell’estetica della ricezione di Hans Jauss che cerca di integrare la dimensione individuale e privata con la dimensione sociale e collettiva in una sequenza di domande e di risposte senza necessaria finalità; ai quali si aggiunge la prospettiva di Walter Benjamin sull’estetica della redenzione e sulla problematicità della “traduzione” che si evidenzia nel confronto tra strutture linguistiche e non tra “foreground” e “background”. E, oltre a questo, si tratta di considerare lo specifico postcoloniale che esce dagli schemi dialogici occidentali e dalla frammentazione poststrutturale dell’io proponendo una idea diversa di letteratura. Scrive Abena P. A. Busia,

we have seen beyond your lies and disguises,  
and we have mastered the language of words,  
we have mastered speech. (*Exiles*)

Il mio auspicio a questo congresso è, in definitiva, che si “parli con”, che ad ogni frase che si pronuncia, ad ogni pensiero che si pensa venga attivata contestualmente l’idea di un confronto tra l’io e il non-io, l’idea di un colloquio tra una presenza che siamo noi e un’assenza che è ciò di cui parliamo.

Queste mie brevi considerazioni, che costituiscono una presa di posizione e una scelta tra le varie letture che ognuno di noi fa, non dovrebbero essere fine a se stesse, ma collegarsi idealmente a quanto ci diremo al termine di questo Congresso, quando si porrà il problema delle definizioni e delle prospettive di studio riguardo alle Letterature in Lingua Inglese e quindi anche al destino della nostra Associazione.

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**CONFERENZE PLENARIE**  
***PLENARY LECTURES***



# *Greco-Roman Classical Aesthetics, Western Christian Humanism and African Modernism*

Kole Omotoso

There is a glossary at the end of Wole Soyinka's first novel *The Interpreters* (1965), the first entries of which list the Gods in Kola's pantheon. Kola's pantheon constitute the Yoruba pantheon of Gods. These Gods are "Esu, spirit of disorder; Sango, God of Lightning; Orisa-nla, the principal deity; Esumare, the rainbow; Erinle, the animal spirit; Obaluwaiye, the respective name for Sopona, the god of smallpox and Ogun, the explorer, warrior, creative god." Any casual reference book will provide the names of the six Greek gods and six Greek goddesses in the following order: Zeus ruler of all divinities; Apollo, god of music, poetry, and purity; Ares, god of war; Haphaestus, black smith for the gods; Hermes, messenger of the gods; Poseidon, god of earthquakes and the oceans; Athena goddess of wisdom and war; Aphrodite, goddess of love; Artemis, twin sister of Apollo and goddess of hunting; Demeter, goddess of agriculture; Hera, sister and wife of Zeus; and Hestia, goddess of the hearth. What needs to be taken note of here is the multiplicity of gods and goddesses in both pantheons as well as the allocation of 'ministries' and responsibilities to each god and each goddess. Is there any particular reason why Yoruba Gods and Goddesses are more similar to Greek Gods and Goddesses than to the Gods and Goddesses of other African cultures?

It is important to quote here what I call the Yoruba statement of compromise with Western political and Christian Humanist intentions which occurs towards the end of the crucial *History of the Yoruba* by Reverend Samuel Johnson:

With the establishment of the British Protectorate a new era dawned upon the country. It marked the close of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth period (of Yoruba history). What the distinguishing feature of this new era

will be, and how long it will last, are questions which only the future can answer. When we have allowed for all the difficulties of a transition stage, the disadvantages that must of necessity arise by the application of rules and ideas of a highly civilised people to one of another race, degree of civilization, and of different ideas, we should hope the net result will be a distinct gain to the country. But that peace should reign universally, with prosperity and advancement, and that the disjointed units should all be once more welded into one under one head from the Niger (River) to the coast (Atlantic) as in the happy days of Abiodun, so dear to our fathers, that clanish spirit disappear, and above all that Christianity should be the principal religion in the land—paganism and Mohammedanism having had their full trial—should be the wish and prayer of every true son of Yoruba.

Anyone familiar with even just a few of the thousands of poems contained in the Ifa Divination poetry would realise how these volumes accumulate material from all and every culture that the Yoruba have been in touch with. Within these volumes would be found Yoruba explanations of the origins of Islam, the limited nature of English hospitality and the comparative powers of various medical practices.

In the 1960s, a Yoruba classical scholar, following on the tracks of those of the nineteenth century, translated Greek and Roman classics into Yoruba including *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *Mercator* by Plautus and Plato's *Krito*. Olanipekun Esan states in the introduction to *Orekelewa*, his title for his Yoruba translation of *Mercator* the following:

Opolopo igba ti mo ba n ka iwe Latin ati Greek ni mo n s'akiyesi pe ojo awon ara atijo wonyi l'o jina si tiwa, iwa ko fi bee yato si tiwa. Orisirisi ona ni asa won fi ba ti ile wa mu, paapaa awon asa ti o wa laarin wa ki aye to d'aye oyinbo.

[Many times while reading Latin and Greek books I notice that the days of these people might be far from ours of today, their behaviour is not so different from ours. Their customs have many similarities to those of our land especially so with our customs before the coming of the English.]

Olanipekun Esan's reasons for doing these renditions from Latin and Greek to Yoruba have to do with the possibility of Yoruba literature and by extension Yoruba people benefiting from these ancient books. This is why he speaks of "itumo ati iyipada" (translation and adaptation) in the producing his Yoruba versions of these writings.

Two major Yoruba playwrights whose English language plays are better

known, Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi, have adapted two ancient Greek plays as part of their works. Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides is a re-working of this play in favour of the slaves of the play. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* is an adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles. Why do these adaptations seat so naturally within the Yoruba cultural environment?

While there have been translations of Shakespeare's plays into African languages such as Julius Nyerere's kiSwahili translation of *Julius Caesar*, little is known if there are translations from Latin and Greek writers into African languages exist other than in Yoruba. There are translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in Yoruba. The Yoruba translation and adaptation of *Everyman* is so popular that it is sometimes difficult to specify who first performed it. *Eda*, as the Yoruba adaptation is called, is a staple of many travelling theatres in Yorubaland.

It is against this sketchy background that one looks at the issue of globalisation and culture around the world today and the situation of the Yoruba. There is no doubt that Yoruba writers, writing in Yoruba or writing through English use a mix of traditional Yoruba aesthetics and European Christian Humanism in their works. There is no doubt too that Yoruba writers and artists do not shy away from eclectic borrowings for the realisation of their works. Such borrowings honour the source and enhance the work of borrower. Finally, it is also quite clear that most Yoruba writers do not accept the idea of a clash of cultures when it comes to the "difficulties of a transition stage" in the encounter between Africa and Europe.

In his Author's Note at the beginning of his play *Death and the King's Horseman* Wole Soyinka says:

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures', a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter. It is thanks to this perverse mentality that I find it necessary to caution the would-be producer of this play against a sadly familiar reductionist tendency, and to direct his vision instead to the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence.

Ecclecticism implies syncreticism in the final outcome. This is an area of inquiry which purists of all types find difficult to investigate. To globalize is not to be gobbled up. Rather, the Yoruba writers come to the conclusion that ours is ours but mine is mine. They insist that we can all defend our own with-

out destroying my own. This is expressed in two significant situations: in terms of their attitude to the English language and their attitude to their traditional religion. In terms of the language they say:

A o s'oyinbo, Yes!  
A o s'ode wa, Aree!  
[We shall speak English yes!  
We shall speak our language as well!]

In terms of religion, they would sing:

Igbagbo ko ni k'awa ma s'oro,  
Awa o s'oro ile wa o!  
[Christianity does not bar us from  
Worshipping the Gods and Goddesses of our Land!]

It is possible then to say that the global inheritance has come about by the contributions of all of us, not just the work of Europe and North America. To that extent the Yoruba and by extension Africa participates in globalisation as one that both contributes and benefits. At the same time, what globalisation contains of Africa's contribution is not the totality of the wealth and potential of Africa.

It is appropriate therefore to end this short presentation with the words of Aime Cesaire (1913 -) from his long narrative poem *Return to My Native Land* first published in 1956:

...And the voice declares that for centuries Europe  
has stuffed us with lies and crammed us with plague,  
for it is not true that:  
the work of man is finished  
we have nothing to do in the world  
we are the parasites of the world  
our job is to keep in step with the world.  
The work of man is only just beginning  
It remains for him to conquer  
At the four corners of his fervour  
Every rigid prohibition.  
No race holds a monopoly of beauty, intelligence and

Strength there is room for all at the meeting-place of  
Conquest  
We know now  
That the sun revolves round our earth illuminating the plot  
Which we alone have selected  
That every star falls at our command from the sky to the  
Earth without limit or cease.



## *“Texts Instead”*: la narrazione (postcoloniale) nell’epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica

Silvia Albertazzi

Nel suo recente lavoro sull’immaginario postcoloniale, David Punter definisce le opere letterarie provenienti dal Sud del mondo come “testi invece”, testi che sono stati scritti al posto di altri testi, in un linguaggio ‘altro’, testi che tradiscono l’impossibilità di visualizzare realtà ‘altre’, situazioni di dislocamento personale e linguistico, tentativi di dare voce al non detto usando mezzi e materiali spesso pagati a caro prezzo sul mercato occidentale della cultura e del potere. Scrive Punter:

The texts of the ‘postcolonial’ are, in partial but crucial sense, not there, they are texts written instead of other texts, unwillingly written under the sign of an ‘other’ language, they are continuing evidences of the impossibility of visualising the dislocated, they are emblems of all that is unwritten, all that must now remain unwritten because the very materials for writing are already co-opted, already displayed in the markets of those who sell power, of those who charge unaffordable prices for what is not theirs to sell. (2000: 105)

Non si tratta, dunque, per Punter, soltanto di una forma di silenzio, di una scrittura che, cercando di dar voce al non detto, risulta circoscritta da un silenzio inattaccabile: siamo ormai ben oltre il ‘silenzio postcoloniale’ che, secondo Ashcroft, Griffiths e Tiffin caratterizza le produzioni letterarie attraverso cui “*the Empire writes back*”, quel silenzio che, circoscrivendo il testo postcoloniale ne precluderebbe l’interpretazione, “challeng[ing] metropolitan notions of polysemy, and resist[ing] the absorption of post-colonial literatures into the new universalist paradigms, which emerge in the wake of post-structuralist accounts of language and texts.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1989: 187). Punter parla di ‘testi invece’, scritture dislocate che impongono al letto-

re – e al critico – non di tentare l'interpretazione del silenzio, ma di scoprire quanto sta dietro le parole, tenendo conto al contempo del non scritto, nella consapevolezza che gli stessi materiali per scrivere sono nelle mani di chi vende a prezzi inavvicinabili ciò che neppure gli appartiene.

Pertanto, qualsiasi discorso critico sulle letterature postcoloniali dovrà necessariamente affiancare alla disamina estetico-letteraria dei testi una presa di posizione in senso ideologico, politico e sociale. Quanto lo storico indiano Dipesh Chakrabarty ha scritto a proposito dell'odierna storiografia postcoloniale può agevolmente essere riferito anche allo studio delle letterature extraeuropee e del Terzo Mondo: la colonizzazione, il nazionalismo terzomondista e la politica accademica hanno contribuito a rafforzare la posizione dell'Europa nel discorso storico, rendendola addirittura universale, “the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Kenyan’, and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’” (Chakrabarty 1992: 4). Sostituendo il termine ‘storia’ con ‘letteratura’, le considerazioni di Chakrabarty risultano perfettamente applicabili anche al nostro campo di studi. Di conseguenza, la soluzione proposta dallo storico indiano si può adattare senza sforzo all'area letteraria postcoloniale. Occorre, secondo Chakrabarty, mettere in atto un grande progetto di ‘provincializzazione dell'Europa’, che si può realizzare scrivendo “into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force and the tragedies and the ironies that attend to it.” (4) Si tratta, in altre parole, di saper leggere la letteratura della modernità (sia essa occidentale o postcoloniale) in senso ‘contrappuntistico’, secondo l'accezione che Said annette al termine preso a prestito dalla terminologia musicale: “In reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked” (Said 1994: 67). Tuttavia, mentre Said applica la sua “contrapuntal analysis” ai grandi testi canonici dell'occidente, nel tentativo di “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (66), per il critico delle letterature postcoloniali si tratterà anche di esaminare l'archivio della cultura non occidentale espressa in lingue europee tenendo conto delle ambiguità, delle ironie, delle contraddizioni che tradiscono il non scritto, quanto il postcoloniale non ha ancora parole per esprimere, quanto viene censurato (o autocensurato) in ossequio al predominio occidentale, quanto non può essere scritto per l'impossibilità di accedere agli stessi mate-

riali della scrittura. In questo senso, non solo alla narrativa realistica lo studioso di letterature postcoloniali applicherà la sua personale (e non eurocentrica) lettura contrappuntistica, ma anche e soprattutto ai testi fantastici, magici, dove ambiguità e contraddizioni della modernità vengono tradotte in immagini.

A questo proposito, credo che pochi testi come il brevissimo racconto di Peter Carey "Report on the Shadow Industry", apparso per la prima volta nella raccolta *The Fat Man in History* del 1974, riescano a mettere in evidenza, partendo da un canovaccio decisamente irrealistico, le contraddizioni della società postcoloniale, fino a tingersi di sfumature inquietantemente premonitrici. Nella sua storia Carey racconta di fabbriche che producono scatole contenenti ombre – ombre di tutti i colori e le dimensioni, di cui uomini e donne sembrano non poter fare a meno, al punto da apparirne come intossicati e da indebitarsi per acquistarle. Scritto nel freddo linguaggio dei rapporti aziendali, il brevissimo racconto ipotizza una società apparentemente distopica, in cui non solo gli individui sono ossessionati dalle ombre, ma lo stesso panorama urbano ne è saturo, impregnato com'è dai fumi colorati delle fabbriche dove vengono prodotte. Nel racconto, la base narrativa realistica da cui diparte ogni autentica storia fantastica è costituita non solo da una ambientazione metropolitana assolutamente riconoscibile nella sua assenza di elementi peculiari, ma anche e soprattutto dall'uso di un registro privo di connotazioni letterarie specifiche come quello delle relazioni aziendali. Nel linguaggio piatto e impersonale dei rapporti commerciali, Carey descrive in tre pagine scarse, scandite da brevi paragrafi, una società non futura, ma già presente – anche e soprattutto rispetto al lettore – in cui gli individui sono ossessionati dall'acquisto di ombre, racchiuse in scatole di varie dimensioni, e il panorama urbano è contraddistinto dalle ciminiere della fabbriche di ombre, che sputano fuori ad ogni ora fumi colorati. Si potrebbe, erroneamente, parlare di fantasia distopica, se non fosse evidente, ad ogni parola dell'asettica relazione, che della società occidentale contemporanea si parla, e che ombre e scatole, probabilmente, hanno funzione metaforica, quando non apertamente allegorica. La trasgressione fantastica dei limiti del reale porta a note profetiche: le scatole di ombre nella cui contemplazione si perdono i personaggi di Carey possono essere piccoli televisori portatili, oppure contenere, per il lettore in vena di interpretazioni simboliche, videocassette, videogiochi, software per computer, e anche, ovviamente, droghe di vario genere. È ovvio che le ipotesi interpretative lasciate al lettore del terzo millennio per le scatole di ombre sono a dir poco infinite: tuttavia, considerando il periodo di scrittura del rac-

conto, più che televisori tascabili, DVD o CDrom, tutti oggetti non ancora commercializzati in Australia nei primi anni settanta, le scatole di ombre potrebbero rimandare a droghe psicotrope di vario genere, queste invece largamente diffuse tra gli studenti e gli intellettuali impegnati anche agli antipodi a protestare contro la guerra del Vietnam. In effetti, nel primissimo paragrafo, il riferimento al fatto che la diffusione delle ombre in scatola costituiva già un fenomeno problematico nell'America del decennio precedente fa pensare ai *trips* da LSD cui si abbandonava la generazione dei figli dei fiori, a Ken Kesey e alla *summer of love* del 1967. Tuttavia, il fatto che di ombre nella storia di Carey siano in larga misura 'drogati' anche anziani e casalinghe, e che all'inizio del secondo paragrafo venga riportata una statistica secondo cui una famiglia media spende in ombre circa il 25% dei propri salari, autorizza a non limitarsi a una lettura del racconto come parabola psichedelica.

In apertura, la relazione di Carey fa riferimento alla situazione americana del decennio precedente, mettendo in chiaro che, già dieci prima, in quel paese, sorgevano fabbriche di ombre e la gente si aggirava nei supermercati in piena notte per comperare scatole dal contenuto misterioso: una situazione che allora sembrava strana al relatore anonimo, ma che è poi diventata comune anche nel suo paese. Fin dal primo paragrafo, la relazione si sofferma sui pericoli e sui vantaggi delle ombre, sul loro probabile contenuto chimico e sull'impatto delle fabbriche di ombre e dei loro residui tossici sull'ambiente. In tal modo, la narrazione scivola quasi impercettibilmente dal tono piatto e razionale del dato di fatto dell'indagine merceologica alla descrizione visionaria di un fenomeno impalpabile e irrazionale.

There are few who say the smoke is dangerous because of carcinogenic chemicals used in the manufacture of shadows. Others argue that the shadow is a natural product and by its very nature chemically pure. They point to the advantages of the smoke: the beautifully coloured patterns in the clouds which serve as a reminder of the happiness to be obtained from a fully realized shadow. There may be some merit in this last argument, for on cloudy days the skies above our city are a wondrous sight, full of blues and vermillions and brilliant greens which pick out strange patterns and shapes in the clouds.

Others say that the clouds now contain the dreadful beauty of the apocalypse. (Carey 1995: 138)

A questo primo stadio la situazione narrata appare principalmente specchio dei tempi in cui è concepita, documento fantastico a base storico-sociale. Ci troviamo di fronte a visioni psichedeliche, che sarebbe difficile imma-

ginare in un periodo diverso dagli anni sessanta-settanta, dal periodo cioè delle droghe chimiche per allargare le frontiere della conoscenza, dell'LSD e degli allucinogeni. Lo stesso riferimento alla situazione americana di un decennio precedente fa pensare ai vari Ginsberg, Burroughs, Leary, Kesey e ai loro *trips*, alle visioni descritte nei loro libri o a quelle cantate, per esempio, da Bob Dylan, nello stesso periodo. Si può ipotizzare con una certa sicurezza che in Australia tali mode siano arrivate con qualche ritardo, mentre è provato che a metà degli anni settanta, nel periodo di reazione anche violenta alla guerra del Vietnam e alla politica statunitense, anche le giovani generazioni degli antipodi facevano largo uso di sostanze psicotrope. E tuttavia, una simile interpretazione del racconto, pur accettabile, risulta subito riduttiva: prima di tutto, già si è detto come, fin dal primo paragrafo, vengano mostrate persone anziane, emarginati, poveri che cercano di procurarsi le misteriose scatole, e come, all'inizio del secondo, venga riportata una statistica secondo cui una famiglia media spende circa il 25% dei propri salari in ombre, percentuale di spesa che, il relatore sottolinea, è inversamente proporzionale alle entrate familiari complessive. Proprio a partire da questo dato, Carey suggerisce altre, e più complesse, chiavi di lettura del fenomeno.

There are those who say that the shadows are bad for people, promising an impossible happiness that can never be realized and thus detracting from the very real beauties of nature and life. But there are others who argue that the shadows have always been with us in one form or another and that the packaged shadow is necessary for mental health in an advanced technological society. There is, however, research to indicate that the high suicide rate in advanced countries is connected with the popularity of shadows and that there is a direct statistical correlation between shadow sales and suicides rates. This has been explained by those who hold that the shadows are merely mirrors to the soul and that the man who stares into a shadow box sees only himself, and what beauty he finds is his own beauty and what despair he experiences is born of the poverty of his spirit. (1995: 138)

Da un lato, sembra riemergere qui la possibilità di interpretare le scatole di ombre come televisori, il cui maggior pericolo risiede nel proporre immagini di felicità materiale impossibile che non potrà mai realizzarsi per la gente comune. Dall'altro, la necessità di incasellare i sogni (= le ombre) e venderli suggerisce piuttosto l'idea di una società ormai talmente massificata e tanto povera di contenuti ideali e ideologici da temere il potenziale sovversivo della fantasia umana, al punto da immetterne sul mercato surrogati fatti in serie. Ancora una volta, il rimando storico-sociale immediato è allo spirito del

tempo in cui Carey scrive il racconto, gli anni immediatamente successivi la richiesta di mandare al potere la fantasia da parte degli studenti di tutto il mondo e immediatamente precedenti la breve ma intensa stagione delle *jacqueries*, degli indiani metropolitani e, per quanto riguarda l’Australia, delle comuni di artisti descritte nei romanzi di Helen Garner. Tuttavia, ancora una volta la visione del fantasista si tinge di involontaria premonizione: il discorso sulla negatività delle ombre risuona familiare al lettore di fine millennio, che ogni giorno si trova a confrontarsi sui media con polemiche relative al buono e cattivo uso dei mezzi di comunicazione e, *last but not least*, del computer e della rete informatica, del tutto sconosciuti, questi ultimi, ai tempi in cui Carey concepisce la sua storia. Non a caso, lo stesso scrittore collaborando in veste di sceneggiatore alla fine degli anni ottanta alla realizzazione del film di Wim Wenders *Fino alla fine del mondo* tornerà sul tema delle scatole di ombre, immaginando una macchinetta portatile in grado di mostrare i sogni di chi la possiede. Questo piccolo computer, estremamente affascinante per chi lo usa, si rivela ben presto una sorta di tremenda droga virtuale: ossessionato dai propri sogni, che ne fruisce non può più farne a meno, e finisce per isolarsi dalla realtà, autoannientandosi nella continua ed esasperata contemplazione della propria attività onirica. Di fronte a questa sequenza, che vuole soprattutto mettere in evidenza la negatività del sogno dei soggetti bianchi metropolitani contrapposta alla creatività positiva del *dreaming* aborigeno (Cfr. Albertazzi 1998), si manifesta a livello visivo e visionario l’assunto della frase che chiude il secondo paragrafo della relazione. Letteralmente, chi guarda nella macchina dei sogni vede solo se stesso, e sperimenta dolorosamente la disperazione che nasce dalla sua stessa povertà di spirito. Del resto, già nel paragrafo seguente della relazione, di carattere più personale, il relatore anonimo ritorna sull’esperienza di desolazione che può derivare da una insoddisfacente contemplazione delle ombre, ricordando, nelle parole di una conoscente, “that awful despair that comes when one has failed to grasp the shadow” (Carey 1995: 139).

Riletto oggi, alla luce, per esempio, delle speculazioni antropologiche di Arun Appadurai su modernità e globalizzazione, il racconto di Carey può acquisire ulteriori – e non meno preoccupanti – significati. Scrive Appadurai:

Negli ultimi venti anni, con la deterritorializzazione delle persone, delle immagini e delle idee che ha preso nuova forza, il ruolo di immaginazione e fantasia è mutato senza che ce ne accorgessimo. Più persone nel mondo vedono le loro vite attraverso il prisma delle vite possibili messe a disposizione dai mass-media in tutte le loro forme. La fantasia è adesso cioè una

pratica sociale che, in modi molteplici, entra nell'invenzione delle vite sociali per molte persone in molte società. (Appadurai 2001: 78)

Al termine del terzo paragrafo di "Report on the Shadow Industry", comunque, il discorso sulle ombre s'è fatto ormai alquanto evanescente: non si tratta più di cercare un significato alle ombre contenute nelle scatole, ma di saperle afferrare. È questa un'operazione, inutile notarlo, quasi impossibile; anzi, si tratta di una vera e propria contraddizione in termini. E se è vero che "to grasp" in un simile contesto può significare anche "capire, afferrare il senso di qualcosa", è ancor più vero, però, che a questo punto non è più questione tanto di decifrare le ombre quanto di rapportarle al proprio vissuto, secondo un procedimento irrazionale che va ben oltre l'esegesi, e che non ha ancora trovato parole per essere espresso. Mentre la fantasia muta di ruolo caricandosi della forza di "mitografie estranee alle costruzioni del mito e del rituale di stampo classico" (20), "l'immaginazione ha frantumato la specificità dello spazio espressivo dell'arte, del mito e del rituale, e adesso è divenuta parte del lavoro mentale quotidiano della gente comune in molte società" (19). Il biglietto sgrammaticato che, nel paragrafo successivo, il padre del relatore di Carey lascia a giustificazione della propria fuga dalla famiglia – "Words Cannot Express It What I Feel Because of the Things I Saw In the Box Of Shadows You Bought Me" – sta a significare tutta la tragedia di un mondo in cui l'individuo medio non sa più rapportarsi con la propria immaginazione, anzi finisce col lasciarsi travolgere dalla propria fantasia, costruendo "mondi immaginati di tipo chimerico, estetico e addirittura fantastico [...] misurati in base ai criteri di qualche altra prospettiva, di qualche altro mondo immaginato" (55). Il padre non ha parole per descrivere quanto ha visto, forse perché la visione contenuta nella sua scatola di ombre appartiene ad altri e, privo di strumenti per decodificarla, egli è terrorizzato dalla paura di ciò che ancora non conosce. Mancano le parole per descrivere quanto il padre ha visto, ma la sua reazione dimostra senza ombra di dubbio che qualcosa di tremendo era contenuto nella sua scatola. Il banale linguaggio quotidiano non ha parole adeguate per il soprannaturale, la magia, l'irrazionale e forse neppure per le manifestazioni più recondite dell'inconscio. Con la storia del padre, Carey insinua una possibilità di lettura metanarrativa per la sua storia. Possibilità che verrà confermata nell'ultimo, cortissimo paragrafo, con l'omologazione totale di autore e relatore.

My own feelings about the shadows are ambivalent, to say the least. For here I have manufactured one more: elusive, unsatisfactory, hinting at

greater beauties and more profound mysteries that exist somewhere before the beginning and somewhere after the end. (Carey 1995: 139)

L'atteggiamento di Carey nei confronti delle ombre – multimediali o meccaniche, capaci di produrre visioni, di sostituirsi all'atto artigianale della scrittura o di divulgare su vasta scala in immagini precostituite le creazioni fantastiche – è ambivalente. La condanna delle scatole di ombre che attraversa tutta la "relazione" si stempera in maniera inattesa nei toni dubitativi del finale, quando il relatore ammette che anche scrivere è creare ombre, ombre insoddisfacenti che additano altre realtà, spesso migliori, e verità più profonde di quanto non siano capaci di esprimere. In altre parole, come le ombre in scatola (ma anche come la radio, la televisione, il computer) i libri possono indurre il sentimento "di perdite che non sono mai avvenute", suscitare una nostalgia senza memoria, una "nostalgia immaginata, per cose mai accadute" (Appadurai 2001: 106). Chi ha letto, per esempio, un romanzo come *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise* di Dai Sijie, riconoscerà questo sentimento nella reazione provata dai giovani protagonisti leggendo i libri occidentali proibiti dei grandi maestri ottocenteschi. I due ragazzi cinesi in 'rieducazione' sulle montagne ai tempi della rivoluzione culturale riescono a partecipare della lontanissima e sconosciuta realtà francese dell'ottocento, a riconoscersi in sentimenti mai provati come la passione e la vendetta, a immedesimarsi in situazioni antitetiche alla loro, fino a provare letteralmente una forma di nostalgia per quel mondo così diverso. È questa, ovviamente, una forma positiva di 'nostalgia senza memoria': attraverso la lettura, il lettore sperimenta un'altra realtà che finirà col mutarlo interiormente; egli compie, cioè, un viaggio verso un mondo sconosciuto (e che mai conoscerà) calandosi all'interno di se stesso. Non per caso, al termine del romanzo, la Piccola Sarta del titolo, di cui i due si sono autoeletti Pigmaliioni, fugge verso una nuova vita cittadina, desiderando sperimentare nella realtà quanto ha letto sui libri occidentali.

Forse una simile forma positiva di "nostalgia senza memoria" dovrebbe guidare anche noi critici postcoloniali occidentali nel viaggio alla scoperta di ciò che sta dietro ai '*texts instead*' di cui ci occupiamo. Invece di mantenere la prospettiva europea al centro del nostro universo, dovremmo sforzarci di essere aperti ai mille modi in cui gli scrittori postcoloniali rinnovano la narrazione partendo da realtà spesso antitetiche alla nostra e noi estranee; dovremmo accettare il rischio del provvisorio piuttosto che la sicurezza della convenzione e dell'abitudine, l'innovazione e l'esperimento piuttosto che lo *status quo*. Ma soprattutto non dovremmo mai studiare i nostri autori e le loro letterature isolati dal proprio contesto. Se è vero, come afferma il grande scrit-

tore e teorico francofono Edouard Glissant, che "l'écrit moderne n'est pas monolingue, même s'il ne connaît qu'une langue, parce qu'il écrit en présence de toutes les langues du monde" (Glissant 1996: 27), ne consegue che anche lo studioso e il critico dei testi postcoloniali devono operare "alla presenza di tutte le lingue del mondo", nella consapevolezza delle diverse culture e delle loro relazioni e in dispregio del settarismo, e di quella specializzazione che è sinonimo di chiusura mentale e culturale. Secondo Said, infatti:

Specialization means losing sight of the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge, as a result, you cannot view knowledge and art as choices and decisions, commitments and alignments, but only in terms of impersonal theories and methodologies [...] Specialization also kills your sense of excitement and discovery..." (Said 1994b: 57)

Non all'accademico super-specializzato deve quindi somigliare lo studioso di letterature postcoloniali, ma all'intellettuale delineato da Said nelle sue Reith Lectures del 1993:

An intellectual is like a shipwrecked person who learns how to live in a certain sense *with* the land, not *on* it, not like Robinson Crusoe whose goal is to colonise his little island, but more like Marco Polo, whose sense of the marvelous never fails him, and who is always a traveler, a provisional guest, not a freeloader, conqueror, or raider. (1994b: 44)

E mi piace chiudere la mia chiacchierata proprio qui, a Venezia, immaginando tutti noi, studiosi, critici, lettori e curiosi del postcoloniale, come tanti Marco Polo dell'intelletto, costantemente meravigliati del mondo.

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Sul racconto di Carey, si vedano anche i miei saggi "La fabbrica delle ombre e la macchina per scrivere storie, ovvero la narrazione al tempo del computer", *Fictions*, 1, 2001 e "Se se la bevono sei salvo. Limiti del fantastico", di prossima pubblicazione negli Atti del Convegno *Lo specchio dei mondi possibili* (Bologna, febbraio 1999), a cura di Gabriella Imposti.

### **Abstract**

*Starting from David Punter's idea that all postcolonial texts, being written instead of other texts, are "continuing evidences of the impossibility of visualising the dislocated", my paper analyses a short story by Peter Carey, "Report on the Shadow Industry", both as a 'text instead' and as the epitome of a postcolonial tale of the technological era. Showing how, in 1974, Carey combines fantastic elements, and metaphors with references to everyday life to reach an almost prophetic view of the society of the third millennium, I try to demonstrate how the postcolonial critic must be able to read contrapuntally (to use Said's terminology) not only the classics, but also contemporary texts. Finally, this assumption leads to the representation of the postcolonial intellectual, who avoids the risks of over-specialisation by always keeping his excitement and curiosity for his cultural discoveries*

## *Andate e ritorni dall'India* (traduttrice per caso)

Anna Nadotti

Nel ringraziare l'AISLI per avermi invitata al convegno veneziano, premetto che la mia sarà una sorta di storia personale e racconto d'esperienza, vagamente “fuori luogo” rispetto alle altre relazioni e comunicazioni in programma, ma coerente con il mio lavoro di traduttrice, editor, consulente editoriale, critica letteraria. Del resto è in questa veste che sono qui.

Il **titolo**, letterale e metaforico, che ho dato al mio contributo, allude al mio personale, fisico, andare e venire dal subcontinente, all'andare e venire di autori e autrici da un'area all'altra del mondo, all'andare dei testi da una lingua all'altra.

Il **sottotitolo** si richiama invece al quando e come ho cominciato a tradurre. Ho cominciato a tradurre tardi, a metà – plausibilmente – della vita. Il mio è un percorso non lineare rispetto agli schemi professionali prevalenti nel nostro paese per la mia generazione, un percorso diverso da quello accademico, con il quale talora si incrocia [penso alla mia partecipazione al dottorato sulle scritture femminili; alle proposte, in genere difficili da accettare, di collaborazione a tesi di laurea; alla mia presenza qui oggi], e anomalo rispetto a quello di molti traduttori/trici che, iniziando da giovani, in molti casi ne hanno fatto un lavoro temporaneo o part time, con ciò che comporta sia in termini di inesperienza soggettiva sia di oggettive difficoltà di riconoscimento professionale ed economico]. Voglio dire che non ho fatto “gavetta”, non ho fatto il “negro” – o se preferite la ghost translator, la prestapenna – e non ho ricevuto “proposte indecenti” – bella definizione che una mia allieva in un seminario alla “Scuola Holden” diede delle proposte di lavoro che giovani studiosi e traduttori principianti si sentono fare da case editrici, da riviste e giornali, da centri studi e, qualche volta, da facoltà e dipartimenti universitari.

Non è forse inutile accennare alla mia formazione, ammesso che ne esista una per chi fa il mio mestiere [alla Facoltà di Lingue di Torino ci sono ora due corsi di curriculum editoriale, tedesco e inglese, e si avvia in questi giorni il nuovissimo master bolognese di Umberto Eco. Quanto al tradurre, Lalla Romano, con la sua implacabile franchezza, diceva che i requisiti sono tre, nell'ordine: talento, una perfetta conoscenza della lingua d'ingresso – e concedeva che, sì, anche una buona conoscenza della lingua di partenza non guasta – e gli amici giusti per confrontarsi, i suoi peraltro erano... Elio Vittorini, Italo Calvino, Giulio Einaudi...]. Della mia formazione, rispetto a quella considerata curricolare [liceo classico e laurea in Lingue e Letterature Straniere conseguita secoli fa all'Università L. Bocconi di Milano], tengo piuttosto a sottolineare da un lato l'appartenenza di genere – non perché io consideri femminile il mestiere del traduttore, dissento in questo da quella grandissima studiosa e traduttrice che è Jaqueline Risset, ma per le implicazioni che la consapevolezza di genere ha sul tradurre. E dall'altro una pluralità di esperienze – l'insegnamento nella scuola, la politica, il femminismo, il lavoro critico – che, ognuna a suo modo, hanno fatto del linguaggio una questione cruciale; e dell'altra/o, in questo caso lettrici e lettori, l'interlocutore privilegiato e per fortuna non sempre invisibile [come ho avuto modo di verificare nei corsi della "Libera Università delle Donne" di Milano, della "Scuola Holden" di Torino, in scuole e biblioteche].

I viaggi, la poesia, il cinema, il jazz e le arti figurative, soprattutto la pittura, contribuiscono non poco alla mia attività di traduttrice. E poi... sono una lettrice appassionata e quasi onnivora. Attività cruciale per chi traduce, leggere nella propria e nelle altrui lingue.

Il lavoro di consulente editoriale [per la casa editrice Einaudi] è proceduto e procede parallelamente a quello di traduttrice e si riassume nella ricerca il più possibile esaustiva sulle letterature del subcontinente indiano per un'equilibrata mappatura delle sue straordinarie risorse.

In questo momento muove sostanzialmente in due direzioni:

a) la ricerca di nuovi autori "non esotici" [faccio due nomi soltanto: Akil Sharma, *Un padre obbediente*, e Ardashir Vakil, *Beach Boy*] di cui è strumento utilissimo, ad esempio, la rivista "Civil Lines", pubblicata saltuariamente da quello straordinario intellettuale e raffinato editore che è Ravi Dayal, New Delhi.

b) l'indagine tra le letterature nelle lingue indiane, che per me passa necessariamente attraverso l'inglese ma anche, ultimamente forse più spesso, attraverso un'altra lingua europea, il francese: con la collana "Lettres

Indiennes” diretta da Rajesh Sharma per le edizioni Actes Sud, benemerite da molti punti di vista; o il magnifico numero speciale della rivista “Europe”, Littératures de l’Inde, aprile 2001. Vorrei qui attirare l’attenzione sul fatto che la rivista, fondata nel lontano 1923 da Romain Rolland, fa in qualche modo una scelta di campo anti-rushdiana. Anticipo io stessa l’obiezione che potreste farmi: ciò non significa che queste letterature abbiano valore, si tratta dell’ovvia, abituale posizione antinglese della Francia. Non escludo questo fattore, ma permettetemi di aggiungere che le letterature nelle lingue indiane sono un universo che il mercato occidentale ha finora trascurato sia per il difficile accesso alle lingue, sia per quel peccato di esotismo da cui sembra restio a fare ammenda, per pigrizia, per mancanza di curiosità... non saprei.

La mia indagine passa infine per i seminari delle scrittrici indiane (stato per stato, lingua per lingua). Tengo qui ad esprimere il mio debito di riconoscenza verso Ritu Menon, fondatrice con Urvashi Butalia delle edizioni Kali for Women, Delhi, e co-autrice, tra l’altro, di un magnifico libro sulla Partizione, *Borders and Boundaries*, che mi ha indirizzata e invitata a seguirla in direzioni che mi sarebbe stato difficile imboccare da sola. Con lei ho discusso infinite volte ormai di ciò che la cultura letteraria del suo paese esprime, dentro e fuori dai confini nazionali, ora felicemente meticcata, ibridata, ora manipolata dagli agenti editoriali occidentali. Sarei felice se prima o poi anche l’università italiana volesse ascoltare con l’attenzione che meritano queste voci femminile intelligenti, discrete e selettive.

Durante un suo seminario a Torino, qualche anno fa, Franco Moretti diceva che il romanzo è come l’araba fenice, che non muore bensì rinasce dalle proprie ceneri, magari altrove; ed esemplificava la sua affermazione ripercorrendone i movimenti dapprima all’interno dell’Europa: la Spagna nel ’600, Francia e Inghilterra nel ’700 e ’800, cui si aggiunge la Russia tra ’800 e ’900; quindi fuori: il romanzo nordamericano negli anni ’30 e ’40 del secolo appena concluso, la triade dei grandi giapponesi Tanizaki, Kawabata, Mishima, il romanzo sudamericano negli anni ’60 e primi ’70, fino all’esplosione del romanzo nei e dai paesi a suo tempo legati dal vincolo coloniale, India, Canada, paesi africani anglofoni e francofoni.

Rinasce l’araba fenice anche nel subcontinente indiano, ma la ri-esplosione nella lingua del colonizzatore – “the empire writes back” – non deve farci dimenticare quanto preesisteva e continua a vivere con estrema vitalità, le letterature nelle lingue locali. Forse l’ultimo continente letterario da scoprire. Un primo risultato di questo lavoro sarà la traduzione, dal bengali, di una raccolta di racconti di M. Devi, cui spero farà seguito la traduzione di *Mother of 1084*.

Poi forse, ma qui varrebbe la pena di fare qualche osservazione sull'andamento del mercato, sulla corresponsabilità dei lettori nelle scelte degli editori, altri seguiranno.

Come editor, mi occupo della cura, oltre che della traduzione di alcuni autori [Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Antonia S. Byatt, Ruth Ozeki]; della revisione di traduzioni fatte da altri traduttori, soprattutto quando si tratta di libri proposti da me; e infine della valutazione e selezione delle prove di traduzione. Ma su questo non intendo soffermarmi, anche perché implicherebbe una serie di annotazioni tecniche per le quali non credo ci sia tempo. Risponderò eventualmente alle vostre domande.

Quanto al lavoro critico [per *L'Indice*, *Leggendaria*, occasionalmente per *il manifesto* e radio 3, e alcune collaborazioni 'in India' di cui, lo confesso, sono particolarmente orgogliosa in quanto mi pare che attestino un apprezzamento 'là' di quanto vado facendo "qui"] si riassume nel tentativo di far conoscere, e possibilmente apprezzare, un punto di vista sbieco rispetto al mercato editoriale e al gossip giornalistico, troppo spesso vincolati alle mode o subordinati ai potenti agenti editoriali anglosassoni; ma anche rispetto a una certa cultura accademica che talora usa pretestuosamente i testi per ricondurre a gruppi, movimenti, correnti autori che in realtà si sottraggono a tale operazione. Il tradurre – il corpo a corpo con il testo – conduce a un atteggiamento critico e interpretativo diverso, che non può sottrarsi a quello che Barthes chiamava "il piacere del testo", o talora il dispiacere, aggiungo io. Non può prescindere dal testo inteso come somma di forma e contenuto, di scelte linguistiche e personaggi, luoghi reali e fittizi. Insomma un immaginario narrativo che a mio avviso non può essere forzato dentro schemi critici per quanto consolidati. Il mio modello, e spero vorrete perdonarmi la presunzione, sono la Woolf del *Common Reader*; o l'indimenticabile *Lettore di professione* Paolo Milano.

Per parlarvi come vorrei del mio lavoro di traduttrice, che del resto credo che conosciate, avrei bisogno di molto tempo. Mi piacerebbe molto approfondirne le più riposte pieghe, non i bizzarri segreti, in una lunga discussione con voi. Ma tant'è.

Anni fa, scrivendo del mestiere di tradurre, lo definivo un viaggio che si fa in due, con quattro occhi, quattro mani... e una valigia sola. Riflettendoci oggi mi pare di ritrovarmi piuttosto in un'idea di traduzione come "pellegrinaggio", nell'accezione dell'antropologo James Clifford [*Strade*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2000]. Un pellegrinaggio con molteplici stazioni, spesso scomode, durante il quale si imparano molte cose su persone, culture e storie diver-

se dalle nostre, non tutto, certo, ma comunque “abbastanza per cominciare a capire che cosa ci sfugge”.

Cominciare a capire che cosa ci sfugge, esattamente questo mi pare sia il tradurre. Soprattutto quando si traducono autrici/tori che da fuori dell'Occidente, con lingue che sono appartenute all'Occidente, ci impongono invenzioni linguistiche e una frammentazione dello sguardo di cui traduttrici/tori devono essere i primi interpreti.

“Arte dell'erranza”, dice Édouard Glissant della traduzione [*Poetica del diverso*, Meltemi, 1998]. Ha ragione. Un'erranza che ci distoglie dalla rigidità, ci sottrae sia all'intolleranza sia all'universalismo. E ci mette a confronto con la possibilità dell'errore. Errare alla ricerca della soluzione [cfr. il mio contributo al dossier sulla traduzione, “L'Indice” n. 5, maggio 2001].

Tradurre comporta vivere nella lingua con l'occhio e l'orecchio, inseguendo una traccia, un rumore, un silenzio. Sapendo che la traduzione è un margine spesso esiguo, un confine sottile su un doppio versante, accidentato su entrambe i fianchi. È questo un nodo cruciale del lavoro di traduzione, dal quale spesso dipende il successo di un autore in traduzione. A questo proposito voglio ricordare quanto diceva Italo Calvino: “Il linguaggio ha un'importanza massima perché per tenere sveglia l'attenzione del lettore bisogna che la voce che gli parla abbia un certo tono, un certo timbro, una certa vivacità [...]. Tradurre è un'arte: il passaggio di un testo letterario, qualsiasi sia il suo valore, in un'altra lingua richiede ogni volta un qualche tipo di miracolo. Sappiamo tutti che la poesia è intraducibile per definizione, ma la vera letteratura, anche quella in prosa, lavora proprio sul margine intraducibile di ogni lingua. Il traduttore letterario è colui che mette in gioco tutto se stesso per tradurre l'intraducibile [...]. Tradurre è il vero modo di leggere un testo: credo sia già stato detto molte volte; posso aggiungere che per un autore il riflettere sulla traduzione di un proprio testo, il discutere col traduttore, è il vero modo di leggere se stesso, di capire bene cosa ha scritto e perché [cfr. “Tradurre è il vero modo di leggere un testo”, relazione a un convegno sulla traduzione (4 giugno 1982, Roma) in *Saggi*, vol. III, Meridiani Mondadori].

Sorprendente sintonia di Calvino con le parole di Gayatri C. Spivak, “translation as the most intimate act of reading”, in un saggio che da molti anni considero un *livre de chevet*: “Una delle seduzioni del tradurre, allargare i confini della propria identità. Dar forma alla responsabilità che si è assunta nei confronti della traccia dell'altro/a [...] La traduzione è il più intenso atto di lettura. Mi affido al testo quando traduco. Il traduttore conquista il permesso di trasgredire alla traccia dell'altro negli angoli più remoti del proprio sé [...] Lo

sforzo del traduttore è facilitare l'amore tra l'originale e la sua ombra. Non si tratta solo di sintassi, sinonimi, colore locale. Si tratta di cogliere la retorica dei silenzi tra e intorno alle parole in modo di vedere cosa funziona e quanto" [*The Politics of Translation*, in Michèle Barret and Anne Phillips (eds), *Destabilizing Theory. Contemporary Feminist Debates*, 1993, Polity P].

L'ho riletto molte volte e sempre ci trovo nuove suggestioni e la sfida creativa della prima volta. Avevo già tradotto *Shadow Lines* di Amitav Ghosh e *Possession* di A. S. Byatt, quando lo lessi, e mi parve di trovare la chiave teorica di certe scelte fatte a orecchio. Oggi più che mai chi traduce non può ignorare il dolore rimosso di quello che Derek Walcott chiama "middle passage"; l'amnesia che trapela tra le righe di molti narratori deve trovare una traduzione silenziosa, data dalle pause, dallo scivolare tra detto e non detto. Da un registro – in molti casi è questa la difficoltà, più che il testo in sé – che rispetti e renda piena giustizia all'autore/trice, al suo immaginario, alla sua lingua.

Gran parte della letteratura contemporanea [ma io credo che nelle traduzioni saggistiche si dovrebbe avere la stessa delicatezza e attenzione] è letteratura dell'esilio, del viaggio imposto, della fuga, dell'esodo; letteratura della dissoluzione e della perdita di identità, ma anche del rifiuto di un'identità imposta, sia essa nazionale, religiosa o di genere. Vi segnalo solo due titoli, due biografie assai diverse ma ugualmente preziose per chi vuole riflettere sui molti modi in cui le lingue incidono, o incombono, sulla definizione di identità: Eva Hoffmann, *Lost in Translation*, titolo felicissimo che infelicemente diventa *Come si dice* nell'edizione italiana, Donzelli 1996, e Marisa Fenoglio, *Vivere altrove*, Sellerio 1999. Moltissime parole all'ordine del giorno hanno a che fare con una qualche forma di riconoscimento, di traduzione, transito, trasferimento o semplice trasloco. Provo a farvene un elenco: migrazione, esilio, espatrio, migrante, esule, profugo, rifugiato, fuggiasco, partenza/arrivo, origine, destinazione... destino [sarà un caso, ma in spagnolo una sola parola basta per entrambi questi significati]. Se la destinazione è un destino, la lingua diventa testimone irrinunciabile.

Giusto allora arrabbiarsi con la lingua, come faceva quel grande e appassionato scrittore e traduttore che fu Beppe Fenoglio [cfr. *Quaderno di traduzioni*, Einaudi 2000].

Letteratura meticciasca, dicevamo, con cui il traduttore italiano si trova spesso in difficoltà perché la nostra lingua, meno ibridata di altre lingue europee – francese e inglese, ma anche il tedesco parlato da curdi e turchi, per non dire dell'americano delle cosiddette minoranze, è o appare più conservata e conservatrice, o comunque meno duttile. Non per questo, a mio avviso, è ostile

alle forzature. Se poi si ha il coraggio sia d'inventare sia di guardarsi indietro, di frugare con curiosità nel dizionario del Tommaseo, di scavare nella lingua dei nostri autori – Gadda, Saba, Morante, Calvino e Fenoglio, Ortese, Consolo, o il critico Emilio Cecchi, che usava l'aggettivo "azzardoso" con lo stesso significato con cui lo usa Jorge Luis Borges, fino al recentissimo straordinario Starnone di *Via Gemito*, ma anche ex cannibali quali Scarpa e Ammanniti – ecco che si ritrova una lingua ricchissima, parole accantonate o rimosse perfettamente legittime, una ricchezza d'inventiva che costituisce un patrimonio straordinario cui attingere o ispirarsi per riuscite forzature. Il che ovviamente presuppone che si accetti l'idea della traduzione come riscrittura. Ma può essere qualcosa di diverso, una buona traduzione letteraria? Per me tradurre è riproposizione rispettosa e coerente dell'immaginario altrui, e fedeltà al suono della lingua. Non mi pongo altri problemi di fedeltà. È una questione cruciale che possiamo riprendere nel dibattito, ma voglio fare due esempi: in *Digiunare, divorare (Fasting, Feasting)*, l'ultimo romanzo di Anita Desai, ho forzato ipotassi nella prima parte e paratassi nella seconda per accompagnare e sottolineare la diversa ambientazione, la diversa psicologia dei personaggi, il diverso ritmo narrativo. In *Carne (My Year of Meats)* di Ruth Ozeki, ho tentato di riprodurre il montaggio narrativo di un'autrice che viene dal cinema e, nel dialogo tra madre e figlia, ho provato a esprimere una tenerezza acuta ma stentatamente bilingue in un italiano che non volevo né sciocco né ridicolmente semplificato. Dovete dirmi voi se ci sono riuscita.

Ho più volte pensato alle felici coincidenze che hanno fatto di me la traduttrice – non solo ma soprattutto – di Amitav Ghosh e Antonia S. Byatt. Un paradosso, essere la traduttrice di due autori agli antipodi? Non direi, piuttosto un ossimoro, un ossimoro terribilmente fecondo.

A Ghosh, voce tra le più significative e intense di un'India che fu parte dell'universo coloniale britannico, devo l'interesse e un inimmaginabile metodo di conoscenza del subcontinente, della sua storia e delle sue connessioni con orienti più a oriente. Al rifiuto opposto da Ghosh al Commonwealth Award devo un approfondimento ulteriore della mia riflessione linguistica, culturale e politica. Spero che la traduzione e la cura del *Palazzo degli specchi*, a cui ho lavorato per più di un anno, ne porti positivamente il segno.

A Byatt, autrice di romanzi programmaticamente, direi anzi ostinatamente "europei", alla sua voce di vittoriano rigore e rutilanza elisabettiana devo una sorta di permanenza nell'universo letterario inglese, innumerevoli riletture, un esercizio costante, severo quando non severissimo, nell'arte difficile della distillazione delle parole. I suoi romanzi e racconti mi hanno fornito

inoltre un'occasione irripetibile di lavoro a quattro a mani, altro esercizio difficile che può diventare molto divertente ed è senza dubbio molto formativo.

Con loro ho sempre la sensazione di trovarmi all'interno di un cerchio che si apre e si chiude e si riapre e si richiude, con una circolarità degna delle narrazioni cui ci hanno abituati i grandi scrittori – di questo e d'altri tempi, di non importa dove. E un cerchio, si sa, non ha una fine, piuttosto successivi inizi. E conoscenze che si sommano a conoscenze. Ciò non riduce la fatica del tradurre, ma è senza dubbio un privilegio.

Vi ringrazio e chiudo con due versi del *Paradiso* di Dante:

Io in te m'intuisco  
come tu in me t'immii

riprova delle straordinarie possibilità della lingua italiana, nonché sintesi fulminante del rapporto che si viene a creare tra autore e traduttore.

## *The Impact of Postcolonial Hybridisation on the Britishness of British Literature*

Itala Vivan

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care—Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburb that did it. Anyway, why search the inner room when it's enough to say that I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action or sexual interest I could find, because things were so gloomy, so slow and heavy, in our family, I don't know why. Quite frankly, it was all getting me down and I was ready for anything. (Kureishi 1990: 3)

In this opening of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi confronts the reader with a bold statement that sums up a long history of immigration and hybridization. The character who utters the statement, Karim Amir, enters the fictional stage by defining himself in terms that appear both introspective and challenging at the same time, while being also ironic and humorous.

I would like to stop the projector here, and leave the film still and my character's black silhouette on the screen. I intend to allow him to continue his challenge and pursue his search. His attitude seems to define the position of the black British writer but goes beyond that, by appropriating the space to install a new scenography of its own, and put up an altogether new show on the great London stage.

Karim Amir is a product of the nineties and expresses the proud, and at the same time problematic, reality of black Britain at the end of the millennium. If we go back in time, to the London of the fifties, when the first big

waves of immigration hit the centre of an empire already on the verge of dissolution, we find a quite different type of black newcomer, like the character in G.V. Desani's *All About H.Hatterr*:

All my life I wanted to come: come to the Western shores, to my old man's continent, to the Poet-Bard's adored Eldorado, to England, the God's own country, the seat of Mars, the damme paradise, to Rev. The Head's mother and motherland, to the Englishman's Home, his Castle, his garden, fact's, the feller's true alma mammy and apple-orchard.

And, now, I have arrived![...]

And, if I am in your way, in your Street, in this earth of majesty, this other Eden, this demi-paradise, this precious stone set in the silver sea, this blessed plot, this earth, this England, among this happy breed of men, and wouldn't avault, trudge, be gone: and if, by the Bard of Avon, sir, I desire you to do me right and justice, for I am a most poor man and a stranger, having here no judge indifferent, nor no more assurance of equal friendship and proceeding: it is not because I wish to be in your way, not because this folio has any piety, poise, or worth: not because I seek a clown's abandon, nor, I swear, the rewards of a mountebank, truly: not because I crave the gain of an unmerited prize, or wealth, or riches, or honour, or more, or less: but, because by the Lord God of hosts, the Holy, who made you of the happy breed and me of the stricken, He alone knowing the aught of making mortal things, I am lonely! (Procter 2000: 51-52) (*Richard II*, John of Gaunt)

That early migrant, speaking in 1948 following the momentous arrival on British soil of the s/s "Windrush" carrying the first boatload of West Indian immigrants accepted under the Nationality Act, experienced the strangeness of his position but was already fighting against the migrant's sense of loneliness with the weapons of inversion and hybridization. Desani's creolized language and parodic imagery appropriate the foremost icon of the English tradition—Shakespeare—and Shakespeare's famous hymn to England—a literary and cultural topos *par excellence*—in order to construct a new event: the migrant's own arrival. He, the black newcomer, has entered the stage which becomes a space where a new play can be enacted, a play speaking about immigration, and a new conquest launched, the conquest of England. He writes, and he becomes his own subject of discourse. While writing himself, he writes about England transforming England into Britain. This move initiates the process Rushdie referred to when he said that "the empire writes back". In those years, in the highly politicised postwar period, England was practising the so-called open door policy on the inhabitants of her colonies: far from rejecting immigration, she welcomed it.

Yet immigration already meant geographical and cultural loss and dis-

placement. England, and London, at its heart, had stood at the core of the immigrant's dream, who attributed it with all the qualities that the ambiguity of colonialism had projected on the image of "home", only to find that once on English soil, England was no Eden and London no paradise. The bitter process of adjusting to the impoverished and conflictual reality of postwar England was certainly hard and unsettling, as the fiction of so many black writers of that era, mostly West Indians and male, like Sam Selvon and George Lamming, indicates.

Literature and visual arts—first poetry and fiction, then films and videos, photography and painting—became the migrant's territory where the English language is appropriated and transformed into something rich and strange, a new medium, a new style. By so doing, the migrant writers took hold of the power of representation hitherto held by imperial authority. In Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the everchanging, tormented hero, Saladdin Chamcha, is arrested and beaten up by the police, and ends up in a hospital where he meets a crowd of monsters who are actually immigrants transformed into monsters by the imperial gaze, as one of them, the Manticore (a strange and mixed creature, half human and half tiger) explains:

'There's a woman over that way [...] who is now mostly water-buffalo. There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes. [...] Every night I feel a piece of myself beginning to change' [...]. 'But how do they do it?' 'They describe us', the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.' (Rushdie 1988: 167-8)

In Rushdie's figuration, the immigrants are classified as hybrids and therefore monsters and confined to that role by those who hold the power of representation and use it to enact the process of otherization.

The "power of description" is what the black writer snatches from "them" in order to construct the picture of himself and reveal not a monstrosity but another human being in a world of difference, a new variety of British citizen. Far from allowing himself to be described as an inferior being and treated as such, this new writer asserts his/her own values and thrusts them on British society till they are accepted as an integral part of it, as relevant and unavoidable as any other brand of Britishness.

If one compares Desani's Hatterr to Kureishi's Karim Amir one sees that the latter results from a complex process that has forced British society to accept

the presence of the black British citizen. This process however was already latent in the early period of immigration and manifested itself in the writer's double voice, an ironic counterdiscourse insinuating doubt through binary oppositions and introducing confusion in the manichean system of either/or, black/white, man/woman, first world/third world, civilization/savagery.

The implicitly subversive function of hybridity, crossing such binarisms, challenges the 'purity' of 'tradition' and therefore creates a 'poetic of re-inscription', to use Homi Bhabha's definition, and opens the way to the conscious articulation of a new history. Salman Rushdie remarks that

Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forbears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. [...] We are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form [...]; and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own—selected half consciously, half not—include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong. (Rushdie 1991: 20-21)

The writer who can choose his/her parents can also choose his/her language and change and manipulate it according to his/her need and pleasure. By crossing the water, s/he has been transported into a new culture, while his/her own native culture travelled with him/her. Again Salman Rushdie concludes that "having been borne across the world, we [postcolonial writers] are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained." (Rushdie 1991: 17) By so saying, Rushdie suggests that not only does nothing get lost in the process of immigration, but—and this is more important—something new will surely take place: the double nature of the postcolonial writer who is both an insider and an outsider, his new angle created by distance and long geographical perspective, loaded with political meaning.

In the late sixties the specific category 'black' came into being, "coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain" and providing the organizing frame of "a new politics of resistance" (Hall 1988, in Baker et alii: 163).

In the meanwhile, the waves of immigration had developed into several different streams coming from many areas and cultures; Indians, Pakistani and West Indians had been joined by many Africans, especially Nigerians. It was in 1960—the same year George Lamming published *The Pleasures of Exile*—that Buchi Emecheta emigrated to London, to increase the ranks of the ‘been-tos’, as those who had been to England were dubbed in Nigeria. Instead she went to London to stay, and became a writer whose fiction often portrayed aspects of black Britain with bitter sarcasm.

In 1968, the year marking the beginning of a new era in social history, the racist leader Enoch Powell made his notorious speech “Rivers of Blood” in which he threatened the country with the phantasm of conflict and revolt. The 1971 Immigration Act blocked all primary black immigration to Britain, and in the following decade a growing deterioration of police/black relationships caused a long string of incidents which continued well into the eighties. The year 1979 marked the victory of the Tories at the political elections under Margaret Thatcher’s leadership. The eighties became a real battlefield for blacks, but also marked new developments in their strategies and self awareness, by widening and deepening the debate on race, ethnicity, and also aesthetics, and connecting the discourse of black cultural studies to that of post-colonialism.

‘Black’, as Stuart Hall observes, is an internally discrepant category, not only because it is crossed by categories such as African and Asian, but also because it includes a number of different ethnicities. Yet in spite of its problematic nature the term continued to be used throughout the nineties. Today it needs revising, even if it is still useful because of the political struggle it rallies as a site of racial contestation. Paul Gilroy has suggested a reconfiguration of the category which he praises for its “multi-acculturality” (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 1993: 112).

By now, speaking in the year 2001, black Britain has acquired an unquestionable visibility and asserted its artistic vitality. In the words of Houston Baker, “There is a feeling of having arrived at a site of intellectual excavation. Working from within this site called Britain, the scholars [...] convert the very sign ‘Britain’ into a metonym for international theoretical territories of debate concerning such matters as hegemony and subjectivity, essentialism and representation, diaspora and home.” (Baker 1996:15)

The eighties saw the rise of black theatre and cinema, and the explosion of (postcolonial, or, perhaps, black British) fiction acknowledged not least by important literary awards. In 1981 Hanif Kureishi wrote the plays *Outskirts*

and *Borderline* for the Royal Court Theatre, and in 1985 Stephen Frears directed *My Beautiful Laundrette*, based on Kureishi's script which later obtained an Oscar nomination. The film became immensely popular, and was hailed as an important manifesto of black British culture. The same decade also saw the rise of Salman Rushdie's fame, from *Midnight's Children* to *The Satanic Verses*, the former saluted by the Booker Prize and the latter stigmatized by the ayatollah's *fatwa*. The classic black British writers of the earlier generation, such as Wilson Harris or V.S. Naipaul, were joined by a number of new writers of recent immigration—David Dabydeen, Ben Okri—and by the offspring of black Britain, young people born and bred in Britain, like Caryl Phillips, Zadie Smith, Kureishi himself, and others who, "writing from inside the 'racial' dialectic, each give voice to what being 'British' has come to mean, and from an angle no longer of immigrant periphery but of post-immigrant frontline and beyond". (Lee 1995: 74)

The nineties brought about a dramatic penetration of the discourse of black cultural studies and postcolonialism in Great Britain, where both Ireland and Scotland proclaimed their status of postcolonial entities and redirected their aims towards a new cultural but also political positioning. The result of all this was, among other things, the granting of devolution to Scotland and Wales by the new Labour government under the leadership of Tony Blair. These events were clear signs of a certain degree of fragmentation in the once seemingly compact front of the master culture, the Englishness of 'tradition', and a symptom of the relevance of ethnicities within the national landscape. The appropriation of the former centre of the empire has entered a new phase and has developed a new concept of centrality, a multiple centrality, to use Stuart Hall's definition, offering a better reflection of reality than the concept of edge culture.

It does not seem possible to attempt to draw even a sketchy history of black British culture and literature in this short paper. Maybe, though, such a history cannot yet be written, for it is a process *in fieri*, a movement towards rather than a definite phenomenon, insofar as it identifies itself with the question of black British identity. Stuart Hall puts the matter well:

Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted with, and not outside, representation. (Stuart Hall quoted by Hebdige, Baker 1996:120)

It might therefore be more interesting to go back to Karim Amir's silhouette waiting as a still frame on our imaginary screen and interrogate it about the artistic and aesthetic assumptions of the discourse of the black British writer in order to follow and analyze Kureishi's itinerary from *The Buddha of Suburbia* to *The Black Album*.

In an autobiographical text significantly entitled "The Rainbow Sign", of 1986, Hanif Kureishi observes that

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time. Much thought, discussion and self-examination must go into seeing the necessity for this, what this 'new way of being British' involves and how difficult it might be to attain. The failure to grasp this opportunity for a revitalized and broader self-definition in the face of a failure to be human, will be more insularity, schism, bitterness and catastrophe. (Kureishi 1996:101-2)

Kureishi's hero, both in *Buddha* and *Black Album*, starts from a disquieting awareness of his own inadequacy and confusion, his need for a deeper search. Both novels are organized as bildungsroman and appear carnivalesque in structure, presenting a main character who seems to be acting many different roles, shifting from one to the other, as if he were acrobatically exploring the many facets of the British context in terms of race, politics and sex. Kureishi's hero resembles to some degree the adventurous nature and burlesque manner of Tom Jones, but does not cross fixed social classes, nor runs the risk of getting lost, because he has nowhere to go. The picaresque quality of this character derives from a postcolonial necessity and throws light on the magmatic conditions of an entire society. The architecture of adventure is nothing less than spectacular for Karim Amir in *Buddha*, while in *Black Album* the hero Shahid is a meditative and ironic philosopher rather than an actor playing acrobatic roles. But even for Shahid there are dramatic shifts in position and allegiance that lead him to take sides with fanatic Islamic fundamentalists, white British leftwing survivors from the sixties, members of his Pakistani family, both alive and dead (father, brother, sister-in-law), young drug dealers heading for catastrophe, and a whole kaleidoscope of minor figures. Both heroes weave a complex plot of speeches and acts against a background of multicultural London, a sort of playground, day and night on end (Karim also makes a trip to glitzy New York, together with his stepbrother Charlie).

Karim and Shahid lead similar quests and speak autobiographically, as

it were, to evoke the mixed world of an immigrant Pakistani family and the dilemma facing the male son in such family, haunted by an everpresent paternal image. From their fathers' past comes the picture of that very England that had confronted the Indian immigrant back in the fifties, as is described in *Buddha*:

London, the Old Kent Road, was a freezing shock to both of them [Dad and his friend Anwar]. It was wet and foggy; people called you 'Sunny Jim'; there was never enough to eat, and Dad never took to dripping on toast. 'Nose dripping more like', he'd say, pushing away the staple diet of the working class. 'I thought it would be roast beef and Yorkshire pudding all the way'. But rationing was still on, and the area was derelict after being bombed to rubble during the war. Dad was amazed and heartened at the sight of the British in England, though. He'd never seen the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen. He'd never seen an Englishman stuffing bread into his mouth with his fingers, and no one had told him the English didn't wash regularly because the water was so cold—if they had water at all. And when Dad tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman. (Kureishi 1990: 24-25)

The quest of the hero for a new balance and a new meaning knows no rest in either novel. In *Buddha*, Karim is more fervently autobiographical and restless in his search, revealing more of the brutality of experiences that immigration implies and the compressed rage it creates. But it is in *Black Album* that the crazy scramble quietens down, flows into an introspective search and crosses a most fragmented world, with white Britons marginalized in their political nostalgia, their ineffectual seductiveness (Brownslow and especially Deedee Osgood) and black friends deeply involved in fundamentalist actions which split the Asian community dramatically. The novel is set at the time of the *fatwa* against Rusdie's *Satanic Verses* and the burning of the book in the London streets and the precincts of the college where Shahid is registered as a student. The event is central to the story, and contributes to unravelling the intellectual impasse blocking Shahid's psyche. In the end, he acknowledges his position as that of a seeker, a man committed to a quest for an impossible identity, but without hysteria or fanaticism:

He had to find some sense in his recent experiences; he wanted to know and to understand. How could anyone confine themselves to one system or creed? Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self; surely

our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity. (Kureishi 1995: 274)

Shahid's final conclusion echoes Stuart Hall's reflections on identity and ethnicity by enacting them and turning them into a performance, making a narration out of them. The hybridity and mutability of the young man do not affect his balance, for he accepts them as part of his cultural being. But in *The Black Album* there is another character—originally called Trevor Buss but who changed his name into Muhammad Shahabuddin Ali-Sha, shortened to Chad—who cannot manage to adjust. His unhappiness touches upon the main themes of an immigrant's maladjustment, and is even compared to the localized stability expressed in George Orwell's canonic essay *England, Your England* dated 1941.

“He'd see English country cottages and ordinary English people who were secure, who effortlessly belonged”, comments Deedee. “You know, the whole Orwellian idea of England. [...] ...the sense of exclusion drove him mad. He wanted to bomb them. [...] When he got to be a teenager he saw he had no roots, no connections with Pakistan, couldn't even speak the language. So he went to Urdu classes. But when he tried asking for the salt in Southall everyone fell about at his accent. In England white people looked at him as if he were going to steal their car or their handbag [...]” Deedee continued: “Trevor Buss's soul got lost in translation, as it were.” [...] “He said to me once, ‘I am homeless’. I said, ‘You've got nowhere to live?’ ‘No’, he replied. ‘I have no country.’ I told him, ‘You're not missing much.’ ‘But I don't know what it is to feel like a normal citizen.’” (Kureishi 1995: 107-108)

Chad represents the other side of the postcolonial coin, the type who did not make it and will perish in the process, destroyed by the conditioning of immigration. He seems light years away from the Caribbean explosive hybridity Jo Jo, a white reggae fan, expresses in an interview given in the eighties in Birmingham's Balsall Heath, one of the oldest areas of black settlement in Britain:

There's no such thing as 'England' any more... welcome to India brothers! This is the Caribbean!...Nigeria!...There is no England, man. This is what is coming. Balsall Heath is the centre of the melting pot, 'cos all I ever see when I go out is half-Arab, half-Pakistani, half-Jamaican, half-Scottish, half-Irish, I know 'cos I am half-Scottish/half-Irish....who am I? Tell me who do I belong to? They criticize me, the good old England. Allright,

where do I belong? You know I was brought up with blacks, Pakistanis, Africans, Asians, everything, you name it...who do I belong to? ... I'm just a broad person. The earth is mine. ...You know we was not born in Jamaica... we was not born in 'England'. We were born here, man. It's our right. That's the way I see it. That's the way I deal with it. (S. Jones, *White Youth and Jamaican Popular Culture*, 1987, quoted in Baker 1996:142)

Salman Rushdie applies the same principle to the Indian writer, necessarily hybrid, and indicates the special extra value he brought to British culture:

Indian writers in these islands, like others who have migrated into the north from the south, are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of a 'whole sight'. (Rushdie1991: 19)

It seems as if only by playing the hybrid role on the stage of modernity can the immigrant survive and find his salvation. Kureishi's heroes, Karim and Shahid, pursue their quest while playing a thousand roles, rushing from one place to another, in and out of bars and pubs, night clubs, restaurants, discos, tube stations and buses, college classrooms—all kinds of places, all sorts of houses, venues and situations. They are not 'normal citizens', but this is why they survive and find a way out of chaos toward life, although they never find the self they are searching for, for such a thing does not exist, or, rather, it can be identified with the movement, the process leading towards the future.

Shahid is on the first foot of the ladder as a writer (like the young Kureishi) and is forever discussing fiction, art, and aesthetics. He is a great music fan, and is hooked on the pop singer Prince whose records he collects. *The Black Album* is in fact the title of a legendary cult record by Prince, which he possesses. His library, a hybrid selection, includes Joad, Laski and Popper, Freud, Maupassant, Henry Miller and the Russians, among others:

He looked ardently at the books piled on his desk. Open one and out would soar, as if trapped within, once-upon-a-times, open-sesames, marriages like those of Swann and Odette or Levin and Kitty, even Sheherazade and King Shahriya. The most fantastic characters, Raskolnikov, Joseph K., Boule de Suif, Ali Baba, made of ink but living always, were entrapped in the profoundest dilemmas of living. (Kureishi 1995: 20)

If his literary tastes are omnivorous, so are his eating habits. In the multi-cultural world of London he eats all sorts of food and goes to all sorts of restaurants. The same thing happens with languages. The novel is woven out

of thousands of voices and idioms, a cacophony of sounds babbling inside and outside Shahid's room and life.

His aim of becoming a writer makes him try all kinds of experiences, but also induces him to play a trick on the fundamentalist leader Riaz, who has entrusted him with typing a manuscript text on the computer. Shahid cannot resist the temptation and while copying the manuscript he gradually transforms it in something entirely different, a long hybrid poem that scandalizes the whole group of fanatics. The episode, which kindles the wrath of his former friends, is one more example of necessary hybridity in the novel, signifying that art can only be hybrid in the black British world, the world of modernity and change, of translation and transmutation. The rigidity of fanaticism, the excesses of hysteria, do not allow artistic discourse to bud and blossom. Like Rushdie, Kureishi believes in the seriousness of art and craft, but asserts the necessity for an artist to choose his or her own style in total freedom. The debate around the burning of *The Satanic Verses* is a strong defence in favour of Rushdie's right to write as he chooses: yet it is well known that the events in 1989 created a rift among Asians in Britain, and set them one against another.

Salman Rushdie's writing is somehow grafted in *The Black Album*, almost intertextually, by adopting characters and situations from *The Satanic Verses*, quoting statements from that book, developing a debate around translation/immigration/hybridisation, and openly questioning the right of a group of extremists to burn a book. If a book—a work of art and craftsmanship—requires a stage, it is not up to the audience, or part of it, to silence the writer's voice and kidnap it from such stage. *The Black Album* metaphorically restores the burnt book to its readers and manages to give it new life by resurrecting it in its own pages.

Hanif Kureishi's voice continues to give life to characters who pursue a serious quest for individual and different solutions within the cultural grid of black Britain. As Karim Amir concludes at the end of *Buddha*, confessing to his unique way of being British and a Londoner, but speaking from a centre:

And so I sat in the centre of the old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way. (Kureishi 1990: 284)

Black Britain—or, rather, Britain *tout court*—comes up with one more fictional avatar in the work of the glamorous new hybrid writer Zadie Smith,

who in the year 2000 surprised the literary scene with her huge novel *White Teeth*, written when she was only twenty-one.

*White Teeth* contains a complex and dazzling plot built around the story of two families, their children and friends and tunes in to a Babel of voices, registering the changes wrought in the language and landscape by the unfolding epic of post-war migrations. The backdrop is northwest London, the English metropolis, where the two families—one, the Joneses, white and Jamaican, the other, the Iqbals, Bangladeshi—act out their existential drama and keep on debating the question of their Britishness:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best—less trouble). Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight's walk), despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist.

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*. (Smith: 326-327)

The debate on identity is located in space but also in time, and appear transversally in history, echoing the developments in the concept of Englishness which took place in the twentieth century. Smith's fiction takes the reader back to 1945, to the end of world war two, when a couple of comrades and friends, Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal, are plotting the execution of the Nazi Dr Sick in a French village. Archie thinks the man should be shot, but at the same time shrinks from doing it himself:

[Archie:] 'It's England's future we've been fighting for. For England. You know [...], democracy and Sunday dinners, and...and... promenades and piers, and bangers and mash—and the things that are *ours*. Not *yours*.' [...]  
[Samad:] 'You don't stand for anything, Jones.[...] Not for a faith, not for a politics. Not even for your country. How your lot ever conquered my lot id a bloody mystery. [...] What are you going to tell your children when they ask who you are, what you are? Will you know? Will you ever know? [...] I am a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer. I will survive the last days,' Samad repeated, as if it were a chant. (Smith: 120-121)

Here again George Orwell's essay *England Your England* (a seminal text for the black Briton of today no less than for the native Englishman of the past) constitutes the intertextual factor in the conversation between the two men, when the Indian Samad accuses the Briton of being a coward, unable to 'defend' his country in a situation of war, an emergency where, as Churchill said, "without victory, there is no survival. [...] no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for"(Churchill 1941:208). It turns out that the immigrant Samad has a stronger sense of identity than the native Englishman Archie and exhibits it. Problems start much later for him, when he feels that neither of his twin sons, who grew up one in Bangladesh (Magid) and the other in England (Millat), are doing well in life. At that point Samad will curse the long years of his life spent in London, the hidden blackmail imposed by England on her immigrants, and the irretrievable loss of his old identity:

There are no words. The one I sent home [Magid] comes out a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here [Millat] is fully paid-up green bow-tie wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes wonder why I bother,' said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the country, 'I really do. These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers—who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil's pact... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere. [...] And then you begin to give up the very idea of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that every-

thing is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?’

As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Irie was ashamed to find that the land of accidents sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom

‘Do you understand, child? I know you understand.’

And what he really meant was: do we speak the same language? Are we from the same place? Are we the same? (Smith: 407-408)

Irie Jones, the young daughter of Archibald and his wife Clara of Caribbean descent, is a representative of the new generation and feels perfectly at ease with her hybridity. A new kind of ethnicity has developed in Britain, transforming it into black Britain and placing it in the interstice, in the in-between. She and her contemporaries are happy to be what they are, “a hybrid thing”:

It was a new breed, just recently joining the ranks of the other street crews: Becks, B-boys, Indie kids, wide-boys, ravers, rude-boys, Acidheads, Sjarons, Tracies, Kevs, Nation Brothers, Raggas and Pakis; manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last three categories. Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geezer* who would fight in their corner if necessary; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power [...]. Ten years earlier, while the happy acid heads danced through the Summer of Love, Millat’s Crew were slouching towards Bradford. (Smith: 231)

It seems that Zadie Smith herself shares the feelings and states of mind of this new generation, a representation of which she offers us in the novel. There is so much ease and boldness in the plot, speed in rhythm and language, skill in handling large numbers of widely different characters, settings and cultural approaches that the reader is dazzled and drawn in by this surging narrative of dislocation, hybridization, displacement. The various elements—language, style, characterization, setting—are living proof of the enormous changes undergone in Britain. Time sequences are organized through chronoschisms splitting the fiction in four parts, where each section takes a step ahead in contemporaneity and a step backward into the past, so as to cover a century and a half of history, going back to the Great Mutiny of 1857 in India and ending in the new millennium. This strategy is similar

to the one adopted by Don DeLillo in *Underworld*, also a book where immigration and its consequences and cultural issues play a fundamental role.

Yet one could not say that there are visible ‘influences’ in *White Teeth*, but only presences. Another important presence is Salman Rushdie, whose intrusive voice echoes here, together with dynamic impetus and fluidity in narrating the tale. Smith’s novel is a warm homage to the master of black British literature, but she also pays tribute to such immigrant writers as Sam Selvon, Hanif Kureishi and Caryl Phillips, including and embracing them all in the irreverent polyphony of her postcolonial London.

Many critics have however pointed out that there is one influence that plays an overriding part in this novel, and it is that of Charles Dickens. His are the crowds of characters and caricaturesque approach to them, and his, of course, is the endless love and curiosity for London, the metropolis and its suburbs which in Zadie Smith’s era have become multiethnic and multicultural. Zadie Smith agrees implicitly with Rusdie’s statement quoted above, and claims as her literary ancestors all the writers she likes, “a polyglot family tree” forming her cosmopolitan circle of friends.

The novel’s title alludes to an unpleasant episode when old Mr Hamilton says to the children who come to his home to help him in his old age, out of kindness and as an act of charity:

when I was in the Congo, the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid business. Dark as buggery, it was. And they died because of it, you see? Poor bastards. [...] Those are the split decisions you make in a war. See a flash of white and bang! as it were... Dark as buggery. Terrible times. All those beautiful boys lying there [...] enlisted by the Krauts, black as the ace of spades; poor fools didn’t even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who they were shooting at. (Smith: 171-172)

Mr Hamilton’s gruesome tale of war and cruelty links Britain’s present to its imperial past, but for the way it is structured it leads us rather into a film of war and adventure, Kiplinguesque with a touch of Bollywood. All this however is couched in irony and made funny by the amusing combinations in language and style as well as the choice of characters.

Some situations and characters recall Hanif Kureishi’s *Black Album*, especially when the Muslim fundamentalists are portrayed and when we enter the home of a certain type of intellectual and somewhat marginal white family, the Chalfens, who ‘adopt’ first Magid and then Irie. These endearing characters are all of one same brand of people and reveal the sarcastic gaze of an

observer who does not consider herself an outsider, who in fact is not such.

The book is a splendid exercise in identity-making and betrays a thorough familiarity with the ideas expounded by Stuart Hall, the thoughts of Homi Bhabha on dislocation and hybridity and the analysis of orientalism by Edward Said. It shows how close a connection there is between cultural studies on one side and creative writing literature on the other in contemporary Britain, where the cultural studies movement first began, in fact, and where it has by now pervaded so many areas of cultural expression. But it also proves that the power of representation may be very strong when captured by the hand of a clever, funny, irreverent young writer for whom hybridity is a beauty to be exhibited and not a sin to be concealed, a plaything to be enjoyed and not a burden to be expiated.

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**STRATEGIE TESTUALI**  
***TEXTUAL STRATEGIES***



## *Code-Switching and Other Textual Strategies in the Fiction of Witi Ihimaera*

Eleonora Chiavetta

Witi Ihimaera is considered the doyen of Maori writers as he was the first to publish both a collection of short stories and a novel, and the first to receive the attention of New Zealand and international critics. He has been defined “one of the most forceful writers to have emerged in the cultural movement termed the Maori Renaissance”, (Williams 1990: 111) where Maori Renaissance refers to the cultural decolonization realized by Maori artists in New Zealand. Between 1972 and 1977 he published four works: the collection of short stories, *Pounamu, Pounamu* (1972), the short novels *Tangi* (1973) and *Whanau* (1974), and another collection of short stories, *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977). This period of great creativity was followed by a ten-year silence from which the author emerged with the publication of the novel *The Matriarch* (1986).

Like Patricia Grace, Ihimaera started publishing under the auspices of *Te Ao Hou*, a quarterly produced by the Department of Maori Affairs, which had promoted Maori creative writing in English since the fifties. The policy of the magazine was to sponsor the creativity of Maori writers, but according to an ideology of integration “which saw Maori people inevitably adapting to Pakeha<sup>1</sup> life styles”, in the interests of “intercultural adjustment” (Heim 1998: 12). The works produced by these emerging writers were expected to show lyrical and passionate tones rather than anger or protest against society. They were expected to conform to an ideology of cultural integration, which denied

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<sup>1</sup> Pakeha means ‘Foreigner, White New Zealander’ and is “the name that was given by the Maori to the white-skinned immigrants who came from the United Kingdom and settled New Zealand.” in Cleve Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro, Key concepts in Maori culture*, Auckland, Oxford UP, 2001, p.87.

the possibility of contrasts between the Maori and Pakeha. The publication of Ihimaera's and Patricia Grace's first collections of short stories in 1972 and 1973 respectively confirmed such expectations: "authenticity of feeling, a predominance of aroha and an absence of violence and anger" (12) are the main features of their works which, therefore, reassured New Zealand readers of European descent. The contrasts presented in their short stories were quite acceptable as they mainly regarded the opposition between the Maori's simple, genuine life and the Pakeha's alienated society.

Ihimaera's second collection, however, was already far removed from such a reassuring vision, as the alienation of the Maori living in the city of Wellington is portrayed quite clearly. When the writer realized his short stories might have created a dangerous cultural stereotype, he decided to withdraw from the literary scene for a while. The ten years of creative silence were a consequence of the author's wish to break a literary model which was imposed by external alien factors, to oppose the diffusion of the stereotyped image of 'the good Maori' and, finally, to create an authentic Maori literature which did not have to conform to Pakeha expectations.

The ten years that separate *The Matriarch* from Ihimaera's previous creative works represent a watershed in his fiction. During his long apparent silence, the writer promoted Maori literature, publishing the anthology *Into the World of Light* (1982) and developed different objectives for his own fiction which would in turn involve a different use of language. Whereas the political message of his initial works was implicit and his main aim was to "establish and describe the emotional landscape of the Maori people" (Robinson & Wattie 1998: 255), *The Matriarch* shows a greater interest in the political and social context of New Zealand and a shift from a horizontal to a vertical vision of Maori culture: from the idyllic world depicted in the first works and the exaltation of its lost values to a clear political message addressed to New Zealand society as a whole. It should be underlined that *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme was published the year before *The Matriarch*, while Patricia Grace's *Potiki* was published in the same year as Ihimaera's novel. All these three novels challenge the Maori/Pakeha relationship and claim an equal status for Maori literature.

The ten short stories of *Pounamu*, *Pounamu* together with the novels *Tangi* and *Whanau* form a trilogy and belong to a stage in Ihimaera's production which the author himself defines 'pastoral'. They are short stories focusing on apparently trivial events in the childhood and adolescence of the narrator. The tone is minimalist, the setting is Waituhi, the country village which

appears in all of Ihimaera's writings: it is the only place the narrator belongs and to which the name of 'home' can be given; Waituhi embodies the fundamental and imperishable values of Maoritanga such as the *whanau* (the village family), the bond of genealogy and traditions, the relationship between individuals and nature, respect towards elderly people, the ethics of work, friendship, the role of the first born son, whose duty it is to safeguard and perpetuate Maori culture.

Although recounted by a first-person narrator, the stories describe a community rather than an individual and celebrate a collective identity, exalting Maori social structure, based on *whanau*, *hapu*, *iwi*, *waka* in an educative, moralizing way. There are only a few references to the false values of Pakeha culture—above all to the mirage of easy money—which contrasts with the simplicity of family life in the same way as the 'Emerald City', that is Wellington, contrasts with the country village. The metaphor of the emerald, which derives from *The Wizard of Oz* by Frank Baum, contrasts with the image of the traditional *pounamu*, the green jade, symbol of the values of Maoritanga (Fitzgerald 1995: 255). The city is a mythical place where everybody can find work in a factory and may abandon the gipsy life that shearing demands.

This collection does not focus on Pakeha/Maori relationships, on discriminations and prejudices; neither does it focus on the history of Maori people, on their arrival in New Zealand or on their fights against the whites. At this stage in his fiction Ihimaera concentrates on "slices of life" (Jussawalla & Dasenbrock 1992: 228) that depict the Maori as separated from the Pakeha, living in a world of their own, as if they still lived in a *pa*, that is a fortified place, where whites enter only if given permission to. The primary aim of these stories is not to highlight traditional Maori culture for the sake of a white public, but to remind Maori of their own image, to let them recognize themselves, as if in a mirror, and 'reflect' on themselves. It is a means of arousing or increasing Maori awareness of their way of living in the sixties, of an everyday life that already belongs to the past, even if Ihimaera introduces it as still alive and thriving. The celebration of life within the rural settlements in New Zealand, however, changes further on in the collection into an elegy, a lament—as only few old people and the obstinate still remain in the village.

The stories are written in English, in an everyday colloquial language, which is both descriptive and narrative, and is often a direct transcription of the characters' dialogues. In this case, the author reproduces an unrefined, structurally simple language, with short sentences, a repetitive lexis, where

slang expressions (i.e. “Just wait your hurry”, Ihimaera 1995: 119) are used together with grammatically incorrect sentences. For instance there may be a lack of inversion of subject and verb in interrogative sentences as well as the omission of the auxiliary verb in interrogative clauses (i.e. “Dad, when we going? I ask”, 75) and in compound tenses (i.e. “Me and Hine, we been working all our lives, 76).

The choice of English as predominant language is a consequence of Ihimaera’s belief that English is not a sacred language like Maori. Talking about his relationship with the English language, Ihimaera says that writing in English gives him a freedom he enjoys and abuses at the same time: “I abuse in the sense that sometimes I am extremely arrogant about my contempt for English as a language. It lacks that talismanic quality that indigenous languages have. It’s o.k. for me to write in it because it is common.” (Ellis 1999: 175) Ihimaera also affirms that

There are certain constrictions when you use your own language and there are certain things you cannot do with the language, which is why we always say that Maori language is tapu, or sacred. And why I always therefore say that English is profane. With English you can go anywhere with it, you can do anything you like with it, you know it is common, an ordinary language. And so what I do is write in a very ordinary language, and I can do whatever I like with it, I can go wherever it takes me [...] I can’t do that in Maori. (174)

In a 1992 interview he also adds that “Maori writing in English is able to portray the condition of being a contemporary Maori person in an English environment, but when you write in Maori, you are not writing about the same thing; you are accessing a deeper, more spiritual resource.” (Sharrad 1992: 98)

Even if the predominant code is English, Ihimaera makes use of code-switching, that is the combination of language items belonging to the two different linguistic codes. In postcolonial literary texts the use of code-switching takes on a symbolic function, as it marks cultural boundaries underlined by the writer which can or cannot be crossed by the readers. According to E. Gordon and M. Williams, this kind of code-switching

has particular relevance to post-colonial writing, especially that by indigenous writers, because it is deeply implicated in the ways in which communities of speakers within bi- or multilingual societies negotiate the relations of privilege and exclusion, challenge and subvert entrenched attitudes of dominance and contest ascriptions of value. [...] In indigenous writing, code-switching often constitutes a means of contesting the cultural and lin-

guistic dominance encoded in language, even where the indigenous writer chooses a language associated with dominance as the primary medium of expression. (Gordon, Williams 1998: 79)

In this collection, as in all his other works, Ihimaera inserts Maori words not to create an exotic atmosphere or to provide local colour, but to express a cultural diversity, the bilingualism he wants to be recognized by New Zealand society. The lack of a glossary of Maori terms at the end of his works depends on the author's belief that, as he prevalently addresses New Zealand readers, they have to learn these terms to avoid monoculturalism: "[...] if you really do want to become bicultural, then you have to begin to do some research of your own and find out these things for yourself. The will to do that is really a personal choice." (Jussawalla & Dasenbrock 1992: 238) Moreover, a glossary would be reductive, because of the polysemantic nature of terms: when translating a word, essential cultural elements, not nuances are lost. To translate the word 'aroha' with love would be reductive, as 'aroha' means love, pity, compassion, yearning for an absent relative or friend, and affectionate care: "Aroha is a sacred power that emanates from the gods. [...] Aroha in a person is an all-encompassing quality of goodness, expressed by love for people, the land, birds and animals, fish, and all living things." (Barlow 2001: 8) Finally, the sacred character of the language has to be preserved even if this means excluding foreign readers, preventing them from crossing the threshold into the world represented.

In *Pounamu Pounamu* Maori terms are inserted into the English text without italics and they are often repeated. The educational function of the mother tongue is obvious: Ihimaera's aim is to teach or refresh the knowledge of the deep meaning of Maori words. He addresses his own group which does not need to have common everyday sentences translated, but needs to 'repossess' the value of terms such as *iwi* or *whanau*, deeply rooted in pre-European Maori culture. Ihimaera fears that young people may forget the basic elements of their culture, therefore losing their own identity. Words transmit a cultural meaning that has to be remembered and assimilated again to preserve an integrity which has been damaged, but not destroyed by Pakeha culture.

For example, in the passage where the grandfather explains to his *mokopuna* [grandchild and descendant] the symbols represented in the building of the meeting house, he is not listing architectural features, but reminding the girl of the close link between physical and spiritual components in the house and between past and present:

Hera, this is not only a meeting house; it is also the body of a tipuna, an ancestor. The head is at the top of the meeting house, above the entrance. That is called the koruru. His arms are the maihi, the boards sloping down from the koruru to form the roof. See the tahuhu, ridgepole? That long beam running from the front to the back along the roof? That is the backbone. The rafters, the heke, they are the ribs. And where we are standing, this is the heart of the house. Can you hear it beating?" (Ihimaera 1995: 126)

Keywords in this collection are words such as *whanau*, *Manawa* [the heart of the whanau], *whakapapa* [genealogy sheets, family trees], *pounamu* [greenstone, jade]— the word which gives the title to the collection—*aroha*, *marae* [enclosed space in front of a house, courtyard, village common], *pakeha*, and *mokopuna*. Sometimes Ihimaera resorts to an organic code-switching where the translation of the word either precedes or follows the Maori term, and, once translated the first time, the word is repeated without further explanations, thus implying an effort of memory on the part of the reader. If addressed to a Maori public, the effect of the limited vocabulary range is to stress and reinforce the keywords; if addressed to a Pakeha reader, the repetition of words certainly helps the reader to memorize them. If the term is vital for the understanding of the story, Ihimaera explains its meaning, as in ‘The Makutu on Mrs Jones’, where, soon after the introduction of the term, an explanation is given: “Makutu is what you would call a magic spell” (25); sometimes an extrinsic code-switching is used, where the term is not translated or explained, but is easily deduced from the context, as in the sentence “You think your Nanny Tama is a bit porangi in the head, ay?” (44)

If there are Pakeha characters in the story as in ‘Beginning of a Tournament’ or in ‘The Other Side of the Fence’, the Maori terms disappear almost completely, and only a few exclamations are left (i.e. “eeee”, 20) as well as the term *Pakeha* (17).

The amount of Maori words and sentences increases whenever the protagonist of the story is an elderly person (usually a grandmother or grandfather) who is in charge of the ‘treasures of traditions’, of the memory of the past, of the genealogies. The fact that old people speak the language underlines the loss of this ability in the younger generations and also in the narrative voice. The final stories of *Pounamu*, *Pounamu* deal with decay and death:

This old one, he has seen too many of his people come as strangers. The Maori of this time is different from the Maori of his own time. The whanau, the family, and the aroha which binds them together as one heart, is break-

ing, slowly loosening. The children of the whanau seek different ways to walk in this world. (129)

The rhetorical repetition of the question “No wai te he?” which appears towards the end of the story ‘The Whale’, is translated only in the final lines—as a question, a complaint, an accusation, a warning: ‘No wai te he... Where lies the blame... the blame. Where lies the blame, the blame...’ (132). Emblematially the collection ends with the story ‘Tangi’, whose title can be only summarily translated as ‘funeral’ as *Tangihanga* is a funeral ceremony which lasts three days and involves not only the family of the deceased, but his/her whole village. It is one of the most important Maori institutions where physical and metaphysical concepts are intertwined (Barlow 2001: 122).

*Tangi* is also the title of the first novel by Ihimaera, an ideal sequel to the themes of the short stories and a metaphor “for the possibility of death of our culture; however, the tangi is where we also renew our culture” (Ellis 1999: 169). There is a greater presence of Maori language in this novel and it underlines the awareness of the narrator who is now responsible, after his father’s death, for the safety of his own family, and is expected to assume a role he abandoned, when he left for Wellington. As he has left his roots, he will have to learn the language again and make the Maoritanga his own again. His memories of his father are closely linked to the mother tongue: the sentences used by his father to instruct him on the origins of Maori culture come back to his mind and only the language of the ancestors is able to tell the myths of the past:

See? Across the great ocean of Kiwa they come: from Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki pamanao. See how they ride the waves to this shore! The Tainui, Te Aeawa, Mataatua, Kurahaupo, Tokomaru, Aotea... And there, Tama, there comes the Takitimu! Look how they come! [...] They are the Maori, Tama. As long as you remember them you are a Maori. (Ihimaera 1996: 48-49)

The political message is underlined by the lack of translation and anticipates the political use of code-switching in *The Matriarch*. Similarly, only the ancestors’ language can express the affective world of the *whanau* as indicated by sentences such as “To manawa, e taku manawa” [‘your heart is my heart’] (48). The structure of *Tangi* cannot be compared to that of a novel constructed according to traditional Western canons. Ihimaera stresses how the genre of the novel is foreign to Maori culture, which is nearer to songs, *waiata*, and epic oral narratives (Ellis 1999: 169). *Tangi*, is in fact a song of praise and mourning, whose rhythm is given by vocatives such as “Aue, e pa” [ahimè, o padre] and

sentences in Maori that are repeated chapter after chapter as, for example, the sentence, “Haere mai ki o tatou mate e... Come to our dead, come” (Ihimaera 1996: 62) which appears also in longer variants. The very epilogue of the novel presents a triple repetition of the sentence “Haere ra, Rongo! Haere! Haere! Haere!” [Farewell, Rongo! Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!], which is considered by the author as “a cry of aroha, swelling louder and gathering in strength. It is an acclamation for our father. It is the final farewell, echoed by earth and sky. It is a roar of pride, before the slow descending of the sun.” (207) The mother tongue accompanies the death of the chief of the *whanau*, at the same time celebrating his greatness; the language is the guardian of a proud memory and of a rebirth. The repetition of entire verses of funeral songs can be found in the text; they accompany the grief of the protagonist, but also remind him of the group he belongs to, and of his role as the heir to such a powerful tradition. Nearly all the songs are translated as the author wants their powerful messages to be perfectly understood by any reader.

The focus of Ihimaera’s fiction shifts from country to city life in the collection of short stories *The New Net Goes Fishing*, whose title derives from a Maori proverb: “Ka pu te ruha, ka hao te rangataki. The old net is cast aside, the new net goes fishing.” A new generation takes the place of the old...” The eighteen stories are set in an urban background, the ‘Emerald City’, “where the money is” (Ihimaera 1995: 151). Once the idyllic country world is lost, the author’s tone becomes more political in denouncing the ills of modern New Zealand society. These short stories are considered by Ihimaera, significantly, his *Songs of Experience*, whereas *Pounamu*, *Pounamu* represents his *Songs of Innocence* (Ellis 1999: 170). Ihimaera now warns Maori readers about what they have lost or are losing by living in a Pakeha environment: the end of the *aroha*, of friendship, even of affective security within one’s nuclear family; the discovery of loneliness, of discriminations, of cultural differences which are not lived with pride, but with a sense of shame. These stories narrate dislocation, immigration—a theme which is so vitally central in the whole of postcolonial literature; they describe the loss of a spiritual balance, when violence and alcoholism are the companions of the ‘fullas’ living on the margins of a hostile city. These stories also introduce the contrast between white and native culture, the prejudices and abuses of the old colonists, underlined by the use of derogatory terms as in “You Maoris are all the same. Dumb bloody horis.” (Ihimaera 1995: 153) The stories denounce how easily one’s origins can be forgotten, and cultural pride be lost, in the attempt to reach alien standards that are considered important for the sake of assimilation.

Maori language disappears almost completely in this new collection, as it is not spoken by the gangs of misfit youths who spend their nights in prison, nor is it spoken by the young man who, encouraged by his parents, tries to rise above his origins, through university studies. In this race to achieve a better status, the acquisition of a perfect standard English is more vital than maintaining the native language as

in the pakeha world they were already losers. They'd no formal education, could barely write a sentence of English and their sole book was a Bible they could read only haltingly and with much difficulty. Their language was composed of broken English and broken gestures. (195-196)

Only at the end of the story, when he has finally reached his degree after a long struggle, will the protagonist realise he has renounced something fundamental in his apparent success: when the old *kuia*, met by chance, a relic of the past, tells him words of pride in a language he is no longer able to decode (“Ka pai e tama. Ka pai. Kua u nei koe ki tena taumata o te matauranga”, 209), he discovers he is trapped between two worlds, unable to belong to either or both.

The stories of this second collection narrate, then, the search for a disappearing world, before it is completely disintegrated: this is the case of the *whakapapa*, the genealogy chart the grandfather tries to complete before dying, or of the *pounamu patu* chased by the aunt from one place to another, ready even to break the *aroha* towards the others, going to a lawyer, so important is it for her to regain the symbol of the collective strength and power of the *whanau*. The use of code-switching reappears only in the grandfather and aunt's words, reminding readers that these are the heroic figures who are the guardians of the memory of the past and are able to defend and hand it down to future generations. Few words survive in the eradication—*whakapapa*, *kai*, *mokopuna*—useless fragments that underline the disintegration even more.

It is with *The Matriarch*, however, that code-switching has a strongly political value. The novel focuses on all the themes previously dealt with by Ihimaera—Waituhi, family values, traditions—but it ennobles them, linking them to Maori history and epics. While intertwining literary genres, the author mixes historical chronicles, fiction, parliament speeches, and oral narration of events. The novel is certainly based on Ihimaera's belief that there is no “difference between what is history, what is reality, and what is fantasy. The whole world is imbued with and energized by legend, by a sense of spirituality and other-worldliness” (Sarti 1998: 72).

The writer also moves from one time dimension to another, from the present of the narrator who evokes the disquieting figure of his grandmother to the time of his childhood and adolescence where he was initiated into Maori spirituality, to the distant past of the Land Wars (1860-1881), and further back to the mythical arrival of the canoes of the first inhabitants of Aotearoa from Hawaiki. The protagonists of the novel are also historical figures such as Te Kooti and Wi Pere, and traditional gods, together with the character of the matriarch, in such a web that every figure is connected to another by a line of unbroken genealogy. The main objective of the text is to reclaim the epic nature of Maori lives, to remind all New Zealanders of both the whites' abuses (the Treaty of Waitangi being a good example) and the by now forgotten rebellious character of the Maori. Above all *The Matriarch* aims at reminding the spiritual strength of the ancestors, in order to change the future, as, according to a Maori saying, "we walk backwards into the future." (Ellis 1999: 173) To write about the ancestors is for Ihimaera the way to 'ancestralize' his generation, making an icon of it for the generations to come. The text no longer offers the tones of the desolate awareness of a loss, but tones of hopes, expressing the wish to claim back what has been taken away. Ihimaera's quest is to

ensure sovereignty for Maori people and that we have political and economic independence, because without that we wouldn't be able to build the physical structure for our Maori heart. What we need is Maori people who have got abilities to set up structures within which Maori values can be maintained. (Sarti 1998: 72)

The narrative voice becomes less dreamy and nostalgic, more involved, angrier, in open contrast with the Pakeha, and has the harsh tones of a prophet, who condemns and foresees. In this political conception of a literary text, the inserting of Maori words and phrases takes on a political connotation as well and is in line with Ihimaera's politically angry mood. The presence of Maori increases, the vocabulary range widens, the sentences become longer, and whereas language was colloquial in *Pounamu*, *Pounamu*, the language of *The Matriarch* is solemn, as in a ritual chant or an action song. Lists of names of historical characters, deities, and places fill the pages, puzzling the readers, but at the same time expressing a great unknown wealth and vitality. Even if there are still examples of organic and intrinsic code-switching, most of the time Ihimaera makes use of a political code-switching, when no translation or explanation is given. Long paragraphs are given in Maori without any comment, to reinforce the *tapu* character of the language that only the initiates can

understand, a means of separation, of border, limit. Wi Pere's song of Rongopai is, for example, entirely transcribed (Ihimaera 1999: 193) and the further absolute lack of Maori words in Wi Pere's talks in Parliament is even more striking, as his language entirely adheres, then, to the canons established by the Pakeha, the powerful masters of politics and language.

Untranslated keywords in this novel are *mana* [meaning authority, control, prestige, power, psychic force], *iwi* [which means bone, but also means strength, nation], *korero* [meaning to tell, to say, conversation, story, discussion], *pa* [meaning both the fortified place and its inhabitants], *haka* [meaning both a dance and the song accompanying a dance], *tapu* [meaning sacred, beyond one's power, under religious or superstitious restrictions]. Palimpsests of the kind: "E mokopuna, listen. The mana and the tapu still remain, in the land and in Waituhi and in the iwi of The Whanau A Kai" (110) are to be found more and more often. Untranslated is also the word *taniwha*, a term that refers to the matriarch and can be translated as 'chief; *taniwha* however, also means 'prodigy' and may indicate 'a shark' or a "fabulous monster supposed to reside in deep water" (Williams 2000: 377). In any case the epithet underlines the charismatic, dangerous personality of the woman as in the sentence "[...] she was a taniwha in the Maori world" (Ihimaera 1999: 25) or "[...] in that taniwha line of fearless women"(25) or "You have to be in that taniwha line if you're a woman and you want to break the rules." (26)

Next to the use of Maori language *The Matriarch* introduces Italian words, from the very beginning, in the Prologue, when, talking about his uncle Alexis, the narrator says that Italians would have called him "*un superbo uomo*, a superb man." (1) When using Italian, Ihimaera recurs to italics, as, of course, this *is* a foreign language, which has nothing to do with the bilingualism of New Zealand. The Italian he uses, however, is not modern and colloquial, but rather aulic as it comes from operas and particularly from Verdi's *Otello*, *Aida* and *Nabucodonosor*. The quotations in Italian are followed by translations into English and accompany the gestures of the matriarch and the Maori fights. Such quotations might be considered to be a sign of Ihimaera's love for the operatic world (he has even written a number of librettos), but the motivation that encourages him to insert entire phrases of famous arias are more historical and political than aesthetic and cultural. As the events Ihimaera narrates take place between 1860 and 1880, the writer connects them with the years of the Italian Risorgimento, thus stressing how Maori fights to regain their land and dignity belong to a wider context of injustice and revolt against it. One of the favourite metaphors used by the matriarch to describe

the conditions of Maori life under Pakeha domination is the biblical image of the flight from Egypt under the guidance of Moses. In this sense the quotations from *Aida*, where Egyptians are the oppressors, reinforce the extended metaphor. These quotations in Italian, then, have to be read in a socio-political light, as they reinforce the writer's aim, his protest against, and condemnation of the Pakeha and the oppressors of the world wherever they are and whatever colour their skin may be.

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### **Abstract**

*Witi Ihimaera, considerato il decano degli scrittori maori, si è affermato sulla scena letteraria nello spazio di appena cinque anni con quattro opere di narrativa: la raccolta di racconti Pounamu, Pounamu (1972), i romanzi brevi Tangi (1973) e Whanau (1974), e la raccolta di racconti The New Net Goes Fishing (1977). Questo periodo di grande creatività è stato seguito da un apparente silenzio creativo di dieci anni, dal quale lo scrittore è emerso con la pubblicazione di un'opera ponderosa, densa di significati, il romanzo The Matriarch (1986). Gli anni che separano The Matriarch dalle opere iniziali costituiscono uno spartiacque all'interno della narrativa di Ihimaera, perché laddove le prime opere celebrano con tono nostalgico i valori perduti della Maoritanga e il messaggio politico dell'autore è implicito, The Matriarch segna un maggior interesse per la realtà politica e sociale della Nuova Zelanda e il passaggio da una visione sincronica ad una diacronica della cultura maori. L'uso del code-switching, presente in tutta la narrativa di Ihimaera, accompagna tale evoluzione e diventa anch'esso strumento politico.*



## *Strategies of (Self)Silencing of the Immigrant Subject: a Linguistic Study of Jean Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz".*

Elisa Lea

Language, like a physical feature, is metacommunicative, that is, it builds up a frame of expectations. In Jean Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz" the immigrant subjects, namely West Indians settling in post-war London, must constantly negotiate their identity and their right to live in a country where reception is unfriendly and language conveys open and covert prejudice. Apart from racial discourse, the *other* is allowed a voice to speak for himself only if he conforms to codes of respectability such as economic contribution, rising social position and education. Otherwise, his voice is viewed only in moral terms, and becomes an expression of disorder, laziness, illiteracy (Urcioli 1996: 26). Linguistic and extralinguistic features involved in communication are, in Rhys's short story, silencing and self-silencing strategies. Though Selina does interact with other characters in the story, her otherness is immediately distancing. This is apparent on two levels: in Selina's contact with her neighbours and the alien environment in which she finds herself, and also in their communication and behaviour towards her.

Although "Let Them Call It Jazz" was published in 1962, we know that Jean Rhys had been working on it for at least thirteen years. In a letter to Selma Vas Diaz, she states that she has conceived the idea of a story to be titled "Black Castle" (Whyndham 1984: 66). It is not until 1960 that she mentions the project again, this time under the title of "They thought it was jazz". She emphasises that it is "a bit of a crazy story", written "as a holiday" and "for fun" (184) and adds that as it is about Holloway Prison it should not be taken too seriously. Jean Rhys was obsessed with the idea of readers and critics concentrating solely on an autobiographical reading of her works: "For them "I" is "I" and not a literary device. Every word is autobiography!" This meant that readers did not fully appreciate her narrative techniques, nor her

attack against social injustice. I believe the choice of a black protagonist for this short story is evidence of Rhys's willingness to distance herself from the voice of the narrator, in order to experiment with language techniques and to express more freely a social critique. That Rhys was conscious of the experimental nature of this writing, a "stylized patois" reconstructed "by ear and memory" (197) is evident from her letters, where she declares her doubts about the use of dialect: "It is supposed to be a Creole girl talking but still—" (186); "I was worried about the story—didn't think I'd managed it well. The dialect was a difficulty—I'm not 100 per cent certain of it. So lapses and guesses. Of course it varies from island to island and in mine is—or was—a French patois, not much help." (201) Then she adds she is uneasy about the sentimentality of the story and about her treatment of the racial problem: "I do not feel quite like that about the black, coloured, white question either. It's more complicated." (202)

A short summary of the plot will prove that in the story the protagonist's ultimate exclusion is operated through linguistic suppression. Selina Davies is a young West Indian who has emigrated to London hoping to find a job as a seamstress. One Sunday morning, her Notting Hill landlords throw her out of the house because she has lost her job and is unable to pay a month in advance. By chance she meets a man, Mr Sims, who offers her temporary accommodation in an old house he owns. When she settles there, she meets a woman who lives on the upper floor and a couple, living in a nearby house, who deliberately avoids any contact with her. Following a visit by Mr Sims Selina is abused by her neighbours, but as soon as she reacts verbally they call the police, who fine her five pounds for disorderly conduct. After two weeks she is again insulted by the neighbours and as a consequence throws a stone at their window. This time the police bring her to the magistrate but she is unable to defend herself through acceptable standard speech and is sent to prison. In Holloway she feels sick and speaks very little, till the day when she hears a healing song sung by some other imprisoned women. She starts to feel better and learns to behave as the authorities wish, so she is released. Soon after she finds a room, then she finds a good job and a friend too. One night, during a party, she starts whistling the Holloway song and a man, who overhears her, plays it on the piano as if it was jazz. He is a musician and eventually earns some money by selling the song. As a reward for the inspiration he had got from her tune, he sends Selina five pounds.

In her study "Modernity, Voice and Window-breaking", Sue Thomas explores some important points of Rhys's short story (Thomas 1994: 187-

188). Firstly, she relates the various meanings of the title: jazz is not only a metaphor for the appropriation and commercialization of a precious song because in the OED it means also “meaningless or empty talk”, “sexual intercourse”, and “to move in a grotesque or fantastic way; to behave wildly”. Secondly, she historicizes it in the context of first-wave British feminist narratives, which essentially consisted of the hardships of the working woman and the suffragette portrayed as martyr. In addition to that, the story is located in the specific context of “racketeering landlords abusing uncontrolled tenancies of black Caribbean tenants in Notting Hill”.

Most of the migration from the Caribbean to England took place in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act forbade further unregulated immigration. While in the USA a high percentage of skilled and professional West Indian immigrants enjoyed extraordinary success, in Britain they were recruited for manual jobs and often experienced psychic shock of rejection: high rates of unemployment, poor educational performance, crime, etc. According to Stuart Hall, racism is always historically specific and in Britain it originated in the postcolonial economic decline that invested political, ideological and cultural spheres: “Blacks became the bearers, the signifiers of the crisis of British society in the 1970s... This is not a crisis of race but race punctuates and periodizes the crisis. Race is the lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing. It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced. It is the means by which the crisis is to be resolved— “send it away”—” (Hall 1978: 8).

Paul Gilroy explains that the *other* is never overtly addressed in terms of his/her biological difference, but a typically decadent preoccupation with the metaphysics of national belonging emerges and law is invoked as a boundary marker between the rightful national community and the blacks: “English law is presented as the summit of the national civilization, the pinnacle of Britain’s historic achievements. An unwritten constitution distills the finest qualities of the national community and enshrines them in a historic compact to which blacks are unable to adhere. Black violations of the law supply the final proof of their incompatibility with Britain. Their “illegal immigration” and a propensity to street crime confirm their alien status. These specific forms of lawbreaking [...] are gradually defined as a cultural attribute of the black population as a whole.” (Gilroy 1996: 355-56) Language and culture are central to the Caribbean community in Britain and Gilroy emphasizes the ethical and educative function of music, song and dance in the construction of diasporic identity: “The contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora

work within an aesthetic and political framework that demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves time and again to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable facts of their survival. This is particularly evident in jazz, where quotes from earlier styles and performers make the past actually audible in the present.” (362)

In an interesting study of present-day multi-ethnic American society by Attinasi we can find some useful categories that can be applied to the post-war British setting of the short story (Attinasi 1994). Language is an instrument of control over people and can reflect forms of inequality which range from overt racism, to covert racism, to the suppression of linguistic varieties. While overt racism, consisting of hate speech where labels of superiority and inferiority based on race or ethnicity can easily be detected, a more subtle form of racism is practised by means of verbal codes, non-verbal communication and other linguistic attitudes. An aseptic and socially acceptable discrimination may be conveyed, in fact, through tone of voice, choice of vocabulary, mockery of language varieties, facial expression, gesture and posture. As a matter of fact, social psychologists who have tested reactions to vernacular speakers on scales of competence (job status, intelligence, etc...) and likeability (friendliness, trust, etc...), have come to the conclusion that standard speech is preferred, and, at least in the Anglophone world, there is a monolingual view of prestige. Vernacular speakers or foreign language speakers are likely to be discriminated against purely on linguistic grounds, because it is assumed that the inability to speak in the dominant variety means an inability to speak and to think in general, or it is attributed to cognitive and social deficiencies. Non-standard English languages are thus considered cultural prisons and standard English a way to liberate minorities and protect their rights. Paradoxically however, “dialect suppression and language prohibition exclude speakers from dialogue with the culture of power” and we have a “silenced dialogue”, which is doubly devastating when the speaker is both from a minority group and a woman. (334-335)

In a “communicative apartheid” situation, there is breakdown in communication, lack of explanations, with both parties unsure about what the other is saying at verbal and non verbal levels. Conversely, we can use the psycholinguistic concept of *synchronicity* or *communicative mirroring* to describe the situation in which people are having a rewarding conversation, where verbal and non verbal interaction synchronize: “Linguistic analysts note congruent body position among interlocutors. Eye-contact conventions, utterance length, nods, facial gestures, turn-taking cues and intonation patterns further signal mirrored interaction.” (326)

With reference to Attinasi's categories, Selina is a victim of all three kinds of racism or marginalization implemented through language. Prejudiced discourses tend to take place in the neighbourhood, a space controlled by a group sharing common interests and owning the houses. In this space of well-tended lawns a long-term tenant like Selina is looked upon with suspicion, both because she is black and because she does not engage in the progression from working class to middle class. "At least the other tarts that crook installed here were white girls." It is her racial origin that disqualifies her from ever becoming a desirable neighbour. Ironically, she is definitely not a prostitute, but to the eyes of prejudiced middle-class British people, Mr Sims visiting her the day before (with a male friend) is evidence enough for it. Racist prejudices superimpose moral stigma on the *other* and reject verbal confrontation.

Covert racial prejudice is conveyed in a number of passages. The first example of non-verbal communication is Selina's encounter with the woman living on the top floor of the house: "[...] she give me a very inquisitive look. But next time she smile a bit and I smile back—once she talk to me." Here we have a progressive increase in synchronicity, but the communicative interaction is still very tentative and formal. Later on, in the story, the same woman does not answer Selina, who is knocking at her door hoping to get some advice from her: "I can hear her moving about and talking, but she don't answer and I never try again." Here no verbal communication has taken place at all but the answer is clear: the woman is not willing to interact and all her body and linguistic activity addressed to some other interlocutor are an indirect, but in a sense also very direct, communicative act.

Similar episodes occur with the neighbours. When Selina greets her, the woman turns her head away and this of course deters the protagonist from speaking. Again interaction is refused because Selina's marks of otherness are in themselves a communicative act, though not considered legitimate. It is not so much her words that people dislike (she is in fact always very polite and her vernacular is consistent and grammatically correct), but her body as a potent, almost provocative signifier of otherness. Ironically, the position of the two women during this first encounter suggests a mirror image (they are standing looking at each other across the garden hedge and, later on, the woman watches from the window, just as Selina so often does), as if to imply that it is only conventions that discriminate between the moral value of the two. This woman's hostility, as in other Rhys's short stories, is grounded not only on generic racial prejudices. Being a single woman, Selina has, potentially at least, an unbalancing role towards married couples. The woman sens-

es the fragile equilibrium on which her status of respectability stands and fears Selina's disruptive force. As a confirmation of this last point, the husband's attitude conveys the stereotyped sexual associations that white males are expected to have as regards black women, as Franz Fanon observes in *Peau noir masques blancs*: "[...] he stare at me worse than his wife—he stare as if I'm a wild animal let loose."

Some quotations will show that Selina has a completely different approach to communication: "Once I laugh in his face"; "my arm moves of itself [...] I start to laugh, louder and louder—I laugh like my grandmother, with my hands on my hips and my head back"; "I catch hold of her hand". All these reactions to other people's intrusive behaviour are not linguistically articulated because Selina is more direct and passionate than English people who, she notes, "take long time to decide". Indeed, she responds to verbal and non verbal communicative abuses with action. Or, alternatively, she chooses silence to defend herself, that is she refuses any further communicative mirroring (eye-contact, congruent body position, etc...): "I don't even give them one single glance." Creole language, however, seems to go hand in hand with gestures and high voice pitch, which the British misinterpret.

Her communication with Mr Sims, on the other hand, is accompanied by closeness and body contact: "I start talking to a man at my table"; "I feel somebody's hand on my shoulder"; "he puts his hand over my eyes"; "he [...] kisses me like you kiss a baby." Unlike Mr Sim's friend Maurice, who is distant, brisk and professionally looking, Mr Sims seems to be emotionally involved. But after buying her food and sounding concerned about her physical well being, his sudden change of mood when she declares she is not interested in money signals his original bad intentions. His verbal attack and subsequent scornful treatment of Selina here is reminiscent of Julian's speech to Petronella's in "Till September Petronella", where the protagonist very feebly avoids becoming a prostitute: "[...] you poor devil of a female, female, female, in a country where females are only tolerated at best! What's going to become of you, Miss Petronella Gray, living in a bed-sitting room in Torrington Square, with no money, no background, and no nous?" (Rhys 1968: 17) In fact, both women are afflicted by accommodation and money problems. Being alone and in need of protection means having a dubious status and that gives licence to men (and women) to despise them. Here, as in other parts of the story, the repetition of the word "money" has negative implications. Another peculiar way Mr Sims communicates with Selina is by means of telephone calls and written messages, especially after his disap-

pearance. This could symbolise his fundamentally financial and impersonal interest in her.

After experiencing the clashing of two cultures and two communicative habits, Selina manages to fit into British highly conventional language “as a clock works” and imposes on her body and language strict rules of behaviour: “I speak bold and smooth faced”. Her life now literally proceeds mechanically and in the last lines she finds a house, a job, a friend and money. When Selina makes friends with another West Indian, “Clarice—very light coloured”, they constitute a small ethnic community. The word “friend” till this moment has been associated only to the ambiguous Mr Sims. Clarice is also the only other representative of Caribbean origin that the protagonist meets; somehow their friendship seems very easily established, presumably because they share similar problems: for both, life in London is a question of strictly practical problems (accommodation, job, money, appearance) and their language reflects this. Working in a shop, Clarice is always in contact with customers who are representatives of the white elite, and the fact that she keenly laughs “behind their backs” means that she masters standard English very well, but also that she has retained some elements of her culture, like the mocking and the linguistic antagonism typical of Calypso. Selina and Clarice really learn to be in between two cultures: “it is take in, or let out all the time”, where the phrasal verb “to take in” means both to make an item of clothing smaller and to deceive somebody, often by pretending that your feelings are different from what they really are. The misinterpretation of her Holloway tune is a final ironic comment on the irreconcilable distance between the inner truth felt by the individual and the conventional truth required by daily superficial social relationships, and it also mirrors the misinterpretation of her work that Rhys herself feared.

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### **Abstract**

*"Let Them Call It Jazz", unico racconto di Jean Rhys condotto interamente in dialetto caraibico, rivela alcuni meccanismi di emarginazione razziale e sociale della Londra degli anni '50. L'immigrato vede negato il suo diritto ad occupare perfino luoghi interstiziali della società britannica a meno che non si conformi alle pratiche linguistiche convenzionali. Le contese avvengono a livello verbale e non verbale ma l'isolamento si attua in modo particolare attraverso il silenzio. Silenzio che infine diventa, per la protagonista, anche una strategia di difesa della propria specificità.*

## *The Polysemous Meaning of the Sketches in Roughing It in the Bush*

Stella Giovannini

In order to deepen the knowledge of Susanna Moodie's masterpiece—*Roughing It in the Bush*—it is necessary to focus on the structure and significance of the sketches in this work, which have seldom received the credit they merit. For a long time the book was considered, in fact, either as a lively and appreciable chronicle of life in early Canada or as an archetypal production, in which the author revealed herself as an isolated monad confronted by an undifferentiated environment of bush and barbarianism. In this last reading what mattered was Moodie's personality and any other element in the text had the mere task of objectifying her inner world. For this reason, the sketches were judged as irrelevant parts, to be absolutely detached from the narrative of the book as a whole.

It was not until years later that scholars paid attention to the fictional nature of the sketches in *Roughing It*, especially after Carl Klinck had emphasized the book's importance within the realm of fiction (Klinck 1962). He was the first to recognize that the masterpiece has a closer approach to fictional form than the usual travel literature, but, then, did not deepen this notion. Notwithstanding this important observation, the conception of design inside *Roughing It* connected with its sketches was left over again in some other interpretations. David Jackel, for instance, asserted that the text is structured, exclusively, upon Moodie's sentimental self (Jackel 1979). Michael A. Peterman, himself, stated that there is no particular narrative unity inside *Roughing It*, since the sketch form provided the author with a freedom, "not only to range widely in mood and subject but to present material in a personal and informal way." (Peterman 1983: 81)

This essay intends to demonstrate the importance of the sketches in *Roughing It* by pointing out that they are the most appropriate means to

describe and to dramatize Moodie's setting and characters. In this sense the sketches are really an integral part, not only of the main theme contained in the text—the emigrant's difficulty in adapting herself to Canada and all the inconsistencies related—but of the pioneer reality and of the writer's life, and of the structure in the book.

With reference to the sketch as a literary genre, Carl Ballstadt had already emphasized Susanna's early admiration of Mary Mitford's works, which were based on a popular and lively study of the quaintly rural. The main elements characterizing this production were quiet contemplation, regional traditions, country walks and several portraits of eccentric and colourful characters. If, on the one hand, a study on Moodie's sketches in *Roughing It* necessarily calls for the connection with Mitford's texts, on the other hand, a deep analysis on this genre, can not be exhausted by focusing, exclusively, on the above-mentioned mentor's pastoral tradition. As Walter Graham demonstrates, the short story genre can be associated to Richard Steels's Jenny Distaff domestic sketches, bringing, thus, the origins of the short story and the periodical press together (Graham 1930: 42). This affiliation of the periodical press with the sketch became particularly meaningful in the colonies, since both these expressions were adequate means to render a new reality with its foreign landscape and society. In order to highlight the significance of the sketches in colonial literatures, Gillian Whitlock also examines their characteristics and adds that "the very openness and heterogeneity of the sketch need not move towards the reconciliation or process of enlightenment which we associate with the short story." (Whitlock 1985: 37) The genre was, therefore, used precisely to represent a peculiar limited microcosm by incorporating local idiom, characters and folk traditions, but in a freer way.

Moodie's sketches in *Roughing It* reflect in their structure the quoted features of openness and heterogeneity and, for this reason, they reveal themselves to be the most relevant channels to describe the backwoods realistically. Susanna's sketches are, in fact, a remarkable compound of caricature, anecdote and essay together with an outstanding mixture of different characters, philosophies, thoughts and styles ranging from comic and tragic to sentimental and didactic expressions.

Given the ambiguous and controversial nature of the Canadian setting, Moodie could but resort to the genre of the sketch to represent a strange universe which, otherwise, she was unable to recognize and to illustrate by utilizing, for instance, the conventions of the sentimental novel. In this sense, the genre is closely connected with the narrative of the book as a whole, being the

particular form which allowed the author to portray her reactions to North American landscape and people. Many of the sketches in *Roughing It* had been published previously in *The Literary Garland* and *The Victoria Magazine* in a different order from that of the text and this rearrangement itself demonstrates that these elements had always been an integral part of the book, both on the level of the form and on that of the content.

In general *Roughing It* provides us with some of its major tensions—the Old World nature and society versus the New World scenery and culture—by introducing sketches involving the representation of human beings, firstly, in society, with reference to linguistic issues as well, and in nature and, then, as individuals (Lucas 1990: 149). In this way Susanna could delineate the Canadian world in all its physical and cultural aspects, linking these features, at the same time, with her own personal comments and response to the new soil.

Moodie devoted a wide range of sketches in *Roughing It* to the definition of human beings in society and nature going from chapter one to chapter eleven. The first sections, in particular, offer us the clearest images of the writer's inability to transplant the structure of her English establishment and a Wordsworthian ideal of nature in the reality of the Canadian wilderness. As a matter of fact, the opening chapter in the book, "A Visit to Grosse Isle", is an extended satire upon the middle-class settler's pretensions and illusions. In this way Susanna introduced a pattern, typical of her narrative, which involves an ironic representation of her own persona and of her inadequacy to perceive the New World, being still concentrated on an Eurocentric apprehension of the universe. The figures of the captain and of some passengers, who travelled on Susanna's ship when she arrived in Canada in 1832, embody the author's tension arising out of her inward conflict opposing the structure of English institutions and the particular foundations in North America.

In the second chapter, "Quebec", Moodie reiterates the conflicting portrayal of persons in society, establishing again a place of contradiction, wherein her self is subverted. To Susanna's eyes the present landscape is not only bewildering because of its sinister and menacing appearance, but it also introduces a setting deprived of any social hierarchy and, therefore, of any order. The distant paradise of Quebec itself turns out to be, thus, a plague-ridden hell, in which newcomers are judged unworthy of immigrating.

In the fifth chapter, "Our First Settlement, and The Borrowing System", and in the eleventh one, "The Charivari", the outline of the typical forms inside North American establishment shows the major tensions running through the book, which arise, unequivocally, since Canada, with its physical

and institutional features, diverged from the British model. Moodie reveals, in fact, a deep sense of cultural shock when she is obliged to live in the colony and to get used to new practices such as a very peculiar way of borrowing things and “Charivari”.

In *Roughing It* one of the most definite examples of social conflict is offered, again, when Moodie introduces the congregation of the Yankees in contrast with some genteel pioneers belonging to the Englishfolk such as Tom Wilson and Brian (Moodie 1989: 63-86, 173-192). The main difference is to be observed, especially, in the fact that North American inhabitants are considered as a group, while their English counterparts are individualized. In general, Yankees are a synonym for low-class, characterized by a very vulgar language. Their way of expression is used to document what the author considered to be the crudity and barbarism of her neighbours. In this sense, the text’s linguistic remarks turn out to be couched in a broader social critique, which is typical of the Victorian age.

The English gentlemen represented by Tom and Brian are totally antithetical to the Yankees and Indians. Firstly, their life-story is fully related, since a whole chapter is devoted to each (63-86, 173-192, 365-387). Secondly, their refined expressions, typical of the English Gentlefolk, belie good manners, politeness and an attitude towards life which is very similar to Moodie’s one. Their education and environment acquaint them with the arts and letters and give them a degree of cultivation, which is the only means to affirm and preserve class distinction within the colonial space (68-69). The author’s depiction of the backwoods can be traced not only in the description of the New World society and of its peculiar language, but also in the romanticized presentation of nature and the wilderness. The whole text is run through by a remarkable juxtaposition of judgements about the Canadian territory, many of which reveal the author’s tendency to apply classifications, typical of the Old World aesthetics, to nature (Stanzel 1991: 97-109). Following the Romantic movement, the famous pioneer describes the bewildering nature in front of her as sublime and beautiful, in order to make this unmalleable reality tractable for the human gaze. As a matter of fact, Moodie takes advantage of these categories to represent a new territory which is sometimes to be appreciated for its wonderful features, while other times intrudes itself powerfully on human perception, becoming dangerous and shocking. The Grosse Isle scene at the beginning of *Roughing It* is an outstanding illustration of this. After an initial presentation of a beautiful environment, disquieting elements such as the clouds, seen as “mighty giants”, interfere to produce the sublime moment.

Unfortunately such a romanticized vision is suddenly dispelled in the encounter with the wilderness only some moments later, when Susanna looks around the St. Lawrence and feels depressed and suffering. In this last interpretation of the Canadian landscape, what is interesting is the fact that Moodie puts the accent on the character of novelty linked to the setting. As she enters deep into the surrounding reality this is a quality considered negative by Susanna, who is no longer capable of judging the phenomenal world by focusing on well-known elements, such as the notion of the sublime and beautiful. On the other hand, the chapter opens with an assertion emphasizing the propagation of cholera which was depopulating Quebec and Montreal when the Moodies landed at Grosse Isle in 1832 (Moodie 1989: 21). The spectre of death circulates, thus, within the worrying North American society, right from the beginning, contributing to nullify the view of this space as a second Eden.

After having examined persons in society and nature in Canada, from chapter 13 to chapter 28, Moodie analyzes, mainly, her own reactions to the New World. In particular, from “The Wilderness and Our Indian Friends” to “Disappointed Hopes”, she delineates her existence by highlighting her practice in the clearing. From “The Little Stumpy Man” on the writer examines closely her inner self in order to stress her development and all the ambiguities related and closes her masterpiece in “Canadian Sketches” returning to the representation of the local modern society. This second half of the book distinguishes itself, essentially, for a pattern which alternates rejection versus adaptation through experience. The image resulting from this literary design is that of a genteel English emigrant, who, after several hard trials, also involving the loss of some children, manages to survive in the colonial space. Susanna is able to transform, herself, thus, into a Canadian pioneer, whose main features are physical and moral strength, flexibility and manual dexterity.

In the chapter “Burning the Fallow” Susanna demonstrates that she is still too passive and weak to solve serious problems such as the deflagration of her own home, because, as she herself confesses: “It was long, very long before I could discipline my mind to learn and practise all the menial employments which are necessary in a good settler’s wife.” (306) Consequently, the woman’s only reaction consists in sitting down upon the step of the door and watching the awful scene in silence (308). The emigrant’s maturity is shown, on the contrary, in the chapter “The Fire”, in which the protagonist turns out to be a very active person, who is now definitely successful in reducing the damage caused by the flames in 1837.

The Chapter “The Wilderness and Our Friends” and “Disappointed Hopes” are specular, again, in presenting the conflicting portrait of the writer seen, in the former, as a weak creature, unable to cope with the world and, in the latter, on the contrary, as a rational being who shows a remarkable manual dexterity.

In the chapter “The Outbreak” Susanna’s redemption comes when she is so good at taking an active role in her own affairs to help her husband financially also by writing. She began, in fact, to work for some periodicals such as *The Literary Garland*, just started in Montreal, and also contributed to the publication of *The North American Review*. Thanks to this work the author freed, in part, her family from the burden of economic urgent need so that they managed to rub along and a “spirit of peace and harmony pervaded” their little dwelling.” (425)

As I demonstrated, the second half of *Roughing It* is run through by the pattern alternating rejection versus adaptation of the Canadian wilderness through experience. The representation resulting from this design alternates, therefore, negative and positive descriptions of the colonial world, which appears as a complex entity, made up of heterogeneous antithetical elements. The inconsistencies related to such a representation are linked to the typically European system of values that Susanna utilizes in interpreting the New World, which, unfortunately, being a different society, can not be apprehended or judged with reference to England. This tension never abandons the text and is particularly significant because it highlights the protagonist’s transformation, consisting in her shift from the figure of the British emigrant to that of the Canadian pioneer. The meaning to be associated to her experience in the wood should be connected, consequently, to the predominance either of her identity as an English lady or as a Canadian settler.

At the conclusion of *Roughing It*, the narrator faithfully reproduces the gradual change in Susanna, due to her contact with an adverse territory, showing its positive and negative characteristics. In her representation of Canada, inside the sketches, what is really essential is the fusion and crossing of different features, which are, another time, undeniable when Moodie indicates the class which should be more suitable to survive in the wilderness. In “Adieu to the Woods” and in the introductory chapter to the 1871 edition, she addresses to a particular rank, that of the working class. In the former, Susanna emphasizes that the colony is the most appropriate dominion for the poor, working man, while the gentleman is not cut out for this reality: “To the poor, industrious working man, it (Canada) presents many advantages; to the poor gentleman, none!” (489) On the other hand, in the above-mentioned introductory chapter,

the writer confirms this thought by explaining the meaning of her life in North America in the following terms: “What the backwoods of Canada are to the industrious and ever-to-be-honoured sons of honest poverty, and what they are to the refined and polished gentleman, these sketches have endeavoured to show. The poor man is in his native element: the poor gentleman totally unfitted, by his previous habits and education, to be a hewer of the forest, and a tiller of the soil.” (527) In “A Walk to Dummer”, the perspective changes, as is typical in *Roughing It*, in that the author recognizes activity and moral principles as the distinguishing physical and ethical features necessary to live in the bush, leaving out the above-mentioned social issues:

...and if this book is regarded not as a work of amusement but one of practical experience, written for the benefit of others, it will not fail to convey some useful hints to those who have contemplated emigration to Canada: the best country in the world for the industrious and well-principled man, who really comes out to work, and to better his condition by the labour of his hands; but a gulf of ruin to the vain and idle, who only set foot upon these shores to accelerate their ruin. (444)

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### **Abstract**

*Il presente contributo analizza la struttura e il significato degli sketches in Roughing It in the Bush di Susanna Moodie al fine di approfondire la conoscenza in merito a questo argomento, ampiamente tralasciato dalla critica, in particolare, in Italia. L'autrice dimostra, al contrario, la notevole importanza di tali sketches sottolineando che essi sono il mezzo più appropriato per descrivere e drammatizzare i luoghi e i personaggi del testo.*

# Finding Mr Madini: *Memory and Story-Telling in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

Maria Paola Guarducci

This is a screwed-up, wounded city, bruised  
By the abusing of its past,  
Stoop-shouldered, hard-talking, vulgar,  
Gauteng's (you have to hawk to say that) epicentre,  
One of the one hundred big cities of the globe.

*Jeremy Cronin*

No individual owns any story. The community is the owner  
of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit.

*Zakes Mda*

The hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995-1998) constituted a huge event involving an entire population—both as participants and spectators—in the search for truth regarding its recent past, and, at the same time, demonstrating a willingness to rewrite its official history and find a way to deal with the pain and loss that the past brought with it. Whether the ambitious targets of the TRC were achieved or not, whether the process managed to create the basis for reconciliation or not, is highly disputable (James & van de Vijver 2000). Nonetheless, I am interested in seeing how the TRC succeeded in “breaking the culture of silence” (Dowdall 1996: 34) and acted as a model for the new narratives that brought to the surface submerged memories, marginalized stories and new points of view.

Published in 1999, *Finding Mr Madini* is a somewhat unusual text, both for critics and readers, because of its composite authorship: ten homeless people and a psychologist. The book pursues, albeit on a different ground, one of

the objectives of the TRC. If the TRC allowed apartheid's voiceless, anonymous and marginalized victims to gain a central position through the public telling of their stories, *Finding Mr Madini* offers a similar chance to a group of apartheid's voiceless, anonymous and marginalized survivors. Made of 55 autobiographical stories, 6 interviews, 5 poems, 3 photographs, the fragment of a manuscript, a few letters, and 11 drawings (all the stories are introduced by the sketched portraits of their narrators), the book can be read as historical document, novel, diary, autobiography, collection of short stories, or thriller, even though it does not fully comply with the formal requirements of any of them. I believe that the structural peculiarity of this text is particularly relevant to the post-apartheid literary context, a context which still shows signs of the recently discarded historical past (Boehmer, Chrisman & Parker 1994). Trying to cope with the legacy of their segregated past, which, without exception, kept their human experience within precise boundaries, South African writers are still dealing with the problems relating to the question of the point of view. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of South African past and present literature is its fragmentation. A fragmentation which on the one hand purposely testifies the effects of apartheid politics on the creative mind, while on the other inevitably embodies a frustration that needs to be overcome. The "Rainbow Nation", so often evoked in South African political discourse, is still missing in most of the literary works of South African authors. The 'great South African novel', depicting the actual heterogeneity of South African stories and perspectives, still waits to be written (de Waal 2000). *Finding Mr Madini* does not aspire to playing such an ambitious role, nonetheless, the book does seem to point to a new direction, and raises an interesting reflection on how to shape a collective memory through writing in contemporary South Africa.

The book begins in a conventional way. Jonathan Morgan, the coordinator on the cover of the book, who initially acts as first-person narrator, tells us of his difficulties about a thriller he is trying to write: "This novel does not know what it wants to be." (Morgan 1999: 6) Later on, we read: "More than anything else I want it to be a description of Jo'burg-Africa, from the margins, just before the end of the millennium." (Ibid.) In order to achieve such a description, Morgan thinks he needs real people who could inspire him with some of the fictional characters of his thriller, and therefore he visits the office of *Homeless Talk*, the newspaper of Johannesburg's homeless. There, he ends up being involved in a creative writing workshop. At this point, the original literary project starts dissolving and the idea of a new one is born, the collec-

tive record of the workshop itself: “‘I’ve been thinking,’ I say, ‘how about we try to give this group and this project some structure and purpose, and we aim for a book. A bloody bestseller.’” (26) A number of homeless people join in, Virginia Maubane, Robert Buys, Valentine Cascarino, Siphon Madini, David Majoka, Steven Kannetjie, Gert, Patrick Nemahunguni, Pinky Siphamele, Fresew Feleke and start working together. Later on, Morgan tells his wife that his thriller no longer exists: “‘I am serious,’ I say, ‘I think I’m going to give up my novel.’ ‘But you’ve put in hundreds of hours,’ she said. ‘This project has more value and the book will be better literature,’ I say, ‘I know what, I’ll call it *The Great African Spider Project*. GASP. All the story lines from all the different places in Africa can be the legs of the spider.” (50)

Two pages only remain of the original thriller set amongst the North African immigrants of Johannesburg, which the book includes in italics. They seem to have been left as the epitaph of a form which is clearly unable to offer a credible presentation of Johannesburg-Africa captured “from the margins”. Jonathan Morgan—an educated, white, Jewish, South African male of Lithuanian origins—can only represent a very small fragment of those margins: a fragment which cannot act either as a fair point of view or as an interpreter for the rest of them. For that reason, he soon abandons also the uniqueness of his perspective: “Over huge plates of spongy fermented bread, spicy food and sweetened avocado drinks, I tell the group that I want to take time out as the main point of view character.” (106) The new framework will give voice and point of view first to Valentine Cascarino, and then to Virginia Maubane. The new book, which does not follow the rules of a specific literary genre, succeeds in meeting the objective of the failed thriller: “to describe a whole lot of marginalised Gauteng geography, characters and conversations.” (277) Drawing upon the private and submerged memories by eleven authors, *Finding Mr Madini*, thus, offers a new picture of a South Africa in transition: a crossroads of cultures that apartheid kept apart, and that literature has so far also failed to reunite in a single text.

The progressive shifting of perspective as well as the alleged rejection of fiction (the workshop is about “documenting” all of their “life stories”, 26) in *Finding Mr Madini* aim at expressing a certain uneasiness about individual points of view and conventional literary genres as a means of describing end-of-the-century Johannesburg-Africa. The interesting aspect, which, even if it does not openly aim at starting a new tradition at least challenges the existing one, is that the plurality of points of view in *Finding Mr Madini* actually reflects the plurality of authors. The result is a kind of narrative in which all

the parts maintain their stylistic peculiarities and are connected to each other by virtue of their pluralistic, varied and heterogeneous nature. It is not a coincidence that the name chosen—The Great African Spider Writers—evokes the image of a spider (and, by association, that of a structured and branching out cobweb). Nor is the reference to the whole of Africa, indicating a further need to broaden the perspective, a coincidence. Indeed, *Finding Mr Madini's* Johannesburg (and South Africa) does not solely belong to those who come from Soweto and Ciskei, like Eddie and Steven, and those who are venda or coloured, like Virginia and Robert, but also to those who come from Cameroon, like Valentine, and from Ethiopia, like Fresew, and to those who can trace their roots back to Mozambique, like Pinky. It also belongs to Jonathan Misha Morgan, who is of European origins, and to Gert, an Afrikaner whose mother came to South Africa from Argentina at the time of the Boer War.

“Since we were exhorted by our enabling legislation to rehabilitate the human and civil dignity of victims, we allowed those who testify mainly to tell their stories in their own words” (Tutu 1999) wrote Desmond Tutu about the TRC. Similarly Morgan, who could have written a sort of modern South African *Decameron*, puts together a heterogeneous collection of short stories told by different people, however imperfect their storytelling could be, leaving their individual voices to speak. “I soon found that the stories I found myself hearing were better left unfictionalised, uninterfered with, and that they belonged to those who had lived them”(A. Donaldson 1999) he said in an interview. *Finding Mr Madini* aims at erasing the figure of the mediator between writing and reality, and tries to create a collective narrative based on truth so as to undermine the idea of an individual author, and the power that characterizes it. When marginalized people start telling their stories, they manage to map out a new history and they discover new roles, reclaiming a space of their own.

The need for such a rewriting has a long history. The critic and writer Njabulo Ndebele wrote: “There is popular culture on the one hand, and on the other, the formal culture which attempts to explain and to give ideological credence to popular culture at the highest conceptual level. It is this relationship between lived life and ideological conceptualisations of it that is fraught with problems.” (Ndebele 1984a: 83) This applies also to creative works. If the TRC has put ‘human flesh’ on the rhetoric that interpreted apartheid and South Africa, we can say that *Finding Mr Madini* puts ‘human flesh’ on the South African literary discourse. The value of this text, there-

fore, lies in the fact that its polyphony does not only describe the geography of margins, it also—literally—embodies it. The coincidence between subject, interpreter and object is achieved using different literary genres, without giving up some aspects of its oral nature (before being read *by* us, the stories are designed to be read *to* the group during their meetings), and with the awareness of the textual strategies being used. For example, when the point of view shifts, we read: “It is 17 January 1999. This is the voice of Valentine. No need introducing myself to you because Jonathan has written about me and I have told you my stories beginning with the mermaid in the village in Cameroon. [...] It is my job to move things on. Jonathan is no longer the chairman” (Morgan and the Great African Spider Writers 1999: 120, 125), and then again: “Hello, my name is Virginia. [...] You’ve heard about my immunisation scars, my white friend Boetie, and my Venda-ness. I’m not used to ordering people around but I look forward for this new role of mine.” (191) *Finding Mr Madini* eludes the problem of literary apartheid, a legacy from the past, and declares, with the words of Valentine Cascarino, one of its author/narrator/character, that “power in literature rests in many angles.” (187)

If the autobiographical tales aim at rewriting individual stories composing a new, collective memory, at the same time they are part of a wider, ‘post-modern’ structure that all of a sudden goes back to its discarded origins: that of the thriller. Halfway through the book, Siphso Madini, the young and talented poet of *Homeless Talk* and a powerful figure of this text, vanishes and the plot will be subsequently focused on his distressing disappearance. The search for Siphso takes us to prisons and obituaries, and to those ‘marginalized’ areas of Johannesburg that today coincide with the very centre of the city. The search yields no results and the detective story, unhappily this time, dies again. Siphso does not come back even though his stories and poems survive in the text, read by others to the rest of the group. The reader is given advance warning of his disappearance in the first page of the book, which reproduces, as a disturbing epigraph, the leaflet with Siphso’s picture placed under the word MISSING, followed by the details of his last whereabouts and the numbers to contact to report any news. *Finding Mr Madini*, thus, places readers in a somehow vague space between text and reality. The title of the book reminds readers of the detective-story nature of the text and also suggests the idea of an ongoing process; an unfruitful search for a missing person which ends up revealing aspects of Johannesburg few books succeeded in portraying so vividly.

The relationship between story-telling, fiction, and reality on one side, and the intersection between individual memory and collective history on the other, create a complex grid of narratives in this text. The loss of a single author-narrator leads to paradoxical extremes, but the plurality of *Finding Mr Madini* perhaps suggests a further critique and, at the same time, a need already expressed in South African post-apartheid literature. The lonely first-person narrator, whom Zakes Mda also discards in his 1995 novel *Ways of Dying* in favour of a plural point of view, seems inadequate. Often patronizing, often class/race/gender related, that voice is by now inappropriate for telling the truth about contemporary South Africa and its complicated transition from apartheid to a democratic society.

*Finding Mr Madini* accomplishes, on a literary ground, something similar to what TRC achieved historically, that is making possible for ordinary people to enter the public discourse and shape the passage of history (Krog 1999: x). Through *Finding Mr Madini* the voices of ordinary people have entered the literary discourse in order to reproduce and, at the same time, shape the passage of a new culture. After the TRC and the narratives of victims—who, as victims, cease to be ordinary people—*Finding Mr Madini* creates a new space for the survivors' narratives producing for the first time an example of the 'rediscovery of the ordinary' through literature. A rediscovery in which Ndebele identified the first objective of new literature, a rediscovery which means being able to produce, through a literary work, a "significant growth of consciousness" (Ndebele 1984b: 53).

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### **Abstract**

*Ispirato ad uno dei principi-cardine della Truth and Reconciliation Commission – restituire centralità alle vittime dell'apartheid attraverso il racconto pubblico della loro storia – Finding Mr Madini è un'opera collettiva i cui autori/narratori/personaggi sono un giornalista-scrittore e dieci senzatetto di Johannesburg, impegnati in un corso di scrittura creativa. Attraverso la sua struttura frammentaria, prevalentemente composta da racconti autobiografici, e il continuo slittamento di prospettiva, Finding Mr Madini riproduce un ritratto efficace e inedito del Sud Africa in transizione, suggerendo inoltre una nuova riflessione sulle modalità del narrare.*



**SPAZI**  
***SPACES***



## *Specchi come doni: You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*

Manuela Coppola

La politica degli spazi, uno dei principali strumenti di controllo attuati nel Sudafrica dell'apartheid, aveva sviluppato un sistema di espropriazione permanente di territori e di divisione di lingue e culture per cui, ad un delirio tassonomico che classificava ogni individuo secondo criteri pseudo-scientifici, faceva seguito la sua collocazione in spazi appositi. La creazione di luoghi differenti per i diversi gruppi etnici ricorda la regola delle *ubicazioni funzionali* – descritta da Michel Foucault – che, nelle istituzioni disciplinari, definivano luoghi che rispondevano alla “necessità di sorvegliare, di interrompere le comunicazioni pericolose.” (Foucault 1996: 156). In questo modo, la minacciosa differenza strutturale dell'altro veniva esorcizzata attraverso la sua frammentazione e il suo relegamento in spazi funzionali, creando la situazione alienante dell'essere a casa propria a casa dell'altro che ha ribaltato così il mito della casa come luogo di sicurezza e protezione.

Frieda Shenton, la protagonista di *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* di Zoë Wicomb, vive una condizione di costante 'ospitalità'; costretta a spostarsi con la sua famiglia in una “coloureds' location”, ospitata in una lingua che non è la sua, Frieda scoprirà la difficoltà di definire la propria identità in relazione ad una appartenenza ad un luogo, costretta ad occupare spazi predefiniti e 'concessi'.

Il senso di inautenticità di Frieda Shenton viene rafforzato dall'imposizione dell'inglese, considerato dai suoi genitori la lingua della cultura e dell'opportunità, ma che si rivelerà un ulteriore motivo di alienazione. Quello degli Shenton è infatti un sogno effimero: assimilando la lingua, acquisiscono anche la cultura, i valori, l'ideologia portati da quella lingua per cui, paradossalmente, la scelta dell'inglese non farà che rafforzare la loro posizione di *inbetweeners*, né davvero africani né davvero europei. Il tentativo di possede-

re di questa lingua comporta una sensazione di inappropriatezza, come se questa fosse stata usurpata ai legittimi proprietari; Hélène Cixous ha così commentato la sua scelta di scrivere in francese: “Ho detto ‘scrivere francese’. Si scrive *in*. Penetrazione. Porta. Bussare prima di entrare. Severamente proibito. ‘Non sei di qui. Non sei a casa a casa qui. Usurpatrice!’” (Cixous 1991: 13, traduzione mia).

Per non deludere le aspettative dei suoi genitori che, attraverso la loro unica figlia, cercano di soddisfare i propri sogni di rivalse sociale, Frieda lascia il suo villaggio per frequentare una scuola di Cape Town in precedenza riservata solo ai bianchi. Ancora una volta si sentirà nel posto sbagliato, *chez-soi-chez-l'autre*, ospite mal sopportato, elemento di disturbo, ‘straniera’ che occupa spazi non consentiti, condannata all’invisibilità perché usurpatrice di spazi che non le appartengono. Il sistema scolastico, principale strumento di imposizione coloniale, si presenta inoltre come efficace veicolo del processo di assimilazione culturale. Nel caso di Frieda, il suo approccio con la cultura inglese avviene attraverso *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Nonostante “Wessex spreads like a well-used map before [her]” (Wicomb 1987: 41), Frieda avverte un senso di estraniante familiarità nei confronti di questo testo, percepito come ostile e lontano dalla sua realtà, specchio del suo stesso atteggiamento nei confronti della cultura inglese, in una problematica prossimità di familiare e sconosciuto.

Fornire un nuovo sistema di identificazioni, cancellando le identità e le appartenenze precedenti, si presenta come uno degli obiettivi principali dell’educazione coloniale. Lo scrittore keniano Ngugi wa Thiong’o ha così descritto questo processo di ‘cancellazione dell’altro’ ad opera del sistema scolastico coloniale: “Those inducted into the school system [...] were furnished with new mirrors in which to see themselves and their people as well as those who had provided the new mirrors” (Ngugi 1993: 32).

Il gioco degli specchi diventa così uno strumento per la costruzione dell’identità che, perseguendo l’‘antico sogno di simmetria’, annulla e appiattisce nell’imitazione ogni differenza attraverso il necessario rispecchiamento nel simile. Gli specchi in questo caso sono costituiti dalla lingua, dalla scuola, dall’educazione; nonostante la pluralità di tali specchi si risolve in realtà in un’illusoria identificazione, in una impossibile simmetria di identità: “Mirrors multiplied and differently disposed are bound to yield fallacious, fairy-like visions, thus constituting a theater of illusions within which countless combinations of reflecting reflections operate” (Minh-ha 1989: 23). Non a caso, nelle culture asiatiche lo specchio è “symbol of the very void of symbols” (ibid.).

Se si accetta la teoria di Jacques Derrida per cui il dono è ciò che sfida la reciprocità e la simmetria dello scambio, un 'aneconomico' dare senza ricevere (Derrida 1991), si può allora ipotizzare che il dono che il colonizzatore offre sotto forma della lingua e della cultura, si riveli un esercizio di potere che, rifiutando la reciprocità tipica dello scambio, si definisca invece come imposizione della soggettività che dona e che rifiuta il contro-dono dell'altro. Si tratta quindi di un finto scambio che piuttosto che arricchirsi della reciprocità, si esaurisce sterilmente nella narcisistica affermazione della soggettività assoluta insita nell' "io dono".

Particolarmente significativa, a questo proposito, è la rilettura che Luce Irigaray fa del platonico mito della caverna, in cui uomini incatenati sul fondo di una caverna-ventre vivono nell'illusione delle ombre create dal fuoco:

Per questo essi restano tutti fermi dentro il recinto, irrigiditi nell'atteggiamento di prigionieri che figurano essere, raggelati dagli effetti di simmetria che comandano, a loro insaputa, questo teatro della rimembranza, alimentando l'illusione, costrittiva, di un'adeguatezza dell'evocazione e della ripetizione (dell'origine). E tesi nel fascino di ciò che hanno di fronte. (Irigaray 1998: 237)

E ugualmente affascinato è il padre di Frieda nei confronti delle ombre della cultura inglese che si agitano davanti a lui, miraggi di benessere e riscatto sociale. Affascinato, ansioso di possederla e di ribaltare la situazione, rivelando ciò che per Derrida è la follia del possesso della lingua, poiché tale possesso si traduce inevitabilmente in una situazione di dominio e potere: "non c'è proprietà naturale della lingua, ciò dà luogo soltanto alla rabbia appropriatrice, alla gelosia senza appropriazione" (Derrida 1996: 47, traduzione mia). Poiché chi 'ha' una lingua, possiede di conseguenza il mondo espresso e implicato in quella lingua, il padre di Frieda cerca con tutte le sue forze di adeguarsi ai modelli offerti dalla cultura inglese e ne ambisce il possesso, tentando allo stesso tempo di soddisfare la sua volontà di rivalsa e riscatto sociale nei confronti di quella cultura. Iscrivere Frieda ad una scuola riservata in precedenza solo ai bianchi è il primo passo verso l'affrancamento che tanto desidera: "We'll show them, Frieda, we will. You'll go to high school next year [...]. We've saved enough for that. Brains are for making money and when you come home with your Senior Certificate, you won't come back to a pack of Hottentots crouching into straight lines on the edge of the village." (Wicomb 1987: 30). La stessa possibilità di poter frequentare una scuola per bianchi rappresenta, per Mr. Shenton, un'opportunità per elevarsi al di sopra dei tanto disprezzati 'Hottentots' in nome degli antenati scozzesi degli

Shenton nel tentativo di avvicinarsi, in una immaginaria gerarchia razziale, alla ‘rispettabilità’ dei bianchi.

La lingua, l’educazione, l’appartenenza ad un gruppo considerato ‘migliore’ appaiono paradossalmente come regali, concessioni elargite in cambio della fedeltà al sistema e della totale identificazione con esso, al punto di fare propria la volontà di distinguersi dagli ‘ottentotti’, dai nativi, dagli africani. Il distacco dalla propria terra e dalla propria cultura è tale che il processo di *renaming* è stato ormai totalmente assimilato dai genitori di Frieda. È significativo, ad esempio, lo scambio di battute tra la ragazza e sua madre circa il nome degli ‘ottentotti’: a Frieda che corregge la madre che usa questo termine dispregiativo, invitandola a usare piuttosto ‘Khoi Khoi’, questa risponde stupita: “Really, is that the educated name for it? It sounds right, doesn’t it?”. Il *renaming* si presenta così come espressione di una strategia di potere che, attraverso il possesso della parola, esercita anche il potere sul territorio e sulle popolazioni ‘rinominate’. L’altro viene così appropriato in primo luogo attraverso la lingua, e il *naming/renaming* – negazione del diritto di auto-definirsi – resta come traccia di sconvolgimenti personali, linguistici e territoriali.

La convivenza delle due lingue ‘coloniali’, l’inglese e l’afrikaans, rende particolarmente complesso il problema linguistico in Sudafrica. Nel testo sopravvivono infatti tracce dell’afrikaans, luogo linguistico condiviso dal colonizzato e dal colonizzatore, nonostante da bambina a Frieda fosse proibito parlarlo a causa della politica monolingua dei suoi genitori, impegnati ad appropriarsi perfettamente della lingua inglese come strumento di elevazione sociale: “‘And I’ve warned you not to speak Afrikaans with the children. They ought to understand English and it won’t hurt them to try. Your father and I managed and we all have to put up with things we don’t understand.’” (Wicomb 1987: 4)

L’impossibilità di possedere una lingua è particolarmente sentita da Frieda: privata del possesso della lingua della madre, di etnia griqua, non conosce lingue africane; ed è ‘ospitata’ nell’inglese così come si sente ospitata a casa sua. A questa privazione di una appartenenza in una lingua è strettamente connesso il desiderio di definire cosa sia ‘casa’: appena tornata dalla scuola e già in procinto di partire per l’Inghilterra, l’anziano Oom Dawid la saluta ricordandole dove sia il suo posto: “‘Still, ‘ the old man persists, ‘you’re home now with your own people: it can’t be very nice roaming across the cold water where you don’t belong.’” (Wicomb 1987: 94). L’uomo le ricorda ancora quale sia il suo ruolo, il suo destino in quanto giovane meticcina scolarizzata: “‘It’s leaders we need. You young people with the learning must come

and lead us.” (Wicomb 1987: 95) Tuttavia, Frieda non riesce a stabilire nessuna comunicazione con la sua gente: la bocca diventa secca, le parole non trovano la loro strada: “My tongue struggles like a stranded fish in the dry cavity of my mouth. Why do I find it so hard to speak to those who claim me as their own?” (94). La lingua – intesa sia come *tongue* che come *mouth* – non trova un rifugio sicuro e accogliente nella casa-bocca-ventre, un luogo che si suppone liquido e caldo, fetale (“The speaking muscle in our bodies is permanently immersed in liquid, like the foetus, in the womb”, Ward Jouve 1997: 159), ma che per Frieda diventa invece una ‘secca cavità’ inospitale. La casa – intesa anche come luogo linguistico – appare ancora come una trappola di definizioni o luoghi in cui è costantemente ospite mal sopportata, dal momento che l’ospitalità nella lingua e nella cultura inglese si rivelerà parte di un’economia di scambio non paritario tesa a stabilire rapporti di dipendenza e subordinazione in cui lo ‘specchio’ della lingua fornisce uno strumento di auto-rappresentazione che continua ad avere il *master* come sistema di riferimento, allontanando Frieda dalla sua comunità, dalla sua lingua, dal suo mondo, pur non assicurandole un’appartenenza alla cultura e alla società inglese.

Il pozzo nelle cui acque si specchiava da bambina sembra essere l’unico specchio che le restituisca un’immagine di sé rassicurante. È Frieda stessa a ricomporre il suo volto, convinta che sia la sua cantilena magica a fermare le acque traballanti del pozzo: “I sang my song of supplication until the water spirits gurgled with pleasure and the face framed in the circle of water grew whole once more.” (Wicomb 1987: 97) Anche in questa occasione un luogo che si presumeva liquido e portatore di vita adesso si presenta invece secco e arido: al suo ritorno a casa dopo gli anni trascorsi a Cape Town, il suo personalissimo specchio è scomparso, il pozzo completamente prosciugato.

Le numerose immagini di liquidi – acqua, sangue, lacrime – rimandano ad un’identità che vuole essere fluida, attraversando confini, straripando sulle rigide linee di demarcazione delle gerarchie razziali; eppure l’acqua apparirà una illusoria via di fuga nel momento in cui Frieda deciderà di attraversare le fredde acque degli oceani per raggiungere l’Inghilterra, spinta dal desiderio di identificazione con il sistema culturale trasmessole dalla sua educazione. Ancora una volta Frieda è ospite, in transito, con la sensazione di essere “in the wrong bloody hemisphere” (Wicomb 1987: 112).

L’acqua è ancora una volta una speranza di salvezza quando si sentirà intrappolata dagli sguardi della gente, chiusa nell’ostilità degli inglesi e dei sudafricani, per i quali è ugualmente estranea: “I do not, dear God, wish to

lengthen my days. I wish to be turned into a drop of water now, before these very *mirror eyes*.” (113, enfasi aggiunta) Sarà ancora uno specchio a rimandarle il riflesso della sua identità, restituendole l’immagine di un viso che porta i segni della deludente esperienza inglese e il cui pallore è un rimando alla sua condizione interiore, sempre più vicina agli standard occidentali... “In the round mirror glass I see my face bleached by an English autumn, the face of a startled rabbit, and I drop my eyes” (111). Il motivo di tanta irrequietezza, del suo essere a disagio in ogni luogo, risiede probabilmente nel fatto di non aver mai accettato la propria identità: come le fa notare un’amica dei tempi dell’università che rivede dopo diversi anni, “in our teens we wanted to be white, now we want to be full-blooded Africans. We’ve never wanted to be ourselves and that’s why we stray... across the continent, across the oceans, and even here” (156).

Silenzio e obbedienza sembrano essere le uniche azioni concesse a Frieda, costretta ad ascoltare i consigli di suo padre, i precetti religiosi e i suggerimenti di Michael, il fidanzato bianco, senza mai ottenere ascolto a sua volta: “God is not a good listener. Like Father, he expects obedience and withdraws peevishly if his demands are not met” (75). Costretta al silenzio, Frieda si condanna anche all’invisibilità sotto gli sguardi di corpi femminili biondi e magri, nel tentativo di nascondere il proprio corpo bulimico e meticcio, mai amato e accettato, rifiutando anche il bambino – dono inaccettabile – che aspetta da Michael.

Divisa tra le sue origini e la sua educazione, Frieda approderà alla scrittura contro la volontà della madre, secondo la quale sua figlia rivolta la lingua e la cultura che le sono state offerte contro la sua stessa famiglia, contro la sua comunità. La madre l’accusa di scrivere libri basati su storie che riguardano la sua famiglia, nonostante non conosca la sua gente e i suoi luoghi perché è andata via: “What do you know about things, about people, this place where you were born? About your ancestors who roamed these hills? You left. Remember?” (172) In realtà si sente lei stessa responsabile della educazione sprecata di sua figlia, colpevole innanzitutto di averla cresciuta nella lingua inglese: ““My mother said it was a mistake when I brought you up to speak English. Said people speak English just to be disrespectful to their elders ... And this is precisely what you do. Now you use the very language against me that I’ve stubbed my tongue on trying to teach you it. No respect! Use your English as a catapult!”” (171)

Durante una gita ‘riappacificatrice’ in montagna in cui la madre non perderà occasione di farla sentire estranea a quei luoghi, affioreranno pregiudizi

e rancori nei confronti della sua terra. Alla madre che le chiede di raccogliere alcuni fiori di protea, simbolo del nazionalismo boero, Frieda risponde fredda: "If you must... And then you can hoist the South African flag and sing 'Die Stem'". La madre, però, le ricorda che la protea non è un altro dono da ricambiare con la fedeltà alla nazione boera, e le insegna a rifiutare le appropriazioni nazionalistiche dei boeri attraverso la conoscenza della vera storia della sua terra e della sua gente:

'You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see in it their own stories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it. We know who lived in these countries when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country. What they think of the veld and its flowers is of no interest to me.' (181)

Il recupero dell'eredità griqua materna, precedentemente rinnegata per soddisfare le aspettative di rivalsa sociale del padre, aiuterà Frieda ad accettare e a comprendere il suo passato, mettendo in discussione la sua educazione fatta di storie ambientate in fredde brughiere, nella speranza di giungere alla consapevolezza che né l'identità né la lingua possono essere dei doni, spazi elargiti generosamente e in cui sentirsi ospitati, ma piuttosto un processo, un rapporto perturbante eppure conquistato con le proprie forze. La sensazione di estraneità forse non potrà mai essere cancellata del tutto, ma la resistenza ad ogni forma di appropriazione e assimilazione potrà trasformarsi in un tentativo di nutrire la creatività della scrittura attraverso il costante senso di perdita e alienazione.

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### **Abstract**

*The gift of culture and language proves a powerful tool of submission in Zoe Wicomb's 1987 novel, in which apartheid South Africa traps the individual's identity into ephemeral identifications with the colonizer's culture. Instead of providing a sense of belonging and a better future, colonial education and the acquisition of the English language produces alienated and schizophrenic selves seeking to be at home.*

## *“A cycle of longing and loss”: Venice by Caterina Edwards*

Sabrina Francesconi

I knew the city,  
not as a tourist does, as a series of “sights”;  
I knew its daily rhythms, its hidden life. (Edwards 1999: 28)

At the moment of arrival, the city vanished.  
And I was suspended in a cycle of longing and loss. (29)

In this paper I plan to encompass the narrative retrieval of the city of Venice throughout the work of the contemporary Italian Canadian writer Caterina Edwards. I will restrict the focus to the novel *The Lion's Mouth*, published in 1982, to the short story “Multiculturalism” –first published in 1998 with the title “Loving Italian” in *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* and later collected in *Island of the Nightingales* (Edwards 2000)– and to her essay “Where the Heart is”. This selection allows me to provide evidence that Venice has offered a recurrent setting in Edwards’ writing. The significance of this operation, transcending a mere geographically descriptive location of events, is to be traced within a biographical, cultural, discursive multilayered framework. I intend to highlight the strategies of representation which shape Venice to the eyes and the memories of the Italian-Canadian characters of Caterina Edwards.

A first approach to the texts immediately reveals Edwards’ passionate link to Venice, which is to be found first of all in her personal family history: her mother, Rosa Pagan, was born and lived in Venice, where she met her future husband, Frank Edwards, a soldier of the British Army who had stationed there after World War Two. The family then moved to England and definitely

to Canada in 1956. Caterina maintains a strong emotional relationship to Venice through several summer trips, first as a young girl and later as a grown-up with her own family. She herself explains this deep connection in her essay “Where the Heart is”:

I was happy, comfortable, connected to the city by history and family. Two elderly aunts, a multitude of first and second cousins lived here: the conductor of the *vaporetto*, the girl behind the bar, the manager of a leather store, the seamstress, the fish farmer, the bank clerk, sprinkled from one end of the lagoon to the other. (Edwards 1999: 29)

This deep “connection”, while being instrumental in suggesting the privileged place Venice has within Edwards’ narrative, provides only a partial perspective. The emotional closeness functions as a useless element since it prevents the writer to reach an objective analytical position.

The second layer of the analysis of Venice discloses a deeper cultural and historical system of reference. The Italian city entails the fascination of splendid art, of sophisticated tradition, of ancient history, that Maggie, the female protagonist of the short story “Multiculturalism”, perceives during her Venetian honeymoon. She observes: “the eighteenth-century chandelier, ...the seventeenth-century silverware, ...the anonymous Renaissance painting”(Edwards 2000: 78). Venice spreads its charm all around, affecting what and who is temporarily involved with it: “Even the shape of Massimo’s head, the set of his face, his sloe eyes carried an insistent echo of history”. (78). Symmetrically, Bianca Mazzin, the main character of the novel *The Lion’s Mouth*, defines herself “a Canadian girl with a Venetian background” (Edwards 1982: 217), stressing her double identity where the past can be defined only within a Venetian legacy. The use of the term *background* underlines the influence of the past on the present, as that unavoidable element, which the subject builds his/her life on and cannot abolish anymore.

However, this vertical/diachronic movement into the past does not allow to grasp a systematic and complete picture of the city of the lagoon. Edwards highlights the need for a contemporary horizontal/ synchronic crossing of geographical, contingent borders: “I will be travelling back and forth, Canada and Italy, if only in my imagination, forever” (Edwards 1986: 64). Not casually, the economic and cultural development of the city finds its roots into the flourishing of international trade and cultural exchanges with foreign countries. The cogent figure of Marco Polo—one of the best known symbols of Venice—provides evidence of this traditional historical and cultural dynamic tension.

Following a symmetrical discourse while moving in the opposite direction, the Italian Canadian writer proposes a constant shift between a Canadian and an Italian location, as if the Venetian identity could not be achieved in itself, as a monolithic and closed structure, but only through a recurring relationship with otherness, represented by the Canadian pole—and expressed through metropolises such as Toronto and Edmonton. The immediate consequence of the geographical dislocation is a positive cultural acknowledgement of diversity: while Venice embodies history, art, culture, Canadian cities represent nature, unpolluted environment, dynamic and effective social and political systems. This splitting perspective is suggested through the intrusion within the English narrative thread of some key terms written in Italian, such as *carnevale*, *chiesa dei Gesuiti*, *maschera*, *vaporetto*, *gentiluomo*. Not casually, all these terms refer to the semantic field of art, history and traditional Italian culture and help to fix the representation of Venice into the symbolic order.

The cultural gap is depicted in the short story "Multiculturalism" in the double Canadian/Italian wedding, which Maggie and Massimo decide to organize. Literary poems and spontaneous vows are opposed to a traditional and conservative service—not casually held in the baroque Jesuits' church—while informal refreshments substitute a sophisticated wedding dinner:

First, in Toronto at Knox United in a service which featured poems by Petrarch and Shakespeare and personally written vows and was followed by champagne punch, munchies and cake in her uncle's garden. Then, in Venice in la Chiesa dei Gesuiti, a more traditional rite, after which they were borne away in a gondola to a seven course dinner on Torcello. (Edwards 2000: 77-78)

Furthermore, Venice itself is the setting of outright social and cultural contradictions. Beside the artistic, cultural and historical ones, other aspects of the city come to light. Venice is lost as the mere artistic stereotype, as that univocal image for tourists. This charming setting for events is haunted by the negative aspects of political corruption, subversive activity, terrorism, decay of family and social values. The bridge between these two semantic poles is the concept of decadence, which Venice has embodied for centuries: "Since Venice's decline in the eighteenth century, the city has been a symbol of decadence, death, and dissolution" (Edwards 2000: 30). It is interesting to notice that the Canadian writer Jane Urquhart also chooses Venice as the setting of her short story "The Death of Robert Browning". The incipit of Urquhart's short story is very eloquent in the interwinding of the narrative threads of art and death: "In December of 1889, as he was returning by gondola from the

general vicinity of the Palazzo Manzoni, it occurred to Robert Browning that he was more than likely going to die soon.” (Urquhart 2000: 3)

The disruptive operation of the mere Venetian artistic stereotype within the discursive framework is enacted by the figure of the mask. As a symbol of the Venetian *carnevale*, it carries a twofold connotative signification: it represents a traditional and ancient practice while hiding a revolutionary, subversive meaning, of change and renewal—which has been extensively analysed by Bakhtin in his essays *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975).

In the short story “Multiculturalism” the female Canadian painter Maggie chooses the mask as the subject, and the form of her artistic production. Maggie’s shows are titled *Mascara*, a name which indicates a cosmetic, a product for the make-up, employed to conceal, to better one’s real skin. But *Mascara* is also the ancient and dialectical word indicating the mask. The first level of ambiguity of the mask relies on terminology. Furthermore, it itself draws back to a double anthropological tradition, since Maggie melts within her imagination the native Canadian masks with the “traditional masks of the *carnivale*”—an operation she usually enacts to tease the critics:

In Venice, in the catalogue of her first show, *Mascara*, she was quoted as saying “I found the way in a Canadian Museum. Before a Cree Horse mask. It had a lightening, almost Picassolike design on a sky blue background...” She told the owners of the tiny gallery off White Avenue that exhibited *Mascara II* that she’d been inspired by the traditional masks of the *carnivale*. (Edwards 2000: 87)

Instead of functioning as the synthesis of this urban space, the mask plays a self-consciously enacted destabilizing role. It is at the same time a conservative and a revolutionary icon, both a Canadian and an Italian symbol; thus, it creates a conceptual short circuit. In order to accomplish this operation, the work of art—the mask, the literary work and even Venice itself—needs to be deconstructed, repeatedly dislocated and relocated, played with. According to Benjamin, this process can be read as the logical and inevitable consequence of the loss of the *aurea*, of the *hic et nunc*, of the authenticity and authority of the work of art in the contemporary age, due to its technical reproducibility.

Thus, the mask avoids the stereotyping representation of Venice—the still surviving place for tourist attraction, which is to be perceived as a “series of sights”—since it allows the coexistence of irreducible multiple contrastive dimensions. The historical, cultural, artistic Venice is superimposed on the decadent, dying, dissolving city—to repeat Edwards effective alliteration. In *The Lion’s Mouth* a masked carnival crowd provides the setting for terrorist

actions, for Marco's family, work and identity problems. In the short story "Multiculturalism" Maggie's exhibition *Mascara II* opens immediately after a "gigantic bank scandal of international proportion...in Italy" (Edwards 2000: 87). Authenticity—those Venetian "daily rhythms", that "hidden life"—, can only be achieved through the acknowledgement of these simultaneous contrasts, of these apparent incongruities.

Multiple contrasts, oppositional stances do not solve the complexity of Edwards' aesthetic; they function as first strategies enabling the fracture of clichés. If the analysis of Venice started from a descriptive level concerning Edwards' personal experiences, and proceeded secondly to highlight a cultural and semantic representation, the third and final analytical moment relies on a broader theoretical and conceptual level. This last essential operation transcends the deconstructive stance—employed to unveil the fallacy of a univocal representation of the city- and goes further towards a dismantlement, a loss of its object. In order to explain this procedure, I would like to borrow the definition Palusci employs in an analysis of the representation of Vancouver in Margaret Laurence's writing,—even though Vancouver has a problem of identity being a newly built city. The Western-Canadian city is defined as a *postmodern space* in its lack of a mythic structure, in its fluidity and fragility of social certitudes. Venice can be located within this precise framework: Edwards takes its picture while the light is declining, when the city is losing its power, its traditional force, its reality, when its mythical historical strength falls into pieces. The Venetian literary trope, losing its traditional "auratic" representation, entails a constant and fluid shift from one image to the other and becomes ungraspable.

The gnoseological approach to the city relies on the contact with what is hidden, with its loss. When the city fades away as a contingent space, the semiotic dimension takes shape. Edwards explains the approach: "At the moment of arrival, the city vanished. And I was suspended in a cycle of longing and loss" (Edwards 1999: 28). All attempts of picturing the Venetian microcosm are possible only while lacking the contact with its contingency. The need for "longing", every step to capture the essence entails the impossibility to achieve its exact drawing. No single or true Venice is to be achieved or captured. The quest for meaning, for definitions, after being deconstructed in its fictitious premises, is dismantled: "I found I could not write myself into belonging. My split was only emphasized" (Edwards 1986: 67).

After this premise, Venice is ready to assume a narrative shape, to find a privileged location among Edwards' pages. The city itself becomes the pro-

tagonist of a textual discourse, whose deeper significance relies on its symbolic irreducibility.

In conclusion, walking through the *calle* of Venice does not mean following linear and mapped lanes. Every time tourists walk through the labyrinthine structure of the floating city, they discover new corners, new architectural patterns, new perspectives. Furthermore, they often forget the *calles* they have just walked through, and need to look for new alternative paths. Far from being a limit, this challenge provides evidence of the infinite richness of the city of the lagoon. The tourist is invited to a continuous re-walking of the *calles*, the reader is invited to a continuous re-reading of pages.

Edwards' lesson is to be read at a broader level, as a battle against every kind of stereotyping process of interpretation, and its inevitably terrible consequences, such as pretences of national *secessione*, as September 11th's acts of terrorism and violent answers.

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**Abstract**

*Attraverso la lettura di alcune opere della scrittrice italo-canadese Caterina Edwards è possibile articolare una cartografia della memoria della città di Venezia, a cui è sempre riservata una posizione rilevante, a partire dal romanzo *The Lion's Mouth* (1982), al racconto "Multiculturalism" (1998) e al saggio "Where the Heart is" (1999). La trasposizione narrativa della realtà geografico-spaziale, consente il superamento della dimensione sia contingente che simbolica, per l'assunzione di una valenza discorsiva ed infine epistemica. Il tentativo di recuperare il profilo seppure sfuggente della città si risolve nella decostruzione di alcuni stereotipi che l'hanno riduttivamente rappresentata.*



## *Enchanted Forests, Darkening Cities. Temporal and Spatial Perspectives in African Migrant Literature*

Cristina Lombardi Diop

My paper will focus on representations of space in contemporary African literature by writers who have either lived in Europe for some time, such as Nigerian author Ben Okri, or who have recently migrated to Italy, such as Senegalese Pap Khouma and Saidou Moussa Ba, and Moroccan Mohamed Bouchane. Despite their different origins, these writers share a common experience of migration and dislocation. Such experience, specific to each of them, informs their historical and spatial perspectives on Africa and Europe. Before I begin, I would like to thank the organizers for the inspiring title of this conference, which has stimulated the following notes. The title, “In that Village of Open Doors: The New Literatures, Crossroad of Modern Culture,” refers to the emerging literatures from Asia, the Americas, and Africa as a meeting point of destinies and cultures. According to the title, literature is understood as a spatial practice. The last part of the title also suggests that at the crossroad where literatures meet and exchange, history and memory are of paramount importance. Cultures are produced within a temporal framework that allows its practitioners an awareness of their origin and future possibilities. The new literatures thus offer a new way of thinking at our cultural moment as part of modernity, and not as always already outside of its reach.

I would like to start from precisely the idea that new migrant literatures create a space of modernity and memory where historical time, often repressed in postmodern synchronic simultaneity, can be humanly lived. Writing the postcolonial migratory experience in contemporary times is way of organizing a new space while maintaining a discursive and affective sense of place. The new urban space is no simply organized from above as an ominous sanitized order imposed upon city dwellers. It is rather a lived space that reproduces the opacities of history and traditions. Moreover, African migrant

writers experience the present politically, that is, not simply as unreadable, immutable chaos, but as a process that leads to future possibilities. In this sense, I agree with Silvia Albertazzi's important recognition of the distance between postmodern and postcolonial writing practices. According to Albertazzi, the postcolonial not only reclaims human experience, the religious as a higher form of mythology, and the historical subject as a political subject, but also, and most importantly, "l'ideologia, che consente di mettere nuovamente in evidenza le disuguaglianze e le strutture di potere politiche ed economiche cancellate o tralasciate dal discorso apolitico postmoderno" (Albertazzi 2000: 155-156). At a time when the presence of decolonized subjects are challenging the very fabric of Western cultural hegemony, migrant writers affirm that authorship is not dead and call for more engaged ways of reading and writing texts.

The metaphorical space that we find in migrant literatures deviates from the normative order by introducing the stubborn resistances of traditional cultural practices that are modern in so far as they break and defy the technological, rational space of global postmodern capitalism. Fredric Jameson speaks of the impact of migrant urban practices within the West as a possible breakdown of the still surviving space of bourgeois private life within the already disruptive decentering of global capital itself (Jameson 1991: 413). In a by now famous essay, Homi Bhabha uses Jameson's work in order to reinforce his idea of the transgressive nature of the emergent decentered subject. To Bhabha, the liminal migrant experience, in between a nationalist pull from origins and the postcolonial metropolitan push to assimilation raises the problem of the intranslatability of cultural difference. But while for Jameson the creation of a third space between global and national cultures leads to a new internationalism, for Bhabha, it is in "the interstitial time and space," "between geographies and genealogies," that "history's intermediacy poses the future, once again, as an open question." (235)

Bhabha's critical gesturing toward an open future is indeed a mimicry of the utopian tension present in migration and diaspora writings. In his work on travel, anthropologist James Clifford notices that a utopic/dystopic tension often pervades diaspora cultures. According to Clifford, diaspora consciousness is constituted as both negatively (by a sense of uprooting and loss) and positively (through identification with global political forces such as "Panafricanism" or Islam). This sense of attachment *elsewhere*, to a different temporality and vision, coexists with a sense of subjectivity highly localized in relation to family and community. Clifford defines this specific

temporality as “discrepant modernity,” that is, as modernity with a difference. The black diaspora, for instance, grew inside modernity with its specific temporality and historicity that troubled the linear, progressivist narratives of nation-states. In literature, the figure par excellence of this broken, syncopated historicity is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, who lives underground and from this new place, invisible to the world, looks at it with an enhanced sense of self and time: “invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you are never quite on the beat. Sometimes you are ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into breaks and look around” (cited in Clifford 1997: 264).

In contemporary African migrant literature, we find a similar syncopated simultaneity of temporal and spatial dimensions. In Ben Okri’s novels, the forest, where physical and historical experiences coincide, opens the hero’s vision onto the concomitant presence of different dimensions. Like Ellison’s underworld, the forest is organized as a network of partially connected histories that live simultaneously in the present. It is indeed a third space that makes historical remembering, but also future resistance, possible. The dreaming forest of *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), for instance, discloses new worlds and new visions: “We ran into a quivering universe, into resplendent and secret worlds. We ran through and abode of spirits, through the disconsolate forms of homeless ghosts. We hurried through the mesmeric dreams of hidden ghosts, through a sepia fog thick with hybrid beings, through the yellow village of invisible crows, past susurrant marketplaces of the unborn, and into the sprawling ghomid-infested alabaster landscapes of the recently dead” (Okri 1993: 25).

These walks away from a familiar reality are always terrifying but yield an enhanced vision of one’s own fear and possibilities. In the end, the forest is an oppositional force that, in its hybrid proliferation of dreams and worlds, resists the repressive and totalitarian worldview of the postcolonial one-party societies. Moreover, walking through the forest is not only a personal but also a collective quest. What critic Itala Vivan suggests for the work of Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, Okri’s precursor and literary model, also applies to the latter: “la meta principale viene dunque lasciata a margine, e il desiderio appare deluso, mentre si compie una meta altra rispetto all’obiettivo dichiarato in partenza [...] l’eroe che era ‘caduto’ bambino nel bosco degli spiriti ritorna adulto alla città natale, ma vi trova un mondo cambiato e diverso, il cui

mutamento viene interpretato come effetto dell'odio, ma di fatto viene anche offerto come risultato della storia e della conoscenza." (Vivan 1984: 250)

In Okri's poems, urban landscapes are inhabited by figures embodying both freedom and alienation, such as children and beggars. These quasi-mythical figures, redeemed in the end by their very dejection, enact the dystopic/utopic tension and turn it into a dialectical movement. In Ben Okri's 1983 poem "On Edge of Time Future," decolonized Africa is a neocolonial space of historical memory and repetition. Its future depends on retrospective historical consciousness. The opening stanza recites: "I remember the history well:/The soldiers and politicians emerged/With briefcases and guns/And celebrations on city nights." In the opening and closing stanzas of section 2, the city view again triggers mnemonic visions: "Through the view of the city/In flames, we rewound times/Of executions at beaches. Salt streamed down our browns. [...] The nation was a map stitched/From the grabbing of future flesh/And became a rush through/Historical slime.//We emerged on edge/Of time future/With bright fumes/From burning towers." And the last stanzas go: "We weave words on red/And sing on the edge of blue./And with our nerves primed.//We shall spin silk from rubbish/And frame time with our resolve" (Okri 1997: 48-50).

Okri's colors red and blue oppose the blankness of Joseph Conrad's colonial map of Africa; yet, they also reveal that changes brought by colonialism in Africa have disrupted its ontological unitary landscape. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the village of Umuofia and the woods around it are already separate and incommunicable realms. The occupation of the civil and communal space of the village by the British church completes this process of territorial and cultural appropriation which stresses change rather than temporal and spatial continuity. Against this historical disruption, Tutuola's bush of ghosts and Okri's enchanted forests are spaces of transfiguration and communication where all conscious and unconscious, real and imaginary, historical and subjective times coexist and unite.

This mythical, utopic space of possibility returns in Okri's 1990 poem *An African Elegy*, which gives the title to his 1992 collection. Africa is not the divided continent whose wounds are literally stitched onto the body. It is an adjectival abstraction, whose natural richness and spiritual legacy offer hope despite of and perhaps because of the continent's great suffering:

We are the miracles that God made  
To taste the bitter Fruit of time.

We are precious.  
And one day our suffering  
Will turn into the wonders of the earth.

There are things that burn me now  
Which turn golden when I am happy.  
Do you see the mystery of our pain?  
That we bear poverty  
And are able to sing and dream sweet things

And that we never curse the air when it is warm/  
Or the fruit when it tastes so good  
Or the lights that bounce gently on the waters?  
We bless things even in our pain.  
We bless them in silence.

That is why our music is so sweet.  
It makes the air remember.  
There are secret miracles at work  
That only Time will bring forth.  
I too have heard the dead singing.

And they tell me that  
This life is good  
They tell me to live it gently  
With fire, and always with hope.  
There is wonder here

And there is surprise  
In everything the unseen moves.  
The ocean is full of songs.  
The sky is not an enemy.  
Destiny is our friend. (Okri 1997: 41)

In the elegy, the dystopic/utopic tension is resolved precisely because the spatial and historical dimensions are dissolved beyond geographical and historical determinations.

But what happens outside the enchanted forest, when the hero crosses the

border to migrate to a new urban space? If the rural and urban space of Africa does not simply overlap with the new landscape of contemporary Europe, how do migrant writers experience and write about Western cities? In Okri's poems, Lagos and London are both "darkening citi(es); in Lagos, "Mobs in cancerous slums/Burn the innocent and the guilty" (38) while in London, all you can hear are "the drill of the undercities/the whistles and the screams/and the muffled ironclad feet/and the unsheathed fingernails gouging/Scratching clutching at dreams." (67) If in London "history confuses" (68), in Lagos "all our dreams/Are gripped in self-seeking Towers." (39) For Okri, Africa and Europe are, both spatially and temporally, contiguous realities. While the relation of contiguity affects the poet's language, so that metaphors disappear to leave room to metonymic relations, Okri makes clear what Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o also affirms: the relation of contiguity is above all political. In other words, postcoloniality is neocoloniality.

For first generation African migrant writers, Italy is no utopia, and certainly not the place where they would settle down. Even when it becomes home, it may not guarantee success. For some of these writers, the European cityscape is only a further step in the passage from African rural to urban realities. In Saidou Moussa Ba's novel *La promessa di Hamadi*, the urban space of Dakar, "full as it was of voices and disorder," (Parati 1999: 80) is juxtaposed to the Lebu communal space of old days in the fishermen village of Quakam: "the market, the mosque, and the large square next to it, where the elderly would meet after the prayers and where they would sit to chat." (81) 1. The village, Ba tells us, has gradually disappeared and has become a suburban neighborhood of Dakar. The taking over of this imagined community, which no longer exists for the young migrant, is symbolized by the white cumuli along the shore of Petite Cote, outside of Dakar, "mountains of shells massed together layer upon layer, century after century, by the people who had lived there. It seemed that the impressions of men from past ages still fell upon them, as if the entire history of our people had been squeezed between those smooth surfaces and among those hard, smooth scales." (83) The history of the Lebu aristocracy, rooted in fishing and sea trade, appears to Ba's protagonist in a shell form that is simultaneously hard and smooth, both surface and depth. The alternation of fluid and solid imagery embodies the historical passage from sea to land life of the Lebu ethnic group. Moreover, the simultaneous presence of diachronic and synchronic dimensions highlights how both historical, affective considerations and a more political awareness motivate the migrant at the moment of his imminent departure for Europe. This

peculiar coexistence of solid and fluid material also constitutes an anticipation of images of water and land that conjure up the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, the watery border between Africa and Europe.

In many migrant narratives, the Mediterranean Sea represents the very first foreign space, at the same time barrier and passageway, frontier and bridge, that must be crossed to reach the other side. The Mediterranean constitutes the very paradox of national space; like all frontiers, “created by contacts, the points of differentiation between the two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them. Of two bodies in contact, which one possesses the frontier that distinguishes them? Neither. Does that amount to saying, no one?” (de Certeau 1988: 127). Upon arrival at the border, migrants test their family’s omens and pray for good luck. Like the movement of waves, the Mediterranean border rejects or accepts with no apparent logic those who intend to cross it. The fluxes of the sea reproduce the unpredictable destiny of those who are at the mercy of visa inspectors whom, rather randomly, may decide “to tighten (ed) the mesh of the net” (Ba 1991: 94). Random is also the movement of migrants from one Mediterranean port to the next, where they hope to be able to disembark. Saidou Moussa Ba describes the ship filled with Africans as a “a huge petal that carried all those stories over the waves, those pains and those hopes that added and melted together into one, to spill them onto the land, week after week, month after month.” (93)

The fluidity of the watery space, where destinies meet and melt in their crossing, is highlighted here against the hard impact of land borders and barriers. In Ba’s story, the Islamic marabout suggests the offering of water as harbinger against fear. While the stories of migrant men and women travel on the sea, unbound from soil, the Mediterranean appears no longer as limit, but as a fluid multiplicity where all the cultures living on its shores can hardly be separated. It is indeed the *medias terrae*, which unites all the people of its diaspora (Dainotto and Zakim 2000: 5). The Mediterranean, both limit and point of contact between Africa and Europe, is in Ba’s novel the paradigm of diaspora existence that challenges the unflinching rejection of territorial national spaces.

On the *terra ferma*, things are slightly different. Moroccan writer Mohamed Bouchane and Senegalese writer Pap Khouma describe the movements of African street vendors from one Italian city to the next, or from one selling spot to the next. It is an uncertain and dangerous journey whose pattern and destinations are left to chance, but whose sufferings are common to

many. Unlike for the people on shore, story telling is possible only when the police are not around to harass them. Maria Viarengo, daughter of a Piedmontese father and an Eritrean mother from Asmara, affirms that “Italy, at that time, was our America,” only to be proved wrong by later experience. Moroccan Mohamed Bouchane instead, looks at the Mediterranean Spanish shores from the historical perspective of Tariq Ben Zayad, the Arabian warrior who embarked on the conquest of Spain. The story says that the warrior, after setting fire to his boats, said to his men: “Behind us is the sea, in front of us the enemy. What do you decide to do?” Bouchane adds: “I have also burned my boats and now must move ahead at any cost.” (56) Also for Pap Khouma the choice to migrate is ineluctable. Yet, his panoptical view of Italy from the plane high in the air yields another perspective: “I feel like I am abandoning a sinking ship and that our leaders are the prime cause of the shipwreck.” (58) For Khouma, Africa is a sinking ship that no longer offers enchanted forests or future hope. Burning your boats, abandoning a sinking ship are metaphors for the act of border crossing that imply a violent break with past geographies and time, and the uncertainty of the future. And yet, for migrants who had their stories published, literature became a ship where cultures joined, the “huge petal that carried all those stories over the waves.”

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All quotations from Saidou Moussa Ba, Mohamed Bouchane, Pap Khouma, and Maria Viarengo are in the English translation of excerpts of their works edited by Graziella Parati in *Mediterranean Crossroads*. For the original titles of their works see the above Works Cited.

## Abstract

*Una delle conseguenze del colonialismo europeo in Africa fu lo stabilirsi di una diversa nozione della territorialità e la creazione di frontiere che negarono l'unitarietà dell'idea ontologica di spazio. Partendo da questo presupposto, il presente saggio analizza immagini di spazio urbano e di frontiere nelle opere di scrittori africani contemporanei emigrati in Europa, quali Ben Okri, Saidou Moussa Ba, Pap Khouma e Mohamed Bouchane. L'autrice rileva in essi una forte componente utopica che, se tipica della cultura diasporica, è anche legata, nei testi presi in esame, alla compresenza ed all'interazione della dimensione temporale e di quella spaziale. Lo spazio postcoloniale, spazio letterario ma anche materiale, diventa allora uno spazio denso di storicità, non più e non solo dimensione alienante e caotica, ma luogo di memoria e affettività in cui è possibile procedere verso un cambiamento.*



**INCONTRI**  
***ENCOUNTERS***



## *L'Orfeo rilkiano in The Ground Beneath Her Feet di Salman Rushdie*

Viktoria Tchernichova

Quando ci troviamo di fronte ad un testo letterario siamo spesso costretti ad attualizzare solo alcune delle sue proprietà in modo da mettere in opera un coerente processo di decodificazione. Si effettua cioè un'ipotesi circa il topic o i topic testuali che orienteranno in seguito il nostro percorso interpretativo (Eco 1999: 89). In questo modo diventa possibile discernere, all'interno del testo, una serie di amalgami semantici che stabiliscono un livello di coerenza interpretativa detta isotopia. Spesso il testo contiene degli elementi più o meno espliciti—titolo, epigrafi, parole chiave—che assolvono la funzione di marcatori di topic. Un possibile marcatore di topic in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* è l'epigrafe del poeta tedesco R.M. Rilke (1875-1926), tratta da *I Sonetti a Orfeo*:

Set up no stone to his memory.  
Just let the rose bloom each year for his sake.  
For it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis  
in this one and in this. We should not trouble  
about other names. Once and for all  
it's Orpheus when there's singing ...

Una delle funzioni dell'epigrafe è creare un collegamento intertestuale tra le due opere. *I Sonetti a Orfeo* sono dedicati alla memoria di una fanciulla precocemente scomparsa, così come il romanzo di Rushdie può essere, tra le altre cose, un monumento funebre per Vina Apsara, uno dei personaggi principali. In secondo luogo l'epigrafe fornisce un commento al testo (Genette 1989: 154). Dal passo citato in epigrafe è possibile spostarsi ai concetti che stanno alla base dell'opera da cui il passo è tratto e allargare i riferimenti sino al contesto culturale dell'autore che l'ha composta. Ci troviamo dunque di fronte ad una soglia che rappresenta un luogo d'in-

contro tra due opere, due contesti culturali e due dimensioni spazio-temporali diverse.

Scegliendo di seguire un percorso di lettura in base all'epigrafe di Rilke e all'isotopia che ne deriva, in questo breve approccio a *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* si tenterà di presentare alcuni concetti della poetica rilkiana integrati da Rushdie nel suo penultimo romanzo, che in parte può essere letto come una riscrittura contemporanea del mito di Orfeo. Una delle conclusioni a cui è possibile giungere attraverso tale percorso interpretativo è che a seguito dell'isotopia individuata, la lettura del romanzo si scosta dalla cornice del mito ellenico e pone le basi per una struttura discorsiva incentrata sulla figura dell'artista (modellata in accordo ai concetti rilkiani) e sulla collisione e distruzione di mondi (topic elaborato da Rushdie). Sembra superfluo aggiungere che questo approccio a Rilke non ha la minima pretesa di esaustività, vista la complessità delle sfumature filosofiche di cui è carica la sua produzione poetica. Né del resto è possibile, nello spazio a disposizione, presentare in modo dettagliato la grande capacità rushdiana di creare nuovi mondi dai frammenti del passato.

Ne *I Sonetti a Orfeo*, composti nel 1922, Rilke recupera dal passato la figura del cantore trace e sviluppa (come molti dei suoi contemporanei Modernisti) una serie di concetti tramite cui dare forma e senso alla frantumazione della realtà post-bellica. Scegliendo dall'immaginario collettivo l'archetipo dell'artista, Rilke presenta l'arte come un rifugio dal disordine esistenziale, come il potere più alto verso la liberazione: "dopo il crollo delle certezze metafisiche e la precarietà delle soluzioni scientifiche il discorso poetico si fa dunque avanti come *vera* o *unica* attività metafisica dell'uomo" (Larcati 1992: xvii). I tratti che caratterizzano l'Orfeo rilkiano derivano da un corpus di idee comune a molti letterati tedeschi del fine ottocento. Durante il diciannovesimo secolo, a seguito dell'affievolirsi dell'entusiasmo creativo che aveva accompagnato lo *Sturm und Drang* in Germania, la fiducia nel potere dell'arte si stava lentamente esaurendo e con essa veniva progressivamente abbandonato il mito di Prometeo, che era una delle figure più amate di quel movimento letterario. A questa figura carismatica viene a sostituirsi l'immagine dell'artista come un reietto, 'un melanconico dell'impotenza' secondo Nietzsche, un individuo che si ritira dalla vita per vivere nell'immaginario (Rehm 1950: 381). La figura tipica dell'artista agli inizi del novecento nell'ambito della letteratura tedesca è quella che vede il poeta come colui che sta al margine, al confine, non più al centro di ciò che accade, colui che ha perduto se stesso e la propria vocazione e non ha alcuna risposta al dramma esi-

stenziale che gli si presenta davanti. Hugo von Hofmannsthal presenta così in “Der Dichter und diese Zeit” (1907) la figura del poeta come un individuo che ha perso la sua posizione sia all’interno della società che all’interno della famiglia. In compenso il suo posto è sotto le scale assieme al cane. Vive cioè quasi in incognito, come un fantasma. Questa sua condizione di essere presente e assente allo stesso tempo (l’immagine delle scale viene interpretata come un *Zwischenraum*, spazio intermediario tra una cosa e l’altra), di essere e non-essere, lo rende più percettivo verso ciò che gli sta intorno, la sua inerzia apparente è in realtà un accogliere dentro di sé suoni e immagini:

si muove in silenzio, tutto occhi e orecchie [...] Nulla può tralasciare, come se i suoi occhi non avessero palpebre; non si chiudono di fronte a nessun essere, nessuna cosa, nessun prodotto della fantasia umana. Non può allontanare nessun pensiero che incalza verso di lui. [...] In lui tutto s’incontra; in sé egli congiunge gli elementi del tempo. [...] Perché questa è l’unica legge a cui sottostà: a nessuna cosa impedire l’accesso alla propria anima. Egli crea dunque da passato e presente, da animale e uomo e sogno e cosa, dal grande e piccolo, dal sublime e futile, il mondo delle percezioni. Il mondo delle percezioni – sono le innumerevoli relazioni che intercorrono tra le cose e gli uomini, il cui invisibile punto di gravitazione il poeta sente di essere; perché poesia è percepire il mondo, è percezione delle relazioni, un profondo comunicare con le cose. [...] Egli non può respingere nulla [...], è il luogo in cui le forze del tempo esigono di porsi in equilibrio. (Rehm 1950: 383)

Rilke modella la figura dell’artista in parte sulle orme di Hofmannsthal e ne fa un individuo dall’immensa apertura verso il mondo, il luogo d’incontro dei destini altrui. Ne *I Sonetti a Orfeo* in particolare, tale figura assume inoltre le connotazioni di ‘mediatore tra poli opposti’ e tra mondi diversi.

Questi sono due dei tratti principali utilizzati da Rushdie nella costruzione del personaggio di Ormus in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Seguendo il topic indicato dall’epigrafe, questo personaggio non viene riproposto come una rivisitazione contemporanea della figura di Orfeo tramandataci dal mito ellenico (in cui il cantore tenta di salvare l’amata dal mondo dei morti), ma come la figura di un artista che, tramite la propria arte, mette in contatto mondi diversi. In base a ciò che Rilke considerava una delle principali funzioni dell’arte, il ruolo di Ormus sarebbe quello di conciliare l’uomo con se stesso e con i mondi che lo circondano.

Così come l’Orfeo rilkeiano è punto d’incontro tra poli opposti, Ormus Cama nel romanzo di Rushdie rappresenta il punto d’incontro tra vita e morte.

La sua stessa nascita viene interpretata all'inizio del romanzo come l'atto di dare alla luce un bambino morto.

Ormus's mother, Lady Spenta Cama, had been told in the thirty-fifth week of pregnancy that the child she was carrying had died in her womb. At that late date she had no choice but to go through the full agony of labour, and when she saw the stillborn corpse of Ormus's elder brother Gayo, his non-identical, dizygotic twin, her wretchedness was so great that she believed the continued movement within her was her own death trying to be born. (Rushdie 2000: 24. Tutte le citazioni successive verranno indicate con il solo numero di pagina.)

Uno degli eventi che segnano l'adolescenza di Ormus e il suo percorso artistico è il ritirarsi in ciò che il narratore chiama 'cama obscura' – stati d'animo che potrebbero essere letti come momenti di raccoglimento interiore durante i quali Ormus incontra 'mentalmente' Gayomart. In questo modo il fratello morto gli trasmette melodie di canzoni.

A shadow falls. This is the fabled 'cama obscura', his stricken family's curse of inwardness, which he alone has learned how to harness, to transform into a gift. [...] Sitting on the top step of this dreamworld, staring into the dark, the purple stain on his eyelid glowing with the effort of searching out his lost sibiling, his shadow self, who is down there somewhere in the blackness, Ormus Cama can hear Gayo singing his songs. [...] In Gayo, Ormus found the Other into which he dreamt of metamorphosing, the dark self that first fuelled his art. (97-99)

Il legame tra Ormus e Gayomart rispecchia l'immagine rilkeana della connessione esistente tra rami e radici – simbolo dell'appartenenza di Orfeo ad entrambi i regni (dei vivi e dei morti): "Dimora egli quaggiù? No. Da entrambi / i reami egli trasse l'ampia natura. / Più saggio piega del salice i rami / chi del salice ha saggiato le radici" (Rilke 1991: 26). Ciò che vive a contatto con la luce del sole (l'albero o, per fare un riferimento all'epigrafe, la rosa), si nutre in realtà dalle radici, da ciò che cresce nell'oscurità. Scegliendo la figura mitica di Orfeo il poeta tedesco dà un volto alla paradossale coesistenza dei due poli che segnano la vita umana. Nella sua produzione poetica egli non oppone mai l'essere al non-essere, non traccia una frontiera tra i due, facendo precipitare il non-essere in un puro niente, come ha fatto la filosofia e la religione occidentale lungo tutta la sua storia. In numerose istanze viene iterata l'idea che è necessario porsi "nel punto di oscillazione tra essere e non-essere in cui tutto il possibile diventa reale" (Rella 1991: 7). Questa potrebbe essere la base

concettuale sulla quale si sviluppa il rapporto tra Ormus e Gayomart. L'arte stessa di Ormus deriva e si nutre dall'oscurità in cui vive il fratello: "Gayomart Cama's melodies burst through from the world of dreams into the real world" (141). Attraverso il rapporto tra i due gemelli Rushdie mette dunque in contatto poli che noi consideriamo inconciliabili: vita-morte, sogno e realtà.

Oltre a mediare tra i due regni dell'essere Ormus è anche punto d'incontro tra i poli opposti entro cui si dibatte l'animo umano. Ciò che lo turba negli anni dell'adolescenza è

The twofold nature of man. Who is both Titanic and Dionysiac, both earthly and divine. By purification, ascetism and ritual we may purge the Titanic element, we may cleanse ourselves of what is earthly, physical. The flesh is weak, evil, contaminated and corrupt. We must prepare for becoming divine. No, Ormus shouts. It is the opposite that's true. We must purge ourselves of the divine and prepare to enter fully into the flesh. We must purge ourselves of the natural and prepare to enter fully into what we ourselves have built, the man-made, the trick, the song. (146) [...] Celebrate the physical, he would hiss, for we are flesh and blood. What pleases the flesh is good, what warms the blood is fine. The body, not the spirit. Concentrate on that. Our selves, not our souls. (181)

Inizialmente Ormus tenta di dare un senso alla propria vita dedicandosi a ciò che è materiale, al nostro essere corporei. Egli è, insomma, un "devotee of the flesh" (388). Rinnegando apparentemente il mondo dello spirito Ormus conduce, nel mondo esterno, una vita da "public love god". In realtà i contatti con suo fratello, e dunque anche con il 'dream-underworld' a cui Gayomart appartiene, aumentano in lui il conflitto tra ciò che è razionale e ciò che non lo è, tra l'anima e il corpo, tra la realtà che i suoi occhi vedono all'esterno ed i momenti in cui Ormus "would lie motionless turning upon that inward eye that saw strange apocalyptic sights" (182). Anche se in questa occasione non è possibile tracciare in modo esaustivo le linee entro le quali si sviluppa la vita di Ormus, possiamo accennare che nel corso del romanzo il "devotee of the flesh" diventerà lentamente un "preacher of the spirit" (388), il "public love god" un asceta. Solo negli anni in cui Ormus deciderà di preparare la propria morte come un dissolversi nell'arte, i due aspetti contrastanti della sua anima riusciranno a trovare un punto d'incontro. Nel mondo esterno un tale punto d'incontro sono le sue canzoni.

Ormus liked to compose his songs up on the flat roof of the apartment block, lost within himself, searching for the points at which his inner life intersected the life of the world outside, and calling those points of inter-

section 'songs'. (183) [...] The reconciliation of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac we call harmonia. Where reason and light meet madness and darkness, where science meets art and peace meets battle, where the adult meets the child, where life faces death and scorns it, make your music there. (392)

E mentre le contraddizioni di cui è composto l'animo di Ormus trovano un punto d'incontro nelle sue canzoni, Ormus stesso, o Orfeo, viene definito dal narratore come "the trickster who used his music to cross boundaries between Apollo and Dionysus, man and nature, truth and illusion, reality and imagination, even between life and death" (498). In questo senso è possibile individuare la prima differenza tra Rilke e Rushdie riguardo la relazione tra opposti. Rilke aveva ipotizzato l'esistenza di "un miracolo mistico, quasi salto repentino dal polo negativo al polo positivo" (Mittner 1971: 1137), un passaggio misterioso dell'orrido in sublime, del dolore in gioia. Tramite il concetto dell'*Umschlag* ('capovolgimento', 'rovesciamento') da lui stesso sviluppato, Rilke affermava l'unità degli opposti, ritenendo che quest'ultimi esistessero in uno stato di tensione mistica in cui alla fine si ribaltavano l'uno nell'altro. Nel caso di Rushdie, anche se indubbiamente viene riconosciuta la necessità del contatto tra opposti, l'attenzione viene spostata sul percorso di attraversamento, e non sull'unità.

Il secondo tratto distintivo della figura dell'artista, come è stato accennato all'inizio, è quello che lo vede come mediatore tra mondi. Nel complesso rapporto tra Ormus e Gayomart si trattava della mediazione di Ormus tra l'our-world' e il 'dream-underworld' di Gayomart. L'elemento tramite cui Rushdie si discosta maggiormente dalla poetica rilkeana è quello dell'inserzione nella trama di un *topos* molto caro alla letteratura contemporanea – quello del mondo parallelo, mondo che, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, si scontra con il nostro e viene, alla fine, distrutto. Ormus diventa in questo caso mediatore tra il nostro mondo e 'the otherworld' – "I'd call them variations, moving like shadows behind the stories we know" (350). La causa del contatto tra le due dimensioni è ancora una volta legata alla figura dell'artista e ai tratti inconciliabili del suo animo. Maria, una delle rappresentanti dell' 'otherworld', spiega a Ormus che

There are certain individuals in whom the irreconcilability of being is made apparent, in whom the contradictoriness of the real rages like thermonuclear war; and such is the gravitational force of these individuals that space and time are dragged towards them and deformed. There are rifts, tears, slippages, incompatibilities. It is not that they are responsible for

deforming the universe, but that they are the instruments through whose agency that growing deformity is clearly and terrifyingly unveiled. It is her view that Ormus Cama is such an individual. (327)

Quest'immagine induce ad osservare tre elementi principali. Innanzitutto viene sviluppato il concetto di Hofmannsthal a cui si è fatto cenno precedentemente (l'artista come un individuo che vive sotto l'immensa pressione delle forze che si scontrano dentro di lui, creando così un movimento simile ad un vortice) per cui l'inconciliabilità interiore di Ormus crea un vortice in grado di deformare le dimensioni spazio-temporali (ricordiamo che Hofmannsthal parla di forze del tempo che cercano di equilibrarsi). Del resto, come verrà chiarito alla fine del romanzo, la causa primaria del contatto tra i due mondi sono "accidentally entangled time lines" (507). In secondo luogo viene data voce al discorso rilkeiano sulla 'contraddittorietà' della natura umana, cui tratto caratteristico è un innato dualismo, il dibattersi tra impulsi contrastanti che aumentano di continuo la sua imperfezione: "Un dio può. Ma come, dimmi, come può / un uomo seguirlo con la sua lira inadeguata? / il suo senso è la scissione. All'incrocio / di due vie del cuore non c'è tempio per Apollo" (Rilke 1991: 23). In Rushdie troviamo: "our inner irreconcilability, the tectonic contradictoriness that has gotten into us all and has commenced to rip us to pieces like the unstable earth itself" (339).

Infine, nella costruzione del personaggio di Ormus, Rushdie aggiunge un'altra sfumatura ed incarica l'artista del compito di svelare la crescente 'deformità' dell'universo – motivo per cui (sul livello diegetico) ciò che preme di più a Maria di fronte alla distruzione del proprio mondo è salvare Ormus e non se stessa (su quello extradiegetico potrebbe trattarsi dell'idea di trasfigurare in arte le tensioni esistenziali invece di distruggerci). È possibile supporre che la deformità di cui si parla derivi dalla distruzione delle 'variations of the stories we know', dall'imposizione di un'unica "frame story" ad ogni cosa. La perdita delle versioni è "a step leading to the grave where all versions blend and end" (510). Sembra dunque che il compito di Ormus e della sua arte sia di svelare proprio *questa* "growing deformity" – il nostro perenne essere in guerra con noi stessi e con ciò che è altro da noi:

There is a world other than ours and it's bursting through our own continuum's flimsy defences. If things get much worse the entire fabric of reality could collapse. (347) [...] They say another galaxy is presently invading the Milky Way, swirling its otherness into our familiar neighbourhood, bringing its story into ours. It's small, we're relatively big; we'll pull it to pieces, destroy its suns, rip its atoms up. (297)

Visitando Ormus, Maria parla spesso di terremoti (una delle metafore centrali in questo romanzo), la cui causa risiede in parte nella colpa umana.

What she wants to talk about most is earthquakes. There are going to be more of these, she prophesies. Two worlds in collision. Only one can survive. When she is not with him, she says, she visits past and present earthquake zones, all those places where the fabric of the earth has put itself in question. [...] Underlying all earthquakes is the idea of Fault, she says. The earth has many faults, of course. But human Faults cause earthquakes too. (326-327)

Secondo Rilke la colpa fondamentale dell'uomo nei confronti delle cose e delle persone è quella di cercarne il possesso. Egli propone dunque un modello ermeneutico e artistico che si basa sul superamento del soggettivismo e dell'imposizione del punto di vista umano su ciò che ci circonda. Si tratta della ricerca di un equilibrio tra l'io e la realtà esterna, un equilibrio che lasci all'altro la sua alterità. Rilke insisteva sull'idea che è necessario sradicare la nostra abitudine di degradare gli oggetti e gli eventi a strumenti di espressione di sentimenti o sensazioni soggettive. A questo proposito scrive Heidegger in un passo dedicato all'analisi dei concetti filosofici di Rilke:

L'uomo si pone di fronte al mondo come di fronte ad un oggetto e propone se stesso come l'ente che, di pro-posito, impone tutte queste posizioni. Porre qualcosa dinanzi a sé (pro-durla) [...] è un tratto fondamentale di quel comportamento che chiamiamo volere. [...] Il volere di cui si parla qui è l'imposizione incondizionata di sé secondo un progetto che ha già posto il mondo come l'insieme degli oggetti producibili. Questo volere determina l'essenza dell'uomo moderno senza che egli si renda conto della sua portata [...] In questo volere l'uomo moderno si rivela tale da imporsi – in qualsiasi relazione a qualsiasi cosa e, quindi, anche a se stesso – come il produttore incontrollato che ha organizzato la propria rivolta a dominio universale. [...] Non è la bomba atomica, di cui tanto si parla, a costituire, in quanto ordigno di morte, il mortifero. Ciò che da tempo minaccia l'uomo di morte – e di una morte che concerne la sua stessa essenza – è l'incondizionatezza del puro volere, nel senso di autoimposizione deliberata e globale. (Heidegger 1984: 265-71)

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* viene proposta, tramite la voce di un personaggio dell' 'otherworld', un'alternativa all'imposizione:

You see, one of our ancient philosophers says, consider the humble bat. That we should try to experience reality as a bat might. The purpose of the exercise being to explore the idea of otherness, of a radical alienness with which we can have no true contact, let alone rapport. Bats live in the same space

and time as we but their world is utterly unlike ours. So also: our world is as unlike yours as a bat's. And there are many such, believe me. (506)

A seguito dei concetti sinora osservati è possibile passare all'epigrafe.

v. 1 Set up no stone to his memory.

Herman Mörchen, nell'analisi dei sonetti di Rilke menziona che “una delle nostre concezioni più comuni è quella di concepire l'essere in base alla sua durata e consistenza materiale nel tempo. Erigiamo delle lapidi come se potessimo conferire queste qualità anche ai morti. Ed è importante per noi tornare, di volta in volta, e leggere le scritte, come se volessimo assicurarci dell'esistenza di colui che è stato e così anche della nostra” (Mörchen 1958: 83). I motivi per cui Orfeo deve esserne privo sono diversi. In primo luogo Orfeo appartiene ad entrambi i regni (così come Ormus appartiene al mondo di Vina e a quello di Gayomart) e non è dunque possibile erigere una lapide in *questo* mondo per commemorarlo. In secondo luogo, se Orfeo è simbolo del canto e metaforicamente dell'arte, è ovvio che né l'uno né l'altra possono essere rappresentati da una pietra tombale. Infine, la mancanza di una lapide richiama alla memoria il modo in cui Orfeo (e anche Ormus) muore. Nel mito ellenico il cantore trace viene smembrato dalle Menadi e con ciò viene sottoposto, secondo Rilke, all'eterna legge della metamorfosi. Nel romanzo di Rushdie Ormus viene ucciso per strada e le sue ceneri vengono in seguito sparse da un elicottero sulla città.

And then Ormus was flying away from us, spreading out over the city he had loved, he was a small dark cloud dispersing over the great white metropolis, losing himself in all that whiteness; he merged with it, and was gone. Let his ashes fall upon the city like kisses, I thought. Let music be. (572)

Secondo Rilke la rinuncia al possesso è condizione indispensabile affinché si entri nel cerchio della metamorfosi e si attraversi la soglia che separa il mondo dei vivi e quello dei morti. Rushdie, tramite l'immagine della distruzione dell' 'otherworld' (almeno per ciò che concerne l'isotopia derivante dall'epigrafe) aggiunge l'idea che le soglie tra noi e ciò che è altro potranno essere attraversate solo rinunciando all'abitudine di imporci.

v. 2 Just let the rose bloom each year for his sake.

L'imperativo 'lasciate che fiorisca' (del resto, non viene detto 'piantate' una rosa) invita implicitamente alla (perlomeno momentanea) sospensione del

dominante punto di vista umano. Sulla complessa simbologia che la rosa assume nella poetica rilkiana si è scritto molto (Hippe 1983; Mörchen 1958; Mittner 1961; Wolff 1983). Cantata nei sonetti come “oggetto inesauribile” che cresce in tutte le direzioni (sonetto VI, parte II) la rosa può essere assunta a simbolo dell’esistenza (con riferimento alla caducità della vita e ai due poli entro cui si evolve), come simbolo di Orfeo (in relazione alla sua metamorfosi), dell’arte (con riferimento alla vita ‘autonoma’ dell’opera d’arte nel tempo), dell’artista (e della sua immensa apertura verso il mondo). In ogni caso Rilke sceglie il caduco fiore come simbolo di Orfeo invece che la lapide che dura nel tempo, fiore che, seppur privo di durata, “blooms each year”. Il continuo ciclo del fiorire e appassire, nascita e morte, essere e non essere si collega al terzo verso e alla strofa successiva in cui si parla della metamorfosi di Orfeo.

For it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis  
in this one and in this. We should not trouble

about other names. Once and for all  
it’s Orpheus when there’s singing...

Secondo Rilke tutti i poeti sono delle metamorfosi di Orfeo (lettera a N.W. Volkart del 29.07.1920, in Salis 1936: 138). Esiste cioè un’unica essenza che nel tempo riappare in spiriti diversi; così come l’essenza della rosa è una nonostante i diversi nomi che l’uomo le attribuisce. L’importante è che si canti (non il nome del singolo cantore) e che l’arte persista, nonostante la violenza con cui l’uomo può distruggere se stesso e ciò che lo circonda. In questo senso una delle idee fondamentali che Rushdie traspone nel proprio romanzo tramite il riferimento interstestuale a Rilke è l’invito a rinunciare al nostro istinto di appropriarci del mondo e dei mondi intorno a noi.

È possibile dunque supporre che Rushdie abbia scelto la rielaborazione rilkiana del mito di Orfeo non perché essa propone una versione diversa dell’amore infelice tra Orfeo e Euridice (figura peraltro quasi assente dai sonetti) ma per la fermezza con cui Rilke denuncia tutti i comportamenti in cui si manifesta la volontà di possesso. E se, secondo i romantici, l’artista media tra la natura e gli uomini, uno dei compiti principali dell’artista secondo Rilke è quello di mediare tra l’essere e il non-essere, tra le porte che separano il mondo dei vivi da quello dei morti. Rushdie evolve il modello rilkiano e presenta l’artista come mediatore tra il mondo che conosciamo e un mondo *altro*.

Alla dicotomia simile-diverso viene aggiunta una terza categoria: dell'uguale-ma-non-proprio, dell'ibrido, del misto, del meticcio. Rushdie non solo allarga l'orizzonte, ma propone anche un modello ermeneutico basato su una riconciliazione che mantenga le differenze. Non propone la costruzione di muri (per separare il simile dal diverso), né la loro distruzione (per creare un amalgama indistinto), ma l'idea di mantenere delle piccole soglie che possono essere attraversate.

Esistono però, all'interno del testo, segni abbastanza espliciti sulla scarsa fiducia con cui Rushdie investe questa visione utopica, oscurata dal dubbio se l'essere umano sia capace di vivere in assenza di conflitti: "One war ends another begins, the human race is never really at peace".

Or maybe it's not necessary to hypothesize another reality smashing into our own. Suppose the earth just got sick of our greed and cruelty and vanity and bigotry and incompetence and hate, our murders of singers and innocents. Suppose the earth itself grew uncertain about us, or rather made up her mind just to open her jaws and swallow us down, the whole sorry lot of us. (573)

Forse siamo molto lontani dal giorno in cui gli esseri umani si concilieranno con il mondo e con se stessi.

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### **Abstract**

*This essay is concerned with Salman Rushdie's seventh novel The Ground Beneath Her Feet (which could be read as a modern version of Orpheus's myth) and its epigraph, taken from R.M. Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus. The aim is to examine the complex intertextual links existing between the novel and the sonnet by first introducing some of Rilke's philosophical concepts (on the artist and his ability to mediate between opposites and between different worlds) and then examining the way Rushdie elaborates them in his work. One of the conclusions is that by reading the novel through its epigraph, the narrative discourse shifts from the Greek version of Orpheus's myth and concentrates on the artist-figure and its function to prevent the destruction of worlds.*

## *Encounters: Dennis Lee Meets Harold 'Sonny' Ladoo*

Elsa Linguanti

0. We know very well that present-day reality consists of a juxtaposition of different cultures, which not only exist simultaneously as static fragments, but also interact as dynamic constructions. Intertextual interplay—a fashionable expression in the language of contemporary criticism—is the dominant element in literature, and it stems from meetings between cultures. Alternative forms, or different points of view, may parody each other—as seems to be happening in most so-called “postmodern” literature—but they may also provide a mutual source of nourishment, offer each other their life-giving lymph, or, to quote Rushdie’s famous expression, “cross-fertilise one another”.

Meetings, then: between ethnic groups and cultures; between intellectual systems, with a collaboration of the various activities of the human mind (consequently, decompartmentalisation); contact between literary texts, with a crossing over from one world to another; and literally, meetings between people (and consequently between ethnic groups, cultural systems, and literary systems).

1. The meeting described in the title can be narrated as a story: once upon a time—in 1968—there was a young man by the name of Harold Ladoo: he was a dark-skinned, lanky, loose-jointed, Indian-looking fellow of 22 or 23 years of age, with a small moustache and sunken cheeks. He had left his home on an island in the Caribbean to go and study at Toronto University. He spent his evenings and nights working as a waiter wherever he could. He felt a burning thirst for justice and beauty, and an impelling need to communicate, to make his voice heard, and to take his place as an artist among other artists.

At the same time, in Toronto, there was another young man, whose name was Dennis Lee: he was Anglo-Saxon in his appearance, with a light com-

plexion, blue eyes and fair hair; he had published poems (*Civil Elegies*), had tried to form a cultural cooperative run by resident students at Rochdale College, and together with a friend, had founded a publishing house (the House of Anansi Press). For Lee, these were years of intense passion and cultural rebellion (“headlong years”), together with other young Canadian intellectuals:

For eight years of crud in public places  
we worked to incite a country to belong to.

[...] beneath the endless  
bellyful of ego, yes, and even though  
each one of us kept skittering through  
the tyranny dance of his difficult compulsions  
what surfaced day after day was a  
deep tough caring (Lee 1996: 51)

The meeting between the two immediately led to a close spirit of comradeship: their conversations went on till late at night at the Lion Bar in Jarvis Street, and their friendship was quickly cemented (“the friendship moved so fast”). Ladoo was ready: a flood of manuscripts gave rise to the novel, *No Pain Like This Body*, published in 1972. Then, Ladoo went on a trip to Trinidad, and didn’t come back: it was 1973 when he was assassinated. At the age of 28, he created his myth, brought his violent vocation to an end, and met with his tragic destiny. Two years later, in midsummer 1975, Lee completed an elegy: “The Death of Harold ‘Sonny’ Ladoo”.

What happened in this meeting between, on the one hand, the “skinny man in a brown suit” with a hypnotic voice and a “quiet, deadly, and convincing” urge to write, who seemed to be “possessed”, his body “close to skeletal fury”, his eyes “deadly and on fire”, overflowing with “incandescent pain”, and on the other, the “nice Wasp from the suburbs” with his polite manners, who said of himself, “I could barely raise my voice if somebody stepped on my foot in a movie”?

And what happened in the meeting between a Caribbean experience with Indian roots, a Buddhist faith, and a Western culture saturated with texts that Ladoo wished to imitate, and to surpass—Faulkner, Milton, Achebe, Naipaul, Gibson, Godfrey, Márquez, Harris, Carrier—on the one hand, and Lee’s modernist and postmodernist culture, based on the reading, study and meditation of texts by Hölderlin, Rilke, Celan, the Eliot of the Quartets, Heidegger, the

mystics—Meister Eckhart, Teresa de Avila, St. John of the Cross, on the other? And what remains for us?

2. As Lee recognised Ladoo's talent, and published his novel, what remains for us is *No Pain Like This Body*. The verse that acts as a title for Ladoo's novel comes from a stanza of *Dhammapada* (the 'Happiness' section, Canto XV, stanza 202: see *Dhammapada* 1980), and, together with the other verses of the stanza, is the epigraph to the novel. This is a collection of meditations inspired by the Buddhist religion, a survival manual, whose aim is to remove dismay, pain, and the humiliation of life.

But Ladoo does not wish to remove any of this. His book is an experience that leaves a permanent scathing impression, a surrealistic, terrifying experience, a collective cry, yet sober and without sentimentalism: in his elegy, Lee calls it "that spare and luminous nightmare". There is a brief descriptive note at the beginning: it is a small community of Indians who arrived from Eastern India (but also from the south: Madras, and also Ceylon), to work—with a contract, but in reality as slaves—in the sugar plantations between 1845 and 1917 (their story of colonised peoples who migrate from one colony to another within the enormous British Empire is also often narrated by Naipaul, starting with *Finding the Centre*: see Naipaul 1984: 19, 46 and *passim*) on the island of about 1000 square miles discovered by Columbus in 1498, which was a part of Venezuela under the Spanish domination, and was then conquered by the English in 1797, and which exports sugar, oil, rum, cocoa, coffee, citrous fruits and asphalt. And there is a map of the tiny area where the story is set, Tola, and a glossary at the end for the various Hindi and Caribbean terms.

The novel tells the story of a few days in the life of a very poor family of rice-growers, during the rainy month of August 1905: the father ("Pa") hates work, and loves drinking; he is unpredictable, violent, and completely closed inside himself; the mother ("Ma") is full of love and apprehension, and works like a slave to provide her four children with food and protection, "brave as a woman is brave." The children, slaving on themselves, live in fear of their father and of the many real or imaginary dangers of their world; their names are Balraj, the boy, Sunaree, the girl, and the two twin boys, Rama and Pandaj. The maternal grandparents ("Nanna" and "Nanni"), who live just beyond the river, are called in to help at times of crisis, and try to do so with their good sense and with ancient *mantras*, sacred formulas. This world is circumscribed, static, stagnant, wounded by the violent rain, shaken by the wind in the forest and by a current "like jolts of pain in the air", as Lee says. A dark, hard, unreliable world: for the children, the fear of snakes hidden in the rice fields, scor-

pions that come into the hut where they live, the shadows in the wood, the crash of the thunder and rain, and above all, fear of their father. Nothing helps the children: not their rare games, threatened by the dangers and by their father, not God, who seems so similar to the figure of their father, for them. For the woman, fear of everything that threatens her children's safety—snakes, scorpions, rain, and above all, the man. The total sense of impotence and despair drives the woman mad, as is already announced in the opening pages (“bent over the tub [...] scrubbed like a crazy woman”); in the end, after the death of one of the twins, she is impotent while screaming for vengeance on her husband, and she wanders and is lost in the forest, laughing by herself, and filling her mouth with handfuls of mud. The book leaves her there, with the remaining three children looking for her together with their grandparents in the wood.

The narrative voice appears to share the naïf point of view of one of the children throughout the book, but it is an external voice. The style is jolty and paratactic, and is characterised by similes, repetitions, onomatopoeia, producing a ‘staccato’ kind of music, rough, and raucous.

Pa came home. He didn't talk to Ma. He came home just like a snake. Quiet (Ladoo 1987: 13).

Pa just stood in the banana patch like a big snake and watched all the time. [...] Pa had a voice like thunder. When he spoke, the riceland shook as if God was shaking up Tola (16).

Pa was smarter than a snake [...] was watching Balraj with snaky eyes (18).

Pa stupid like God (19).

there was not a laugh or a smile on his face [...] Pa hated Ma [...] Pa turned her over and pushed her face inside the tub; trying hard to drown her like. Her feet were high in the air, and her whole body was shaking like a banana leaf shakes when the wind blows (21-22).

There were razor grass and broken bottles in his voice(67).

he chased the children out in the rain and the wind; he ran them out of the house in the wind and the rain (89).

the rain was wicked like Pa (123).

Pa sat like a tigre snake (125).

As regards God,

“Somebody shouda hit God and kick and bust he eye!” Rama shouted (19).

“God like a stone” (20).

“God does only eat and drink in dat sky” (23).

God was watching them with his big big eyes (24).

The eyes of God were moving up and down in the sky and the lightning winked zip zip at the earth (105).

The sky God was doing his work: doing it real good: just sending the cloudsto choke Tola (125).

The mother is immersed in her grief:

Ma felt grief; her grief was not as shallow as a basket, it was deeper than a river; deep like the sea; like a sea without fishes (56).

she sobbed and sobbed, and the tears just rolled down her face (57).

Her madness at the death of the child:

She jumped into the water *ploojung!* Ma was stupid like; she ran in the mud *plaps plaps plaps*. Pa got vex. He took the leatherbelt and began to beat her in the water [...] instead of running away, she sat down in the water and laughed and laughed (119-120).

Around them,

the snake moved *clips clips clips*. Fast. Faster. The snake moved as oil on the water (21).

A streak of lightning ran down to the earth: it turned and twisted as a golden rope, then it lassoed at a tree in the forest. It sounded *crash!* [...] it was as if big big winds were leaving from far away and blowing over Tola and the whole of the island; blowing with such force and temper; blowing with the intention of crippling even the trees, blowing just to cause trouble and hate (43).

the night loomed and loomed and loomed as a mountain of wet coals before them (51).

the clouds were mad like; they ran into each other like mad bulls (108).

The world of the grandparents still has its primitive wholeness, which is expressed in the music of the drums played by the grandmother and the flute played by the girl, Sunaree:

Nanny took the brown hand-drum and beated and beated (36).

the drum [...] kept on beating and beating and beating and beating. [...] The rain began to drizzle. Ma heard the rain drizzling. The rain came down real hard and the lightning danced and the thunder shook up Tola. The wind came out from the sky and began to pull the trees and shake the house. But the drum was still beating (40).

The music of the flute was sweeter than sugar; than life even [...] The kitchen was full of music and sadness (41).

Ma sang a line, and she repeated it. So it went on and on. The song was in Hindi. The sky God was listening, because the drum was beating like cake over Tola; like honey. It was beating and beating and beating; beating only to keep them awake [...] to keep them happy and sad, happy and sad; it was beating for the black night that was choking Tola, and the rain that was pounding the earth; the drum was beating in the sky and was beating on the earth; it was beating, and even the great sky God could not stop it from beating, because it was beating and beating and beating just as the heavens roll (42).

Ma and Nanny began to speak in Hindi. Balraj, Sunaree and Pandaj couldn't understand too well, but they knew what Ma and Nanny were talking about: they were talking about the rain and life; the rain and the thunder; the rain and the wind; the rain and the darkness; the rain and the past, and about the rain and the future; and about life and death (45).

Nanna started to recite some mantras from the Hindu scriptures; he was trying his best to drive away the evil spirits (51).

as he recited the sanskrit verses [...] he was begging the gods (52).

mantras from the Puranas and the Mahabharat (101).

Ma heard the drum. She stood up and listened. She didn't move because the drum was beating sweeter than the sugar (129).

When her daughter disappears in the wood,

Nanni walked with the drum into the night [...] beat the drum with life; with love; she beat the drum with all her strength and the drum sounded loud as if a spirit was bawling in the forest (134).

The best comment on the book is found in Lee's words in the elegy;

a raucous raging thing [...] dragging old  
generations of pain as perpetual fate and landscape, [...]  
a lifetime of intricate fury, no four,  
centuries of caste and death  
come loose in your life, the murdered  
slaves come loose, great cycles of race and blood, the feuds,  
come loose, the wreckage of mothers and sons in  
Trinidad [...] (48, 49)

Thus, a book even harsher than Achebe's or 'Ngugi's novels.

3. Then, what remains of this meeting and this friendship is the elegy. The Canadian author of the elegy is often defined as a philosophical poet: it is true that he shares with others, Robert Bringham, Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, the

idea that poetry has something to do with thought and with the mystery and the polyphony of the world. (The key words in these poets' essays are 'thinking', 'ecology', '(un)knowing', see Zwicky 1992, as an example). His poems are meditations, often about the profound sense of destitution of our time. Anguish, anger, enchantment are orchestrated with polyphonic modulations from one 'cadence' to another (this word is precious for Lee, who has written essays identifying it with poetry *tout court*: "'Cadence' is my name for the flux, the felt and living flux that poems rise out of. I'm a function of it, rather than vice versa", see Lee 1995: 29-43). Clashes and echoes, in the succession of timbres, trace out the trajectory of the meditation: "voice embodies, polyphony enacts, [...] it enacts an ontophony, so to speak. A music of being." And these are also explorations of the persistence of an impalpable need for transcendence in our daily life, the need for a divinity, of whose remote presence among us we paradoxically continue to try to find traces. What does Lee do in his elegy (June Solstice 1975, published in 1976)?

There is the alienation of death, the attempt to compose a song after the event, and a dialogue with his lost friend: there is the rituality of the elegiac tradition—"Lycidas", "Adonais", "In Memoriam":

[...] come at last  
to wrestle with your death –  
    waiting on magisterial words  
    of healing and salute,  
the mighty cadence poets summoned in their grief  
    when one they cherished swerved from youth to dead  
    and everything went numb, until  
their potent words resumed his life [...] (45)

There is the regret: Ladoo, the "living myth gone dead and legendary" is the figure of the "Tragic Artist", who is consumed "dragging old / generations of pain as perpetual fate and landscape, bound / to work it through in words"; there is the interrogation about the use of poets "in a time of dearth" (from the elegy 'Bread and Wine' by Hölderlin), and then about "how to be in the world?" (51).

More than 600 verses: an alternation of memories, meditations, dialogues with Ladoo, and notes on the environment that surrounds the poet who is intent on writing the elegy in the summer evening in Canada. It is divided into two parts, and we find the truly elegiac moment at the end of the first part, in short verses in broken syntax, which speak not so much of Ladoo's death, as

of our own incomprehensible mortality. On the one hand, young people ready to “live it all from the start”, on the other, Ladoo “all / gone as you reached it” (the trash of life), “dead to way to be / not a / human does” (58). At the beginning of the second part, the meditation on “the loss of awe, the numbing of tremendum”: the loss of the numinous, the exile of gods and demons. The gods have become blood thirsty mutants who, after being rejected by mankind, move furtively among us, and punish men, driving them mad. In the end, in a calm tone, the continuation of the search that stems from both forces, from the poet himself, alive in the Canadian evening and night, and from Ladoo, dead with his mouth in the dust of a back-street in Trinidad, and the things they both succeeded in writing. Thus, a meditation and an exploration.

Lee states in an interview that the poem started as an elegy of 14 verses, with a high rhetorical tone of praise, grief and celebration, with the aim of making it possible to accept Ladoo’s death, going beyond the tragedy, facing up to death and being reconciled with it: poetic language was thus to be used as a protection against the bewilderment of being alive, and torn, and uncertain, before the death of a person, avoiding the encounter with pain. What happens, however, is that the elegy, with its traditional tone, continues to collapse: there is a real fear of insulting the memory of the poet’s friend by writing a poem about his death (and this is the start of an idea of the exploitation of our noblest feelings).

A tension is created between the impulse to write the poem and the other impulse to do justice to all the confused, unsolved parts of one’s own psychic anatomy, to pay tribute to the flow of what is, the naked, painful being of being. The text continually passes from the need to formalise to the need to resist the impoverishment of experience that formalisation involves. It is possible to feel the broadest cadences, not only the constructions and the rhythms of the isolated sections into which the poem is divided, but the trajectory covered in blocks of two or three hundred lines, and to perceive the broadest progressions from one movement to another. The movements are sections of the text that may number from eight to fifty verses, in which a new position suddenly emerges, generally with respect to the poet’s friend, Ladoo; these are stages in the course of the meditative quest. Successive movements may stem from one another, or “cross-fertilise one another”, says Lee as he speaks of polyphony in literature, using the verb that again reminds us of Rushdie and his “cross-culturalism”. The rhythms of a broader range are those of grief, accusation, nostalgia, self-accusation, and then reflection, meditation on their young lives, in that period, captivated on the wave of both excitement and

intellectual honesty; these arise from sudden changes of direction, with different tones, each of which is immediately modified by the following one, while a sort of harmony is created out of their dissonance and the changes in tone:

The meditative poem does two things: embodies and enacts. It embodies a particular stance or condition, by speaking a particular voice. And it enacts a trajectory of meditation, by moving from one voice to the next; sometimes one voice will hold for twenty lines, sometimes there are three changes in two lines, voices flickering or criss-crossing, till it has struck and orchestrated dozens of tonalities across the piece [...]

I'm after a wholly supple medium: polyphony, a voice that can metamorphose endlessly from moment to moment, gradually, abruptly, like an Einsteinian force-field, knotting and folding, and stalling and skittering back, perpetual live changing energy.

the voice keeps getting swung around by the successive new content and is changed by what it discovers at each new stage; those changes are enacted in the shifts of voice [...] a meditative quest rather than a poem [...] Ladoo isn't about a quest, it is the quest. (see Pearce 1979: 18, and Lee 1995: 29-43).

In the most devastating section of the poem (section 8 of the first part)

And as for you, Ladoo! —you never missed a trick.  
You soaked up love like a sponge, cajoling  
hundreds of hours, and bread, and fine-tuned publication,  
and then accepted them all with a nice indifference,  
as though they were barely enough. You had us taped, you knew white  
liberals inside out; how to  
guilt us; which buttons to push; how hard; how long. (50),

the poetic voice suddenly begins to say things that it would never have believed itself capable of saying, with a sort of cold, measured fury. The premature attempt to place Ladoo on a pedestal precipitates in the opposite direction—and both of these are partial truths—that is to say, he was capable of exploiting others shamelessly; this goes on for 25 verses. When the section finishes, the voice has drowned in its bitterness: “Ladoo, you bastard, goodbye; you bled me dry / You used me [...]”. And then, “goodbye and good riddance” (51).

After an interval of two sections dedicated to the intensity of the intellectual passion of those years, both among young Canadians and in Ladoo, the attack reappears in section 11 of the first part, but it turns against itself: if

someone attacks someone else, this implies that he has some moral superiority which gives him the right to attack the other. The voice is led to admit that the attribution of a fascination to Ladoo, making him the mythical image of the heroic, desperate outsider, had been necessary for the ego of the “nice WASP from the suburbs”:

For I needed you, Harold, as  
outlaw, rock-bottom  
loser  
[...]  
And I cherished that holy rage, I believe I  
sponged off it (53).

That is to say, the one who was judging is judged by the same kind of judgment that he himself had pronounced (it is impossible not to think of the chapter of Wilson Harris’s *The Four Banks of the River of Space*: the character goes into a courtroom, and is accused about the way he has lived his life, but also the judge comes under judgment: Harris 1993). The voice turns round again and fastens on to the discovery of the pathology of his attachment to Ladoo, with sarcastic self-criticism: “Say it: I used you, Harold, / like a hypocrite voyeur” (54).

The anxiety that unites them is that of the artist: it is thus appropriate that in the second part of the elegy the question is posed, “what good are poets in a time of dearth?” The verse comes from Hölderlin’s ‘Bread and Wine’: there, too, there is the dedication to a friend—who is alive—, there is the night surrounding the poet, there is the departure of heavenly beings and mourning on the earth: they were once here, and they will return. Hölderlin’s ‘God who is coming’ is Dionysus, a metaphor for the migration of cultures.

The question that Hölderlin poses, “I don’t know why (there are) poets in a time of dearth” is examined by Heidegger, who speaks of a time that is so poor that it cannot even recognise the lack of God as a lack, the lack of a basis, of a ground to sink one’s roots into, amid the growing bewilderment of our age. For Rilke, the time is one of poverty because mortals are hardly capable of understanding that they are mortals. Being poets in a time of dearth means taking the inspiration for one’s song from the trace of the gods that have fled. As they realise their loss of salvation, their damnation, the poets follow in the traces of the Sacred, they bring to mortal mankind the trace of the gods who have fled into the darkness of the night. Singing means expressly stating the existence of the world, the humanity of man, and the thingness of things.

Thus the poet’s voice calms down towards the end of the elegy:

People, people, I speak from  
private space but all these  
civil words keep coming and they  
muddle me! (63),

admitting that “Salvations come & go”, “epiphanies will come / as they will come, will / go”.

But when the meditation reaches its conclusion—“I loved you, and I owed you words of my own. / But speaking the words out loud had brought me close to the bone”—in the final stanza:

But to live with a measure, resisting their terrible inroads:  
I hope this is enough.  
And, to let the beings be.  
And also to honour the gods in their former selves,  
albeit obscurely, at a distance, unable  
to speak the older tongue; and to wait  
till their fury is spent and they can call on us again  
for passionate awe in our lives, and a high clean style. (66)

the speaker is a citizen of secularised modernity who feels at the same time an anxiety for spirituality, which he calls a “worship without belief. For no reason, except I have to. In darkness; in muteness; in desire”, he writes in an essay.

4. A meditation and an exploration that deal with the truth, at the point of interaction between the subject and experience: an epiphany of the conscience. This is poetry with a new codification: the choice of what kind of codification to give to one’s writings today becomes a necessary gesture of intimacy with oneself, first of all, and then of courage, and of heeding the imagination. An authentic writing, which possesses a composite energy: the maximum potential intracing one’s own mental liberty; a break with a large part of the intimistic self-referential poetry, whether neo-Baroque or minimalistic, that has been produced in recent years. A poetic writing which aims to project into reality, with all their implications and distances, the painful severances required by the reappropriation of meaning, the focal point of a singular quest of humanity, which, for the umpteenth time, wants to redesign the background that allows writing to be linked with thought, in the search for an earthly sense of both the finite and of mystery, together. A poetic writing unequivocally in contrast with much decadent contemporary writing, which is perennially waiting to flourish again in the light of a beau-

ty that is presumed and theorised, but unfortunately cannot be found in the text; and with a large quantity of poetry of the memory and overdeveloped narrative I's.

The rhythms of the words, the pauses, the changes of direction in the meditation and in the exploration, carry in the poem the hope of a discovered meaning. Disenchantment *is* the condition of this poetry and poverty *is* its destiny. Being poets in a time of dearth means taking the inspiration for one's song from the traces of the gods that have fled. And yet, this is not an oblivious evasion into myth, but a condition of dwelling in truth ("poetry deals with truth, but never communicates a determined content of truth", Heidegger 1950) with words that are resolutely, obstinately *for*, that is *in favour of*, a project, that of arriving, by a dissonant route, at a new consonance. The search for, and the use of, a language that acts as a propeller, and sets in motion an epiphany of the conscience: as a result of this epiphany, the reader feels that he is introduced into a search for his own heuristic procedures in daily experience (Magnani uses the metaphor of the propeller: "if this is well-traced, if the writer succeeds in choosing the cylindrical surface to move over, it will be natural for the reader to feel introduced into the search—which is only and exclusively his own—for his heuristic procedures in the field of daily experience. Which, who knows?, might become a take-off runway"; see Magnani 2001: 8, my translation).

This is what happened to me as I tried to work on, around, against, with, this poetic text. The meeting between the young man from Trinidad (and the epigraph from the *Dhammaphada*), the elegant WASP from Toronto (and Hölderlin, Rilke, Heidegger, Celan, etc.) and ourselves: ourselves as an association, and the task of promoting the meeting between our young students, and our studies, and the work of writers at the "margins", if possible, not as "hypocrite voyeurs." Lee's picture of the academic world is fairly ironic:

I just get embarrassed.  
Alienation and Integration: the Role of the Artist in Modern Society.  
Panel at 8, Discussion 8.30. Refreshments.  
And mostly I believe the artists further  
the systematic murder of the real, and if their work does have  
the tang of authentic life  
it is one more sign that they are in business to kill (59).

All of us as individuals, as well. When Lee's poetry meditates on mutual exploitation, is it right to remember that there is, also in us, the passion for these studies and the exploitation, both good feelings and career prospects? that we are sincere and time-servers at the sametime? What we continually

observe, that is to say, diffidence in university circles—which remain safely and staidly within traditional limits—towards these writers who, after winning admiration for their work, praises and prizes, end up by moving definitively to the West (see also the criticism of Rushdie in Indian universities), and the diffidence towards academic figures who base their careers on ‘fields’ of study not yet exploited (and here Wilson Harris also has something to say: see Harris 1992: 37-38), with an *escamotage*, therefore, or else enjoy a flight into the exotic—and it really seems at times that we are considered to be a phenomenon of the New Age.

But Lee’s poetry, which recognises all the complexities of these relationships, succeeds in finishing with words that are *for, in favour of* “the plain gestures of being human together”, on “the deep unscheduled ground of caring”, and he succeeds in pronouncing the “words of high release” after all.

This is what I would like to be said of our work. It is probably true that we are mutually exploiting each other: it is a good thing that we are aware of it, then, just as it is a good thing that we move over “a deep ground of caring”, that we accomplish “the plain gestures of being human together”, in the hope that the work we perform may be carried out in a “clean style”, sustained by passion and reverence.

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### **Abstract**

*L'incontro tra il caraibico Harold Ladoo e il canadese Dennis Lee è visto come emblematico di un incontro tra camerati che condividono una passione intellettuale e che si arricchiscono reciprocamente. L'elegia di Lee sulla prematura morte di Ladoo è esplorazione del rapporto tra integrato ed 'outsider', meditazione sulla condizione dell'artista "nel tempo della miseria", e, a causa dell'energia composita e dell'esigenza di 'soggiornare nella verità' che nutrono la ricerca del poeta, finisce con il riverberare su noi lettori e studiosi di letterature in inglese sia il rischio pur sempre potenziale dell'opportunistic sfruttamento dei nostri più nobili sentimenti, sia l'ostinata speranza di condividere con passione e reverenza la ricerca della nostra comune umanità, all'interno dei nostri studi letterari.*

## *Verso una poetica della relazione: fisica, matematica e cosmologia nella narrativa di Janette Turner Hospital*

Ivana Foti

L'opera della scrittrice australiana Janette Turner Hospital si presenta, in maniera esemplare, come crocevia della cultura moderna: il transculturalismo assume infatti diverse configurazioni nei suoi testi narrativi, presentandosi non solo come elemento tematico, all'interno di storie che hanno come protagonisti individui caratterizzati da una condizione di dislocazione sociale, culturale e geografica, ma anche come contaminazione di forme artistiche (frequenti, ad esempio, i riferimenti alla fotografia e alla pittura) e di campi culturali. In due dei romanzi più recenti della scrittrice, in particolare, la presenza di riferimenti alle teorie scientifiche moderne dà vita ad un interessante fenomeno di interazione tra sistemi intellettuali da valutare alla luce di un generale processo di rinnovamento dell'immaginario con la creazione di nuovi campi metaforici (Linguanti 2001).

Nei romanzi *Charades* (1988) e *The Last Magician* (1992), la scrittrice si richiama alle rivoluzionarie teorie della fisica moderna, con le quali è venuta in contatto soprattutto nel suo periodo di insegnamento al MIT, per sostenere a livello ideologico strutture tematiche e procedure compositive. Narrazioni che ruotano intorno alle operazioni di decifrazione del reale di parte dei personaggi – “urgent questers” insieme alla scrittrice (Hamelin 1993) – colti a districarsi nel groviglio dei fatti e delle loro interpretazioni, trovano sostegno filosofico privilegiato nelle implicazioni ideologiche delle teorie della fisica subatomica, che hanno minato alla base gli assunti della meccanica newtoniana, superando la logica degli opposti e introducendo i concetti di indeterminazione, comportamento probabilistico, interconnessione, approssimazione, complementarità.

Contraddicendo le leggi del determinismo e del meccanicismo, la nuova fisica offre la visione di una realtà dalla natura imprevedibile, paradossale.

Come è noto, nelle teorie della relatività speciale e generale elaborate da Einstein, l'opposizione tra spazio e tempo, categorie divenute ormai relative e soggette a curvatura, si dissolve nella quadridimensionalità dello spaziotempo. La meccanica quantistica scardina a sua volta l'idea classica di particelle solide elementari, mostrando come la materia sia costituita da entità che appaiono come configurazioni dinamiche e che assumono contemporaneamente le caratteristiche di particelle e di onde. Nella cosiddetta "interpretazione di Copenhagen" elaborata da Heisenberg e Bohr, inoltre, la materia si riduce a livello subatomico ad una distribuzione di probabilità, poiché le particelle hanno una "tendenza ad esistere" in luoghi e in tempi diversi; il principio di indeterminazione di Heisenberg esprime in una formula matematica la relazione tra le incertezze nella posizione e nella quantità di moto di una particella. La scienza del caos ha poi introdotto il concetto di imprevedibilità riguardo ai fenomeni naturali, individuando meccanismi per cui sistemi dinamici determinati si trasformano in sistemi erratici a causa di lievi variazioni che producono una fluttuazione dei valori.

Superamento dei binarismi spazio/tempo, esistenza/non esistenza, osservatore/fenomeno osservato, visione della realtà come rete dinamica di configurazioni di energia che danno vita ad una "danza cosmica" (Capra 1989: 259ss.), individuazione della probabilità e dell'imprevedibilità come elementi costitutivi del reale: sono questi gli aspetti della fisica moderna a cui la Hospital fa riferimento nei suoi romanzi, intrecciandoli a storie incentrate sulla *quest* di personaggi dal carattere erratico, colti a districarsi nella paradosalità del reale.

In *Charades* la fisica viene utilizzata come sistema di riferimento dalla protagonista, Charade, una giovane australiana in cerca del padre in America, nelle sue operazioni di ricostruzione del proprio passato e delle proprie origini. La relazione sentimentale che la protagonista instaura con Koenig, un professore di fisica teoretica, si accompagna ad un percorso di carattere conoscitivo che si basa sulla convinzione della ragazza che chiunque sia abituato a trattare con principi di indeterminazione e a confrontarsi con la paradosalità della realtà subatomica possa offrire spiegazioni e risposte anche in scala macroscopica, o che possa ricondurre il caos dell'esistenza all'eleganza di formule matematiche e alla coerenza di grandi teorie unificate: "I keep thinking to myself, anyone who has a handle on the issues of quarks and black holes, on space that is void of space... anyone who can say to me that the self-same photon is sometimes a particle and sometimes a wave, *depending on the context*... well, surely such a person has some answers" (26).

Entrambi coinvolti in operazioni speculative del reale, l'uno con rigore matematico, l'altra con l'atteggiamento erratico che la contraddistingue ("brilliant but erratic" la definisce un suo professore all'università, 21), Koenig e Charade sono accomunati dal condurre una *quest* relativa alle origini e dalla necessità di colmare delle "cracks": Charade cerca di ricomporre i tasselli della propria esistenza cercando il padre, Nicholas Truman, del quale possiede solo le frammentarie e contraddittorie informazioni che emergono dai racconti, spesso fantasiosi, di due donne che lo hanno amato, Bea, la madre di Charade – la "Slut of the Tamborine Rainforest" – e la "brainy" zia Katherine, chiamata Kay; Koenig invece elabora teorie relative all'origine dell'universo: il suo campo di indagine è infatti "the first second after time began, specifically that space between 10-30 and 10-35 of a second after the Big Bang itself, a crack large enough to swallow a life" (5).

Notte dopo notte Charade, la "hologram girl" (16), compone sciarade col proprio passato, raccontando a Koenig, come Scheherezade al suo re (Koenig significa infatti "re" in tedesco), della propria infanzia nelle foreste pluviali del Queensland e storie relative al passato di sua madre Bea e della zia Kay e all'ossessione di quest'ultima per la figura silenziosa e affascinante di Verity Ashkenazy, donna a sua volta amata da Nicholas. Attratta dai microfenomeni, dalla "smallest subatomic particle of the whole" (24), e affascinata dai "linkages", Charade ricostruisce il proprio passato disintegrandolo in una miriade di racconti, di storie, che non contengono "fatti", ma versioni diverse e interpretazioni che, come le particelle subatomiche, costituiscono configurazioni di probabilità. Secondo una modalità che ricorda i processi di interazione tra particelle subatomiche ma anche i frattali della teoria del caos (vedi anche Concilio 1997 e Linguanti *ibid.*), il filone narrativo principale si moltiplica in micronarrazioni che urtano tra loro, entrano in relazione, si disintegrano generando altri racconti. La realtà, di conseguenza, si dissolve in mille e una interpretazione, in mille e una versione, in un gioco di infinite rifrazioni (simbolicamente, davanti ad una torre di specchi a Toronto, Kay scambia Koenig per Nicholas). Del resto, come ci ricorda l'epigrafe posta all'inizio dell'ultimo capitolo, tratta da *Physics and Philosophy* di Heisenberg, "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning" (288). L'oggettività del reale, cioè, si dissolve nell'interazione tra il soggetto e l'oggetto dell'osservazione, che dall'operazione di misurazione esce inevitabilmente influenzato.

Nella sua operazione di ricostruzione e comprensione del proprio passato, Charade fa ricorso alle teorie della fisica subatomica, cercando in esse una

chiave interpretativa ed esplicativa delle incertezze e della paradossalità che caratterizzano la propria dimensione esistenziale. Affrontando con gli strumenti teorici forniti dalla fisica il problema della lacuna conoscitiva relativa alle proprie origini, Charade fornisce differenti versioni sull'identità di quel padre che sta cercando di continente in continente:

Hypothesis number one. My father, Nicholas Truman, was born in England and shipped to Australia as a boy; he may or may not have returned to England when he disappeared; he may or may not continue to spend his life as a global nomad, writing books, filing stories under a thousand and one different names. That is the particular history, the Particle Theory of my father's life.

Hypothesis number two: My father was never more than a platonic conception, an idealized object of adoration, in the minds of various people, most notably my mother and my aunt Kay: He glides forever on the crests of their imaginations. This is the Wave Theory of my father. (25)

Proprio come gli elettroni possono configurarsi contemporaneamente come particelle e come onde, così queste diverse interpretazioni, non escludendosi a vicenda, possono essere "right *and* wrong. Both" (14).

Alla luce della possibilità di coesistenza di interpretazioni opposte e complementari, è anche tragicamente possibile che l'orrore dell'Olocausto venga negato e che, nel processo di Zundel che si è tenuto a Toronto, la morte di milioni di persone possa essere interpretata come un fenomeno di allucinazione collettiva. Sullo sfondo del processo revisionistico del passato attivato da Charade, si staglia l'evento storico dell'Olocausto filtrato attraverso le vicende che coinvolgono Verity Ashkenazy, ebrea fuggita da un campo di concentramento, e attraverso il dramma psicologico vissuto da Rachel, ex moglie di Koenig, anche lei reduce da un campo di sterminio. Se, come risvolto tragico del principio di indeterminazione, è anche possibile che il fatto storico venga cancellato, l'effetto traumatico del passato continua però a gravare, con tutta la sua concretezza, sul presente: Rachel continua a scrivere lettere a suoi parenti morti nel campo di sterminio, coltivando l'illusione della complementarità tra esistenza e non esistenza; Verity invece, che sembrava "immunized against harm" (184), soccombe al trauma sprofondando negli abissi della pazzia.

Rappresentando un quadro di legami emotivi e ossessioni che attraggono individui come forze magnetiche, la scrittrice osserva interazioni tra personaggi come interazioni tra particelle che urtano tra loro, notandone contemporaneamente la distruttibilità (il cedimento di fronte al dolore) e l'indistrut-

tibilità, cioè la capacità di sopravvivere, di non soccombere, aggrappandosi agli spiragli di speranza offerti dalla ricerca continua.

L'erranza che contraddistingue Charade e la sua ricerca richiama la componente erratica dei sistemi dinamici individuati dalla scienza del caos, e con essi condivide, in conclusione, il fattore dell'imprevedibilità. Charade infatti, in cerca del padre, scopre infine che la sua vera madre è Verity, la donna chiamata "Sleeping Beauty" che aveva sempre considerato una delle sue tante sorelle. Come sottolinea Koenig, d'altronde, "The observer, by imposing a particular set of questions, also predetermines the answers he will find" (211). Nel momento in cui infatti Charade, su suggerimento di Koenig e dopo un sogno, sposta la direzione della propria indagine e rivolge delle domande a Bea scopre un risvolto insospettato della propria esistenza.

Nel finale del romanzo, Charade lascia Koenig per tornare a casa, nel Queensland. I suoi racconti dunque si interrompono, ma continua la sua *quest*, che contiene "her need, in the light of the tragedy of her mother, Verity Ashkenazy, to ask incessant and unanswerable questions about the nature of psychic damage, about the role of victim, about blame and responsibility" (289). Nel finale dunque cessa il racconto ma riprende il viaggio, che, dopo le speculazioni intellettuali e filosofiche, corrisponde ad un ritorno a quella che Koenig definisce "*one of our most persistent illusions*" (19), la materia, poiché è un ritorno alla corporeità e alla fisicità che caratterizzano Bea, principio vitale e materno. Quasi a riprodurre gli scenari ipotizzati dalle teorie cosmologiche relative alla contrazione dell'universo, Charade pone fine al proprio vagare erratico e centrifugo, compiendo un viaggio di ritorno alle origini. Quando, infatti, "the farthest splinters of the farthest galaxies go spinning far enough into outer cold, they will begin to return, to contract, to arc their elastic way back to the dense core where everything began, is beginning, keeps beginning and beginning again" (208).

Mai elemento statico, puramente conservativo, il recupero memoriale è dunque, nei romanzi della Hospital, un processo dinamico, creativo, che procede di pari passo alla speculazione epistemica. Non è più il futuro ad essere oggetto di divinazione, ma il passato, sempre carico di misteri e interrogativi, e di risvolti imprevedibili.

Il carattere intrinsecamente dinamico del passato, e la sua interazione continua con il presente emergono chiaramente in *The Last Magician*. Nel romanzo Lucy, la narratrice, nel tentativo di chiarire le dinamiche che hanno portato alla scomparsa di Charlie (l'"ultimo mago" del titolo), del proprio amante Gabriel e di Cat, donna vittima di emarginazione, dà vita ad un percorso nar-

rativo vertiginoso in cui a mano a mano riemergono antiche ossessioni e si ricompongono storie torbide di abusi e di violenze perpetrate dai potenti.

Le teorie scientifiche del caos, dei mondi paralleli, del “butterfly effect”, della rete cosmica informano a vari livelli il romanzo, diventando modelli di riferimento per interpretare le vicende, comprendere la dinamica compositiva del testo, coglierne i contenuti ideologici. In un romanzo in cui vengono indagati i meccanismi del potere e i fenomeni di sopraffazione sociale che operano sulla base di principi di esclusione, vengono dunque esaltati a livello compositivo e sul piano ideologico schemi mentali che oppongono l'imprevedibilità dei sistemi erratici al determinismo, le configurazioni di interazione tra elementi all'isolamento di unità costitutive fondamentali, i principi di complementarità e coesistenza alla logica dell'esclusione sulla base di opposizioni binarie, modelli, infine, dall'applicabilità limitata a sistemi di pensiero che si pretendono assolutistici.

Nel romanzo si nota un fenomeno di isomorfismo tra le tecniche narrative adottate a livello dispositivo e le implicazioni delle teorie scientifiche a cui il testo fa riferimento.

Annunciando uno scardinamento delle leggi che regolano i sistemi lineari, l'epigrafe al Book I, tratta dal libro di James Gleick *Chaos*, recita: “The first message is that there is disorder”. La diegesi viene infatti smembrata nel testo, parcellizzata in frammenti narrativi distribuiti in modo disordinato, secondo un procedimento che, annullando le leggi della causalità e della consequenzialità temporale, mira a creare una dimensione di “synchronous time and parallel space” (135), quasi a ricordarci le parole del fisico Louis de Broglie: “nello spazio tempo, tutto ciò che per ciascuno di noi costituisce il passato, il presente e il futuro è dato in blocco... Ciascun osservatore col passare del suo tempo scopre, per così dire, nuove porzioni dello spazio-tempo, che gli appaiono come aspetti successivi del mondo materiale, sebbene in realtà l'insieme degli eventi che costituiscono lo spazio-tempo esistesse già prima di essere conosciuto” (citato in Capra 1989: 216). La frantumazione della diegesi comporta una ridistribuzione dei vari tasselli secondo una procedura di accumulazione di elementi anche microscopici del passato in una vivacissima mobilità temporale che genera al contempo ellissi che sottraggono preziose informazioni al lettore. La narrazione procede dunque all'insegna di una sostanziale complementarità tra vuoto e forma, tra silenzio e parola, quasi a ricalcare le implicazioni della teoria dei campi, che raffigura la realtà della materia come un *continuum* dall'aspetto però “granulare” (Capra *ibid.*: 249), e in base alla quale l'opposizione tra vuoto e pieno perde significato.

Nel suo percorso di esplorazione e conoscenza la narratrice, posta di fronte alla difficoltà di districarsi in una “rete” di avvenimenti interconnessi nel tempo e nello spazio, si muove caoticamente in operazioni di decifrazione, misurazione, decodificazione del reale, consapevole del fatto che l’osservatore influisce sul fenomeno osservato e che, come esposto nella teoria relativa al cosiddetto “butterfly effect”, in un sistema di relazioni, in un tutto interconnesso, anche il battito d’ali di una farfalla, anche dunque il minimo turbamento può avere effetti considerevoli sul corso degli eventi: “is it true that the future is unalterable? Or can a watcher, a mere watcher, influence the course of events? [...] Watchers, after all, make choices; they choose what to see. And certainly the course of events changes the watcher. [...] I have read that the oscillation of butterfly wings in Brazil may set off storms in Texas” (82).

Il lettore, coinvolto nella stessa *quest* di significato e coerenza del narratore, a sua volta esperisce, nel percorso di lettura, la natura dinamica del tempo e l’interazione continua tra presente, passato e futuro. Alla luce delle informazioni via via acquisite nel disordine dispositivo, egli infatti torna indietro, compie verifiche, interpreta in una nuova ottica ciò che ormai dava per assunto. Come avviene diegeticamente, dunque, il passato (della lettura) torna prepotentemente nel presente, carico di nuovi significati. Una progressiva operazione di integrazione delle informazioni, che avviene per mezzo di recuperi completivi, provvede a ricomporre gradatamente il quadro diegetico, riproducendo così le implicazioni della teoria del caos come sistema strutturato, dotato di un proprio ordine interno. Ad una ricomposizione dei frammenti, tuttavia, non corrispondono una ricostruzione della verità e il raggiungimento di una conoscenza certa relativa alle sorti dei personaggi scomparsi. A conferma di quella “*necessity of uncertainty*” (11) di cui parlava Charade, il finale rimane aperto sul dubbio interpretativo, sospeso sul filo della speranza che unisce le due protagoniste Lucy e Catherine.

È questa apertura fiduciosa all’ignoto e al mondo – apertura che nel romanzo *Oyster* (1996) è metaforicamente rappresentata da una “gap” attraversata dal personaggio Mercy nella sua fuga finale – il messaggio che in conclusione la Hospital veicola nei suoi romanzi, affidandosi anche agli scenari subatomici fatti di imprevedibilità, connessioni, probabilità che le teorie scientifiche moderne ci hanno rivelato. L’incontro tra la fisica e la letteratura proposto dalla Hospital nei suoi romanzi non corrisponde dunque solo ad un’operazione che mira a creare una connessione a fini estetici e immaginativi. Si presenta come incontro tra sistemi intellettuali che hanno la potenzialità di suggerire configurazioni di relazione al travagliato mondo contemporaneo.

Le metafore basate sulle teorie scientifiche moderne diventano mezzo privilegiato per sostenere l'abolizione dei principi oppositivi e supportare una operazione estetica ed ideologica volta alla valorizzazione delle potenzialità creative, trasformative e dinamiche del reale. In un articolo dal titolo "The Open Door" (1996), lo scrittore guyanese Wilson Harris sottolinea l'importanza delle implicazioni ideologiche delle teorie della fisica moderna, e riporta un brano del libro di Nick Herbert *Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics*, che pone anche come epigrafe al suo romanzo *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1993): "Quantum reality consists of simultaneous possibilities, a 'polyhistoric' kind of being incompatible with our one-track minds. If these alternative (and parallel) universes are really real and we are barred from experiencing them only by a biological accident, perhaps we can extend our senses within a sort of 'quantum microscope'".

Come dimostrano, con modalità differenti, opere narrative come quelle della Hospital e di Harris, la letteratura può e vuole funzionare come un microscopio quantico che permette di vedere relazioni e di rivelare l'esistenza di infinite possibilità alla nostra percezione limitata, gettando le basi di quella "poetica della Relazione" invocata da Edouard Glissant in diversi scritti teorici. Lo scrittore martinicano, in *Poetica del diverso* (1998), coniuga la teoria del caos con i fenomeni di interazione culturale, rintracciando nell'imprevedibilità che caratterizza i sistemi deterministici erratici un elemento di affinità con le modalità di evoluzione dei rapporti tra le culture nel mondo contemporaneo. Bandendo ogni pessimismo che tale imprevedibilità potrebbe generare, Glissant sogna "un nuovo apprezzamento della letteratura [...] come scoperta del mondo, come scoperta del Mondo-tutto" (Glissant 1998: 73) e vede nell'esercizio dell'immaginario basato su quella che chiama "visione profetica del passato" (il corrispettivo della "sensibilità alle condizioni iniziali" dei sistemi erratici) un modo per affrontare e vivere l'imprevedibilità che caratterizza il "caos-mondo" (66 e segg.). E Janette Turner Hospital, con le sue "visioni profetiche del passato", con la forza immaginativa delle sue storie di personaggi erranti che sopravvivono alla violenza e al dolore ricercando connessioni e guardando all'infinitamente piccolo, ci offre un modo per "iscriverci nell'imprevedibilità della relazione mondiale" (72).

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## Abstract

*In this paper I discuss the way in which references to new scientific theories enter the narrative in Janette Turner Hospital's novels Charades (1988) and The Last Magician (1992) affecting it at different levels. I then argue that this phenomenon of interaction between science and literature, belonging to a wider literary process, points towards the creation of an Imaginary based on the promotion of the concept of Relation, as theorized by the writer Edouard Glissant.*



## *Bodies, Clothes, Habits: the Dilemma of Difference in Emily Carr and Anne Cameron*

Franca Bernabei

This paper focuses on the analysis of two passages, one from Emily Carr's "Ucluelet" (the first sketch of *Klee Wyck*, 1941) and the other from Anne Cameron's short story "Clowns" (included in *Daughters of the Copper Woman*, 1981). Both authors hail from the Canadian West Coast, but, of course, they belong to different times and have different reputations and affiliations, both cultural and personal. Emily Carr, who is known above all as a famous modernist painter, also published a significant body of autobiographical work and is now considered a feminist and ecologist *ante litteram*—a fore-mother, if you will, of Anne Cameron, a contemporary postcolonial, ecofeminist or ecocentric writer. A popular West Coast writer, she has published more than thirty books, children's books included. Her activity includes film scripts, TV, and radio programmes. In addition, Carr and Cameron share an interest in Native cultures and people which, as has often been pointed out, is primarily prompted by the need to project their own valutative standards and aspirations onto the other (Shadbolt 1997: 10-12; Kirkwood Walker 1996: 138-144; Davidson 1994: 25). Of course, to discuss this hermeneutic issue more fully, we would have to introduce the current debate about cultural representation. But if this is the unavoidable sub-text of my paper, my intention is, rather, to concentrate primarily on the texts themselves and extract from them two paradigmatic scenes of contact.

Before taking up this somewhat arbitrary but hopefully not pointless *abstraction*, let me recall that the scene of the Carr passage is lifted from the narrative context of autobiographical memory, while Cameron's belongs to a context of genealogical memory (a Native woman telling a story to her granddaughters). In the first case, the encounter with the places and peoples of the West Coast is evoked mostly as a pretext for the self-creation of an artist. As

a matter of fact, the scene I'll be dealing with represents a momentary suspension of that subjective vision which informs both the introductory and the closing parts of the sketch. Here the narrator for the most part presents her younger self as a detached, invisible witness rather than a participant observer personally involved in the dynamics of the encounter—the dynamics of which involve not only the Natives' reaction to her appearance but also, on her part, the deciphering of an otherness she doesn't know how to read (yet) but that she obviously judges according to her prior, "transparent", cultural standards (Rosaldo 1993: 198-204). Moreover, since the stress is primarily on Carr's ethically "innocent" approach to the Natives (she even makes herself much younger than she actually was at the time of her peregrinations), her depiction of this community places it in a timeless or apparently self-evident "ethnographic" frame.

In the second case, that of Anne Cameron, the ambit is that of an oral tradition in the process of disappearing, of stories "given" to the author by a secret society of Native women "whose roots go back beyond recorded history to the dawn of time itself" and freely adapted for publication. However, in spite of the stress given (in the Preface) to an original femininity which supposedly transcends or predates historical time, the colonial context of "Clowns" is quite evident and is, indeed, indispensable for a full understanding of its implications. "Clowns" is made up of two stories. In the second we are faced with the power of the fur trade and the Hudson Bay Company, which by the early 1840s had established its influence in the area and was capable of operating beyond the State. In "Clowns" the latter is represented by the Governor of Victoria (Vancouver Island became a colony in 1849, while British Columbia became a Crown Colony in 1858 and was annexed to the Confederation in 1871).

Speaking of her "Indian stories" Carr states: "I wanted to be true to the places as well as to the people. I put my whole soul into them and tried to avoid sentimentality. I went down deep into myself and dug up". Documentary truth is presented as the result of an archeological work of excavation within her self. And yet, the style of the delivery is intentionally Indian: "I tried to be plain, straight, simple and Indian" (Carr 1997: 864). Cameron, instead, inserts her "re-telling" in a chain of sharing and participating in a heritage of myths and traditions whose truth is in the stories themselves. In accordance with the Native notion of ownership, she claims that copyright remains with her since "A story can be passed on, re-told, or shared by a listener only if the person who owns the story gives specific and personal per-

mission.” Needless to say, her writing “most clearly approaches the style in which the stories were given to [her]” (See the “Afterword” and “Preface” to *Daughters*, cit. Later on, Cameron agreed to stop using Native culture and sacred stories in her books; Davidson 177).

No matter how “author-saturated” or “author-evacuated”, no matter how politically (un)correct Carr’s and Cameron’s “Indian stories” may be, their impact is inevitably the result of a cultural contamination owing to which “differences are brought together so they make contact” (Tostevin 1989: 13). But the point we must address is whether this “bringing together” really achieves that form of *co-operation* or cultural translation evoked by Native writers such as Harold Cardinal and Jeannette Armstrong and whether we actually do end up with a comparative approach capable of transforming one’s own evaluative standards and of displacing “our horizons in the resulting fusions” (Taylor 1994: 73).

I should say immediately that the two passages under discussion here are connected by the fact that both enact a microdrama of contact between two cultures and two sociopolitical forces, one of which is hegemonic with respect to the other. More than that, such microdramas hinge not only upon the coercive control of the former over the latter, but also, and perhaps above all, upon that oscillation between similarity and difference—or mimesis and alterity—around which confrontation with the other is played out and negotiated.

Before taking up the specific ambit of representation, let me briefly recall the extent to which a rhetoric of similarity and difference has been critical to the establishment and maintenance of Canadian sovereign authority over its Native peoples. The law has alternatively constructed Native peoples either as different or similar to non-Native people so as not to threaten basic categories of the Canadian legal imagination, and this interplay between the acknowledgement and denial of difference has strongly marked both aboriginal self-knowledge and the self-identification of the nation-state (Macklem 1993: 9-28).

The two texts under discussion, which are set in the colonial (Cameron) and late colonial (Carr) period of contact, deal with such dilemmas by fixing on the Native body, which is seen not so much as a surface on which constrictive socio-cultural codes are impressed as an autonomous agent of improvisation and recombination of these very codes. More than that, in both of them this body breaks into the time-space where the rules of colonial society are most enforced and reinforced: namely that of religious ritual. In Carr’s “Ucluelet” the body is old Tanook’s, who infringes upon the Missionaries’ norms and ostentatiously “trespasses” the space of the other:

The Missionaries insisted that men come to church wearing trousers, and that their shirt tails must be tucked inside the trousers. So the Indian men stayed away.

“Our trespasses” had been dealt with and the hymn, which was generally pitched too high or too low, had at last hit square, when the door was swung violently back, slopping the drinking bucket. In the outside sunlight stood old Tanook, shirt tails flapping and legs bare. He entered, strode up the middle of the room and took the front seat. (9)

In Cameron’s “Clowns” the body is that of a woman-clown:

“Well, one Sunday didn’t the clown show up. She was wearin’ a big black hat, just like a white man, and a black jacket, just like a white man, and old rundown shoes some white man had thrown away. And nothin’ else.” (111)

These scandalous violations/irruptions remind us of how every society is made of places and bodies, as anthropologists have recently suggested; that is to say, it is made of bodies which live, operate, interact and inhabit certain places. The semantic connection between *inhabiting* and *having certain habits*—thus, the idea of wearing certain dresses (in Latin *habitus* refers both to dress and look, disposition, or character)—is reinforced by the connection between body and custom (habit)/costume (an ambivalence present in the Latin *mos*). In short, the body can be said to mediate between places and customs, *habitat* and *habitus* (Remotti 1993: 30-46). In this light, the arrival of the colonizers and the missionaries entails a form of intervention which modifies the Native space as well as the bodies inhabiting it, cuts into it, leaves signs, and brings about separations and boundaries between culture and nature that no longer match the originary context. In Carr’s sketch we find a double inscription, both disciplinary and pedagogical, in the building which serves as a schoolhouse during the week and a church on Sundays, while the cow’s horn used to call the children to class becomes a church bell.

Tanook, who does not wear the prescribed *habitus*, is actor and protagonist of a complex performance of partial imitation and partial resistance. He puts on the colonizer’s shirt but does not tuck it inside his trousers, preferring to let it flap free over his bare legs. By wearing the white man’s costume, the woman-clown even more glamorously trespasses the limits of decency (she is half-naked) and gender (she is half-man). Her transgression, then, is more radical, as the different narrative and rhetorical strategies adopted by the two writers testify.

In “Clowns” the prescriptive control of the church is explicitly stressed:

“So the people started goin’ to this church, and pretty soon it was just like the same old story. They started gettin’ told what to do, and what to wear, and how to live, and this particular preacher, he was big on what they ought to wear... And he kept tellin’ everyone to learn to live like the white man, dress like the white man.” (111)

Here, evidently, the contrast/contamination between mimesis and alterity rhetorically hinges on the repetition of “like” appearing right after the above passage, in which the clown’s attire is described, with the conclusive “nothin’ else” to top it off (see previously cited passage above). In this case, however, the transcultural recombination (Rosaldo 1993: 215) of the various pieces of clothing takes place within an exclusively Native context of ethical and social control of the community’s *mores*. Such savvy makes the clown “as important to the village as the chief, or the shaman, or the dancers, or the poets” (109). Both as actress who enacts moral representations and as character who acquires meaning through social performance, the woman-clown can wear any kind of costume she chooses (“Anything they felt like, they wore” [109]) and put on or take off her clothes at will (“Wasn’t nothin’ sacred to a clown” [110]).

Essential for this activity of reconstitutive re-dressing, or perhaps desacration, is the partial imitation of the other. Far from meaning that one passively repeats the other, however, the act of mimicry more accurately entails offering oneself as a mirror, so that the members of the community may emerge as others to themselves. As the following passage bears out:

“It was like you were real vain about your clothes, all of a sudden, the clown would be there walkin’ right behind you all decked out in the most godawful mess of stuff, but all of it lookin’ somehow like what you were wearin’... (109)

A clown didn’t do what a clown did to hurt you or make fun of you or be mean, it was to show you what you looked like to other people...” (110)

Hence her autonomy (which does not mean dissociation), her inviolability and unquestioned authority.

Tanook’s half-decked body is dialectically opposed to that of the women who clearly show that they have internalized the codes of behaviour, the bio-power exerted over them, with all the comic-grotesque effects of compression and mortification of their sexed corporeity that inevitably follow:

The Indian women with handkerchiefs on their heads, plaid shawls round their shoulders and full skirts billowing about their legs, waddled leisurely towards church. It was very hard for them to squeeze their bodies into the children's desks. They took two whole seats each, and even then the squeezing must have hurt (9)

On the contrary, far from causing "quick intakes of horror" (9), the clown's nakedness in Anne Cameron's story elicits respect and candid confrontation from the people in the church. So much so that the white preacher "just about had a fit":

"Well, the white preacher, he just about had a fit! Here's this woman more naked than not, walkin' into his church, and what's worse, the people in the church are all lookin' at her respectful, not mockin' her or laughin' or coverin' their eyes so that they wouldn't see her nakedness..." (111-2)

Significantly, Tanook's performance is embedded not only in the above description of the Indian women but also in a scene in which we are faced with his wife's humiliation. In fact, when she takes off her shawl, it is passed from hand to hand under the desks to the front of the room and then laid across the trespasser's bare legs. Although instructed by "a gentle voice from the back of the room which told [him] in pure Indian words what he was to do" (9-10), Tanook twists the shawl around his middle and leaves, as noisily and ostentatiously as he had arrived. The woman, whose heroic act has saved her husband's dignity in front of the missionaries but at the same time has shamed her before her people, waits with her face "sunk down on her chest" till everybody leaves. Because, as the narrator (who has now resumed her interpreting function) explains, "It is considered more indecent for an Indian woman to go shawl-less than for an Indian man to go bare-legged" (10).

Therefore, the dialectic that obtains here between mimesis and alterity and between body and habitus leaves unresolved the contrast between Indian dignity and Christian morals and that between dignity and shame within one own's *mores*. In Cameron's text this same dialectic is dealt with in a more provocative and radical way. The clown's selective cross-dressing intentionally exhibits the momentary failure of categorial distinctions, of the differences that colonial culture produces or invents in relation to other cultures, other societies, or within its own society, gender included. At the same time, her half-dressed body becomes the locus of invention for an alternative system of values which shows the interaction among power, domination and sexual difference. After all, it is power that constructs the body in a certain

way and thus helps to determine gender. Indeed, this alternative system, which is the result of a contamination—or of a mediation—between the Native healer’s “dwelling” and the white preacher’s “travelling” (Clifford 1997: 17-46), pivots on the ambiguity of that “looking somehow” mentioned in Cameron’s text.

The old Indian’s voluntary or involuntary challenge is fundamentally unmotivated, and it delegates to the semiotic but not verbalized language of the body the conditions of its readability. If the fool as hero (Brydon 1994: 26) is silent, then Cameron’s heroine as fool becomes the agent of her own word, subject and not object of analysis. She also provides us with a lesson on tolerance, on the ethical acknowledgement of cultural difference, and on one’s accountability regarding the members of the local society. Thus we read:

And she said different people had different ways of doin’ things, and that didn’t mean any one way was Right or any other way was Wrong, it just meant all ways were different. And she said we ought to think how we’d feel if there were only a few brown faces and lots of white ones, because maybe the preacher felt that way about bein’ almost alone with us... (112)

In the light of this concern for cross-cultural interpretation and understanding, she enacts at the same time what Renato Rosaldo would call a performance of “cultural stripping” (201) and cultural creation. And in contrast with Emily Carr’s text, she also concretely faces up to the interaction between culture and power, dominating and subordinate forms of knowledge, as well as the inevitable bio-political gap determined by contact.

This is tragically confirmed in a second episode in which the clown’s subversive mirroring leads directly to her death. This time her body becomes much more seriously scandalous (from the Greek meaning “obstacle”), not because of its partial nakedness but because it breaks into the habitus—which, according to Pierre Bourdieu, means the inner logic and regulations of a competitive field of social relations—of the fur trade, and is thus capable of operating beyond the state or, for that matter, any other formal system of legitimacy. As the grandmother recounts:

“More and more the company was just handin’ out junk, and private traders were steppin’ in with a few blue beads and lot of rum, and it was all a real mess.”

“And this same clown woman, she took herself down to Victoria and she set up shop right next to Hudson Bay. Hudson Bay would give beads, so she had bits of busted shell. They’d give molasses, so she had wild honey;

They'd give rum, so she had some old swamp water. And she just sat there. That's all she did, was just sit there..." (113)

Her "dumb", "not quite" (Bhabha 1994: 85-92) imitation fully succeeds, but she is finally killed when she tries to block the rum trade. And in doing so, she trespasses the porous border between cultural incomprehension and brutal colonial repression.

It is, therefore, from the crisscrossed and hybridized confluence of mimesis and alterity that a paradox is produced. By availing itself of bodies, habitats and habits, the nation-state determines a difference at the very moment in which it wants to eliminate it. This is, according to H. Bhabha, the fundamental ambivalence of colonial power. It affirms itself as universal and yet is obliged to discriminate; it asserts its authority but, inasmuch as it must be imitated, repetition inevitably produces a difference (107-8). Or, if we prefer, the nation-state produces a slippage between bare life (the body) and politics, which rather than being a coherent whole, a form-of-life shared by everybody, fragments into various identities—administrative, legislative, bureaucratic, competitive (Agamben 1996: 13-19).

The tangle of regulations that has sanctioned the legislated identity of the "Indian" is an outstanding case in point when it comes to Canada's attempt to civilize and then "citizenize" those "natives" whose very existence and "scandalous" resistance to assimilation contradicted the fiction of the implied coincidence between nativity and nation. And yet, it is from the immediacy of the social members' particular, situated practices rather than from the sharing of collective norms and symbolic structures (Fele and Giglioli 2001: 31-2), that that creative non-order, that articulation of new cultural and ethical/political demands which is the unavoidable stance of (post)modernity, can emerge.

Let me conclude by returning once more to the body and consider it not only from a cultural or political perspective but also from a philosophical one. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's fascinating suggestions, we can conceive it as an exteriority, a surface, an instance of bare existence: a sensitive singularity which overturns the notion of intimacy because there is no inner self to begin with unless it is already *with*-others, in the simultaneity and concomitance of our existing. In the light of this proximity, which does not simply offer itself to the other's gaze but rather places itself alongside of the other, every presence is shared and there is being only in a "singularly plural" *co*-existence. Is this advocacy of an ontological con-division, or—if we prefer to side-step the pitfalls of ontology—is this advocacy of a more elusive and contingent geog-

raphy of proximity a feasible approach to the problem of our existing in a multicultural context; located as all of us are, by now, not “at the edge of nowhere” (this is how Carr defined her beloved West Coast) but at the centre of an interdependent world, less and less internally homogeneous and more and more “on edge”? I’d like, at least, to think so.

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### **Abstract**

*Due testi, rispettivamente di Emily Carr e Anne Cameron, mettono in scena, sia pure con accentuazioni diverse, un microdramma della complessa interazione e della sfasatura bio-politica prodotte dall'incontro tra due culture di cui l'una è egemonica nei confronti dell'altra. In entrambi i casi il corpo nativo appare, momentaneamente, come agente di improvvisazione e ricombinazione dei codici socio-culturali che avrebbero dovuto esservi iscritti.*

**INFANZIA**  
***CHILDHOOD***



## *Children, Dwarfs and Storytellers: “Elfin Figures” in William Trevor’s Fiction*

Silvia De Rosa

In William Trevor’s novels set in England and written during the sixties and the seventies there is a recurrent kind of character who presents some basic features: he is Irish, he is a scoundrel, he is dirty and shifty-looking, and he is usually short and/or very thin; moreover, perhaps the most important quality of all, although he definitely plays the part of the antagonist, is that he is somehow innocent, untouched by the evil he inflicts on other people. This happens mainly because the “Irish scoundrel”, as I have dubbed this kind of character, is, or has been, a victim in the first place and cannot behave differently because he does not know any other kind of behaviour.

His past is often mysterious and so is the place he comes from: this detail assumes particular relevance if one considers how important belonging to a place is in Irish culture and therefore in Irish literature as well. As Seamus Heaney claims in his essay “The Sense of Place”, “to know who you are, you must have a place to come from” (Heaney 1985: 135), and this belief can be connected to the importance given to the land by rural traditions. Those who do not possess land, who are not actually tied to it and to its rhythms, are outsiders, tinkers: these “do not belong”. This fact of being outsiders is further worsened in these novels by the same fact that these “scoundrels” are Irishmen in England. Their task in the plot is, usually, to disturb the tranquil, often snug lives of the protagonists, or, more generically, the whole system of hypocrisy on which these lives are built: for instance Septimus Tuam, in *The Love Department* (Trevor 1970), is a dark, small Irishman who has come from nowhere and who seduces the bored housewives of the fashionable neighbourhood of Wimbledon in order to enjoy these women’s money, but what he actually does is to expose the emptiness of their marriages. He does not know to what extent he damages his victims, because what matters to him is to sur-

vive: just like an animal, Septimus is propelled by an inner instinct which does not involve any moral principle. In this sense, Septimus and the other Irish scoundrels are not immoral, but amoral. Of course, disrupting the established system, often by exposing the truth, is a task that only an outsider can carry out: truth itself, in a world based on appearances, is an “outsider” which must be silenced.

This “Irish scoundrel” type is reworked into more complex versions in Trevor’s Irish short stories, and I have grouped these characters under the name of “elfin figures” because in one way or another they look like gnomes and fairies and sometimes are even somehow connected with the devilish world of magic. “Elfin figures” are, like Irish scoundrels, small, dark, shifty, and usually of apparently fragile build; they are outsiders in the world they live in for one reason or another, and though they often damage other people by their actions, nonetheless they succeed in keeping a certain sort of innocence. The main differences between these characters and the earlier, simpler kind are first of all that they are depicted with a greater richness in their individual psychological features, second, they are given a deeper symbolic value; third, the issues connected to this group are more complex and important; this point will be discussed more thoroughly later on, and is the core of this paper.

The presence of a similar kind of character has been detected by Kristin Morrison in her critical study of Trevor’s fiction. Morrison calls “holy fools” (Morrison 1993: 143) those characters who, by transcending both good and evil, have the capacity to reveal the truth without paying attention, however, to the consequences of this action. Morrison has created this category, which includes also children, in order to support her critical vision of Trevor’s works, which is an attempt to construct a logical system of interrelated principles and topics at the heart of the whole production of the writer. What identifies holy fools is, according to Morrison, a certain estrangement from the outside world and a basic innocence—sometimes even mental derangement, qualities which make them outsiders and therefore ideal truth-tellers. In Trevor’s fictional world, where appearance is what matters, truth is a dangerous weapon that must be eschewed all the time: for this reason, truth-tellers of every kind are of utmost importance in Trevor’s stories insofar as they expose and threaten the established order.

“Elfin figures”, though very similar to “holy fools”, are, unlike them, not always truth-tellers and are sometimes closely related to Evil, while “holy fools” are in general positive characters, connected with Good. Also, while

physical similarity is not important among “holy fools”, “elfin figures”, as described above, share some basic common features among them.

A typical instance of “elfin figure” in Trevor’s Irish short stories is Mr. Purce, in the story “Attracta” (Trevor 1993: 675): short, bad-natured, always dressed in black, a bachelor in a world where singles are looked down upon, Mr. Purce is also a very fastidious man and the whole village where he lives avoids his company as he is considered an eccentric; in short, he is an outsider. The truth he reveals to a young Protestant girl, Attracta, concerns her foster parents, two Catholics who, when younger, killed Attracta’s parents by mistake in an ambush, and eventually tried to amend their act by helping the little orphan. Purce’s purpose is to perpetuate hate between Catholics and Protestants, the same hate which caused Attracta’s parents’ death: in this sense, he is definitely a truth-teller, but a diabolical one. Therefore it is not inappropriate that Purce’s malign influence is frustrated by a man of the church, Archdeacon Flower, who acts almost like an exorcist fighting against a demon who is trying to possess the girl’s mind.

Another similar example of the “elfin figure” is Quigley, a mentally retarded dwarf who, in the story “An evening with John Joe Dempsey” (255), recounts to young John Joe the villagers’ private lives in detail. Quigley possesses that kind of “innocent wickedness” referred to at the beginning of this paper in that he has a negative influence on the boy; however, being insane, Quigley does not realise how much he damages John Joe. The fact that both the dwarf and Mr. Purce are truth-tellers, storytellers and outsiders calls into question a major issue in Trevor’s work, that is, the role of the writer.

Trevor has often described himself as a storyteller, adding that his “fiction may, now and again, illuminate aspects of the human condition” (Shakespeare 1991): therefore, he clearly connects the representation of reality with the kind of fiction he writes, but on the other hand to define himself he employs a term which carries some meaningful connotations. In fact, traditional storytellers were considered as a sort of magician who had the power of entrancing people simply by uttering words, that is, by putting spells on them. William Trevor seems perfectly aware of his link with these ancient storytellers when, in *A Writer’s Ireland: Landscape in Literature*, he writes: “Professionalism... would have drawn the storyteller to the edge of society, making him both special and an *outsider*... travel was what they came to understand.” (Trevor 1994: 26, emphasis added) And again: “The storyteller was reverently regarded, a man of magic and of thrall because of the riches of his tongue.” (134)

What is interesting is that Trevor uses here the same terms he usually employs to describe himself: first of all, the expression “at the edge of society”, which can be found in an interview he gave to Stephen Schiff (Schiff 1992: 163); secondly, “outsider”, a word Trevor widely employs in his autobiography *Excursions in the Real World*: “I was fortunate that my accident of birth actually placed me on the edge of things. I was born into a minority that all my life has seemed in danger of withering away. This was small time Protestant stock, far removed from the well-to-do Ascendancy of the recent past.” (Trevor 1993: xiii)

“The writer’s stance is different. He needs space and cool...To do so, he has to stand back—so far that he finds himself beyond the pale, outside the society he comments upon in order to get a better view of it.” (xii-xiii) And this is what he says about his life in Ireland in an interview released to Mira Stout: “...Being a Protestant in Ireland was a *help*, because it began the process of being an *outsider*—which I think all the writers have to be [...]. Poor Protestants in Ireland are...displaced persons in a way—which is really very similar to what a writer should be...” (Stout 1989: 131-132)

By now, it should be clear that the writer identifies himself with outsiders and, as such, he assumes on himself the role of truth-teller about the society which surrounds him. However, there is a partial inconsistency which must be taken into consideration: if the storyteller is a magician who has the power to enchant people, there is a strong possibility that he could be a liar instead of a truth-teller. Trevor seems conscious of this when he examines the power of fiction on readers in two novelettes collected under the title *Two Lives*, in which he presents two characters living in a world of fantasy because of too much reading. John Banville writes as follows about *Two Lives*: “At a deep level...there is a radical, perhaps even subversive, criticism of the art of fiction. [...] Does fiction sustain us, and feed the heart, or is it merely another means of self-delusion which will disappoint and cheat us, and leave us isolated in the foolishness of our dreams?” (Banville 1991: 30)

For a writer who has always claimed his total commitment to writing the truth about society, this is a major issue, and in fact, all his “Irish scoundrels” and some of his “elfin figures” are not truth-tellers, or, if such, they have the negative effect of isolating themselves or their victims into a fictional world of dreams—which is what in the end happens to John Joe. Moreover, the role of the reader is one of Trevor’s main points of interest, since he considers the reader as “the other half” of the creative process, as he tells Stephen Schiff: the Reader becomes a kind of detective who tries to solve a puzzle by finding

the missing pieces that the Writer has omitted: “It’s up to the reader to put the clues together [...]. It’s like a lot of jigsaw pieces, and the reader has got some of them and you’ve got some of them... It’s the other half of your imagination. It’s almost as if you divided your imagination in two...” (Schiff 1992: 161)

Finally, there is another similarity which joins Trevor to storytellers: as a child, Trevor travelled all around Ireland as his father was transferred from one bank to another, a situation which put him even more “at the edge of things” and brought him close to traditional travelling storytellers. The relationship between the author and his childhood is of fundamental importance to detect the links between him and his work and must be analysed more closely.

When asked by Mira Stout and Suzanne Paulson about his primary source of inspiration, Trevor answered:

I think it’s more likely that *my sense of tragedy comes from childhood*. And I say that because countries—one’s own country—haven’t anything to do with human relationships, whereas something you observed in childhood so often has. That is where I think both tragedy and comedy come from. (Stout 1989: 129, emphasis added)

A huge amount of what I write about is internal, a *drifting back into childhood*, based on a small event or a moment. (137, emphasis added)

As far as I can remember, I wasn’t an observant child. It is the passing of time between childhood and now that allows me to dwell naturally on childhood images. (Paulson 1993: 117)

However, these statements leave one major problem unsolved: in particular, the sentence “drifting back into childhood” is rather ambiguous, especially when one considers that Trevor has always claimed his total lack of interest in writing about himself. As he has said to Mira Stout: “Personally the last person I want to know about is myself...I am totally uninterested in myself.” (Stout 1993: 148)

In my opinion, the only way in which this question can be solved is by seeing children as actual representations of William Trevor himself as writer, as outsider, as storyteller and as truth-teller. In fact, most of Trevor’s short stories are set in the years of his childhood, and those which feature children as protagonists are told in the first person by them, following in the manner of Frank O’Connor and James Joyce. Moreover, these children are all outsiders and often affected by a split personality, which seems a tragic version of that interior exile reputed by Joyce as the only way by which an artist could free himself of the ties with the surrounding society. As seen above, although less polemically, William Trevor seems to agree with Joyce when he claims that

the writer should be an outsider, because outsiders only, seeing things “at a distance”, are able to have an objective vision of society. Finally, these children are all potential or effective truth-tellers.

I would like to conclude this paper with two examples of “elfin figures” who are storytellers as well. The first is not a child, but he exemplifies perfectly the figure of travelling magician I have outlined above; the second one is indeed a child and, in my opinion, is the most accomplished version of the writer’s presence in his fiction because he embodies all the qualities and the issues examined here.

Mr. Dukelow, a character in the story “A Choice of Butchers” (Trevor 1993: 302), is a journeyman, apparently with no past, small, of fragile build, with delicate hands and an incredible skill in learning new crafts. All these qualities not only make him a typical “elfin figure” and an obvious outsider without a place to belong to, but they also grant him a place in the household he has come to live in in order to become a butcher. In fact, he rapidly takes the place of his rude, dirty, clumsy boss in the latter’s wife and son’s hearts. Besides, Mr. Dukelow is depicted as a travelling storyteller connected with the world of magic: for instance, he tells bedtime stories to the young protagonist and he leaves a coin under his pillow like the tooth fairy. So it is not surprising that, when he is forced to leave the house, the rude butcher, again in control of his world, hints at a possible diabolic connection; for him, Mr. Dukelow is a magician who has cast a spell on his family with his enticing words: ‘A chancer like that ...Sent up *from Satan*...Sent up *to make wickedness*.’ (314-315, emphasis added)

In the story “Downstairs at Fitzgerald” (718), Little Abrahamson seems at first an insignificant character; on the contrary, he represents all the various kinds of “elfin figures” examined up to this point. He is a short, dark, ugly child, avoided by the other children because he is a know-all. His truth-telling involves one of his classmates, Cecilia, whose mother has remarried her former husband’s best friend: Abrahamson is convinced that Cecilia’s mother had an affair with this man before divorcing her husband, and therefore that Cecilia herself is not the daughter of the man she considers as her father, but of the man who is now her mother’s husband. He makes so many innuendoes to Cecilia about her resemblance to her step-father, that in the end it is she who actually asks him to reveal the sad truth to her. This is the pivotal scene of the story:

‘It isn’t a likeness or anything, Cecilia. Not a strong resemblance, nothing startling. It’s only a hint, Cecilia, an inkling you could call it.’

'I wish you hadn't told me.'  
'You wanted me to.'  
'Yes, I know.' (728)

The relationship between Cecilia and Abrahamson is exactly like the one which creates itself between Reader and Writer, at least according to Trevor's theories quoted above; in fact, Cecilia, tries to solve the riddle by gathering hints and clues from Abrahamson's allusions, but in the end she gives up and asks him to give the (sad) solution. Thus, the boy can be compared to the Writer, while the girl, in her attempt to complete the partial truth given to her, becomes "the other half" of his creative mind. This correspondence is strengthened also by the fact that Trevor has often been accused by his readers of writing "gloomy things" (Schiff 1992: 158), just as Abrahamson is reproached by Cecilia because he has unveiled a painful truth. Finally, in order to describe the young boy, the author employs in the story two expressions he uses also to define his personality in Schiff's interview and in his autobiography, that is, "self-effacing" (Trevor 1993: 728; Schiff 1992: 158) and "content to remain on the edge of things" (Schiff 1992; Trevor 1993: xiii).

In conclusion, Abrahamson, a child, an outsider, and an unpleasant truth-teller, is perhaps the most successful—because well concealed—embodiment of Trevor himself and a figure who encompasses all the principal features of Trevor's alienated children. At the same time, if this young boy is considered as a metaphor for the Artist in general, then in Trevor's fiction children and artists are equally stigmatised as potential disrupters of the society's hypocritical rules through the revelation of inconvenient truths, and for this same reason they are rejected by society itself. Perhaps it is not too far flung to say that William Trevor continues the tradition begun by Yeats and pursued by other writers of short stories such as Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty, whose works present children as *alter egos* of the Artist by celebrating their innocence and purity (Kiberd 1996: 101-102, Averill 182: 103,117). On the other hand, Trevor seems to share Joyce's vision of the artist as a rebellious outsider, though he eliminates the most controversial connotations of this role.

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## Abstract

*Questo lavoro rappresenta un excursus su un particolare tipo di personaggi che ritornano costantemente nell'opera dello scrittore irlandese William Trevor; specialmente nelle short story: gli "elfin figures". Queste figure, la cui natura sta in bilico tra il reale e il magico, sono degli estranei rispetto al mondo che li circonda, ed è per questa ragione che essi sono dotati di una potenziale ed eversiva capacità di rivelare scomode verità. Questa caratteristica li avvicina quindi al ruolo solitamente attribuito allo scrittore e all'artista, una convinzione di cui si fa portavoce lo stesso Trevor. Ad esempio, nei suoi racconti egli impiega i bambini come "elfin figures" privilegiate in quanto personificazioni ben celate dello scrittore stesso.*

## *“Not to Forget”: the Japanese American Relocation Camp Experience in Four Books for Children*

Elisabetta Marino

As Peter Hunt pointed out in his seminal *Introduction to Children's Literature* (1994), “children’s writers [...] are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values, rather than simply ‘telling’ a story.” (Hunt 1994: 3) They encourage the readers to identify and emulate the positive models they are setting, and act as “interpreters”, “translators” of the complex and many-sided world into the stigmatized reality of *good* and *bad*, *white* and *black*, the only one that children are supposedly capable (and allowed by the adult writer) to understand. It is therefore relevant to notice the limited number of American children’s books featuring, as main characters, children of Asian ancestry and their *realistic* experiences (particularly their fight for integration) which, in the words of writer Sandra Yamate, “serves to maintain the *invisibility* of these issues and adds to the sense of *invisibility* that so many Asian Americans experience.” (Sandra Yamate, personal correspondence, March 4, 2000) In fact, since the beginning of their immigration to the US, people of Asian origins had to negotiate their identity by struggling between the preservation and the rejection of their cultural heritage (sometimes perceived as an embarrassing burden preventing their assimilation into mainstream America). They had to cope with the “glass ceiling” and the parallel demands of the American society (its myths of wealth and success). Most of all, they had to grapple with a long series of stereotypes according to which they were “hyphenated” people, a “model minority” (always silent, obedient and hard-working), men were either “rapists” or completely “emasculated”, while women were hyper-sexed, commodity-like geishas ready to satisfy every wish of the “truly *real*” American: the WASP. Therefore, even nowadays, as Yamate remarks, “children of Asian Pacific ancestry are still more likely to find books featuring anthropomorphic animals and creatures of fan-

tasy than people who look like them and their families.” (Yamate 1997: 3) Moreover, the existing books—even some memoirs—seldom aim at enabling children to internalize and personalize their ethnic identity, thus feeling comfortable with their multiple roots. On the contrary, they often strengthen a biased perception of reality and, quoting again Yamate, either ignore completely any issues of cultural identity or describe the escape from a bleak and backward Asian country of origin to find happiness and fulfilment in the land of opportunities: America.

The books for children and young readers I would like to analyze in this paper seem to contrast this tendency by wishing “not to forget” and to hand on from generation to generation an important, painful and controversial episode of the American history, another example of unfairness against Asian Americans. These volumes are in fact focused on the writers’ experience of the relocation camps where, after the tragedy of Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), the *Issei* (Japanese emigrated to America but not officially acknowledged as citizens) and also the *Nisei* (US-born Japanese American citizens) were interned for fear of espionage until the end of the War. While fighting against the Nazi’s rule, the Americans paradoxically applied very similar, though not so abominable, measures of control against their own country-fellows, just because of their sallow complexion and slanted eyes.

However, as I intend to demonstrate following Yamate’s criticism, notwithstanding their efforts to remember, and remind the young generations of such an excruciating experience, some Asian American writers are caught into the same web of stereotypes and biased views they wish to set their readers free from, thus reinforcing rather than dispelling a partial understanding of the historical events and of the cultural identity of Asian Americans in general. My analysis will be therefore divided into two sections: at first I will focus on two books which successfully aim at helping Japanese American children resolve their ethnic identity conflicts and find a balance between two cultures that, once, were at war with one another. In the second part I will focus on two other volumes in which the expected message of tolerance and integration, seems to turn into a mere hymn to a thorough Americanization, beyond the hindrance of the “Oriental” facial features.

Section I. The first book is *The Children of Topaz, the Story of a Japanese American Internment Camp* (1996). Collected and edited by Michael Tunnell and George Chilcoat, this is the true, illustrated classroom diary written by third-grade students interned in the relocation camp of Topaz (Utah), opened

on September 11, 1942. Together with Manzanar (California), Topaz was one of the harshest camps, mostly due to its location in the desert, at 4600 feet. The unfinished barracks were extremely cold at night and terribly hot during the day, besides being filled with dust, penetrating through the cracks in the walls during the frequent dust storms that almost choked the prisoners. Although they were confined in a barbed-wired, limited space manned with armed soldiers, with no privacy and little food to survive, these children were still willing to recite “the Pledge of Allegiance” every morning and honor the American flag, which is the most frequent drawing in the diary. On March 11, 1943 we read: “Please, remember to put 10% of your pay into war bonds and stamps” (Tunnell & Chilcoat 1996: 18), while on May 18 of the same year we read: “We have a large box filled with nails. Every day we bring more and more nails for Uncle Sam” (38). This is an obvious reference to the recycling policy adopted by the United States in times of war aiming to turn everything possible into bullets and weapons. The patriotic drawing of this page shows a border of nails surrounding two crossed American flags. The most moving of the pages, however, is the one recalling “the Japanese American Combat team” which “left Topaz to join Uncle Sam’s army” (44). The children were writing about the famous all-Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a unit approved by President Roosevelt and assigned to the most difficult and risky tasks. It was the most decorated, but also suffered the highest incidence of deaths and casualties, evidence of the fact that Japanese Americans were actually ready to shed their blood for a country that was still treating them with scorn and suspicion. In the diary, however, there are also frequent references to Japanese festivals celebrated in Topaz (such as “the Japanese Boy’s Day” on May 5), mentions of Kabuki plays, regularly staged in the camp by the prisoners themselves, and drawings of Buddhist parades, that establish a tight connection with cultural roots the prisoners were not willing to lose. *The Children of Topaz* has been successfully inserted in the curricula of many American elementary schools and has contributed to witness one of the most controversial episodes of US history.

The second book is a memoir by Yoshiko Uchida (1921-1992) entitled *The Invisible Thread*, published one year before the death of the author. The meaning of the title is explained in the very first pages of the volume when, reflecting on her parent’s perpetual longing for Japan while living in the US, little Yoshiko remarks “it was as though a long invisible thread would always bind Mama and Papa to the country they had left behind” then adding, with evident uneasiness “and that thread seemed to wind just as surely around [...]

me” (Uchida 1991: 5). Uchida portrays herself as a thoroughly Americanized child, who recites the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag each morning at school and “loves (her) country as much as any other American—maybe even more” (13). She does not want to learn Japanese, notwithstanding the pressure from her parents; her only wish is to be like her “white American friends” (15): blond hair, blue eyes and nobody who would compliment her for her wonderful English, thinking of her as a foreigner, as an *alien*. She reads Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and *Little Men*, Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* and, similar to every good American of the most authentic puritan tradition, she writes a sort of autobiography that she calls “My Diary of Important Events” (31), in which she often copies the short stories she keeps inventing. At this introductory and descriptive point of the memoir, Uchida makes an important remark on children’s literature in America which, besides confirming what the above quoted Sandra Yamate had pointed out, anticipates the further developments of the plot, and the value attached by the writer to children’s narrative as a means to set the bases for a fairer society:

It never in my wildest dreams occurred to me to write about a Japanese American child, which may seem strange today. But the books I was reading at the time were only about white children and were written by white authors. The best world, it seemed to me then, was the white American world. So that was what I wrote about. (32)

The internment in Topaz ripens Yoshiko’s ideas and forces her to face and come to terms with her cultural roots in the most hurtful way, through the feeling of being betrayed (shared by Japanese Americans during World War II), closely entangled with her sincere love for what she still perceives as her mother country. When, after three years, she and her family are eventually released, Yoshiko is a different person: she enrolls in Smith College and becomes a successful teacher, as she had already been in Topaz with children who were “longing for a normal routine and needed school to give them the sense of security and order that had been snatched from them so abruptly” (84). At the end of the book, Uchida discloses to her young readers, especially Japanese American, the twofold reason why she had decided to write her memoir:

In my eagerness to be accepted as an American during my youth, I had been pushing my Japaneseness aside. Now, at last, I appreciated it and was proud of it. I had finally come full circle. Now it was time for me to pass on this sense of pride and self-esteem to the third generation of Japanese

Americans—the Sansei—and to give them the kinds of books I’d never had as a child.

I hope the young people who read this book will learn to have big dreams [...] I also hope they will learn to see Japanese Americans not in the usual stereotypic way, but as fellow human beings. (131-132)

Once again, the author writes “not to forget”.

Section II. First of this second section is *Baseball Saved Us* (1993), a picture book by novelist and journalist Ken Mochizuki, whose parents were sent to Minidoka camp in Idaho during World War II. The story is preceded by a short note that summarizes the historical events which form the background of the narration, set in one of the ten relocation camps for Japanese Americans (there is no precise indication of which one exactly). However, as the reader immediately finds out, the plot is almost entirely focused on baseball, the all-American sport *par excellence*. The poignancy of the internment is therefore understated if not completely neglected. As the very title seems to infer, baseball “saves” the young main character, (whose biased name is “Shorty”) by enabling him to display his potential beyond the *limits* of his height, “of his ethnic origin” and therefore to be totally accepted by mainstream America. In the first part of the narration, the Japanese American prisoners are busy building a baseball field inside the camp where, following on, they practice baseball every day. One of the highlights of Shorty’s story is when, after beautifully hitting the ball, he looks up at one of the watch towers and the guard “with a grin on his face, gives (him) the thumbs-up sign” (Mochizuki 1993: 18), pleased with the result. In the second part of the book, when the characters are released from their confinement (though Mochizuki does not explain how and why), Shorty is again playing baseball, this time in a competition. He is called names by some of the other children who, due to his being so short, think the “Jap” is incapable of hitting the ball. However, at the end of the match, Shorty succeeds in becoming the hero of his team. The message given by Mochizuki to his readers is very disturbing and confusing; we do not know why, instead of setting the first part of the story in the relocation camp, he did not choose to set it anywhere else, since the historical issues and the struggle in the heart and soul of many Japanese Americans are not at all addressed. Moreover, the very character of Shorty reinforces stereotypes such as the perception of Asian Americans as “model minority”. As a matter of fact, when he

is despised and scorned by the other children, he does not answer back, but *silently* hits the ball, and tries to perform one of the duties imposed by the American society he is eager to be part of: to win.

The second book is *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), a memoir by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston (b. 1936). Even though this is a rather “old” publication, the volume is still one of the best sellers among children and young adults interested in World War II and its effects on the Japanese American community. The plot is very similar to Uchida’s book, since it describes the internment in Manzanar relocation camp and the attempt on the part of the main character to build back a life after the end of the war. However, the approach is completely different and, similarly to Mochizuki, also Wakatsuki ends up strengthening stereotypes and misconceptions, apparently without even realizing it. As an example, the above mentioned stereotype of the Asian American offensive man can be found in the description of Wakatsuki’s father, descendent of a samurai family, who, once relocated, “kept pursuing oblivion through drink, and kept abusing Mama, and there seemed to be no way out of it anymore” (Wakatsuki 1973: 71). At the same time, he embodies the opposite stereotype of the non-sexed man since, in the camp, “he had no rights, no home, no control over his own life” and he suffered from some “kind of emasculation” (73). Moreover, Wakatsuki’s self-portrayals throughout the memoir display a rather shocking vision of herself—as an Asian American and as a woman—that nowadays, after Said’s *Orientalism* and many years of feminist criticism, would not be tolerated. When in Manzanar, she confesses to being “desperate to be ‘accepted’” and that taking up “baton twirling was one trick (she) could perform that was thoroughly, unmistakably American” (109). After being released, as a young teenager (at twelve or thirteen years of age) she becomes one of the baton twirlers that march in front of a boys’ band:

The boys in the band loved having us out there in front of them all the time, bending back and stepping high, in our snug satin outfits and short skirts. Their dads, mostly navy men, loved it too. At that age I was too young to consciously use my sexuality or to understand how an Oriental female can fascinate Caucasian men [...] from that point on I knew that one resource I had to overcome the war-distorted limitation of my race would be my femininity. (163-164)

She consciously turns herself into a hyper-sexual geisha, a commodity-like object for the white man’s desire. She even hyper-exoticizes her looks when she competes with other American girls to become “Prom Queen”, since she knows that would appeal to the audience, mostly made by men: “I decid-

ed to go exotic, with a flower-print sarong, black hair loose and a hibiscus flower behind my ear. When I walked barefoot [...] the howls and whistles of the boys were double what had greeted the other girls” (173). At the end of the memoir, after happily stating that she had been one of the first “to marry out of (her) race” (186), she goes back with her perfect, typical American family (father, mother and two children), to say “farewell to Manzanar”, discard her past and ethnic struggles, and to finally greet the American dream.

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## Abstract

*Lo scopo di questo articolo è mostrare il modo in cui l'esperienza dei campi di concentramento per giapponesi americani negli Stati Uniti durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale sia stata descritta e rivisitata nella letteratura per l'infanzia, con lo scopo di non dimenticare un episodio così controverso e drammatico della Storia. Dall'analisi di quattro testi ad opera di scrittori giapponesi americani, si evincerà che alcuni autori sono riusciti con successo a trasmettere alle nuove generazioni il senso del paradosso di tale evento, gettando, inoltre, ponti che portano verso la tolleranza e l'integrazione. Altri autori invece, pur desiderando svincolarsi dai pregiudizi nei confronti della loro comunità, sono caduti in contraddizione e, di fatto, i loro libri sembrerebbero quasi convalidare tali stereotipi.*



# *Open Doors to Multiculturalism: Representations of Ethnicity in Children's Literature*

Laura Tosi

## *1. Critics as colonizers?*

As Jaqueline Rose (1984:2) argues,

children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written [...] but in that it hangs upon an impossibility, one which rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. [...] Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) but where neither of them enter the space in between [...]. There is, in one sense, no body of literature which rests so openly as an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writers and addressee.

It has become conventional to study children's literature as the product of what the adult "desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of his speech" (Ibid.), as the projection of adult nostalgia, as the appropriation of the discourse of the Other who can't speak for itself. This kind of critical approach is strongly evocative of the discourses of Orientalism by Said (1978): some critics have gone as far as pointing out that the relationship between adult and children's literature appears to be a form of colonization. Other scholars (Hunt 2001) have noticed that the marginalization of children's literature in the literary canon mirrors the way colonial literatures have been treated by the literary establishment.

Perry Nodelman, in a perceptive article on the relationship between Orientalism, colonialism and children's literature, has highlighted the similarities between the way Europeans have read, judged, and ultimately "framed" the notion of Orientalism and the way adult critics have imposed their values

and meaning on childhood. Like Orientalism, childhood and children's literature can be perceived as a representation of the (adult) dominant group, as a dangerously attractive site of irrationality and lawlessness, or as a stable and fixed category that can be conveniently labelled, defined, and silenced on those issues we do not want to dwell upon. Exactly in the same way as Europeans "just knew" that Orientals were different, in which ways they were different, and therefore inferior to them, "we adults, similarly use our knowledge of 'childhood' to dominate children" (Nodelman 1992:31) and impose our adult-centred vision of them. One wonders whether the adult image of careless and light-hearted childhood is in fact based on a nostalgic and selective recreation of an idealized past age, a utopic dimension which more often than not happens to clash with the far less idyllic stories with child protagonists that we read in the papers or watch on the news. It seems that we can't escape from the fact that

Because it's our adult attempts to see and speak for children that create children's literature and child psychology in the first place, our attempts to analyze texts in these areas are doomed to inhabit the same discourse as they would be purporting to reveal and criticize. (Nodelman 1992:31)

If we are colonizing children's literature as we speak, by superimposing on it our constructions and desires, how can the imperialist critic ever hope to compensate or mitigate the inevitable adult hegemony in children's literature studies? One approach could be that of detecting any textual strategies that encourage young readers to adopt adult interpretations of juvenile behaviour. With regard to the representation of ethnicity, which is the main concern of this article, criticism can unveil stereotypes in the representation of race and cultures—a typical strategy adopted by dominant groups to patronize or diminish and therefore "control" minorities. In many "children's classics", universally considered as harmless or even formative reading, like *Mary Poppins* or *The Secret Garden*, our ethnically conscious sensibility perceives aspects of the text where colonial ideology and stereotyping might be embedded. These readings will be contrasted with a selection of contemporary children's texts where multicultural issues are privileged and representations of ethnicity are more in touch with our modern sensibilities.

## 2. *Images of the Other in "politically incorrect" children's classics*

Among the texts that create stereotypical images of the Other in nineteenth-century children's literature, Helen Bannerman's *Black Sambo* (1898)

is probably the most controversial. Sambo, one of the first Afro-American children to appear in children's literature, is still a pejorative term for a black male in contemporary English. His parents, simplistically called Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo have full protruding lips, wear multicoloured clothes and no shoes. If it might be anti-historic to expect a more accurate portrayal of ethnic characteristics in a period where the black minority was living on the edge of civilized society and was underrepresented in both children's and mainstream literature, it is legitimate to wonder about the meaning and the implications of reading the adventures of this oversimplified and even grotesque Afro-American family (the book is still on sale today—having gone through numerous editions) set in an inaccurate geographical context, more similar to India (there are tigers) than Africa (see Harris 1990; Martin 1998).

Stereotypical representations of the Orient in British children's literature are present in both works of fantasy and realistic fiction throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Kutzer 1988). Children's literature of the Golden Age and beyond cast white children at the centre of the narratives—and celebrated their essential superiority from a racial and cultural point of view. This raises the controversial issue of the advisability of preserving certain classics, if the values they support contrast with a view of education founded on respect and acceptance of a plurality of cultures and races.

There is a specific genre, however, that of the *school story*, which is rarely connected with images of the East, set as it is in the very British space of the public boarding school for children of the upper classes, but which I believe offers quite a few interesting instances of interstitial colonial ideology.

*Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) by Thomas Hughes, commonly considered to be the first example of the genre (see Quigly 1984; Musgrave 1985; Richards 1988) follows the life and adventures of the student-hero in the context of the public school system of education, based on the concept of muscular Christianity (outdoor activities and sports are equal to, if not more important than, traditionally academic subjects), and on a strong hierarchical system where older boys both educate and bully younger boys into becoming future leaders for the nation—at once gentlemen and officers of the Empire: as K. Reynolds (1990: 63) has put it, "Bracing, bold and British".

Some child characters, however, as are depicted in Farrar's *Eric* (1858), the sentimental school story where the hero falls victim to the temptations of drinking and rioting, do not seem to react positively to the educational environment or to the long separation from their parents, who were often, in life as in fiction, posted in far-away places of the colonial empire (Eric's parents

are typically in India) and only see their children when they were fully grown-up. From a narrative point of view the removal of parents is clearly very convenient, as it gives the hero the freedom to experience the world, make mistakes, enter into scrapes—which accounts for the substantial number of orphan heroes in children's literature, the latest of whom, Harry Potter, is educated in a magical boarding school which is simply another version of the English public school).

The school story in the nineteenth century shows a displaced child and highlights the ambivalence towards the East and the Empire which on one hand evokes memories of a romanticized idea of a lost family home, and on the other the school story represents the East as the field where the rhetoric of patriotism and the promotion of masculinity as stoicism, courage, resourcefulness, and athleticism will have to be exercised at the end of the educational process.

As is often the case, juvenile literature helps to sanction and spread social norms and dominant value systems—though often based on autobiography, only thinly disguised, the school story offers an ideal medium in which an educational and imperial ideology can be consolidated. As J. A. Mangan (1982: 136) has written,

It was the new imperialism of late-Victorian Britain which produced the precarious fusion of Christian gentility and social Darwinism. Three sets of values became enmeshed: imperial Darwinism—the God-granted right of the white man to rule, civilize and baptize the inferior coloured races; institutional Darwinism—the cultivation of physical and psychological stamina at school in preparation for the rigours of imperial duty: the gentleman's education—the nurture of leadership qualities for military conquest abroad and political dominance at home.

Equally removed from the familiar landscape of sunburnt India are the girl protagonists of Frances Hodgson Burnett's novels. *The Secret Garden* (1911) opens with an act of displacement when Mary, removed from India when her indifferent parents die in a cholera epidemic, is sent to her uncle's stately house in Yorkshire. Born in India of British parents, Mary explores England like a migrant, an exile (see Lennox Kaiser 1983; Philips 1993)—but England is not only identified with history as represented by the grand country house, or with the magic of the Moors and the cold bracing British weather. It is also the place where masters are not allowed to exercise total authority over their servants: the myth of Oriental despotism vs. enlightened and civilized relations between classes looms large in the novel although the true

representative of a tyrannical order is incarnated in the sickly Colin, the peevish little despot who is nursed back to health by Mary, “the Indian child”, and her gardening activities:

“I am going out in my chair this afternoon,” said Colin. “If the fresh air agrees with me I may go out every day. When I go, none of the gardeners are to be anywhere near the long walk by the garden walls. No one is to be there. I shall go out about two o’clock and everyone must keep away until I send word that they may go back to their work.”

“Very good, sir” replied Mr Roach [...]

“Mary,” said Colin, turning to her, “what is that thing you say in India when you have finished talking and want people to go?”

“You say, ‘You have my permission to go’” answered Mary.

The Rajah waved his hand.

“You have my permission to go, Roach,” he said (Hodgson Burnett 1995: 194).

Both Mary and Colin, with the aid of the natural child Dickon (the similarities between the plot of *The Secret Garden* and Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* have been pointed out by Plotz 1994) blossom physically and psychologically with their garden—the temperate climate of England, the outdoor activity, the civilizing influence of planting and taming a wild enclosed piece of land, bring out the best in the children’s personalities (see Evans 1994; Gunther 1994)—after all, isn’t gardening the domestic counterpart of imperial activity? As the little Yorkshire Rajah, on his way to recovery and reconciliation with his estranged father (who spends far too much time “abroad”) from whom he will be soon fit to inherit the Manor, asserts in typically colonial appropriating terms:

It is my garden now. I am fond of it. I shall come here every day. [...] My orders are that no-one is to know that we come here (Hodgson Burnett 1995: 213-214).

The idea that colonies are not healthy places for a growing child is also shared by Sarah’s father in *The Little Princess* (1905), a colonial officer who conveniently (or inconveniently) dies early in the novel and leaves his daughter destitute and cast in the Cinderella role of a servant in a girls’ school in which she had previously been a wealthy boarder. Release from this helpless situation is provided by an elderly gentleman who had been a friend of her father’s in India, in the person of his Indian servant and his little monkey—the colonial equivalent of a fairy godmother. The magical “Other” comes back

into the urban reality of a Victorian English town in the shape of the exotic stranger, never fully developed in the novel, who attracts the little girl's attention and leads her to reflect on her degraded state, in a nostalgic recollection of the privileges and power she enjoyed as the daughter of a colonial officer:

When he had gone Sara stood in the middle of her attic and thought of many things his face and his manner had brought back to her. The sight of his native costume and the profound reverence of his manner stirred all her past memories. It seemed a strange thing to remember that she—the drudge whom the cook had said insulting things to an hour ago—had only a few years ago been surrounded by people who all treated her as Ram Dass had treated her; who salaamed when she went by, whose foreheads almost touched the ground when she spoke to them, who were her servants and her slaves. It was like a sort of dream. It was all over, and it could never come back (Hodgson Burnett 1987: 134).

As Roderick Mc Gillis (1996: 20) has written,

What we refer to as “multiculturalism” is a result, in part, of our understanding of just how deeply infected with imperial thinking we are. We cannot read a book such as *A Little Princess* with the same innocence as a reader might have read it in 1905, and it is important to understand just how our experience of cultural diversity differs from that of a reader in 1905.

If Burnett's novels still display their colonialist ideology in full, in other cases stereotypical images of the Other which would not be politically acceptable to a contemporary readership have been corrected.

The multiple revisions of *Mary Poppins* (1934) by Pamela Travers are an example of this. In the chapter “Mad Tuesday” Mary takes the children on a magical tour round the world where they meet Africans, Chinese, Eskimos and American Indians presented in a way that nowadays would be considered offensive, as in the case of the African family:

On the knee of the negro lady sat a tiny black piccaninny with nothing on at all. It smiled at the children as its Mother spoke.  
“Ah bin ‘specting you a long time, Mar’Poppins,” she said, smiling. “You bring dem chillun dere into ma li’l house for a slice of water-melon right now. My, but dem’s very white babies. You wan’ use a li’l black boot polish on dem. Come ‘long, now. You’se mighty welcome.” (Travers 1940: 92)

The author declared in an interview that she didn't know where she had picked up the black vernacular because she didn't know any black people at

the time when she was writing the book (but admitted that she was familiar with the notorious *Little Black Sambo*). As a reaction to pressure from the Council on Interracial Books for Children, potentially offensive sections were modified in the 1972 paperback edition. The scene of Africans now reads:

“We’ve been anticipating your visit, Mary Poppins,” she said, smiling. “Goodness, those are very pale children! Where did you find them? On the moon?” She laughed at them, loud happy laughter, as she got to her feet and began to lead the way to a little hut made of palm-leaves. “Come in, come in and share our dinner. You’re all as welcome as sunlight.” (quoted in Schwartz 1979: 31)

However, if you want to read *Mary Poppins* now the most readily available edition in the United Kingdom is the Collins Modern Classics (1998) where the episode has been totally excised as well as other national and racial stereotypes: the children are introduced to the various parts of the world by animal guides: a Hyacinth Macaw for the South, a Panda for the East, a Polar Bear for North Pole, and a Dolphin for the West (this might also imply that the contemporary child is far more familiar with animal characters than American Indians or Eskimos!).

Politically incorrect classics for children often raise a form of uneasiness in the modern reader. Poetry is no exception—Stevenson’s *Foreign Children* in his celebrated *A Children’s Garden of Verses* (1885) seems miles away from the contemporary trend for children’s poetry towards the multicultural:

Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,  
Little frosty Eskimo,  
Little Turk or Japanee,  
O! don’t you wish that you were me?  
[...]  
You have curious things to eat,  
I am fed on proper meat;  
You must dwell beyond the foam,  
But I am safe and live at home.

Little Indian, Sioux or Crow,  
Little frosty Eskimo,  
Little Turk of Japanee  
O! don’t you wish that you were me?

### 3. *Difference and ethnicity in multicultural children's literature*

The presence of more realistic representations of ethnicity in contemporary children's literature is more widespread now—from the simple expedient of having children of various needs and cultures as characters of the stories (illustrations can become absolutely crucial) to the rewriting of traditional Western fairy tales into exotic contexts, to the collection of native stories and legends. The word “multicultural” becomes an umbrella term where quite diverse issues are treated with regard to children (sometimes with unpleasant implications as I discovered recently when browsing through the children's book section in the Gower Street Waterstones' branch in London—curiously under the heading “multicultural” one can find books on how to deal with violence in the home, bullying in class, or dysfunctional families as if such problems were invariably connected to multicultural backgrounds or contexts).

Contemporary multicultural books vary enormously depending on the age group they address, the issues at stake, style and illustration, and explicitness of message.

A way to depict multiculturalism for very small children, in a very elementary yet powerful way, is *The Baby's Catalogue* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg (1982) which follows the conventions of mail-order catalogues in providing lists of favourite characters and activities of babies—one of the five featured children is a black child.

Some texts address multiculturalism and the acceptance of difference in a stylized, even quite abstract way. In David Mc Kee's *Tusk Tusk* (1978/2001) white elephants and black elephants fight and kill one another until they become extinct, at which point descendants of the peace-loving elephants who had retreated into the jungle during the war are free to come out—grey! However, there is no happy ending as we are told that “recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks”.

In Colin McNaughton's *Have You Seen Who's Just Moved in Next to Us?* (1991) we hear the unreliable narrator constantly complaining about the unsatisfactory neighbours who move in next door to his family (quite extraordinary characters including the sculptor Michelangelo, King Kong, Tarzan and Jane, a bunch of hippy bikers, Superman, and a whole shipful of pirates). New and old neighbours together stare in horror at the latest arrival in the street which they find totally unacceptable. This time, however, the people who have just moved into the street are a very ordinary family of parents, two children, a cat and a dog. Immediately afterwards, we also discover the true identity of the narrator, a vampire who is so horrified at the quaintness of the

new family that he decides to go back to his native Transylvania. In the ironic deconstruction and reversal of the concept of “normality” and “strangeness” the text humorously underlines the relativity of the perception of the Other.

I would like now to concentrate on three texts in which the representation of ethnicity goes hand in hand with emancipatory and feminist issues: three central black female characters with a distinctive personality who triumph at the end. I realize that I might be treading dangerous ground here—many believe that positive essentializing isn’t all that different from negative stereotyping. The three girl protagonists, however, may invite identification for their strong personality—because they are individuals who act, and not because they belong to a specific ethnic or racial group. In a way, their exploration of a more active pattern of female identity transcends the fact that they also represent a minority culture—although their race is probably the first characteristic we are alerted to.

Chronologically, the first text we come across is Gareth Owen’s *Ruby and the Dragon* (1990). Rejected for both the role of princess (played by a blond rosy-cheeked little girl) and prince in the school play, Ruby is left with the costume of a dragon, and the awkward feeling that she might have to be killed in the last act by the prince. On her way to performance, due to a series of misunderstandings and farcical mishaps, Ruby ends up disturbing two burglars in the headmaster’s office, who will eventually be arrested. Even if Ruby defeats the robbers by accident rather than design, it is definitely her decision to disregard the teacher’s instructions and end the play by triumphing over the prince—quite an unusual ending which is appreciated by the audience and the mayor who says in his final speech “I have seen many school plays in my time but that was the best I have ever seen. What an original idea to have the dragon kill the prince”. One of the most interesting implications of this comical story is that the reader tends to sympathize with Ruby’s lively personality and her absolute relish for her empowering costume which clearly allows her to channel and express her aggressiveness at leisure—the costume fits her perfectly (“she looked fierce. She felt fierce”): her anger is safely released through the therapeutic and cathartic means of theatre.

In Mary Hoffman’s *Amazing Grace* (1991) the protagonist’s multifaceted personality expresses itself through the acting out of the stories that her grandmother tells her. She impersonates male and female characters of all races: pirates, red Indian chiefs, Mowgly, Alladin, Hannibal crossing the Alps with a hundred elephants and many others. When her classmates tell her that

she can't take the role of Peter Pan in the school pantomime because she isn't "right" for the part Grace becomes aware of racial and gender prejudices:

"You can't be called Peter," said Raj, "That's a boy's name"  
"You can't be Peter Pan" whispered Natalie, "He wasn't black".

Her grandmother reassures her ("You can be anything you want, Grace, if you put your mind to it") and takes her to a ballet where she sees the outstanding performance of a black ballerina playing Juliet. When school auditions start Grace is able to show her acting abilities to the full and is cast in the part: "the play was a great success and Grace was an amazing Peter Pan". In the story the gender and race issues cannot be conceived separately—both constitute Grace's sense of personal and cultural identity. It is interesting to notice, however, that while her mother reacts with anger at hearing Grace report Natalie's words on the race of Peter Pan, her grandmother prefers to lay the emphasis on the girl's potentialities rather than dwell on her schoolmates' attitudes (see Pinsent 1997; Mikkelsen 1998).

*Nappy Hair* by Carolivia Herron (1997) is different from the two books analysed above in that it does honour to racial individuality as it is expressed in the little girl's extremely curly hair. The story is narrated in call-and-reponse gospel rhythm by uncle Mordechai who on the occasion of a family gathering, celebrates Brenda's hair as a symbol of her history of which she should be proud. By using the word *nappy* Herron touches a very sensitive nerve within African-American culture—that of Black people's hair which is traditionally perceived with a form of anxiety by black people themselves. It is not by chance that many of the icons of black female beauty—Naomi Campbell, Whitney Houston and many others, flaunt unnaturally flowing glossy straight hair (it should be remembered that hair care, especially chemical relaxers for ethnic hair, is a thriving industry and commercials are especially directed to teenagers and even pre-adolescent girls).

Herron's mock-heroic celebration of Brenda's hair, as Lester (1999: 173) has written, "was one way of appropriating a negative image from a Eurocentric culture that does not value non-straight, non-European hair, and making the source of a communal storytelling ritual". The narrator creates a revisionist mythology of hair in which God at the time of Creation reacts to the angels' attempt to dissuade him from creating nappy hair:

So, God hisself around, look them angels square in the face [...]  
And God say, "Get outta my way." [...]  
"She's going to have the nappiest hair in the world!"

In Brenda's hair the story of her people, her heritage, her ancestors deported from Africa, sold as slaves for a nickel or a dime, is recapitulated—her wild and rebellious hair is a visual symbol of the strength of her fathers, the pride of her race:

The Lord in Heaven

**What you say**

The Lord who brought the Israelites

Out of Egypt

**Yes he did**

He looked down on this cute little brown baby girl

He looked at her

He looked at her and he say, "well done."

[...]

"One nap of her hair is the only perfect circle in nature".

Nappy hair becomes a privilege and a gift from God, an example of absolute perfection as it comes to represent the circularity of experience, a special attribute which characterizes Brenda, "a rose among a thousand thorns".

Against the pressure to conform to a standardized canon of Western beauty—a sort of cosmetic world globalization—*Nappy Hair* makes a definite statement on the value of difference (see Enekwechi and Moore 2000). Brenda's family underline the uniqueness of her hair, a powerful external sign of her spiritual and cultural identity. If we compare these recent representations of ethnicity with the portrayal of African-Americans in *Little Black Sambo* probably the epitome of racial stereotyping in children's literature, the contrast is striking. So is the contrast between the ideology surfacing in Stevenson's poem "Foreign Children" and contemporary portrayals of multicultural and divided identities, like the voice of the child in Jackie Kay's "At Home, Abroad" (1999: 98-99) who dreams all summer of places he's never been, or faces he's never seen,

like the dark

face of my

father in

Nigeria,

or the pale

face of my mother in

the Highlands,

or the bright

Faces of my  
Cousins at  
Land's End.

Despite the inevitable oversimplifications and ingenuity of many children's books that want to promote tolerance and the desire to learn about other cultures, and the utopian wish-fulfilment produced by texts that portray children of different backgrounds living together in harmony, children's and juvenile literature also show the ambivalence and the conflicting attitudes of society towards multiculturalism (see Hade 1997; Carpenter 1996). In Perry Nodelman's (1996: 129) words,

One way or another, it's undeniably important that children of all races and colors read stories about children of all races and colors written by authors of all races and colors. In a world in which race and color still play such an important part in defining the experiences of individuals, books by and about people of different backgrounds are bound to offer access to a vast spectrum of ways of being human. Experiencing that spectrum is one of the key pleasures of literature.

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## Abstract

*Prospettive critiche recenti hanno messo in luce come il rapporto che il critico intrattiene con la letteratura per ragazzi possa essere paragonato a quello che il critico occidentale ha tradizionalmente instaurato con la letteratura dell'Oriente: osservando l'altro che non è (ancora) in grado di descriversi, il critico che si occupa di letteratura postcoloniale o di letteratura per l'infanzia ne riporta necessariamente una versione distorta, costruita attraverso il pregiudizio di una posizione euro o adulto centrica. Se dunque parlando dell'infanzia la si ricrea come rappresentazione secondo le nostre aspettative, percezioni e proiezioni adulte da una posizione di potere, al critico letterario "colonizzatore" per temperare o compensare l'inevitabile egemonia adulta non resta che individuare le strategie testuali che incoraggiano i piccoli lettori ad accettare le interpretazioni adulte del comportamento infantile. Rispetto alla questione della rappresentazione dell'etnicità che costituisce il tema centrale del saggio, una delle direzioni in cui si volge l'analisi è quella degli stereotipi culturali nella rappresentazione di determinati gruppi etnici. A tale scopo vengono individuati in testi canonici della letteratura per l'infanzia come The Secret Garden o Mary Poppins spazi o interstizi in cui l'ideologia coloniale si insinua offrendo, ancora una volta, un punto di vista occidentale egemonico nei confronti di altre etnie. Queste rappresentazioni di etnicità più o meno stereotipate vengono messe a confronto con testi della contemporaneità, i quali, incorporando la consapevolezza di dialogo multiculturale, riportano dei modelli etnici più complessi e "aggiornati".*

**STORIA E IDENTITÀ**  
**HISTORY AND IDENTITY**



## *Revisiting Africa Through European Eyes: Myth and History in the 'Postcolonial Village'*

Esterino Adami

Hereunder we set forth and telecast  
To all continents and oceans  
Seven insufferable reasons  
Why it was our duty to topple the Monster.  
Timothy Wangusa, *Anthem for Africa*

Patrick Neate's *Musungu Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko* imposes the distancing perspective of a Western writer as a parodic key to understand the crucial claims of contemporary and post-colonial Africa to nationhood, unsplit identity and communal belonging. Its plot revolves around the odyssey of the young British protagonist, Jim Tulloh, whose encounter with Zambawi, a fictional state whose model seems to be Zimbabwe, is bound to be converted into a process of meeting 'mythical realities', a powerful oxymoron that idiosyncratically depicts the ambivalence that lies at the very heart of African society. To me, a kind of cultural diglossia that permeates the local view of the world and its notion of History. The discursive strategies adopted by the writer must consider the "nativist" or tribal archive as their starting point. Patrick Neate seems to tell us that we must steep into myth, if we want to understand the traditional African frame of mind. The myth of a single common ancestor, simultaneously tribal god and tribal hero, defines the national archive of the African land as a fragmented series of sharply localised myths of origin and foundation. Such promotion of images and narratives, for instance, has been previously assumed in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. This novel deploys a similar pattern of "nativist" history, one that features "origin" as a coming from faraway (that is, a "native" migration inside the African land) and a "split" growing into the new location. A double metaphor of dispersal,

then, given that each migrating tribe is divided further into subgroups, each of them worshipping a different god. In Neate's case too, notion of History moulds the politics of representation by discriminating the idea of Nation against the tribal identity.

Rejecting the concept of national unity, a false myth introduced or rather imposed by the colonial masters, we should detect the basic unit of African collective consciousness in the village, seen as an operational microcosm, teeming with human actors. A linear contrast separates the hegemonically constructed nation from the localised village, a place that should be recognised as the ideal site for the unifying rites of socialisation, in which the relationship between man and gods becomes a governing paradigm. Rather than being a place of mediation, one that encapsulates the policy of communication between the centre and the periphery, between the nucleus of power and the outer instances, as might occur in the West or in India, the primary significance of the village lies in its ability to uphold the world of the ancestors by means of rites and traditions. As a matter of fact, myth in its protean manifestations expresses what in the African frame of mind is unseizable and untranslatable, although endowed with a *modus operandi* of its own. The style of Achebe amalgamates a historical specificity and a didactic approach and yet it displays cogently a rich ethnic pantheon, whose deities participate in human life, so as to give substance and meaning to the myths of origin and foundation. The notion of resistance is brought about along the imposition of cultural schemes operated by the colonizers and its purpose does not limit itself to a sense of opposition but it stems from such complex ground in terms of both cultural self-affirmation and armed reaction. The challenge towards the paradigm of dominance goes beyond the mere re-appropriation of the modes of discourse expressed through the western canon, but it rather concentrates on the remoulding of social roots and sense of identity. It is a counteract that subverts the fictional battleground.

Jim Tulloh's pathway of self-formation, expressed in the traditional genre of *Bildungsroman*, coincides with a twist in the history of Zambawi, an imaginary central-southern African state, at the beginning of the nineties. With the highly praiseworthy task of teaching English at a bush school in the former colony, Jim ponders on the events that he is facing, but being a *musungu*, i.e. a white man, he seems to be unable to take in the entangled revolution that abruptly redraws the map of the whole country. Jim's coming to Africa reflects the contrast of values that has accompanied the transition from the colonial age to postcolonial independence. After completing his education at

some Dorset school, he attends an introductory course to Africa, run by an “African expert”, a title Jim comprehends stands for “mercenary”. The strategies for surviving across the African continent are explained by the trainer, Terence Lamberton (whose nickname “Lambo” reminds the reader of the filmic character Rambo) as the “Ten Rules of Africa”, that reveal the military aspect of the Western gaze onto postcolonial countries. The sense of physical displacement is also stressed by the protagonist’s social rank, he being a dropout who defines himself with adjectives like “unambitious, incompetent, unassuming, inconspicuous, unprepared” (Neate 2000: 11). The positions of power are occupied by president Zita Adini, who plays the double role of the tyrant and the clown, after an odd accident in Oxford that turned him into a eunuch, and general Bulimi, who strives to reacquire his poetic inclination. Prior to joining the army and becoming a general, he was a poet and a rebel, but now he sincerely regrets the loss of such qualities and would like to be the communal singer of Africanness again.

Jim crosses Africa’s (and Elsewhere’s) borders in his capacity as a teacher, a seminal role in the social hierarchy being a position held in high consideration in both the Western world and the tribal constituency and here the Gramscian allusion to hegemony lies in the harsh clash between the mythical structures that give voice to local and popular cultures (the traditional heritage of the country) and the imperial and post-imperial dominance that imperceptibly dictates a new order (the western archive). After his collision with the local stances of the African society, Jim suddenly discovers in his teaching activity the counter-hegemonic role of English: the acquired language may elevate new insights and cultural perceptions. According to his bush pupils, the witches of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* can be viewed as carriers of a unique import, not just as fictional imagery. Thus the cultural-hegemonic aspect too is handled parodically; Adini intends his son Enoch to attend St Ignatius’ College, based in the capital of Zambawi, Queenstown, and then Brasenoe college, Oxford, thus following his personal footsteps. But St Ignatius’ College, a religious body of higher education, run by the Order of the Ark, where Latin has substituted the local idiom, Zamba, represents a decadent and absurd system of imposed values. A further sense of irony accompanies the introduction of this institution, as the reader learns that such Order had been rejected by the official Church of England and exiled to Africa. However, Adini, symbolising as he does the stereotype of the Western-oriented dictator, refuses the complaints of his disappointed son who denounces the brutal teaching methods of Brother Angelo, his tutor. On the contrary, the President

commends the English “public-school” educational system: “A pervert? For goodness’ sake! Of course he is. It is the perversity of private education that formed the greatest characters of the British Empire. Besides, it never did me any harm” (36).

The entire fifteenth chapter (‘The Story Musa Told’) deals with the mythical foundation of Zambawi, drawing from the epic confrontations between the Sun, the Moon and some greedy chiefs (the *shamva*). Reinvigorated by the oral craft of Musa, the local witchdoctor, the narration ends with the pacification brought about by the Traveller, Tuloko, who manages to reconcile the Sun and Zamba, after whom the country has been named; this character is then transformed into the Moon. Musa’s warning, (“like the people of today, the *shamva* had forgotten their ancestors or thought that the history of their birth from the heat of the sun was nothing but a legend”, 97), turns the myth into a parable on the ideology of power in contemporary Africa. In a similar way, modern Zambawi mirrors the conflicting theatre of ancient times. Jim Tulloh, ‘unfrozen’ by the sultry African heat from his juvenile and limited perception of the world, will eventually tread on the mythic and shamanic pathway and embody the ancient hero Tuloko, with the goal of restoring freedom. Indeed, the African cosmology allows the intersection of human society with the world of deities, thus establishing ties that transcend the common experience of living. As Richard Priebe points out, “the gods all have historic and anthropomorphic dimensions, and all men reflect aspects of the gods” (Priebe 1988: 83). Quite often, the mythical element is seen as a rite of passage, a metamorphosis within a line of succession of chiefs and a justification to tribal power.

Therefore myths of origin are exploited within a project that aims at creating a redeemed national self, based upon tribes as its constituencies, one in which African identity strives for hegemonic control by way of legitimising structures of power. The confiscation and subsequent distribution of the land (or more often the exploitation operated by central authorities) is paralleled by the attempts to fix the idea of ‘nationhood’ into the mould of communal consciousness.

In his timid efforts to accost African society, Jim is helped by Musa, the magician, who points out the intimate connection between reality and mythic significance. In Musa’s opinion this relationship should be the actual unifying element of the Zambawian population, the metaphoric glue that keeps the social classes together, in stark contrast with the carnivalesque populism professed by the central government, in the person of president Adini:

...in his speeches the eunuch continually refers to the importance of Zambawian tradition. As if he cares a fig for tradition! The eunuch does not have the support of a single witchdoctor. How can he be the chief of our people without the ratification of the *zakulu*? It is ridiculous. It is no wonder he sides with the *musungu* farmers; the man is a coward and a charlatan. In fact, he is barely a man at all! (169)

For a leader, not having the support and the approval of the *zakulu*, the shamanic priest, signifies being a mere icon of false authority. Even the myth of virility is here mocked and demolished by the mutilated personality of Adini, reduced to a sort of puppet. Moreover, the President's dealing with the white settlers is perceived as a further sign of betray of the patriarchal group, a retreat from the local traditions.

This fragmented model of political unity is indebted to the false notion of cultural hegemony provided by colonialism, a notion that actually functions in terms of hierarchy and whose inheritance should be traced in the militarisation of the state, seen as the only possible organising structure. The leading class is recuperated directly from the former political structures of the empire: after independence, local administrators and officers play a primary role in the reconstruction of local networks of power. Military uniforms, for example, previously adopted by invading troops and now worn by the armies of independent countries, bear a highly symbolic value, with the purpose to reset all social differences and assimilate local cultural expressions. However, such a constructed and artificial sense of union and solidarity is treated parodically by Neate, when he presents the confusing interface of identity that characterises both Adini's regular army and the rebellious gangs. These characters appear to shift between both poles, like captain Isaiah Muziringa who operates in the rebellious forces too, under the pseudonym of Dubchek:

...Dubchek now wondered whether he had even been 'politicized' at all, or merely seduced by the delicious slogans of revolution that he barely understood: 'power is freedom', 'democracy is choice'; even 'Africa for the Africans' now seemed to throw up more questions than it answered. The truth is, he thought, I am a coward. It's not that I'm scared to fight. Or even to die, come to that. But I am scared of change. And that can't be right for a revolutionary." (160)

Jim eyes up the constant changing of sides and the sense of doubleness that seem to test life in Zambawi, and simultaneously reduce the macrostructure of politics and social divisions to a mere listing of relics and stereotyped

objects from the African world. He still clings to the European canon, but will eventually change his perspective and turn into Tuloko, the magical hero of the nation. After the murder of his friend Paul Kunashe, a Black Boot Gang sympathiser, he is interrogated by captain Muziringa/Dubchek and in a Kafkesque atmosphere he desperately breaks out:

You fucking Zambawians don't have a clue who you are! You love the English. You hate the English. You're soldiers. You're guerrillas. You're Christians. You're pagans. You're a nation, a tribe, a totem, a *gwaasha*. You're rich and poor, you get fat while you starve, you dance brilliantly to music that sounds like rodents being murdered, you smoke the best weed on earth and drink the shittiest beer. You would die for a chicken and kill for...for what? Who the fuck are you people? You're nationalists, continentalists, Marxists, democratists, piss artists! (190)

The eruptive result of coming to terms with the whole chaotic African universe, in which Jim is perplexingly immersed, introduces the initial phase of his transformation. The cosmological and social dimension manipulated by Neate acquires the same structural patterns of the fecund Yoruba tradition. The mythical mode of salvation therefore connects the Great Chief Tuloko, who defeats the *shamva*, with Jim, who deposes the dictator. In Soyinka's words, African gods "embrace man's existence and give [...] to every performance a multilevelled experience of the mystical and the mundane" (Soyinka 1979: 86). In Neate's instance too, the same structural motif is developed and the lampooning defamiliarisation lies in the fact that the triumphant revolution is led by a white young man. By shifting the emphasis onto an outsider, a sort of outcast who seems to belong to neither the British society nor the African world, the author insists parodically on a human instrument of social reshaping. Confronted with Musa, the witchdoctor who provides the Black Boot Gang with magical guidance and wise advice, Jim is puzzled by his response that indicates the god-chosen:

'Cool!' Jim said. 'Who is it?'  
'It is you.'  
'I'm sorry?'  
'You.'  
'Who?'  
'YOU!'

When Musa said this last 'you', the most extraordinary thing happened. Time stopped. Jim was in the middle of an enormous lug on the joint and his lungs were full to bursting. [...], he found that he couldn't exhale. At

first, he panicked thinking that he was to suffocate. Then he realized, with relief, tinged with apprehension, that he no longer needed to breath. (282)

Prodigiously, the words he mouths reproduce the local idiom and his style appeals to all the guerrilla fighters; even his physical aspect undergoes a metamorphosis. No biological barriers or ethnic division can resist the comeback of the god and his apotheosis:

He licked his lips and they felt like two tyres set in front of his face. He suddenly felt very peculiar and, for a second, he covered his eyes with his hands. He was surprised to find that his palms were the size of large pizzas. Taking his hands away, he inspected them in disbelief, turning them around in front of his eyes. His hands were the colour of dark chocolate, shiny and polished and rough with hard work. His fingers were long and thick and his nails—usually bitten to the quick—were as tough and sharp as an eagle’s talons. Across the base of his right thumb, a jogged scar snaked to his wrists. (288-89)

The tradition is made tangible, though the restoration of the chiefly titles, ceremonial ritual and paraphernalia is mocked. Jim/Tuloko admonishes his followers for the lack of faith from which they suffer. Such inability to enclose religious impulses within the social framework of the clans has caused the civil war and the destruction of Zambawi.

The provocative drawing of the fictional dictator, though historical models could be traced, is part of the novelist’s plan to ape modern tyrants. Indeed, he mollies the narration and creates a *pastiche* that incorporates several levels of meaning. A further hint to the allegorical anthropology worked out by Neate surfaces in the quotation of the real and imaginary texts that testify to the cultural and ethnographic approach to Africa, and functions as a sort of frame to the whole novel. In this manner, the name of Lévi-Strauss is presented in the mock preface as a signifier that furnishes a semi-realistic and nearly academic system of reference. A glossary of local words and phrases, enriched by mentions of main characters, places and events, and even a map of the imaginary country of Zambawi, highlights again the ironic procedure that the novelist fosters. The use of Latin citations too (Virgil, Cicero, Horace, among others), which stress Adini’s Eurocentric and dictatorial projection, can be analysed in the very same terms.

The narration of the events reaches its climax in chapter 34, that records the battle of Maconda, between Jim’s gang and the white mercenaries, in a fragmented series of comments of the single characters. This polyphonic

device offers a multiple perspective on the *momentum* of the entire revolution, tangling up the plurality of voices, memories and confessions that precede the victory of the Black Boot Gang. Though presented as a sort of anti-hero or mock hero, Jim will be able to radically change the result of the conflict; and yet, although praised and mythicised by the faith of the people, the British lad remains doubtful about his fate and still interrogates his attitude towards life and relationship with Africanness. The transposition of mythical hints into the historical panorama, an instrument employed by Neate so as to deconstruct meaningful and actual representations of Africa, finds a place in the meta-narrative of Eddy Kotto, editor of the *Zambawi National Herald*. Sketching his proposed reports of the civil war for the *Sunday Times*, he frequently points out the unusual features of his country (“Zambawi is a nation founded upon myth”, 323) but warns against any attempts to penetrate the African traditionalism and the fixed form of myth:

But the myth of Tulo is just that: a myth. It is not to be analysed as though it were a document of law or a scientific equation. Suffice to say that the Black Boot Gang chose to follow a nineteen-year-old *musungu* from rural Dorset. Surely that fact alone will resonate for everyone. (323)

In the author’s re-interpretation of folklore and traditions, Tulo/Tuloko, the hero imbued with the tribal myths of the African identity, cannot be easily pigeonholed and such a structural resistance functions as a key to accentuate in a parodic way the postcolonial dictatorial establishment. Both a subtle critique against the totalitarian regimes of self-appointed presidents who have seized the power through opportunism and mass murders, and an insight into the experiences of life of a young boy (again a sort of Western rite of passage from one age to another), the text brings along interrogations of the concepts of nationhood and human values, on the backdrop of the postcolonial African Babel.

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### **Abstract**

*L'articolo prende in esame la situazione politica dell'Africa postcoloniale con riferimento ai concetti di nazionalità e organizzazione egemonica del potere. Come punto di partenza, le mie strategie narrative utilizzano i miti tribali che mostrano le caratteristiche comuni dell'identità africana di base. Punto focale è l'analisi di un tipico testo parodico come Musungu Jim and the Great Chief Tuloko di Patrick Neate, che iscrive la richiesta coloniale per il possesso della terra in un background mitico della società africana. Il saggio affronta l'ibridizzazione politica e postcoloniale e il contrasto tra la nozione di "archivio" (Ahmad) dell'Occidente, che include le identità in termini di gerarchia e egemonia culturale e il retaggio mitico africano, che discrimina, a partire dalle piccole unità tribali.*



## *L'alba d'un nuovo canone? La letteratura scozzese*

Marco Fazzini

Non c'è nulla di ingenuo, nulla di semplicemente estetico nel processo di formazione di un canone. Il giudizio sul valore letterario di un'opera è fortemente condizionato da ciò che quell'opera deve fare a livello istituzionale, psichico e sociale. A tale proposito John Guillory ci dice che il "giudizio di un individuo che reputa grande un'opera non sortisce nulla per preservare quell'opera, a meno che il giudizio non sia fatto in un certo contesto istituzionale, un ambiente in cui sia possibile assicurare la riproduzione dell'opera, la sua continua reintroduzione verso generazioni di lettori. L'opera di preservazione possiede altri contesti sociali più complessi che non i responsi immediati dei lettori verso i testi." (Guillory 1990: 237) L'inclusione, o anche l'esclusione, di un'opera dal canone sono quindi questioni riguardanti non solo la letterarietà, o il mero fattore produttivo e recettivo della letteratura, ma un più alto intento che definirei istigatore, perché in ogni caso provocatorio e fonte di successive argomentazioni conflittuali. Importante allora diviene il problema non di cosa viene incluso o escluso, ma di quale sia l'utenza dei libri e di quali meccanismi strategici siano dietro alla disponibilità e alla distribuzione dei testi.

Illustrerò brevemente un caso che può considerarsi esemplificativo del sistema educativo che ha riguardato tutte le ex-colonie di lingua inglese nel mondo. Si tratta del ricordo di un frammento della vita da studente del caraibico Austin Clarke, romanziere, poeta, e già *cultural attaché* presso l'ambasciata delle Barbados a Washington negli anni 1974-1976. Clarke ricorda: "Quale altra poesia potevo conoscere? Milton e Keats... Avremmo sostenuto gli esami di Cambridge; e le nostre risposte sarebbero state mandate in Inghilterra, a quegli stessi dotti professori che si sarebbero stupiti a leggere le nostre risposte date a domande d'oltremare, domande che non avevano nulla a che fare con il modo in cui vivevamo, con il modo in cui capivamo noi stes-

si, con il modo in cui vedevamo noi stessi. Ma si trattava di domande ‘colte’, e noi eravamo studenti colti di Combermere.” (Clarke 1980: 137; 181) [corsi-vi miei]

L'imposizione di Keats e Milton, di spezzoni della storia, della cultura e della civiltà inglese rispondeva a precisi intenti istituzionali e politici, permettendo di caratterizzare quel periodo passato da Clarke a Combermere attraverso un suo simbolo principe: la bandiera dell'Union Jack. Il libro infatti reca volutamente un titolo ironicamente ladipario: *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack*, un titolo che già contiene in sé l'indicazione di alcuni stereotipi della sottomissione fisica e politica patita dagli abitanti delle ex-colonie inglesi durante tutto il periodo imperiale, e anche oltre:

1. crescita (“Growing Up”), una crescita massicciamente gestita e regolata, ma anche mistificata, dal colonizzatore;
2. sottomissione (“Under”) che ricorda sopraffazioni politiche e culturali di più larga portata;
3. “Union Jack”, la bandiera, sia quale indicazione d'un nazionalismo imperialista che ha resistito per secoli grazie alla potenza militare della Gran Bretagna, sia una sineddoche usata da Clarke per tacere altre e più vaste aree di arrogante appropriazione e violenza.

Fanon ha giustamente affermato che il “colonialismo non si accontenta di tenere un popolo nella sua stretta e di svuotare il cervello del nativo di ogni forma e contenuto. Per una logica perversa, esso si rivolge al passato del popolo oppresso e lo distorce, lo sfigura e lo distrugge.” (Fanon 1990: 169) Non a caso Fanon torna quale passpartout per la lettura non solo di molto dell'imperialismo che ha riguardato il Terzo Mondo, ma anche della storia politica e letteraria della Scozia. Un accurato libro di Beveridge e Turnbull dimostra come tutta la politica del Partito Nazionalista Scozzese fino al referendum per la devolution del 1979 sia stata contrastata dagli Unionisti grazie a delle argomentazioni perfettamente sintonizzate con la strategia del colonialismo culturale delle potenze europee. Secondo “autorevoli” opinionisti e storici unionisti la Scozia, con le sue richieste d'indipendenza e di devolution, non ha fatto altro che procedere verso l'inabissamento in un altro lungo periodo di oscurantismo simile a quello vigente prima del 1707, data del passaggio della corona scozzese sotto l'egida britannica, un momento risolutivo per la sottrazione, grazie all'Inghilterra, del popolo scozzese dalla barbarie e dal fanatismo. (Cfr. Beveridge, Turnbull 1989: 4-15)

Il subdolo imbonimento del colonizzatore, il suo falso paternalismo celano quindi altre e terribili finalità di cui la cultura, e la letteratura in particola-

re, sono stati strumenti sottili e duraturi. Muovendoci da un estremo all'altro di questa pratica di imperialismo culturale – Clarke che sotto il sole delle Barbados studia la battaglia di Hastings, il 1066 e la poesia di Milton e Keats, e Soyinka che dopo essere stato insignito del Premio Nobel (il primo assegnato ad un “selvaggio” dell’Africa) ha patito l’inclusione nel Canone occidentale rischiando di veder fagocitata la sua opera come un’altra delle forme occidentali di sperimentazione – non possiamo ignorare più a lungo ogni forma di esclusione dei testi provenienti dalle periferie, qualunque esse siano e qualunque gruppo linguistico-culturale esse sostengano. Ancora prima di vedere trasformati questi testi post-coloniali in classici istituzionalizzati, prima ancora quindi di renderli innocui, è necessario mostrare come la relazione, in molti casi ancora vigente, tra la letteratura di una supposta madrepatria (il Centro) e le sue periferie non possa più funzionare in termini filiatrici ma secondo una prospettiva discorsiva d’opposizione che smascheri, da un lato, la falsità del mito dell’universalità e ricomponga, dall’altro, una fattiva dialogicità di aspettative. Tale prospettiva ci aprirebbe gli occhi sulla compromissione in atto tra educazione, editoria e critica letteraria, una realtà che in molte delle periferie del mondo è stata naturalizzata, spesso inconsciamente, come una “concessione apolitica” (Tiffin 1989: 121).<sup>1</sup> Ora, ovviamente, la rinuncia del mito dell’universalità del Canone, e la sua possibile sostituzione o integrazione con vari canoni alternativi o paralleli, pone il problema della deperibilità del gusto e del valore estetico-politico d’un testo, forzando la nostra volontà istigatrice a tener conto sia d’una ipotesi di continuo svecchiamento del canone stesso sia dell’inevitabile inarrestabilità delle pressioni interculturali ormai in atto. Come osserva Franco Marengo in una recente nota sul canone europeo, “il canone è il risultato d’un conflitto culturale che è sempre in atto. Per quanto pacifica possa apparire ai posteri, e regolata da indiscutibili principi estetici, la costruzione di un canone riposa sempre sulla contestazione, aperta o occulta, di un altro canone – e l’operazione non è estetica soltanto: è più profondamente ideologica e politica.” (Marengo 2001: 9) Bergonzi, seguendo direttive simili, ha parlato della necessità di rompere quella “sacra unione” di lingua, letteratura e nazione che ha servito le potenze imperiali in più d’un continente. (Bergonzi 1990: 71-84)

In Scozia, dopo un passato glorioso sia per lo *scots* che per il gaelico, già nell’Ottocento furono palesi i sintomi di una rapida estinzione delle lingue minoritarie del paese. Durante la seconda metà dell’Ottocento, e per almeno due decenni fino agli anni Settanta, il sistema educativo scozzese subì un radicale cambiamento, soprattutto dopo l’introduzione dell’ Education (Scotland)

Act. In base a questa legge del 1872, si introdusse in Scozia “uno dei sistemi scolastici dall’organizzazione più centralizzata del mondo” (Withrington 1974: 13), determinando altri problemi conseguenti l’intero processo di ridefinizione della cultura scozzese.<sup>2</sup> Colin Milton osserva che i parametri che “le scuole scozzesi furono incoraggiate ad adottare dall’ispettorato scolastico non erano parametri scozzesi; la pressione era verso l’anglicizzazione, come le relazioni degli ispettori mostravano chiaramente verso la fine degli anni novanta. Così, in Scozia, la riforma educativa non solo minacciava le particolarità regionali ma anche, e più fondamentalmente, la stessa identità nazionale” (Milton 1983: 85).

Il controllo linguistico e culturale in mano agli inglesi fu la diretta conseguenza di un più diffuso controllo politico che imperava ormai sin dal 1707. Sin da allora la decadenza dell’uso dello scots per intenti letterari si legò all’impatto religioso di cui già godeva la traduzione della Bibbia ad opera di Re Giacomo. Come notano Cairns e Richards: “I gallesi, gli scozzesi e gli irlandesi devono dimostrare, quindi, di parlare inglese come prova della loro ammissione all’interno della più vasta potenza dell’Inghilterra, eppure devono parlarlo con sufficiente deviazione dalla forma standard per affermare il loro status chiaramente subordinato all’interno dell’unione.” (Cairns, Richards 1988: 11)<sup>3</sup> Con ciò ebbe inizio ciò che JanMohamed ha definito di recente come l’asse per il macchinario ideologico dell’“allegoria manichea”, (Cfr. JanMohamed 1985: 63)<sup>4</sup> una delle cause del declino delle lettere scozzesi, ma anche del progressivo depauperamento della forza legante che le lingue locali esercitavano per materie sia letterarie sia di corrente quotidianità. (Cfr. Morgan 1990: 15)<sup>5</sup>

Sappiamo troppo bene che questi modi binari di ragionamento sono deleteri e rispondono spesso a specifiche necessità sociali. Si rischia, seguendo queste direttive dicotomiche, di perdere di vista le sfumature, le complessità, quelle che Nemoianu di recente ha definito “multidimensional realities” (Nemoianu 1993: 32-4), una definizione calzante per descrivere la situazione linguistica e letteraria della Scozia.

Spence attorno alla fine del secolo scorso, e MacDiarmid successivamente, furono i due intellettuali che mostrarono di nuovo tutte le potenzialità d’un elemento di caratterizzazione culturale, un elemento che nelle loro mani divenne con facilità un mezzo di lotta politica e letteraria. (Cfr. Chapman 1985: 11-4; 32-3) Ciò che MacDiarmid propugnò negli anni venti e trenta del Novecento fu la rinascita delle lingue locali, degli idiomi che potessero riuscire a rappresentare l’intera gamma della vita della Scozia, ridefinendo la natura ed il carat-

tere delle tecniche nazionali e dell'economia artistica. Ciò che diede forza ed efficacia alla così detta Rinascenza scozzese fu la mistura esplosiva di poetica ed azione politica condotte ai loro vertici da Hugh MacDiarmid prima, e da quella che si indicò quale "Second Wave" dello Scottish Renaissance poi.<sup>6</sup> Ecco quindi l'importanza che assunsero i due primi volumi di MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw* e *Penny Wheep*, due libri che nel loro intento di recupero dello *scots* sostennero la prima parte del programma di rinascenza, arricchito poi, con il volume *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, da un'ampia campagna a sostegno dell'"Idea gaelica" a cui MacDiarmid dedicò l'intera vita. Il suo programma letterario si muoveva su due fronti: mostrare fedeltà alla tradizione culturale del suo paese e acquisire coscienza che un movimento all'interno di aree nuove ed inesplorate dell'attività intellettuale dovesse necessariamente implicare l'assunzione di una coscienza rivoluzionaria.<sup>7</sup>

Fu quindi ad iniziare dagli anni venti, gli anni che videro la pubblicazione delle prime liriche brevi in *scots* di MacDiarmid, passando poi per la tappa intermedia del suo capolavoro (*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, del 1926) e fino ad arrivare al 1946, l'anno di pubblicazione di *Songs to Eimhir* del poeta gaelico Sorley Maclean,<sup>8</sup> che la così detta Rinascenza prese a manifestarsi quale sommovimento decisivo per la cultura scozzese includendo non solo scrittori in *scots*, quali Alexander Scott, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch, Douglas Young, Tom Scott, George Bruce, Duncan Glen e il contemporaneo W.N. Herbert, ma gli scrittori più diversificati sia nello stile che negli intenti ideologici come Lewis Spence, Helen Burness Cruickshank, Compton Mackenzie, Neil Gunn, William Soutar e Lewis Grassie Gibbon, o musicisti come Alexander Campbell Mackenzie, William Wallace, Hamish MacCunn, John Blackwood McEwan e F.G. Scott, o artisti della statura di William McTaggart, S.J. Peplow, F.C.B. Caddell, Leslie Hunter, J.D. Fergusson, William Johnstone e William Crozier. Eppure la lista, il nuovo canone se volete, rimase del tutto inefficace nei confronti delle roccaforti imposte da Leavis, almeno fino ai primi anni sessanta, come testimonia un recente scritto di R.D.S. Jack. (Cfr. Jack 2000: vii-xi)

Il superamento di questo stallo si verificò dopo la pubblicazione del libro di Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, quando, forse casualmente, la riconsiderazione del canone scozzese venne ad intrecciarsi sempre più con i risultati delle altre letterature post-coloniali, smontando quella famosa "sacra unione" di cui parla Bergonzi. Non si tratta di sostituire ad una sacra unione di lingua, letteratura e nazione un'altra sacra unione altrettanto stereotipata e sicuramente condannata a sua volta ad essere estirpata: se appare oggi

giustificato ripescare da periodi storico-letterari più distanti scrittori come Thomas Pringle e Lady Anne Barnard, finora prerogativa del solo canone sudafricano, o ripensare il ruolo ed il posizionamento di Smollett, Byron, Carlyle, del nuovo canone dovrebbe far parte a buon diritto tutta la nuova scrittura in gaelico successiva ai *Songs to Eimhir* di Sorley Maclean,<sup>9</sup> la letteratura cioè che attinge dai classici settecenteschi quali Alexander MacDonald, Duncan Bàn Macintyre e William Ross e li riscrive nel novecento lanciandoli ben oltre la modernità nella poesia di George Campbell Hay, Iain Crichton Smith, Derick Thomson, Aonghas Macneacail, Meg Bateman, Anne Frater, Catriona Montgomery, Mary Montgomery e Myles Campbell.<sup>10</sup> Ma anche e soprattutto la nuova scrittura in prosa che da Muriel Spark, Jessie Kesson, William MacIlvanney e George Mackay Brown ha mosso la Scozia verso i successi internazionali di Alasdair Gray, Emma Tennant, Irvine Welsh, A.L. Kennedy, Janice Galloway, Kenneth White, Robin Jenkins, James Kelman, Iain Banks e John Burnside.<sup>11</sup> O la nuova poesia successiva al secondo dopoguerra, soprattutto quella di Hamish Henderson, di Norman MacCaig, di Edwin Morgan, di George Mackay Brown, dell'artista-poeta Ian Hamilton Finlay, di Stewart Conn, Douglas Dunn, Tom Leonard, Valerie Gillies, Carol Ann Duffy, Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie e Don Paterson.

David Daiches, riflettendo sulla legittimità d'un apparato bibliografico per lo studio del canone anglo-americano, ha osservato: "L'indagine storico-critica sulla letteratura di un paese non può avviarsi se non quando il numero delle opere scritte sia tale da far ritenere utile una catalogazione, la gamma dei generi e dei tempi di scrittura sia così ampia da consentire confronti e dare l'idea di una crescita o di una decadenza, e infine sia emerso un indirizzo critico capace di conferire un assetto sistematico alla materia, di operare una scelta e di formulare un giudizio." (Daiches 1989: 3) A seguire i dettami di Daiches, ci sarebbe molto da catalogare ed indagare in Scozia, e questo è un fenomeno che non può limitarsi al solo Novecento. La gamma dei generi e dei tempi di scrittura di cui parla Daiches sono stati, e continuano ad essere, così ampi che a più riprese si è tentato di conferire alla letteratura scozzese una sorta di sistemazione critica e cronologica.<sup>12</sup> Siamo ormai lontani da quella boutade di Arnold in cui si voleva delegittimare un possibile *primer* di letteratura americana. Ecco come il poeta polemizzava con tutte le letterature altre:

Vedo che si fa pubblicità al *Primer of American Literature*. Si immagini la faccia di Filippo o di Alessandro nell'udire che possa esistere un manuale di letteratura macedone. Dovremmo avere allora un manuale di letteratura canadese, o anche un manuale di letteratura australiana? Siamo tutti contri-

buenti di un'unica grande letteratura: la Letteratura Inglese. Il contributo della Scozia a questa letteratura è di gran lunga più serio ed importante di quello che l'America ha fornito fino ad oggi; eppure un 'Manuale di Letteratura Scozzese' sarebbe un'assurdità. E queste cose non sono solamente assurde: sono anche causa di rallentamenti. (Arnold 1977: 177)

Ovviamente, la legittimazione per la Scozia si sta attualizzando non solo attraverso le tradizionali storie letterarie ma anche grazie a studi orientati sui generi e su alcuni aspetti che ridefiniscono strategie letterarie e sinergie tra testi; mi riferisco in particolare al volume di Colin Manlove sulla letteratura fantastica scozzese, o a quello di Kenneth Simpson sulla crisi dell'identità in alcuni scrittori scozzesi da Settecento. Non solo già da più d'un secolo i capisaldi medievali della Scozia sono apparsi inamovibili (mi riferisco qui a Robert Henryson, William Dunbar e Gavin Douglas) e fondamentali per la rifondazione del canone successivo alla chiara crisi ottocentesca – e molto MacDiarmid ha fatto per non limitare la Scozia al folclorismo paesano a cui qualcuno ha voluto ridurre la poesia di Burns. Non solo ormai da venti anni (dal 1981, per la precisione) per figure del calibro di James Boswell e Robert Louis Stevenson, ma non esclusivamente per queste, la MLA Bibliography ha coniato l'etichetta "Scottish Literature", non ancora però estesa a Carlyle o a Smollett. Viene spontaneo però chiedersi come mai nel 1981 s'introduca, assieme alla voce "Scottish Literature", anche la voce "St Lucian Literature" (ben prima del Nobel a Derek Walcott) per poi scoprire nel corso degli ultimi venti anni, che questo è un raggruppamento di un singolo autore e fatto per un singolo autore, pur bravissimo, che risponde al nome di Derek Walcott. E questo mentre una storia letteraria ormai innegabile, come quella scozzese, fatica a trovare luoghi istituzionali deputati in Europa, nonostante sei secoli di scrittura, nonostante la MLA metta a disposizione di noi insegnanti, critici ed operatori un apparato che penso debba servire per la nostra attività didattica e scientifica, e nonostante la Canongate di Edimburgo sia ormai arrivata al centesimo volume nella sua collana di classici scozzesi (Cfr. Sutherland 2001: 12), annoverando autori che vanno da James Boswell e James Hogg a Emma Tennant e Liz Lochhead.

In questa sorta di regno dis-unito che è quello dell'Inghilterra, della Scozia, dell'Irlanda e del Galles ancora una volta è la letteratura a precedere la politica,<sup>13</sup> e per il termine "post-coloniale", come osserva Helen Tiffin, si ha bisogno di spiegare che esso "non si riferisce a date particolari di acquisizione dell'indipendenza dalla Gran Bretagna o a qualche esacerbazione politica, ma ad un insieme di circostanze condivisibili che possiedono un effetto fon-

damentale sulla letteratura prodotta in quelle aree, circostanze che probabilmente continueranno ad essere tali” (Tiffin 1983: 23-4).<sup>14</sup> Non si tratta solo di fronteggiare l’ansia di essere totalmente sopraffatta dalla voce centrale e centralista dell’Inghilterra, ma di evidenziare che una multietnicità linguistica e letteraria, e la presenza di quelle “multidimensional realities” sopra ricordate grazie a Nemoianu siano anche qui determinanti per quella ibridazione creativa che di recente sembra aver fatto decollare le nuove strategie discorsive del mondo post-coloniale.

Ciò che più ha contribuito alla rinascita della letteratura scozzese come corpo indipendente non è stato quindi solo il sostegno eclatante e narcisista di MacDiarmid per lo *scots* quale mezzo creativo di lotta (il momento propriamente abrogativo della lingua del colonizzatore),<sup>15</sup> né l’estremismo della politica nazionalista avviata fin dagli anni trenta, ma la presa di coscienza che un’identità sincretica per la Scozia riesca prima o poi ad aprire, come suggerisce David Lloyd a proposito dell’Irlanda, ad una dimensione di frontiera tra l’imperialismo inglese e il nazionalismo post-coloniale, annullando la trita dicotomia manichea di identità ormai stereotipate, per fondare, nell’ambiguità d’una identità inesistente, d’una incarnazione della vacuità (Cfr. Lloyd 1993:54-6), la sua inattaccabile differenza dal Centro.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Helen Tiffin ha osservato: “La lettura di testi caraibici, o africani, ha svelato quelle relazioni di dominio tra la ‘periferia’ ed il ‘centro’, tra testo ed immaginazione, identità e giudizio che avevano formato l’ossatura della mia stessa esperienza letteraria, ma che erano state naturalizzate come ‘concessioni’ apolitiche. Le similitudini eccitanti tra quelle opere non risiedeva nella spuria costruzione di una comune ‘natura umana’ ma nell’esposizione delle formazioni discorsive di un persistente imperialismo anglo-europeo attraverso una varietà di culture complesse e differenti, come anche della relazione tra l’imperialismo e le istituzioni che lo hanno nutrito e mantenuto, i modi in cui siamo stati ed ancora siamo interpellati come assoggettati coloniali, non meno attraverso il nostro studio acritico dei testi (letterari e non) di quell’impero.” Tiffin 1989: 121.

<sup>2</sup> Si veda anche Görlach 1991: 74. Per uno studio più ampio sul dominio inglese a spese del sistema educativo scozzese degli ultimi due secoli si confronti Crawford 1991: 16-44.

<sup>3</sup> Si veda anche l’ormai storico studio di Hechter 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Tale divisione dicotomica sta alla base dell’opposizione tra la supposta superiorità del Centro e l’inferiorità delle periferie. Mirando alla negazione di tutte le civiltà non-inglesi, questo asse, come osserva Abdul R. JanMohamed, “fornisce la caratteristica centrale dell’impianto cognitivo colonialista e della rappresentazione letteraria colonialista: l’allegoria manichea, un campo di opposizioni diverse eppure intercambiabili tra bianco e nero, bene e male, superiorità ed infe-

riorità, civilizzazione e stato selvaggio, intelligenza ed emozione, razionalità e sensualità, sè ed altro, soggetto ed oggetto.” Si veda JanMohamed 1985: 63.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Morgan afferma: “Quando i poeti scozzesi si trovarono di fronte al trauma invidioso dell’anglicizzazione della lingua della loro poesia, sia che fossero inclini a seguire o no la corte da Edimburgo a Londra, ogni tipo di scots, anglo-scots, inglese-scozzese o inglese fa la sua comparsa. In quanto tale cosa indebolì l’uso dello *scots* per la poesia alta o seria, fu in generale una cattiva situazione dalla quale a fatica i resti della lingua di Scozia si ripresero; eppure questo periodo sanziona anche, per lo scrittore scozzese, l’inizio di nuove possibilità espressive in inglese, possibilità che indicarono alla fine, persino ai più scettici e ai più nazionalisti, una fonte di potere non svincolata dall’aspirazione nazionale”. Morgan 1990: 15.

<sup>6</sup> Per una panoramica sul fenomeno si veda Glen 1964. Una lista completa di poeti ed intellettuali che contribuirono o continuarono l’opera di MacDiarmid è fornita da Tom Scott nell’articolo “Some Poets of the Scottish Renaissance”, *Poetry*, 88: 1 (April 1956): 43-47

<sup>7</sup> Per l’aspetto post-coloniale di questo argomento si veda Bruce King, “Towards Post-Colonial Literatures”, in A.L. Mcleod, ed. 1989: 57. Per l’aspetto politico del nazionalismo e le sue prerogative conflittuali si veda Anderson 1983: 9-46.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1926; Sorley Maclean, *Dàin do Eimhir agus Dàin Eile*, Glasgow: Maclellan, 1943. Commentando sul sostegno che MacDiarmid diede alla Rinascenza gaelica, George Kitchin puntualizza: “Poiché MacDiarmid era ormai divenuto il grande eresiarca, il suo ritiro nel 1933 nell’isola di Whalsay, nelle Shetlands, lo espose ad ogni tipo di dottrina. In *Direadh I*, il primo dei poemi dinosaurici che stava scrivendo, lui afferma: ‘Mi volgo dalla poesia della bellezza alla poesia della saggezza’, cioè, la politica, la filosofia e la scienza evolutiva. Allo stesso tempo lui era sempre più convinto che il gaelico era la *Ur*-lingua della Scozia, ed il vernacolo semplicemente un mezzo temporaneo.” Cfr. George Kitchin, *The Modern Makars*, in James Kinsley, ed., *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, London: Cassell, 1955, p. 261. Si veda anche Sorley MacLean, “My relationship with the Muse”, in *Ris a’ Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*, Stornoway: Acair Limited, 1985, pp. 6-14; e Douglas Sealy, “Out from Sky to the World: Literature, History and the Poet”, in Raymond J. Ross e Joy Hendry, eds., *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986, pp. 53-79.

<sup>9</sup> Commentando sul sostegno che MacDiarmid diede alla Rinascenza gaelica, George Kitchin puntualizza: “Poiché MacDiarmid era ormai divenuto il grande eresiarca, il suo ritiro nel 1933 nell’isola di Whalsay, nelle Shetlands, lo espose ad ogni tipo di dottrina. In *Direadh I*, il primo dei poemi dinosaurici che stava scrivendo, lui afferma: ‘Mi volgo dalla poesia della bellezza alla poesia della saggezza’, cioè, la politica, la filosofia e la scienza evolutiva. Allo stesso tempo lui era sempre più convinto che il gaelico era la *Ur*-lingua della Scozia, ed il vernacolo semplicemente un mezzo temporaneo.” Cfr. Kitchin 1951: 261. Si veda anche Sorley MacLean, “My relationship with the Muse”, in Id. 1985: 6-14; e Douglas Sealy, “Out from Sky to the World: Literature, History and the Poet”, in Ross e Hendry, eds. 1986: 53-79.

<sup>10</sup> Per la tradizione poetica del gaelico scozzese si veda Thomson 1989; per una panoramica della poesia novecentesca in gaelico si veda l’antologia curata da Ronald Black 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Si legga l’ancora attuale volume di Wallace e Stevenson, eds. 1993 e il più recente studio di Craig 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Si vedano non solo le recenti storie della letteratura scozzese di Lindsay (1977) 1992, di Bold 1983, di R. Watson 1984, di Craig, ed. 1987, di M. Walker 1996), e di Glenn 1999), ma si con-

sultino anche gli studi pionieristici di Millar 1903, di Gregory Smith 1919, e di Muir 1936.

<sup>13</sup> Oltre agli studi di genere e di storia letteraria sopra elencati si vedano i recentissimi volumi: M. Watson 2001; Taylor 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Si legga anche Shaffer 1997: xxv-xxvii.

<sup>15</sup> Per una discussione estesa delle strategie di “abrogazione” ed “appropriazione” si consulti Ashcroft, Griffiths e Tiffin 1989: 38-44. Si noti, in particolare, la seguente osservazione di Gareth Griffith: “Questa necessità di rimodernare la lingua è un compito affrontato da tutti gli scrittori delle società post-coloniali, sia che acquisiscano l’inglese dalla nascita sia che ce l’abbiano per imposizione esterna. Quando affrontano la necessità di registrare una esperienza marginalizzata dal discorso a loro disposizione, fuori dalla norma disponibile, possono far ciò solo abrogando quel discorso, cioè riconoscendo che la loro realtà è oppressa da quel discorso e che ogni lingua vera per loro deve implicare il rifiuto della gerarchia entro cui loro non sono privilegiati. Hanno la necessità di far sì che l’Inglese (con la i maiuscola) diventi l’inglese (con la i minuscola), una lingua appropriata e indigenizzata che abbraccia la sua varietà come una qualità positiva e non negativa.”

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## Abstract

*This paper offers a reconsideration of Scottish literature within the more general frame of world literatures in English and postcolonial literatures, highlighting which authors and which books have been instrumental to the so-called 'Scottish Renaissance' of the 1920s and 1930s. Such a revision brings about an analysis of the ideological ambiguity of operations of canon-making and of the high politicisation involved in the educational syllabi adopted in the various parts of the United Kingdom. The rediscovery, in Scottish literature, of the local 'Scots' is seen as essen-*

*tial, together with the many studies which are trying to assess the specificity of this literature by moving away from traditional literary historiography, and choosing to focus more on the texts, the genres they employ, the strategies they deploy.*

*Carved into Black Flesh: storia e schiavitù in due romanzi ambientati a Hispaniola.*

Paola I. Galli Mastrodonato

Voodoo Music from the stars  
Voodoo Music comes from Mars  
Ogni giorno e ovunque sei  
Buena Suerte dal tuo deejay

*Radio Zombie #2 – Negrita*

La nostra contemporaneità – quella del momento in cui sto scrivendo, quindi post-11 settembre 2001 – è sicuramente segnata da due caratteristiche mutualmente interdipendenti tra di loro: da un lato, ci troviamo a vivere immersi in un brodo di coltura essenzialmente intermediatico, nel senso che le nostre percezioni e le nostre idee incorporano simultaneamente i diversi messaggi audio-visivi-testuali che ci veicolano i mezzi di comunicazione di massa, dall'altro, questo processo è andato di pari passo con la progressiva ibridazione di culture diverse in seguito alle successive trasmissioni di popoli in età moderna (ivi incluse la tratta dei neri e l'emigrazione di manodopera povera dall'Europa).

A questo proposito, vorrei citare cosa risponde lo scrittore martinicano Patrick Chamoiseau, vincitore del Premio Goncourt nel 1992, alla domanda su cosa egli intenda per "creolità":

Popoli diversi tra loro per lingua e visione del mondo – amerindi, coloni europei, enclave africane, immigrati indù, cinesi, sirio-libanesi – dopo essere stati sradicati dalla loro terra, sono stati obbligati a vivere insieme.

E sono riusciti, pur nel conflitto e nel dolore, a creare una nuova identità culturale. Questa è la *creolizzazione* che è identica ovunque: a Cuba, in Martinica, a Trinidad, in tutta l'America Latina: ciò che cambia è la creolità. Esiste una creolità metropolitana e una della periferia, in Francia o in Italia, o in qualsiasi altro paese dove c'è un incontro di popoli diversi. Attenzione però: la creolità non è un *metissage*, né una sintesi. È un mosaico di popoli e di valori che si compenetrano, che si ripudiano o si accettano in maniera imprevedibile. Si è quindi in uno stato di creolità quando ci si trova nel punto di confluenza di diverse razze, lingue e culture. (Chamoiseau 2000)

Altra breve premessa: il territorio di scrittura. Hispaniola, la vasta isola caraibica su cui pose piede Colombo nel 1492 e che oggi è divisa tra Repubblica di Haiti a ovest e Repubblica Dominicana a est. La Storia 1: nel 1791 scoppia a Saint Domingue, il lato sotto il controllo francese, una rivolta degli schiavi neri capeggiata dal giamaicano Boukman e poi da Jeannot e Toussaint L'Ouverture e che porterà, nel 1805, allo sterminio di tutti i coloni bianchi e alla proclamazione della prima Repubblica in terra americana, Haiti. La Storia 2: negli anni '30 dello scorso secolo, nel lato spagnolo dell'isola, imperversa la feroce dittatura del generale Trujillo che perseguita, fra gli altri, gli immigrati haitiani che lavorano in semi-schiavitù nelle piantagioni di canna da zucchero. Scrittore 1: Madison Smartt Bell, nato nel Tennessee nel 1957, si confronta con la Storia 1 nel suo romanzo *Quando le anime si sollevano* (*All Souls' Rising*, 1995), ponendo in epigrafe due testi: "Per *les morts et les mystères*,/ e per tutte le anime schiave dei corpi,/ ho bruciato questa offerta", e "Four hundred years.../ (Four hundred years, four hundred years...)/ And it's the same.../ Same philosophy... *Bob Marley* 1972". Scrittrice 2: Edwidge Danticat, nata ad Haiti nel 1969 ed emigrata negli Stati Uniti all'età di dodici anni, si confronta con la Storia 2 nel suo romanzo *The Farming of Bones* (1998), ponendo in epigrafe due testi: una citazione tratta dalle Sacre Scritture (Judges 12: 4-6) e una dedica, "In confidences to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers Amabelle Désir".

Romanzo e Storia, quindi, due corpose categorie critiche ed epistemiche che hanno suscitato, come ben sappiamo, altrettanto corpose sintesi e compendi. Storia e Schiavitù, il campo va forse restringendosi verso zone di indagine non così chiaramente delimitate, che hanno nel "revisionismo" e nella cosiddetta coscienza postcoloniale (e postmoderna) i loro punti di svolta; ancora una volta un intellettuale caraibico, Frantz Fanon, fornirà delle chiavi di lettura necessarie ad aprire molte delle porte sbarrate dall'eurocentrismo occidentale. Romanzo e Schiavitù, un abbinamento forse da far risalire alle

prime *slave narratives* di fine Settecento, dove degli schiavi emancipati di origini africane raccontavano nella lingua dei padroni del Nuovo Mondo la loro peculiare e tristissima *historia calamitatum* nel solco di una parabola escatologica e culturalmente “doppia” che li porterà ad elaborare una diversa visione del concetto stesso di realtà e realismo (Galli Mastrodonato 1998). Alcune precisazioni. Secondo Gyorgy Lukacs, lo sviluppo del romanzo storico in quanto “forma” è andato di pari passo con il crescente coinvolgimento delle “masse” nei processi stessi (guerre, rivoluzioni) che quella Storia o quelle singole storie nazionali andavano costruendo: per la prima volta si assisteva “alla possibilità concreta che degli uomini comprendessero la propria esistenza come qualcosa di storicamente determinato, che considerassero la storia come qualcosa che influiva profondamente sulla loro vita quotidiana e che li interessava direttamente” (23, mia trad.). Ovviamente, Lukacs non considerò mai le “masse” del Nuovo Mondo come portatrici di Storia, nonostante in quell’emisfero *parallelo*, si stessero portando avanti, da metà Settecento in poi, diversi movimenti di liberazione e di indipendenza, fra cui la rivolta degli schiavi di Saint Domingue. Come scrivere, quindi, un romanzo storico su masse senza Storia o al di fuori della Storia? Che ruolo hanno la Schiavitù e il contesto caraibico in particolare nella creazione di una “forma” nuova di romanzo storico, che io chiamerei il *romanzo creolo*, secondo la definizione di Chamoiseau, un testo ibrido e “poliritmico” (Benitez-Rojo 1990: 104) scaturito da un Tropo, un nero abisso di sofferenza, che trascende le nostre stesse appartenenze ed identità precostituite – linguistiche, nazionali, di colore di pelle – e ci porta a sperimentare una diversa vicinanza storica (o pre-storica, o anti-storica, se per Storia si continua a significare il destino di sottomissione coloniale ad un Impero tuttora onnipresente...) con i fatti e i personaggi che ci vengono narrati.

Scegliendo di pormi in quest’ottica, vorrei parlare di questi due straordinari romanzi soffermandomi sulla loro discorsività, vale a dire, la costruzione consapevole di quello che ho appena definito come un testo *creolo*, tralasciando di proposito riferimenti dettagliati ai due *plots*, che chiunque potrà verificare di persona con una lettura attenta. Primo nucleo discorsivo: la struttura del racconto. Decidendo di scrivere un romanzo storico oggi, non si possono trascurare le motivazioni implicite che devono aver spinto sia Bell che Danticat ad un’operazione di questo genere e che Cok van der Voort definisce efficacemente quale “ritorno alla storia”, e questo “non tanto come rifugio nostalgico-consolatorio quanto come serbatoio delle radici profonde dell’umanità” (Voort, 96). E per far questo, l’autore ricorrerà ad una struttura nar-

rativa aperta, circolare, non-lineare, ad una “storiografia ‘debole’, che ricorre all’ermeneutica, alla pluralità dei punti di vista ed ai tanti fenomeni interdisciplinari del mondo moderno” (97). Tuttavia, nell’affrontare il Tropo Hispaniola, le cose si complicano. Il cubano Alejo Carpentier ne *Il regno di questo mondo*, che si occupava dei “fatti di Saint Domingue”, aveva già colto alcuni degli elementi *creoli* peculiari a questa ambientazione:

il racconto che si sta per leggere è stato costruito su una documentazione estremamente rigorosa che non solo rispetta la verità storica degli eventi, i nomi dei personaggi – anche quelli secondari –, di luoghi e persino di vie, ma che nasconde pure, sotto la sua apparente atemporalità, un minuzioso raffronto di date e di cronologie. E tuttavia, per la drammatica singolarità degli eventi, per la fantastica intensità dei personaggi che si ritrovarono, a un certo punto, nel crocicchio magico del Cap Français, tutto si rivela meraviglioso in una storia che sarebbe impossibile situare in Europa, e che è reale, tuttavia, quanto uno qualsiasi dei fatti esemplari racchiusi, a fini di pedagogica edificazione, nei manuali scolastici. (Carpentier 1990: xi)<sup>i</sup>

Sia Bell che Danticat intrattengono lo stesso rapporto conflittuale reale/magico con la materia storica del loro scrivere. Il primo appone una breve Prefazione introduttiva ai fatti narrati nel proprio romanzo e la completa con una Cronologia posta in appendice che va dallo sbarco di Colombo al 1805, anno in cui Dessalines ordina lo sterminio dei bianchi superstiti, cronologia che precede di molto l’inizio storico del romanzo (1791) e ne posticipa l’epilogo che ferma il racconto alla cattura e alla deportazione in Francia di Toussaint (giugno 1802). Danticat sostiene fra gli Acknowledgements posti a conclusione del romanzo, che “This book is a work of fiction based on historical events” (Danticat 1998: 311), eventi che ruotano intorno al 1937, anno del grande Massacro perpetrato dai militari di Trujillo sugli inermi lavoratori haitiani. *L’incipit* dei due testi è indicativo del contratto di leggibilità che i due autori vogliono stabilire con il lettore e che ricalca quella struttura “meta-arcipelagica” con cui Benitez-Rojo efficacemente descrive la peculiarità del testo caraibico/creolo, una “macchina” significativa ad andamento fluviale e marino, con le sue maree e i suoi flussi e riflussi (storici? metastorici?), che “connects the Orinoco to the Hellespont, the Niger to the Bahamian Channel, Olympus to a street in Kingston” (98). Il romanzo di Bell si apre infatti con un breve Prologo in cui è riprodotto un passaggio del diario di bordo tenuto

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<sup>i</sup> Devo questa importante segnalazione all’amica e collega ispano-americanista Maria Gabriella Dionisi dell’Università della Toscana.

dall'anonimo capitano francese che sta trasportando "il capo brigante Toussaint" (Bell 1999: 13) e la sua famiglia verso la fredda prigionia sulle Alpi dove troverà la morte. Siamo in mare aperto e il capitano osserva la figura idiosincratca del ribelle nero mentre riflette ad alta voce e pronuncia parole non del tutto comprensibili per il bianco:

- Guinée – ha detto, così piano che quasi non ho afferrato la parola.
  - Africa? – ho replicato un po' sorpreso.
- Naturalmente non guardava nella direzione giusta, ma non ci si poteva aspettare che si orientasse fuori dalla Colonia. È creolo, e credo che si trovasse in mare aperto per la prima volta. Mi accorsi che i miei occhi andavano dietro ai suoi, mentre scrutava la superficie dell'Oceano. L'acqua, assorbendo la luce del tramonto, aveva assunto un lucicchio rugginoso.
- Guinée, on dit, se trouve en bas de l'eau. Continuava a fissare le onde. (Bell, 1999: 17)

Il romanzo di Danticat si apre con un capitolo 1 di poche pagine, tipograficamente distinto dal seguente per il suo carattere in grassetto, e che esprime il punto di vista della voce narrante, Amabelle:

His name is Sebastien Onius.  
He comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time of my parents drowning. While my body is struggling against sleep, fighting itself to awaken, he whispers for me to "lie still while I take you back."  
"Back where?" I ask without feeling my lips moving.  
He says, "I will take you back into the cave across the river."(Danticat 1998: 1)

Nel penultimo capitolo, ritorna Sebastien e il ciclo sembra compiersi:

His name is Sebastien Onius and his spirit must be inside the waterfall cave at the source of the stream where the cane workers bathe, the grotto of wet moss and chalk and luminous green fresco—the dark green of wet papaya leaves.  
Sometimes I can make myself dream him out of the void to listen. A handsome, steel-bodied man, he carries a knapsack woven from palm leaves as he walks out of the cave into the room where I sleep. (282)

La figura di Toussaint ritorna anche nel breve epilogo del romanzo di Bell, intitolato "Envoi" (invio, come il tasto del computer), e che ripercorre il "fuoco" tramandatoci da quei lontani fatti, narrato in uno stile misto, impersonale/storiografico e flusso di coscienza allo stesso tempo, rappresentato tipograficamente in corsivo:

*un fuoco che brucia per oceani e secoli, un vento generato dal vortice del tempo che lo scaglia a distruggere le città delle terre future, perché le braci di questo fuoco tornano a divampare a ogni minimo soffio, una sola scintilla basta a ravvivare un incendio così tenace; e da quelle ceneri l'inferno appiccato a Le Cap ancora brucia, scioglie e divide, obbligandoci tutti ad ammirare il pallido candore delle fiamme contro le braci nere, anche se i lampi di fuoco si aprono a stento un varco nello spazio, come la luce di una stella spenta da tempo, traccia di una storia tanto remota da apparire quasi pittoresca: le urla, le morti lontane di tutta quella gente, il loro grasso sfrigolante sulle braci delle fondamenta in rovina, tante storie scritte sulla pelle come fogli di pergamena da leggere alla luce di lampade alimentate dall'olio delle loro ossa; un fuoco simile può affievolirsi, non oscurarsi totalmente, brucia ancora adesso, cerca di farsi largo nel futuro, vuole bruciare chi, come te, si crede assuefatto alle atrocità, agli omicidi per le strade, un fuoco che vorrebbe illuminarti la vita perfino quando si riduce a un debole puntino verde luminescente sul tuo orologio: sta arrivando, è ancora fra noi. Ma nessuno ne scorge la luce. (Bell 1999: 646)*

Il Grande Oceano del *middle passage* che separava gli africani dal loro passato, dal loro clan, dal loro popolo, dalle loro lingue e dalle loro credenze e religioni, così come il fiume che delimita la frontiera tra Haiti e gli spagnoli, rappresentano il magma liquido che contiene il significato storico di ciò che è avvenuto ad Hispaniola e che da lì si è propagato alle nostre coscienze. La struttura circolare rafforza questa immagine di una Storia incompiuta e che implica un ritmo cadenzato, di eterno ritorno, appunto come il *reggae* giamaicano e i tamburi che scandivano la ribellione degli schiavi. Questa cornice strutturale che ingloba i due racconti, contiene al suo interno altri due nodi discorsivi su cui mi soffermerò brevemente. Il primo richiama il titolo che ho voluto dare al mio intervento: inciso nella carne nera. Il primo capitolo del romanzo di Bell si apre temporalmente nell'agosto del 1791 e presenta, alla terza persona, l'arrivo nella colonia del medico francese Dottor Hébert, uomo progressista bianco al quale si spalanca dinanzi agli occhi improvvisamente la seguente realtà:

Non era esattamente una crocifissione, pensò il Dottor Hébert, perché di fatto non c'era nessuna croce. Soltanto un palo, o meglio un tronco ancora rivestito della corteccia. Vicino alla punta si notavano degli sfregi, certo provocati dalla catena con cui lo avevano trascinato. Una trentina di centimetri più in basso le mani della donna erano fissate al legno con un grosso chiodo quadrato. La sinistra sulla destra, le palme rivolte all'esterno. I rivoli di sangue colati dai fori lungo la parte interna degli avambracci si erano

rappresi e screpolati per la calura. Il dottore ne concluse che la donna doveva trovarsi lì da parecchie ore. Sorprendente che fossa ancora viva. I muscoli del petto esercitavano una forza contraria all'azione del chiodo e spingevano i seni verso l'alto. Le areole erano grandi e i capezzoli dilatati, mentre la pelle dell'addome, nonostante la tensione che il peso del corpo produceva sul diaframma, cadeva rilassata. Dalle pudende pendeva un'escrecenza membranosa da cui il Dottor Hébert distolse lo sguardo. Anche i piedi erano trafitti l'uno sull'altro dallo stesso tipo di chiodo di rozza fattura impiegato per le mani. (Bell 1999: 23)

Amabelle, nella sua fuga disperata verso la frontiera haitiana, viene bloccata con alcuni compagni dai militari dominicani che impongono l'esatta pronuncia di "perejil" (prezzemolo) quale prova della loro appartenenza. Il Massacro del "pési", pronuncia kréyol, è vissuto da Amabelle in prima persona sulla propria carne:

I coughed and sprayed the chewed parsley on the ground, feeling a foot pound on the middle of my back. Someone threw a fist-sized rock, which bruised my lip and left cheek. My face hit the ground. Another rock was thrown at Yves. He raised his hand and wiped his forehead to keep the parsley out of his eyes.

The faces in the crowd were streaming in and out of my vision. A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath. The pain was like a stab from a knife or an ice pick, but when I reached down I felt no blood. Rolling myself into a ball, I tried to get away from the worst of the kicking horde. I screamed, thinking I was going to die. My screams slowed them a bit. But after a while I had less and less strength with which to make a sound. My ears were ringing; I tried to cover my head with my hands. My whole body was numbing; I sensed the vibration of the blows, but no longer the pain. My mouth filled with blood. I tried to swallow the sharp bitter parsley bubbling in my throat. Some of the parsley had been peppered before it was given to us. Maybe there was poison in it. What was the use of fighting? (Danticat 1998: 194)

Il nero abisso di sofferenza forma il nocciolo duro di una Storia vissuta da generazioni di schiavi ed ex-schiavi nella propria carne e che dal proprio martirio produrrà il seme della Resistenza: il terzo nucleo discorsivo è infatti quello che oppone il realismo delle atrocità subite alla magia trascendente della propria alterità spirituale, alterità che ha un nome ed è il Vudù. Nel capitolo ottavo del romanzo di Bell, ci viene presentato il personaggio del giovane schiavo *marron* Riau, allievo di Toussaint, il quale rievoca in prima persona dapprima la figura storica (e mitica) di Macandal, il mandingo che organizzò

una prima campagna di sterminio dei bianchi e fu poi bruciato sul rogo – “[...] Tra le fiamme ha spezzato le catene che lo tenevano legato al palo, però non è uscito dal fuoco con il corpo. Il fuoco ha preso il suo *corps-cadavre*, ma lui ha trasformato il suo *ti-bon-ange* in una zanzara ed è volato via; quella zanzara è ancora qui da qualche parte [...]” (Bell 1998: 154) – e quindi ci conduce ad una *calenda*, il raduno clandestino organizzato sui monti:

Sentivamo l’eco dei tamburi guidarci da una grande distanza. Dapprima abbiamo udito il suono del *rada*, poi sia il *rada* sia il petro. [...]

Nella radura Boukman e i suoi avevano preparato un grande *hûnfor*. L’altare non aveva tetto, ma al centro del peristilio avevano capitozzato un albero dritto, lasciando in piedi il tronco senza corteccia perchè servisse da poteau mitan. Damballah e Aida Weido erano avvolti in una spirale dipinta sul terreno intorno all’albero. C’erano quaranta giovani hounsisi tutte vestite di bianco e una *mambo* di cui non ho mai appreso il nome, sebbene fosse grande come due case. Mi sono guardato intorno e al margine del campo ho visto l’albero dove dimorava Damballah. Sapevo che viveva lì perchè davanti all’albero c’erano una scodella di latte e delle uova sigillate dentro una cassa, in modo che nessuno, se non Damballah, potesse sciogliere attraverso le fessure e cibarsene. (Bell 1999: 155)

Una profonda spiritualità animista permea tutto il romanzo di Danticat – “In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her” (1998: 207) – e si incarna in Sebastien Onius, l’amato compagno di Amabelle che scompare durante il Massacro. Egli è dotato di capacità guaritrici:

“Amabelle, it is Sebastien, come to see you,” he says. “I have brought remedies for your wounds. I’ve brought citronella and cedarwood to keep the ants and mosquitoes from biting your skin, camphor, basil, and bitter oranges to reduce your fevers and keep your joints limber. I’ve brought ginger and celery, aniseed, and cinnamon for your digestion, turmeric for your teeth, and kowosòl tea for pleasant dreams.” (282)

Anche Toussaint era un sapiente *dokté-feuilles*, un esperto di piante medicinali, oltre che un fine bibliista, ed ambedue i romanzi utilizzano un “network of subcodes holding together cosmogonies, mythic bestiaries, remote pharmacopoeias, oracles, profound ceremonies, and the mysteries and alchemies of humanity” (Benitez-Rojo 1990: 98). Su questo sottofondo ritmico, pulsante, incalzante, si stagliano le vicende della Storia dei bianchi, fatta di rivoluzioni e votazioni all’Assemblea Nazionale, di dittature militari e religione cattolica,

ombre minacciose (i coniugi Arnaud, la famiglia della Senora Valencia) che spesso parlano la lingua suadente e razionale del genocidio e dell'olocausto.

La Schiavitù nella Storia ha quindi prodotto la *creolità* di cui parla Chamoiseau; egli stesso, come Edwidge Danticat, haitiana discendente spirituale di Macandal e Toussaint, la porta *incisa nella sua carne nera*. Lascerei le ultime parole di questo mio intervento a Madison Smartt Bell, il quale, benché di pelle bianca, è sicuramente anch'egli creolo:

La storia di Haiti contiene tutte le componenti che hanno dato vita alla civiltà occidentale così come la conosciamo oggi. Haiti è stato il primo insediamento di Colombo. Lo sterminio europeo degli indiani d'America è cominciato qui e fu Las Casas (il missionario spagnolo del Cinquecento che denunciò la brutalità degli spagnoli verso gli indios dei Caraibi.) a farsi venire l'idea della schiavitù degli africani nella speranza di alleviare le sofferenze dei nativi. Così Haiti è stato il primo punto di incontro delle tre razze e la sua rivoluzione è la terza delle rivoluzioni che hanno creato la società moderna: americana, francese, e infine, seppure molto meno nota, haitiana. Io credo addirittura che la rivolta haitiana sia la più importante. Perché? Perché fu l'unica a estendere l'ideale dell'uguaglianza dei diritti – alla vita, alla libertà, al raggiungimento della felicità & company – anche ai non bianchi. Le conseguenze di questa piccola svista le viviamo ancora oggi. (Nirenstein 1999)

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### **Abstract**

*By considering Madison Smartt Bell's historical novel, All Souls' Rising (1995), on the slave rebellion of Saint Domingue in 1791, and Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones (1998) on the 1937 massacre of Haitian sugar cane workers in the Dominican Republic, the author investigates the relationship between history and the novel on one side, and history and slavery on the other. She then defines a new form of historical novel termed the creole novel, according to new insights into Caribbean literature.*

## *Sebastian Barry's The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty as an Irish Narrative of Exile*

Roberta Geffter Wondrich

Exile and displacement are among the foremost problematic discourses which distinctly inform Irish contemporary literature that also constitute a common ground within the wider context of postcolonial and emerging literatures in English. After Joyce's *Ulysses*, Irish literature and Irish cultural imagination have continued to engage with the time-honoured Odyssey-trope in connection with notions of quest, exile and return and with anti-heroic, diminished and often battered human characters, even while curtailing the mythical references and palimpsests created by Joyce. The reversal of the heroic perspective is by no means innovative in terms of literary conception, and yet Sebastian Barry's *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, published in 1998, is worth examining as one of the most interesting fictional recastings of the anti-heroic figure and of the Odyssey (and Aeneid) archetype, as a text that illuminates the ongoing and still vitally complex Irish literary discourse on exile.

The novel revolves around the life-story of a central character who incongruously epitomizes the Irish Twentieth century in its misery and brutality, being born at its very inception in 1900, and dying an absurdly heroic death in the mid-Seventies, in an arson overtly evocative of the raging explosion of the Troubles:

All about him the century has just begun, a century some of which he will endure, but none of which will belong to him (Barry 1998: 3).

Endurance and a frustrated sense of belonging beset Eneas McNulty's entire life-parable, which brings him from his birthplace, an elegiac and unreal Sligo, across the perilous seas of the British Merchant Navy first, to the Royal Irish Constabulary during the Revolution and Civil War. Then a life-sentence issued by a former pal of his childhood—now a fanatic IRA man—

relentlessly pursues him until the end of his days, after years spent in England, France and Nigeria, again back to Sligo where he keeps coming back, only to his misery, and until the furthest reach of his wanderings, the Isle of Dogs.

As a marginal and diminished figure, Eneas is yet another Irish displaced exile, perpetually doomed to estrangement, a victim and a champion of innocence, naiveté and utter lack of malice. Constantly longing for a *nostos* which proves impossible or disappointing, and thus reviving a debunked and highly sympathetic and humanized version the Ulyssean plight, this character also fits well in the Joycean gallery of silent and ineffective spectators, “outcast(s) at life’s feast”, thereby reinstating many Irish tropes and stereotypes which have often been exploited by literary narratives of exile and displacement.

The crucial theme which sustains the emotional lyricism and the whole narrative texture of this novel is in fact that of the denied or unattainable *nostos*, a treatment of and perspective on the “myth” of exile which apparently seems to be at odds with a trend shown by recent Irish fiction to privilege and emphasize the element of an exilic *return* to an Ireland which has to be re-experienced after extrangement in order to be ultimately acknowledged as homeland. This reversal to a bleaker and more “traditional” outlook is to be related to an exile figure which is no longer identifiable with the modern expatriate, the emigré, or the outsider who deliberately chooses to leave Ireland, all types which constantly overlap and conflate with a stricter and less accommodating notion of “exile”. Here the protagonist is a victim, he is forced to leave first by his lack of opportunities, then by a life-sentence which he will eventually pay, precisely because of his return to an Ireland disfigured by bigotry and by “an edge of murderousness”.

It is worth mentioning, in this respect, a distinction which appears to be crucial to the narrative and which adds to the rich literary typology of Irish exiles: too naive and unassuming to conceive of himself as an “exile”, Eneas wonders about his plight:

He has lost the love of his fellow people and maybe he should term himself an outcast instead of a wanderer. [...] A wanderer is someone you might like to be after watching a western [...]

He knows there is a scattering of other souls like his own, shocked and fearful in their shoes. (98)

And yet the homecoming Eneas longs for throughout the novel amounts to a real *nostos*—though denied—precisely in that it is idealized and transfigured by memory and imagination:

The shock of the land invades him [...] places he barely knows, maybe visited once in the old days when his mother would bring him to the capital... But his chest heaves with love, with peace, with pure need. It's the tobacco, the opium, of returning home. (163)

In the forced dichotomy between stasis and movement, Eneas significantly seems to at loss in both, so that neither appears to be identifiable with the privileged condition of understanding the world and the self engendered by belongingness, as his haunted fate implies that return may lead to retribution.

*(at the age of 22)* He feels like an ould fella. He feels like a fabled wanderer of old and he hasn't left the spot yet. He has not endured shipwreck maybe but maybe he has—the shipwreck of freedom so general and welcomed in the land. (110)

Nor can he allow that his own life has been worth saving. He doesn't even know what his life has been, whether it has a weight or a value. (139)

Departure for Eneas is prompted by a naive carelessness which only partly conceals the dread of being denied homecoming:

'Trouble is', says his Pappy, 'a man goes away like that and maybe he never comes back to his people.' (69)

At the same time he harbours the illusion that home and homecoming might protect him and somehow restore an original bliss, while the novel's tragic paradox lies precisely in the inherent destructiveness of the New Ireland of political bigotry. Thus, the absurd tragedy of the epilogue suggests that the novel dramatizes the impossible nostos in the sense of a questioning of homecoming as a condition of reconciliation.

Eneas rides again the river of home like a broken branch. He feels that old sense of power that comes from being fit and alive in his own country, as good as the next man... He has assumed that, as he has suffered in a mighty war and lain ill in a great asylum in England, his old sins will not be set against him. Now he's not so certain. He smells Ireland outside the window of the train, and she smells very much the same as always, as twenty years ago she smelled. (166)

Worn out by "the huge silent racket of history"—a history he never perceives as such, but to which he pays the highest tribute—Eneas becomes less and less of a wanderer and a seeker:

There's a seed at the back of his mind that suggests that leaving is still an adventure, but it's only a seed. The great tree of hope and energy is no more. (200)

Significantly, what the novel thus sanctions the distinction between physical and geographical return and truly existential return as full acceptance on the exile's part, both passive and active, received and proffered. It predicates the tragic coexistence of the inevitable return with an impossible *nostos*, of a return which does not become homecoming, thus equating Eneas, "deep in his dream of forgotten safety" (142) with the figure of the migrant, for whom, according to Iain Chambers, even "the promise of homecoming [...] becomes an impossibility" (1994: 5).

And it is precisely the *nostos*-motif which merges the mythical and epical echoes with the main "Irish" strand in this narrative of exile.

And he remembers Mr Jackson the master explaining in his batlike voice years ago that nostalgia means something hard and tricky in the Greek, not a pleasant feeling at all, but the sickness of returning home, and how Greek mariners, Homer's or just mariners of the wild and ordinary world in old epic days, suffered it, feared it, answered it, were led into the vales and isles of death by it, where nothing is at it seems. And yes, he understands it now. (Barry 1998: 167-8)

In the novel references and allusions to the classic world abound, in fact, depicting a "leviathan world" where the forlorn anti-hero finds himself at loss as yet another anti-Odysseus, musing on "How dark and hurt and deep the world" (233) and thus once again confirming the abiding fascination with the homeric world of contemporary literatures in English. The novel also partly owes its lyricism and epic-like suggestiveness to the omniscient and extradiegetic narrative voice that recounts the protagonist's life, in compassionate and densely poetic tones evocative of ancient narrations.

Sligo as an unwelcoming, harsh homeland is peopled by men who "are more doomed and fixed in their courses [...] it seems to him, than those bewildered and doomed Greeks of old that the master used to relish" (71).

The classic world is also alluded to through an overtly "Irish" humour which performs a debunking effect in the narrative, as in the Joycian flavour of the justification provided for the protagonist's name:

When Eneas first came into the class Mr Jackson showed some interest in the name Eneas, pointing out it was taken from the Roman story about a long-suffering and wandering sea-captain. But Eneas was only called

Eneas after some old great-grandfather of his father's, ... And the discussion was ended suddenly by one of the boys offering the information that in Cork the name is pronounced anus. (27-28)

The sense of this allusiveness is also overtly deflatory, especially with regard to the protagonist as a diminished and almost pathetic version of the Odysseus (and Aeneas) figure: he returns to his birthplace after twenty years of hardship only to find himself more helpless and unable to attain rescue than ever, faced with:

The joke of being an outcast in his own town [...] The joke is he's twenty years away and he can't recognize a soul, let alone prepare for the attack. (167)

His first return home after serving in the British Royal Merchant Navy prefigures his crumbling sense of identity ("It is a long time before he reappears as himself, if he ever does"), almost in a reversed and parodic echo of Odysseus' slyness in taking on semblances other than his own to avoid being recognized. Another thread woven in the novel's web of classical allusiveness is the motif of Eneas' descent to hell, as in a parodic recalling of both Odysseus and of his namesake epic hero:

he has also been released into the nether world, the interesting hell of Johnno Lynch's heart. (18)

His doomed wanderings across two world wars and the Troubles lead him to envisage his own life as progressively wasted on the evil and sorrows he has born witness to:

He discovers that having seen the dead he can scarcely retrieve a sense of himself as a living man. (141)  
he knows that in a sense he is already dead, that time has already taken care of him. (224)

Until "He is mortally exhausted sometimes by being this Eneas McNulty" (228).

While the protagonist's incredible innocence and tenderness often amount to a lethal lack of ruse—an IRA gunman refuses to shoot him because he considers him "a simpleton"—and clearly set him at odds both with the powerful mind of the Homeric prototype and with the accomplished heroism of the Virgilian hero, placing him rather in the Bloomian track, the loose Homeric

parallel is also implied by the use of (marine) imagery, episodes and figures, together with an almost epic sense of history and time as cyclical and unintelligible mysteries.

Within this intesection of homeric and epic resonances, in fact, the novel overtly dramatizes a prominent space (and place) associated with the exilic predicament, such as the liminal one of the shore, which is often conflated with war, carnage, impending destruction, thus reaffirming the basic and unavoidable nexus between individual predicament and national history. When he returns to sea, “God brings Eneas again to the shore” (153), another tossed-about human being, rescued from the tragedy of war at Dunkirk only to face a darker ordeal “at home”. Everything in the life at sea, even the boat, is but a recollection or a replacement of home, from the hope of the early years to the sad hopelessness of ripeness:

But he has chosen to come out upon the sea... He knows that if a man chooses to go, he may freely in the next breath choose to return home, wherever his true home lies. And this is his liberty, his home reachable behind him, and all the different versions of home in the ports of the world, and the peculiar but adequate home in the person of the boat. (36)

The marine metaphoric texture and imagery recurs throughout the novel also in relation to the motif of “drifting” and floating as metaphors of an existence robbed of its purpose and drive, and to the illusion of finding freedom and belonging elsewhere, bred by the life at sea:

Out in that immaculate waste world of ice and sea and herring, with the companionable whales ...it is possible somehow to hold Sligo in his head, floating, particular. (129)

[...] the flotsam of men and women without employment spreads everywhere, pushed by the shallow sea of need. As he moves from town to town, as much a ghost as any English drifter, he marvels at the condition of the old Promised Land. For an Irishman might affect to hate England and love America, but they are both and were ever equal refuges to him. (125)

Moreover, the text dramatizes the notion and image of drift not only in spatial terms, in relation to the sea as the great interstice, the great in-between between shores as possible homelands, between departure and arrival, exile and homecoming, but also across time, within the realm of temporality. Thus Eneas is “unhomed” by his place and time, “He’s adrift on the shallow sea of his homeland” (60), and his plight is made even more significant in the light of his contemporaneity with the twentieth century:

He looks around at the country that is his world and is not his world. ... He can't seem to get himself to sit in his own time. drifting, drifting. (85)

Another obsessive image reads as an emblem of the protagonist's displacement: a ship of refugee Jews "refused everywhere [...] that no port on earth would take" becomes almost an objective correlative of his own plight as an outcast, "as a hated man"(132) in search of a promised homeland, never to be found.

Similarly, a sea image of death by water appears to bear Joycean resonances:

He imagines the panic of being alone in the water but he has heard that a queer peace intrudes in the drowning man, sailors have told him. Momentarily he too longs for that peculiar peace. (163)

Finally, the protagonist's "whereabouts" take on a distinctly postcolonial roaming which opens up to a whole set of implications which make it possible to read this novel as yet another expression of the highly idiosyncratic postcoloniality of the Irish reality. Significantly, Eneas' only true friend is a "Negroman", a Nigerian named Harcourt, who befriends him until the end, when they both die in the arson caused by the fanatic Johnno Lynch, the betraying old friend. A link is thus established between the African colonized subject and the Irish outcast, both disparaged, marginal and alien to a new order of things they cannot understand nor identify with. They end up their days in the Isle of Dogs, seeking shelter in a hotel which for them "must be homeland and home":

it is strange that though many years separate the freedoms of their homelands, Eneas and Harcourt are scraps of people both, blown off the road of life by history's hungry breezes. (284)

*The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* thus subtly but powerfully enacts the possibility of a revived (counter-) epic strand by poetically problematizing the notion of home, homeland and belonging, already so widely explored by modern and contemporary Irish literature, where often Ireland itself and the exilic predicament have been linked and almost conflated in a sort of reciprocity. Significantly, it recuperates not only the Odyssean epic, but also the Virgilian one, since the protagonist incongruously recalls his namesake, the hero Aeneas, the man destined to succeed and to become the founder of the greatest (imperial) city of antiquity, Rome. Although the novel does not employ the metaphoric implications of (British) Romans and (Irish) Carthaginians, as has been done in some recent plays by Irish dramatists, as E. Butler Cullingford pointed out ("British Romans": 1996), it clearly suggests a pathetic and elegiac reversal of Aeneas' epic fate. Eneas McNulty, the Irish anti-hero, does not

succeed in re-founding a personal homeland, but instead ends up crushed by a merciless fate, and his life becomes the epitome of Ireland's troubled destiny. He is redeemed because of his innocence and his "*pietas*", but he remains an ineffectual adventurer.

In reading this text as an effective treatment of the exilic predicament one may recall Homi Bhabha's notion of "unhomeliness": Bhabha states that "to be unhomed is not to be homeless", but that "The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (Bhabha 1994: 143). The novel offers a treatment of the "myth of exile" by reinscribing the Odyssey-trope into this grotesque and quasi-picaresque notion of "whereabouts". It is precisely by means of this key-term and interrogative notion of "being-somewhere", of "the place in or near which a person or thing is" (OED) that Barry's novel may be shown to be both highly representative and to add a new and important chapter to this foremost and self-refashioning Irish literary discourse, while proving quite radical in its critical angle, as such a "place" is ultimately denied to its protagonist.

Even though in the title "whereabouts" reads as affirmative, this novel suggests that it remains a word used interrogatively in an Irish narrative of exile and homecoming, where history has proved that "home" itself can be exile.

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## Abstract

*L'intervento esamina un contributo significativo alla già ricca produzione narrativa della letteratura irlandese contemporanea incentrata sul tema "canonico" dell'esilio: un recente romanzo dello scrittore irlandese Sebastian Barry, The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty, che ripropone in chiave elegiaca il mito odisseoico e la figura di Enea attraverso un protagonista antieroico, vittima sacrificale della drammatica storia d'Irlanda del Novecento.*

## *Crossing Doors: Questions of Identity in A. B. C. Merriman-Labor's Britons through Negro Spectacles*

Claudia Gualtieri

This workshop on “Storia e identità” has carried us from Zimbabwe to Scotland and Ireland following the line of identity construction and representation. We are now ending in Sierra Leone and Britain looking at Merriman-Labor’s *Britons through Negro Spectacles*. The writer was a native-born clerk in the British colonial office in Sierra Leone and the book was published by the Imperial and Foreign Company of London in 1909. This book offers multiple perspectives on the issue of identity construction which is central to post-colonial studies. West African and British identities are constructed by re-using, reversing, and manipulating colonial racial stereotypes by way of travesty, role playing, carnival, and by bringing in the questions of origin and of mimicry both by West Africans and the British. As a result, while issuing political statements which I will not discuss in this paper, *Britons* also describes compound identities as representations across borders which help to open doors of separation and exclusion.

It is little use underlining the relevance of the issue of identity to the so-called New Literatures. These literatures mark zones of cultural encounters where hybridisation is an on-going process in representing identities. As Itala Vivian argues in this volume, post-colonial hybridisation is influencing the representation of Britishness in British literature. But this process of hybridisation started long ago. It can be traced back in time before the very notion of New Literatures came into use. If we selected the theme of travelling in West Africa, for example, I would suggest reading slave narratives such as *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by Himself*, published in 1789, or reading travel reports from the point of view of a Christian priest of Yoruba origin such as Samuel A. Crowther’s *Journal of an Expedition up the Niger in 1841*, published in 1842. Or, as we

will do, we might look at fictional journeys such as Merriman-Labor's *Britons*. These texts offer examples of how "authenticity" is conditional by constructing identities across racial, ethnic, and cultural borders. And by a virtual journey through different imageries and languages they lead us beyond, towards the future. As Ken Parker argues in "Writing Dis-Location", until recently, even in the field of cultural studies in Britain, little attention has been paid to these texts which contributed in the making of the story of European imperialism, and, I would add, which contributed to focus on the issue of hybridisation in the process of identity construction. I suggest that we should approach these texts following Henry Louis Gates Jr's theory of "signification" in *The Signifying Monkey*. This mode of figuration in Afro-American discourse works by evoking meanings from different cultural imageries and is expressed through rhetorical strategies of indeterminacy which stimulate multiple and open interpretations.

Now, let me draw your attention to questions of identity, cultural location, and colonial affiliations in the name and the title of A. B. C. Merriman-Labor's *Britons*. It is clearly an imposed colonial name in which ABC stand for the literacy brought in the colonies by the British Empire. They also stand for Augustus Boyle Chamberlyne with an open reference to western European imperial history. Merriman marks the condition of happiness brought by civilisation through the work-ethics which also appears in the second part of the name—Labor—and which indirectly refers to the widespread colonial bias of African peoples' laziness. In the full title, *Britons through Negro Spectacles: or a Negro on Britons, with a Description of London*, the colonial gaze is reversed and the writer's look is directed back to the colonisers through a literary move from the periphery to the centre of the British Empire: London. In fact, the book describes a one-day trip to guide a friend named Africanus. It is his first visit and the narrator—being, as he says, a western-educated West African who has read and travelled widely and knows British culture quite well—acts as his cultural interpreter. At times, he defends the British point of view, at times he condemns it, at times he advocates a necessary in-between perspective from which cultures should be looked at.

As regards questions of identity, a blurring of perspectives is introduced from the very beginning. However using such a specific name, "Africanus" never speaks. His comments are reported by the narrator so that the hypothesis of an identification between the two may be justified. While Africanus signals the African perspective from which he looks at the British, he is also the narrator's listener. As such, he may simultaneously be viewed as a

British/western reader, so that the readers are indirectly invited to look at their own culture with a satirical stance. As the narrator says, part of the discussion, in fact, is devised to help self- and mutual understanding. If the trip to London may be a necessary visit to the centre of the Empire for the cultural assimilation of the western-trained élite of Sierra Leone, it also offers the opportunity to use British caricatures to re-write colonial stereotypes from an opposing perspective. Of course, part of the narrator's description reproduces conventional colonial images, but I will not explore this issue now as I am more interested in showing both how satire and the unconventional use of anticipation which is later distorted in unexpected ways make the readers shift their point of view, and, related to this, how it is impossible for the readers to identify themselves with one perspective or character. As we will see, identities are represented as performances. As such they are multifarious and, in some ways, transitional. They are works-in-progress developing from cross-cultural negotiation and interacting historical knowledge and cultural discourses to conceptualise a will-to-identity as Ato Quayson theorises it in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*.

I will pursue my task by quoting two examples from the text: first, an anecdote—with some related issues about origin—which will offer an example of a re-writing of colonial stereotypes; and second, “a most laughable sight!” the description of a meeting which may be read as promoting mutual understanding.

The anecdote outlines how images of difference are constructed in symbolic representations. If we take travesty as a mode of assuming and performing different identities, then this mode can be taken as a metaphor for identity construction in *Britons*. In the anecdote we are told that when the narrator was a child he sometimes behaved naughtily. To make him obey his mother:

cried that the white man was coming. [Uncle] Jim hid himself behind the door, and there, with a voice which mother kept repeating was the white man's, growled continuously in a coarse gruff manner that shook all naughtiness out of me. (Merriman-Labor 1909: 10)

As in children's tales, the white man is the evil creature who scares, kidnaps, and eats children when they are not good. For the child, a deception is constructed by giving the white man the attributes of a beast, then a reverse of racial colonial images of black people follows when the white man's facial traits are turned into signs of inferiority:

He had such a long and pointed nose, two prominent cheek-bones, and a protruding chin which resembled a third cheek-bone [...]

This three-cheek somebody owned, besides, a pair of dancing eyes which appeared at the bottom of deep hollow sockets. (10-1)

The description approaches that of a caricature similar to those which are constructed in colonial stereotypes, and the anecdote seems to give reasons for West African people's fear of the colonisers:

even in the minds of civilised Negroes, there lives a feeling that there is something not natural about the white man. (12)

If "not natural" may remind us of Marlow's apprehension of local people in the Belgian Congo as "non-human" in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Merriman-Labor's association would then justify the inclusion of European colonisers into a "sub-human" category, this idea is negated a few words later: "The white individual is some sort of superhumanity: so many Blacks imagine" (12). But doubts are cast again upon the credibility of this idea in that representations of the colonisers are described as a superstitious belief in West African popular culture:

the notion seems to exist in the mental somewhere of a good many black people, civilised and uncivilised, that the white man is a premature return from the spirit world.

This fact affirms, and perhaps assists in creating, the idea now current in the minds of millions of black people that white men belong to the supernatural creation of angels, ghosts, and devils (12-13).

In a curious twist, the anticipation about the colonisers as god-like beings is turned into a negative picture of white creatures of the underworld. Uncle Jim's travesty in the anecdote also reveals the identification of the white man with a white devil.

The narrator's final discussion which proceeds from the anecdote posits the problem of origin as related to that of identity: "Where do the Whites come from?" and "Where do the Blacks come from?" (13). At first, the questions address issues of "natural" origin and race with a reference to Darwin's theory. But again, while expectations are directed to positive associations as regards the origin of the colonisers, these expectations are frustrated by the following sentences which reuse and obliquely reverse colonial racial stereotypes:

The great English thinker, Charles Darwin, answering these two questions, said that Whites and Blacks came from certain species of the baboon-apes [...] In consequence, to-day, most Negroes agree with Darwin that the Blacks come from the ape. As regards the parents of the Whites, the common Negroes differ. [...] They declare that the forefather of the whites cannot be as man-like as the ape. They say that the original ancestor of white people is the grunting creature,—the filthy pig. (13-14)

This surprising connection, which again finds an origin for the Europeans in non-human conditions, is then criticised and ironically justified by a purposely naive explanation which may recall the colonial image of the African as child-like:

Their reason, a simple one, is thought out in a more simple way. The common Negroes in a mirth-provoking manner argue that, because the skin of the pig as seen at the butcher's resembles that of a white man, therefore the white man is a child of the pig. Hence some common Negroes often say of any objectionable white man, 'That dirty, filthy, white pig'. (14)

With this unflattering quotation, I will move to my second example describing a meeting in which shifting black and white identities are represented in a kind of performance. In *Britons* a number of colonial issues are discussed taking a satirical stance and in many cases this distancing perspective depends on travesty and humour. Drawing on Bakhtin's work on carnival, laughter and satire can be read as speech acts of discursive resistance in *Britons*. They are widely used in the book and directed to criticising colonial racial stereotypes and to breaking cultural and discursive constraints. Travesty—as an expression of carnival and laughter, and as a mode of mimicry and of blending identities—also offers an entrance key to the following example. Outside the main gate of the Houses of Parliament, the two travellers meet:

A laughable sight, it is indeed, to see two Negroes arm in arm, meeting two niggers coming from the opposite direction. 'Who are they?' you enquire [...] One is the chimney-sweep who is blackened by his work, the other is the nigger-minstrel who is blackened for his work. (166)

This scene as an elaborate blend of similar, inverse, and overlapping identities which mimic each other while retaining specific individual features. The vision is hilarious for the travellers because it mirrors them. In the quotation, the words "negroes" and "niggers" are used to address black people, yet the

two persons who are disparagingly tagged happen to be British. The external transformation of “whites” into “blacks” within their own culture suggests an association with the interior mutation of some European colonisers who are said to “go native” in Africa in colonial adventure tales. However, the chimney sweep as a representative of a British type, and the minstrel as a fashionable character in Britain at that time, express a different mode of “going native” which occurs inside their own culture and operates by mimicking Africans in colour, semblance, and actions (however inadvertently in the case of the sweeps). This form of mimicry suggests that symbolic cultural representations can comprise both their opposing double, embodied in the Other’s difference (the two characters look black being, on the contrary, white), and their copies which may be reproduced through travesty (they are in fact black as they appear to be).

From a different point of view than Bhabha’s, the mode of mimicry in Merriman-Labor’s description may be read as an expression both of difference and unity inside a culture, as an indicator of the contaminated identities which are laid bare in symbolic representations and which derive from cultural encounters. Cultures invade each other and modify symbolic representations to the extent that factual reality and conventional notions are not definite standpoints:

The sweep’s duty is to clear all the smoke and soot inside the chimneys of houses. He, the real nigger, is a contradiction. He is always cleaning, but is never clean himself. (166)

The nigger-minstrel, the other nigger, goes about with a banjo and a blackened face. He thinks, and I think some people think also, that any two-leg being with a six-inch collar, a giant neck-tie, and a pair of red lips on a black face, constitute a modern Negro. [...]

On the whole the nigger-minstrel is not right in his interpretation of the Negro. [He] does not resemble one of us. In regard to the colour, he does resemble us. He no longer resembles ghosts and spirits. With our colour, he looks so natural. I will be able to make him out again, if ever I meet him once more with a black face. A white face is so hard to recognise when seen a second time ... (167)

The description is clearly ambiguous. Let’s take the minstrel, for example. On the one hand, he is a grotesque effect within Bhabha’s idea of mimicry, the partial reproduction of a fixed ambivalent image. On the other hand, because of his change in colour he is “natural” and familiar to the travellers, although what is his “nature” is not his “real” colour. In point of fact, the minstrel

shares various identities which range from the original one, that he acquired, that which is seen by the British and by the West African travellers, to the identity which is the product of this assemblage and consequently of the modification he temporarily undergoes. Through travesty he becomes “black”, but as the effect of a camouflage he is also a “nigger”. His process of identity construction develops from contaminated identities exchanged between “blacks” and “whites” and by this shuttling move he gets, in some ways, closer to the different cultural positions signalled by the identities which he adopts: “This white nigger, the minstrel, being black, it will be a delight to see him another time” (167).

As Spivak argues in “Asked to Talk About Myself . . .,” identity is an experience of staging connected to the notion of shared origins, to the problem of inscription in history, and to representation. My conclusion is an invitation to go back to such texts as Merriman-Labor’s for a more complete view on the process of identity construction and representation as we find it now in the so-called New Literatures.

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## Abstract

*Le cosiddette Nuove Letterature in lingua inglese mostrano la complessità delle relazioni e delle rappresentazioni che derivano dagli incontri tra culture diverse. Gli studi postcoloniali si sono ampiamente occupati delle dinamiche di opposizione e di negoziazione in tali incontri, esaminando, tra l'altro, temi come l'appartenenza e l'identità e sottolineando come dall'incontro tra culture si costruiscano rappresentazioni ibride.*

*Ma queste ibridazioni sono rintracciabili indietro nel tempo prima che il termine Nuove Letterature venisse coniato. Scritti di schiavi quali *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by Himself (1789)* dello scrittore Igbo Olaudah Equiano, resoconti di viaggio dal punto di vista di un missionario cristiano di origine yoruba quali *il Journal of an Expedition up the Niger in 1841 (1842)* di Samuel A. Crowther, o romanzi quali *Britons through Negro Spectacles: or a Negro on Britons, with a Description of London (1909)* dello scrittore del Sierra Leone A.B.C. Merriman-Labor sono solo un esempio di come la rappresentazione dell'identità avvenga attraversando confini di razza, etnia, e cultura.*

*Questo intervento mira ad illustrare alcune di queste rappresentazioni d'identità in *Britons through Negro Spectacles*. Attraverso prospettive multiple, l'identità inglese e quella africana (in particolare dell'Africa occidentale) sono descritte riutilizzando, stravolgendo e manipolando gli stereotipi razziali coloniali anche tramite travestimenti, scambi di ruoli, e mascherate. Le complesse e composite costruzioni che ne derivano non sono solo esempi di ibridazione quanto appunto rappresentazioni che, oltrepassando confini, aiutano ad aprire nuove strade verso il futuro.*

**PROSPETTIVE DI GENERE**  
***GENDER PERSPECTIVES***



## *Writing Female, Writing Black. A Tradition in the Making*

Marie-Hélène Laforest

In the newer garb of Afrocentricity it [pan-Africanism] has still proved unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of black artistic sensibility is currently located.” (Gilroy 1993: 122)

The passage that appears as epigraph focuses on a crucial issue in the literary history of the African diaspora, on the possibility of writing ‘black texts’ which reflect black cultures and not the concerns and styles of the dominant Euro-American world.<sup>1</sup> Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison has expressed the tension between the search for a black aesthetics and the danger of falling into an essentialist trap in the following terms:

I don’t have the resources of a musician but I thought that if it was truly black literature, it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together—the sentences, the structure, texture and tone—so that anyone who read it would realize. . . . Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I’ve appropriated it. (181)

The struggle to find a black aesthetics has a long and complex history, as long as that of racism and segregation which has characterized black presence in the West, for it is precisely because of this history of oppression that the Afro-diasporic world has developed culture specific forms which have had great difficulty in achieving literary status.<sup>2</sup> In the case of women, gender bias, besides racist ideologies, has prevented their voices from being heard. The history of black women can indeed be summed up as one of voicelessness, misrepresentation, and “unheardness” (Davies 1994). The double task of finding the words to inscribe themselves in a language that had reified them and of pro-

ducing a distinctive female aesthetics, which distanced itself from the silencing norms of dominant literate culture, has proved particularly challenging.

A black women's renaissance began in the 1970s through the surge of writing on the part of African American women. Works by Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou revealed a market for black women's texts and encouraged publishers to accept their work. This new wave echoed throughout the diaspora as writers emerged in England and in the Caribbean, adding to the range of female writing which had been spurred by the Women's Liberation movement.

Since this explosion of writing, black women have earned the freedom to experiment new forms while expressing their belief in the power of the word to change the world. Their production of the last three decades testifies to the recuperation of a female genealogy and of corresponding forms of expression. Recuperating 'forgotten' women from the dustbin of literary history, they have reconstructed a female lineage which they are intent on continuing.

Among their literary foremothers three figures stand out. Very briefly, Sojourner Truth, through her subversive "Ain't I A Woman" speech; Zora Neale Hurston, for creating a free black community with a specific idiom and Janie Crawford, a black woman who appropriates the word; and, especially for Caribbean women, Jean Rhys and her alienated female characters.

Particularly productive for African American women has been the renewed affirmation of the African elements of their culture, the return to the oral roots of their tradition. As Susan Willis has indicated, the use of popular folk forms and styles (funk, blues, jazz); the creation of metaphors taken from female cultural practices—laying of hands, specifying or name-calling, conjuring, quilting—provided new creative avenues (Willis 1989). This is also true of Caribbean women, re-diasporized in the United States, England, and Canada, who have drawn from the female rural culture where folk wisdom predominates and where strategies of orality are still alive.<sup>3</sup> Extremely fruitful has been the recourse to folk songs, to proverbs, animal tales and religious rituals which they have used in greater abundance than male writers and have combined with the English tradition deriving from their formal training.<sup>4</sup> Non-Western elements obviously often coincide in African American and Caribbean cultures as both grew out of Africa and were transformed in the Americas during the system of plantation slavery. This, after all, is what is implied in the concept of diaspora which links blacks dispersed in the West on the basis of their historical memories and the continued racist oppression to which they are subject.

Both in the United States and the Caribbean, folk cultures are closely

associated with the vernacular. Indeed, black speech and *patwah* have emerged with renewed vigor in women writers, from Gayl Jones, Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker in the United States, to Dionne Brand, and Patricia Powell in the Caribbean, whose most recent works are entirely in *patwah*. Although the literary use of the vernacular developed independently in the United States and in the Caribbean, the power and authority which comes from the United States, even from a minority in the U.S., cannot be underestimated. This has indeed significantly altered the literary status of Afro-diasporic women's writing through the legitimization of their language and of discourses linked to female knowledge and to cultural practices which were devalued because they were African-derived. But more importantly, African American critics, who have been theorizing a black female subjectivity, have freed black women from the tension to which they were subject by the two movements which had been most significant in their development: the 1960s Black Aesthetic and Euro-American feminism. Denying the primacy of race or gender, African American women critics introduced the notion that race, sex, class and gender are concurrent and can neither be kept separate nor construed in some hierarchical order.

The influence of three African American writers must be taken into account in this study of Caribbean women residing in the United States; namely that of 'kitchen poet', Paule Marshall, of Pulitzer prize winner, Alice Walker, and Nobel prize winner, Toni Morrison.<sup>5</sup> Paule Marshall, for having written women-centered novels continuously since 1959 and having transformed into art the voices of the Barbadian women with whom she grew up.<sup>6</sup> Alice Walker, for urging women to find themselves in the tales of their mothers and grandmothers, for stressing the communal nature of writing, and for voicing a lesbian experience. Toni Morrison, for boldly positing a black readership, for her choice of a non-realist mode of writing, and her crossing of genres.

In the works of women who have written since, the influence of these three writers is evident. Mothers, grandmothers or ancestral figures feature prominently and so does the community, the two elements through which the culture transmits itself. The voices of mother figures resonate in all Afro-diasporic texts by women, often through the representation of generations of women. They are present in a large number of Caribbean women of the first generation, those who are in their fifties or sixties today: Merle Hodge, Merle Collins, Zee Edgell, Jamaica Kincaid, Erna Brodber, and Olive Senior, as well as in younger, second generation writers like Edwidge Danticat and Loida Maritza Pérez who published their first novels in 1994 and 1999.<sup>7</sup>

Since Alice Walker and Audre Lorde (*Zami*, 1982), lesbian overtones are frequent in both generations: in Kincaid, but also in Danticat and Pérez; while lesbianism is treated outright in first generation writers like Michelle Cliff and Dionne Brand and in second generation writer, Patricia Powell.

Non-realist writing which takes the form of dreams, supernatural events as part of reality, have also become common. Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* (1978) has been defined as "a collection of dream visions" (Niesen de Abruna 1991: 272). In "Night Women" Edwidge Danticat describes, "Places where ghost women ride the crests of waves while brushing the stars out of their hair." (Danticat 1996: 85) Maritza Pérez's characters hear voices, perceive the invisible, and talk to the dead; dreams dictate their actions; in their world, black cats, prayers and chipped statues of saints have their place.

Within the variety of their writing and within the limits of this paper, common approaches can be traced in contemporary Caribbean and African American writers who have published after 1970.<sup>8</sup> They have all been involved in keeping the link between the poetic and the political, in revisiting the past, and in emphasizing the communal nature of their literary production. Even in Kincaid, the most individualistic writer to come out of the Caribbean, a collective presence is significant in *A Small Place* (1988) and in *The Garden (Book)* (1999).<sup>9</sup> Among the themes they have treated most often are: female bonding, motherhood, mother/daughter relations, interfamilial tensions, gender divisions. The view that these female related themes originated in the United States has been contested by critic Rhoda Reddock who has asserted that the struggle for improvement of women's status is not a "1960s import into the Caribbean... [but] firmly based within the sociopolitical and historical context of the region." (Reddock 1990: 63) Caribbean women writers have indeed related to a tradition that has its roots in the archipelago as is attested by the formal echoes in the texts written since 1970. In the first generation of Caribbean women writers, this link is perceived as eminently Caribbean, as the following intertextual relations indicate. *Out of the Kumbula* (1990), the title of a collection of essays by Davies and Fido, comes from the metaphor of the kumbula—a sort of cocoon—used in Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980). *Her True-True Name* (1989), the title of an anthology of women's writing, including translations from French and Spanish, by Wilson and Mordecai, is taken from Merle Hodge's 1970 *Crick Crack Monkey*, the book that marks the Caribbean woman's Renaissance.<sup>10</sup> Another example is the title of Merle Collins's collection, *Rotten Pomerac* (1992), which completes the rhyme beginning with "Crick Crack/ Monkey".<sup>11</sup>

Critic Bruce King (1992: 148) has made a distinction between writers who live in the Caribbean and those who reside outside the archipelago, but many doubts can be raised as to the validity or productiveness of this division. Caribbean writers from the three main linguistic areas have always written of home from abroad, and as to the Anglophone Caribbean, the best-known male writers all wrote the Caribbean from England.<sup>12</sup> And so did women writers, Jean Rhys and Una Marson in the 1930s. In addition, Pan Africanist ties, which have formally existed since 1900, coupled with migration, which is endemic to the region, have always favored exchanges between the peoples of the diaspora. During the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, Jamaican Claude McKay wrote from Harlem; the protest literature of African Americans was translated into French by Haitian Jacques Roumain; Roumain's own work was translated into English by Langston Hughes; and Langston Hughes influenced the poetry of Cuban Nicolas Guillén.

One striking factor in the production of Caribbean writers who reside in the United States is precisely that their work has firm roots in the archipelago, even when they are set in the U.S. and even when the writers themselves reveal an African American affiliation. Writing out of hybrid locations, they provide concrete testimony to the expansion of the Caribbean space to the East coast of the United States as members of hyphenated communities which inhabit new languages born out of migration.<sup>13</sup> Edwidge Danticat is well aware of her hybrid status as a Haitian African American writer. On the one hand, her writing reveals clearly the influences of Haitian writer Jacques Roumain and Guadeloupean Simone Schwartz-Bart, but she affirms her African-Americanness through references to jazz and the blues in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. At the same time, the title of her 1995 collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!* links a Haitian tradition to the African-American call and response one.<sup>14</sup>

Danticat's presence within the Anglophone tradition as well as that of other writers like Julia Alvarez and Loida Maritza Pérez, born in the Dominican Republic, or Cuban born Cristina Garcia, who have turned Anglophone and are successful novelists in the U.S., clearly indicate that discourses of Caribbeanness and diasporic consciousness are interlocked. This makes it even more urgent to overcome the link between writing and national traditions, already disturbed by the concept of diaspora. These writers are clearly attuned to other literatures: their work is informed by French, Francophone, Spanish, and Latin American writings. Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999) echoes Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of*

*Solitude*. The names of Aurelia and her mother, Bienvenida, clearly recall that of Aureliano Buendia; while the wealth of details and the style are also redolent of the magical realist tradition. There is an on-going cross-fertilization as these other mixed traditions enter 'english'. Danticat, for instance, makes abundant use of the Haitian literary tradition of describing skin color through positive fruit and food imagery. Moving away from the stereotypical 'swarthy' and 'dusky' characters of English narratives, the Conradian "wild and gorgeous" native women, she describes a man's skin as "bright chestnut", a woman is a "young-charcoal cloaked beauty"; Joseph, Sophie's husband in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, is "the color of ground coffee with a cropped beard and a voice like molasses that turned to music when he held a saxophone to his lips." (Danticat 1994: 67)<sup>15</sup>

Despite these different inputs, the continuities with the African-American tradition emerge in this literature—variously called African-American Caribbean and migrant female-authored.<sup>16</sup> Through the work of these women, the notion of an Afro-diasporic tradition remains alive. The motifs of naming and return, the tropes of the journey and re-membering as well as the interrogation of home reveal a common sensibility.<sup>17</sup>

However the very act of building a tradition, of founding "representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin" (Gates 1980: 7) can also lead to a predictable sameness. There are repetitive stylistic devices, as in the strategy of listing the litany of chores which are part of a girl child's education which appear in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), in Kincaid's short story *Girl*, and in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. The construction of gender takes the same forms in the three writers.

He thought of his two sisters and the litany of their growing up. Where's your daddy? Your mama know you out here in the street? Put something on your head. You gonna catch your death a cold. Ain't you hot? Aint' you cold? Ain't you scared you gonna get wet? Uncross your legs. Pull up your socks. I thought you was going to the Junior Choir. Your slip is showing. Your hem is out. Come back in here and iron that collar. Hush your mouth. Comb your head. Get up from there and make that be. Put on the meat. Take out the trash. Vaseline get rid of that ash. (Morrison 1978: 307-8)

Kincaid's short story "Girl" is entirely written in this mode.

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't

walk barehead in the hot sun; ...you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys... this is how you hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khakhi shirt. (Kincaid 1983: 3)

Danticat in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also specifies what is expected of a woman through a list: "It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing." (Danticat 1994: 151)

There are other elements in Caribbean women's writing whose use no longer surprises readers. Since Alice Walker, in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1972), located female artistry in quilt making, baking, and gardening, quilt making has appeared in a large number of African-American and Caribbean writers. First used by African-American women, it was appropriated by Caribbean writers and runs from Alice Walker to one of the most recently published writers, Loida Maritza Pérez. In her *Geographies of Home*, the patches of the burlap quilt represent members of the grandmother's family, a dead sister, a dead mother, a great-aunt (Pérez 1999: 132). Its recurrence as a trope of reconnection can be read as a conscious mythologizing process which women are enacting, but it has become hackneyed.

Another conventional device is the presence of three generations of women and demiurgic grandmothers who rescue younger ones from the hardships and tribulations which come from being female in a patriarchal society. The feats of past female generations who have survived against all odds appear so often that they have acquired mythic stature. Edwidge Danticat, in the wake of Morrison and Marshall who have created myths to sustain black people and to counteract 'white mythologies', is both revisiting old myths and creating new ones.<sup>18</sup> These have to do with the miracle of survival through the female line: black women will not succumb. However, despite the need to present positive images of women, the honesty of this body of writing has prevented it from ignoring the continued violation of the black female body on the part of rapists and phallic mothers.<sup>19</sup> It is significant that even in younger writers like Danticat and Pérez, this body is defiled by men and women alike.

As a gendered group in the process of building a tradition, Afro-diasporic women have nonetheless resisted enclosures. Alice Walker has insisted on the use of a qualifier like "womanist" which is more inclusive than "feminist" to describe black women's work; Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* has enacted a male instead of the expected female quest; Olive Senior and Patricia

Powell have inscribed the traditionally excluded East Indian and Chinese in the Caribbean landscape; Michelle Cliff has included all Creole peoples, all subalterns, in her call against the forces of oppression.<sup>20</sup> If as Morrison had said, “Good writing must open the door and point the way,” these women writers have opened many doors and are pointing in the right direction, for they are interrogating the West and patriarchy, but themselves as well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Black literature has often been seen as mimicking the West, but black expression has never been merely imitative. It has always transformed the master’s texts and languages to suit its needs.

<sup>2</sup> This study is limited to the best-known Caribbean writers residing in the United States and to the African American women who have influenced them.

<sup>3</sup> In male writers like Selvon, Lamming and Brathwaite, peasantry has stood for authenticity. Women writers have criticized this use which they see as replicating the colonial outlook.

<sup>4</sup> Women writers were trained within the educational English system, thus their writing is influenced by nineteenth century English literature, even when it functions in opposition to it.

<sup>5</sup> Paule Marshall has traditionally been seen as belonging to the African American tradition. Obviously, with the increased publications of Caribbean women writers, she has been assigned to the Caribbean one. Her work clearly partakes of both.

<sup>6</sup> In Marshall’s words, “True, I am indebted to those writers [the usual literary giants], white and black, whom I read during my formative years... But they were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledge before all others: the group of women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lessons in the narrative art... This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen” (Marshall 1983: 12).

<sup>7</sup> *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Geographies of Home* respectively.

<sup>8</sup> These patterns however, cannot hide differences among these writers. From an ideological viewpoint, Michelle Cliff and Danticat, have claimed an Afro-diasporic belongingness, but Jamaica Kincaid, has explicitly detached herself from this tradition; this might also be true of a writer like Julia Alvarez, who displays no awareness of ‘race’ or ‘color’ in her novels, be they set in the United States (*Yo!*, 1997) or in the Dominican Republic (*In the Time of the Butterflies*, 1994). Whereas Puerto Rican Rosario Ferre, newcomer to the world of English letters, although not to literature *tout court*, with *The House on the Lagoon* (1996), seems to want to establish a link with this tradition. Her “cocina de la escritura” echoes Paule Marshall’s “wordshop of the kitchen”, but she falls back on colonial stereotypes in her representation of black women as sole sexual objects and practitioners of magic.

<sup>9</sup> Jamaica Kincaid has explicitly detached herself from the Afro-diasporic tradition. “I didn’t feel I was home, [in Africa] and then they began to talk about Africans in the diaspora and I thought, “But I don’t live in the diaspora. I live in Vermont” (Ferguson 1994:172). Kincaid’s position regarding the Caribbean is discussed in Laforest (2000).

<sup>10</sup> This title evokes the trope of naming and un-naming, common in both African-American and Caribbean cultures.

<sup>11</sup> “Crick-crack!/ Monkey break he back/ On a rotten pomerac.”

<sup>12</sup> Lamming, Selvon, Brathwaite, and Naipaul.

<sup>13</sup> It has become increasingly difficult to limit the Caribbean geographical space to the archipelago. The large Caribbean communities on the U.S. East coast—Spanish Harlem, Little Havana, Little Haiti, Quisqueya Heights—have been producing an increasing number of original Caribbean works from the U.S.

<sup>14</sup> Unlike what happens in the Anglophone Caribbean, where “Krik Krak” is the call, in Haiti, ‘Krik?’ is the call and ‘Krak!’ the response which allows storytelling to begin. References to the blues in African-American women’s fiction is discussed by Mary Helen Washington (1990:6).

<sup>15</sup> As a National Book Award finalist, Danticat brings into the U.S. literary community images of molasses and coffee which are not part of the dominant literature.

<sup>16</sup> According to Carole Boyce Davies, the first group of writers can be defined as ‘black women’ and the second one as ‘Afro-Caribbean women writing in the U.S.’, but both categories pose serious questions, not least the issue raised by Evelyn O’Callaghan in her *Woman Version* (1993) regarding the inclusion of women of European descent in the Caribbean tradition. Belinda Edmondson instead, has suggested the term “female-authored migrant texts”, to refer to the work of Caribbean women residing in the U.S., labelling these texts on the basis of the immigrant experience of their authors, making them transient like the social and historical phenomenon they allegedly portray (Edmondson 1999: 3).

<sup>17</sup> Re-membering with the two-fold meaning of recollecting and reuniting. The deconstruction of the romantic vision of home is found in Kincaid and Cliff as well as in Joan Riley writing out of England and Erna Brodber writing out of Jamaica.

<sup>18</sup> Toni Morrison has juxtaposed Western myths to African-American ones—Circe and the flying African appear in *Song of Solomon* (1980). Paule Marshall makes her intent explicit in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984). Ten-year-old Avey, after hearing the story of the Ibos who walked on water to escape slavery, wonders why they didn’t drown. Her great-aunt Cuney replies: “Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?” (Marshall 1984: 40)

<sup>19</sup> Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson have noted with respect to Caribbean women writers that “recent writing by anglophone Caribbean women is rigorously honest in its rendering of the societies.” (Mordecai and Wilson 1990: xvii).

<sup>20</sup> A ‘womanist’ approach has in mind the well-being of both men and women. Olive Senior and Patricia Powell, unlike most Caribbean writers, have written about these two ethnic groups in “Arrival of the Snake-woman” and *The Pagoda* respectively.

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**Abstract**

*La tradizione femminile della diaspora africana in inglese si è arricchita negli ultimi anni grazie all'apporto di donne provenienti dai Caraibi che hanno abbandonato la loro lingua materna per l'inglese. Questa produzione ibrida, che si rifà a tradizioni varie come quella sudamericana (nel caso di Maritza Loida Perez) o quella francofona (nel caso di Edwidge Danticat), allo stesso tempo subisce l'influenza della letteratura femminile nera statunitense. La partecipazione di queste scrittrici nella costruzione di mitologie al femminile dà esiti a volte scontati, pur non togliendo nulla all'onestà della scrittura e alla sua capacità di interrogare non solo l'Occidente, ma se stesse.*



## *Il riso di Shireen*

Alessandra Masolini

Nel breve racconto “Sweet Rice” (Hussein 1996), lo scrittore pakistano Aamer Hussein unisce al gusto di una narrazione avvincente e delicatamente ironica, la sostanza di questioni complesse e spinose. Infatti, attraverso la realistica storia di Shireen, Hussein conduce un’appassionata critica alla fissità dei ruoli di genere e alla validità delle leggi sull’ospitalità britanniche, con l’intento di proporre un’alternativa costruttiva al senso di frustrazione ed isolamento che spesso opprime le immigrate in genere, ed in particolare quelle musulmane.

Come molte delle donne che giungono in Inghilterra dal “terzo mondo”, Shireen è una musulmana osservante e legata alla tradizione, al contempo indipendente ed istruita. In Pakistan, aveva studiato duramente per seguire le orme degli uomini di famiglia e conquistarsi un ottimo posto di medico all’ospedale di Karachi.

Dopo anni dedicati esclusivamente all’esercizio della professione, Shireen aveva poi accettato di sposare il banchiere Jamil e di seguirlo a Londra, sperando di conservare, grazie all’indipendenza economica, una certa autonomia di scelta. Eppure, giunta in Inghilterra, si scontra con una realtà ben diversa: la laurea conseguita in Pakistan è considerata di “terza classe” e non le consente un inserimento professionale soddisfacente; Jamil utilizza ogni pretesto per dissuaderla dal proseguire la carriera; Londra le sembra ostile e dispersiva.

Perso ogni contatto con la professione ed il mondo a lei cari, Shireen decide di rimuovere ogni traccia concreta del passato e vivere malinconicamente, nella solitudine dei pomeriggi da casalinga borghese, l’immaterialità impalpabile dei ricordi. Nascondendo gli oggetti un tempo appartenuti all’adorata nonna materna, Shireen nega a se stessa l’evidenza concreta dei lutti reali e metaforici che ha subito, come se ciò potesse lenire il dolore e semplificarle la costruzione di un’identità anglo-pakistana nuova ed appagante.

Solo quando agli albori del quarantunesimo anno di vita, Shireen lascia finalmente che la materialità del presente contaminino il passato e qualcun altro le suggerisca una via per recuperare l'autostima e uscire dall'ombra, il cammino per l'integrazione è veramente intrapreso. Si tratta di un percorso di ribellione che la porterà ad affermare con orgoglio la propria qualità di ospite indigesto e forse inassimilabile, attraverso le sue capacità creative in cucina e nella scrittura.

Prima della svolta, durante interminabili ore di faccende domestiche, l'immagine del tempo che avanza non poteva che tormentare Shireen: i grannelli di sabbia si accumulavano sul fondo della clessidra differendo la morte, ma anche seppellendo ogni speranza di una vita intellettuale attiva ed indipendente. Così, l'istinto di sopravvivenza le suggeriva di colmare ogni istante della giornata con azioni vuote e ripetitive che le dessero l'illusione di gestire la dilazione all'infinito di una realizzazione personale.

Un po' come il bimbo raccontato da Freud in *Al di là del principio di piacere* (Freud 1996), che con la ripetizione del gioco di allontanare la madre cerca di trasformare in piacevole sensazione di controllo e vendetta la sofferenza per l'abbandono, Shireen s'immerge totalmente nell'odiata routine, sperando di esorcizzare così il dolore per la situazione che si sente costretta a vivere:

She'd dispensed with the idea of an au pair a while ago, for she needed something besides shopping to fill up the time that reminded her of the globe of her days which was filling up with sand, taking her further and further away from any chance of regaining her fine hospital job in Karachi, or of adding to her qualifications the required British degrees, for Jamil had always found some excuse. (Hussein 1996: 91)

L'unica attività domestica per la quale Shireen manifesta autentica passione è certamente la cucina. Più che un *hobby*, per lei l'arte culinaria è un modo per osservare i precetti della religione musulmana, restare in contatto con le amate tradizioni pakistane, ed affermare un particolare gusto per le cose fatte con calma e buon senso; un tratto irrinunciabile della personalità ed un territorio di confronto e scontro con il mondo circostante.

Proprio per questo, ciò che offende maggiormente Shireen e il suo disperato bisogno di condivisione e appartenenza, sono le continue diserzioni di Jamil e del figlio Timur dalla tavola domestica. La loro incuranza del divieto di mangiare carni sacrileghe e la rapidità con cui assimilano i costumi europei, accrescono notevolmente il suo senso di straniamento a contatto con la vita della Londra borghese e affarista.

Passeggiando per le strade del centro con l'amica Yasmien, Shireen sorride al pensiero che le mode etniche e i piatti pakistani trasformati in preliba-

tezze da *nouvelle cuisine* siano una sorta di rivalse del terzo mondo sui colonizzatori; ma alle cene d'affari del marito, tra gli sguardi sospettosi che le signore del *jet set* riservano ai suoi abiti pakistani, non può fare a meno di sentirsi un'ospite sotto esame, anche e soprattutto quando è lei ad ospitare.

Sospesa tra due mondi, due culture, due lingue, Shireen cerca una forma d'integrazione a lei congeniale, consapevole che il suo percorso sarà necessariamente diverso da quello di Jamil e Timur. In uno stato di traduzione continua, per lei i confini tra urdu e inglese britannico non sono mai ovvi, e le contaminazioni sono in atto nella sua mente già da molto prima del trasferimento in Inghilterra, sin da quando ancor ragazzina cercava di darsi un tono raffinato e alto borghese leggendo in inglese, oppure arrivata all'università studiava su testi che nessuno avrebbe mai scritto in urdu.

Come dimostra questo divertente episodio, nell'inglese impeccabile di Shireen, riemerge sempre qualche traccia di gergo pakistano:

once she'd seen a poster for an orchestra called LMC and wondered aloud why an orchestra would name itself Lower Middle Class until her friend Yasmien with whom she was walking down High Street Kensington shoved her in the ribs and said no, silly, that's a typically Pakistani term. LMC stands for the London Musicians' Collective. (91-92)

La passione di Shireen per le lingue e la parola scritta è forse ancor più intensa e significativa di quella che prova per i cibi e i costumi della sua terra. Infatti, quando Jamil è a lavoro e Timur a scuola, lei trascorre le giornate cucinando per sé montagne di cibi tradizionali e succulenti, e leggendo voracemente e ripetutamente gli amati libri di Han Suyin,<sup>1</sup> attraverso i quali può volare col pensiero all'Asia sognata e tornare a sentirsi il medico che era.

In "Sweet Rice", cibo e parola scritta sono elementi/alimenti ugualmente vitali che si alternano e s'intrecciano fino a sovrapporsi, per offrire a Shireen la tanto attesa occasione di riscatto.

Le difficoltà d'integrazione incontrate da Shireen, ancor più che il frutto di un penoso travaglio individuale, sono il risultato di una serie d'interdizioni più o meno esplicite che ogni donna straniera subisce e Hélène Cixous, in un saggio autobiografico, così ci descrive:

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<sup>1</sup> Nata nel 1917 da madre belga e padre cinese, il medico Elizabeth Comber è nota con il nome letterario Han Suyin per aver scritto, oltre a due biografie e numerosi saggi storicopolitici sulla Cina moderna, alcune autobiografie romanzate sulle esperienze vissute nei periodi di lavoro ospedaliero a Chengtu e Hong Kong, e in Malesia e Nepal.

Assumi la nazionalità del paese che ti ospita. Sii buona, torna nei ranghi, all'ordinario, all'impercettibile, al domestico.

Ecco le tue leggi: non ucciderai, sarai uccisa, non ruberai, non sarai una cattiva recluta, non sarai malata o pazza (sarebbe una mancanza di riguardo nei confronti di chi ti ospita), non sbanderai. Non scriverai. Imparerai a calcolare. (Cixous 1991: 15-16, traduzione mia)

Cixous ritiene che all'apice dei divieti cui una donna straniera deve sottostare, vi sia sicuramente la tacita regola di non scrivere, ovvero di non violare con l'inchiostro l'integrità immacolata della cultura in cui è ospite, e che tale ingiunzione abbia accresciuto in lei un irresistibile desiderio d'infrazione.

Pur con le dovute distinzioni tra realtà vissuta e finzione letteraria, è impossibile non osservare quanto il percorso di crescita di Shireen sia paradigmatico di quello che porta alla *nourricriture* di Cixous. Interdizione, isolamento, ribellione, recupero del materno e sviluppo della scrittura come indispensabile strumento di contatto e fonte inesauribile di nutrimento, sono le fasi di uno sviluppo creativo al femminile che accomuna il personaggio Shireen all'autrice Hélène.

Infatti, Shireen associa per la prima volta cibo e scrittura in un unico potente talismano, proprio in reazione all'ennesima e sgradita imposizione del marito.

Quando, a pochi giorni dal dimenticato compleanno della moglie, Jamil annuncia di aver invitato a cena un nuovo gruppo di illustri colleghi e propone di rivolgersi a dei professionisti del *catering* per l'occasione, Shireen esplode: tra le tante altre cose, non è più disposta a sopportare la mania di Jamil di pesare e misurare tutto, inclusa l'ospitalità, in termini di raffinatezza ed adeguatezza dell'offerta.

Parafrasando i discorsi di Jacques Derrida in *Sull'ospitalità* (2000), Anne Dufourmantelle osserva che, nelle società dedite alla costante quantificazione del proficuo e dell'efficiente, un gesto di ospitalità gratuita rappresenta una minaccia per l'economia dello scambio regolato. Di fatto, *la* legge dell'ospitalità incondizionata è in conflitto con *le* leggi dell'ospitalità di un gruppo o uno stato perché impone un'accoglienza dell'altro non finalizzata, e pertanto dispersiva e dissennata. Il pericolo dell'ospitalità assoluta si annida in una disponibilità totale che, prescindendo dal possesso, esce dai binari del gesto sensato e rasenta la follia.

Shireen, risiedendo nello straniamento di chi è costantemente "fuori luogo", esperisce quella condizione di sofferenza per la mancanza di casa che Derrida ritiene indispensabile all'autentica apertura del gesto d'accoglienza.

Probabilmente solo chi è senza tetto – insinua il filosofo algerino-francese – può dare e darsi senza contegno.

Forse l'ospitalità che l'infuriata casalinga intende far assaporare agli invitati di Jamil non è quella assoluta e disinteressata cui si è appena accennato, ma non è neanche basata sulla convenienza e lo scambio come quella descritta da Roland Barthes nell'articolo "L'Alimentazione contemporanea" (1998). Sicuramente è un'ospitalità con la "O" maiuscola che mira a lasciar traccia di un tocco sbalorditivo e personalissimo, e perciò mal tollera vincoli, norme ed etichette.

Nel porsi la domanda "Dove?" – nel senso di dove ero? Dove sono? Dove posso andare? Dove riuscirò ad arrivare? – Shireen comprende quanto le sia necessario individuare un punto di partenza per procedere nella giusta direzione. Così, alla ricerca di una ricetta che porti il segno inconfondibile della sua personalità, ella apre il vecchio cassone della nonna e s'immerge negli oggetti polverosi di un passato rimosso, fatto di legami materni, antichi sapori e parole intraducibili.

Per entrare in contatto con questo mondo lontano e nascosto, e attingere da esso le sostanze necessarie al proprio atto di ribellione e crescita, Shireen si deve però spogliare definitivamente di quella presunzione da scienziato che le aveva fatto credere di potersi costruire *ex novo* un'identità britannica completamente distinta e separata dalla precedente.

Tutti quegli'anni trascorsi a rimuovere la perdita dei legami pakistani e della propria indipendenza, le avevano dato l'impressione di poter gestire il presente senza fare i conti col passato. Ma ora Shireen intuisce di dover scavare tra le vecchie memorie per trovare nuove idee, poiché calma, razionalità e buon senso non le bastano più.

Rievocato il passato, la soluzione a tutti i suoi problemi non si fa attendere: la formula magica che stava cercando non può che essere il "riso dolce" che sua nonna le aveva dedicato da piccola:

Sweet rice. It would have been a gesture so grand, so uncharacteristically flamboyant, a celebration of her home, and above all a defiant signature (named after her, the sweet rice, the indulgent grandmother had deceitfully said, the indulged child had gullibly believed)... What have I ever signed with a flourish, Shireen said to herself. Do I even remember my signature. (Hussein 1996: 94)

Per troppo tempo Shireen aveva tenuto separato l'impalpabile regno dei ricordi dall'arida materialità della vita londinese, negandosi così il piacere di accarezzare un oggetto amato, sentirne il profumo o gustarne l'autentico

sapore. Ora, aperte le vecchie casse di libri e quaderni, a contatto con i segni di un urdu ormai quasi dimenticato, Shireen cerca di tradurre, riconciliare e rimembrare se stessa.

Tra le pagine del libro di cucina della nonna – il cui titolo tradotto significa “la dispensa delle tradizioni” – Shireen ha finalmente la possibilità di nutrirsi e rifiorire, soprattutto grazie alla scoperta della defunta autrice Muhammadi Begum.

Con grande sorpresa di Shireen, Muhammadi Begum non era stata una semplice casalinga di fine Ottocento appassionata di cucina, bensì una figura d’intellettuale articolata, in grado di conciliare osservanza mussulmana e lotta per l’emancipazione femminile. Pur morendo a soli trent’anni, questa dimenticata eroina pakistana aveva pubblicato una dozzina di libri di vario genere e diretto la prima importante rivista femminile in urdu, anche grazie al supporto del marito, che l’ammirava smisuratamente.

In Muhammadi, sono presenti praticamente tutti gli ingredienti che Shireen stava cercando affannosamente di armonizzare nella propria vita, e per di più miscelati con una maestria sorprendente:

Who was this writer, then, this master cook who’d stirred the ingredients of romance and realism into platters of parables that had nurtured generations of women, secluded or newly emergent from the confines of four walls and veils, adding a special prescription for those women who, almost a century later, were doctors and lawyers and opposition leaders and even prime ministers. (97)

Stimolata dall’esempio di Muhammadi Begum, Shireen decide di dedicare alla cucina del Pakistan il suo primo progetto editoriale, ormai determinata a nutrirsi di ricerca e scrittura.

Questa scelta tutt’altro che singolare, avvicina la figura storica di Muhammadi e il personaggio di Shireen a scrittrici anche distanti tra loro nel tempo e nello spazio – e mi viene qui da pensare alla famosa romanziera italo-americana Helen Barolini, tra l’altro autrice di un’appassionata raccolta di antiche ricette per le festività italiane – ugualmente spinte dal desiderio di assaporare e preservare concretamente antichi legami e tradizioni.

Una volta compreso quanto sia importante rimanere in contatto con altre donne per tenere vive se stesse e la memoria di un intero mondo, Shireen decide di condividere con l’amica Yasmien quest’esperienza di scrittura. *Sweet Rice* – ecco il titolo scelto da Shireen per il progetto – sarà un *collage* d’illustrazioni, ricette, curiosità sulla vita di Muhammadi Begum e pezzetti di storia personale, all’insegna di uno stile appassionato

e smalziato che Jacques Derrida e Trih T. Minh-ha definirebbero da *bricoleur* (Minh-ha 1989: 63).

Se la scrittura è per Shireen un *pharmakon*-pozione terapeutica, ovvero una ricetta attraverso la quale recuperare la memoria e progettare il futuro, il gioco di frammentazione, ripetizione e recupero nel *bricolage* ha di certo un effetto sovversivo e velenoso sul discorso disciplinante del potere. Nella sovrapposizione del *collage*, la materialità della traccia si fonde con l'indefinitezza del processo creativo decostruendo le gerarchie del pensiero.

Al di là di regole e calcoli, Shireen propone una fruizione del testo indisciplinata ed irriverente. Infatti, cospirando contro una globalizzazione che offre libertà solo a chi fa circolare denaro, e non a chi desidera manifestare e credere nelle proprie passioni, Shireen abbandona ogni residuo di rigidità e qualunque mania di controllo sul potente *pharmakon* da lei assimilato e rielaborato. Il testo diviene il luogo dell'ospitalità descritto da Derrida; un punto d'incontro che non appartiene all'ospite o all'ospitato, bensì al gesto d'accoglienza, qui inteso come invito alla scrittura.

Viste le mode in vigore, saranno proprio il palato degli uomini d'affari britannici e l'operosità delle *caterers* pakistane a decretare il successo di *Sweet Rice*, e poco importa se tutte copieranno le ricette fingendo che provengano dalle loro mamme: il contatto è stabilito, il progetto avviato, l'energia ricomincia a circolare e il successo del riso dolce, finalmente, porta la firma di Shireen.

In conclusione – pur avendo privilegiato in quest'analisi una prospettiva di genere – vorrei sottolineare quanto il percorso di crescita ed integrazione svolto dal personaggio Shireen risulti in sintonia con l'*horizontality* recentemente descritta e auspicata da Bill Ashcroft in *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001).

Nei capitoli "Habitation" e "Horizon" Ashcroft sostiene che una creativa e personalizzata fruizione dello spazio sia un'efficace strategia di resistenza ai vincoli del potere; un atto consapevole di sfida, in grado di ampliare gli orizzonti dell'esperienza post-coloniale. Perché si aprano nuove prospettive, è però indispensabile situarsi oltre una logica dominante fondata su limiti e frontiere:

Habitation describes a way of engaging colonial boundaries which neither ignores them nor rejects them but occupies them in a way which redeploys the power they administer. The corollary of this is a mode of thinking which transforms boundaries by seeing the possibilities—the horizon—beyond them. [...] Yet effective resistance to the concept of the boundary is not another boundary but its opposite: what we may term horizontality. The horizon is a way of conceiving home, and with it identity, which escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary. (182-183)

Nel racconto di Hussein, Shireen decide di sottrarsi all'imposizione dei confini domestici attraverso una creativa ri-definizione del concetto di casa, tradizione e testo, ma riesce nell'intento soltanto quando varca e corrode i limiti tra realtà e immaginazione, presenza e ricordo.

In effetti, il progetto di scrittura *Sweet Rice* nasce nel momento in cui Shireen abbatte le barriere che aveva elevato tra la perdita località della sua giovinezza – l'Asia immaginata e sognata attraverso i libri di Han Suyin – e il mondo reale e globalizzato. All'improvviso le mode alimentari degli inglesi sono per lei una benedizione, e Londra è un luogo di incontri e infinite opportunità.

Attraverso il personaggio di Shireen, Aamer Hussein – come Bill Ashcroft – ci insegna a immaginare luoghi non de-limitati da confini, bensì aperti a nuovi orizzonti; un sogno di ospitalità indispensabile al pensiero post-coloniale e ai processi di scrittura.

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## Abstract

*In Aamer Hussein's short story "Sweet Rice", Shireen is a Pakistani housewife experiencing the uncanny condition of being at home, but foreign, in London.*

*Once she realizes that the British immigration laws have irremediably put an end to her career as a physician, Shireen turns to cooking and writing as a means of reco-*

*vering her self-esteem and subjectivity. Writing a book of Pakistani recipes intermingled with personal recollections, she keeps in touch with the traditions of her beloved country of origin while looking ahead at new horizons and perspectives.*



## *Cibo e soggetto femminile in Fasting, Feasting di Anita Desai*

Floriana Perna

L'ultimo romanzo della scrittrice indoinglese Anita Desai, intitolato *Fasting, Feasting*, è stato finalista per il Booker Prize nel 1999 ed è stato tradotto in italiano da Anna Nadotti con il titolo *Digiunare, Divorare*. Sulla scia del titolo così suggestivo del romanzo e delle dichiarazioni in merito al significato metaforico del cibo, rilasciate dalla stessa Anita Desai a Shaul Bassi (1999-2000) in un'intervista, esplorerò qui *Fasting, Feasting* facendo proprio del cibo, inteso come simbolo, metafora e linguaggio sociale, un metodo interpretativo. Attraverso l'acquisizione, l'offerta e il consumo degli alimenti, metterò quindi in evidenza i legami fra nutrimento e costruzione della soggettività, con particolare riferimento alle figure femminili presenti nel romanzo.

Roland Barthes (1997), Mary Douglas (1971) e Pasi Falk (1994) hanno ipotizzato la possibilità di leggere, attraverso il cibo inteso nel suo significato simbolico, l'intera struttura sociale di una comunità e i rapporti gerarchici che si stabiliscono all'interno di essa. Attraverso le categorie del mangiabile/immangiabile, del buono/cattivo, della cultura/natura e del dentro/fuori, il consumo degli alimenti delimita uno spazio sociale simbolico che la comunità/individuo può abitare, delineando un'identità specifica. La soggettività si costruisce, in altre parole, anche attraverso il cibo che, trasceso il suo mero significato biologico, delinea il sé distinguendolo dall'*altro*. La struttura del cibo riproduce, ancora, i rapporti di potere sociali; la gerarchia delle classi si riproduce nella gerarchia degli alimenti e ogni pasto, così come ogni suo processo di preparazione, può essere "decifrato", decodificando attraverso di esso la struttura sociale di una comunità.

Se il cibo reca con sé rilevanti implicazioni sociali, rispecchiando i rapporti di potere esistenti, non stupisce che esso presenti un legame privilegiato con la figura femminile, mettendo in luce il ruolo subordinato di essa in ambi-

to sociale. All'appetito, così come al bisogno biologico e al corpo, la tradizione filosofica, in particolar modo quella occidentale, ha attribuito una connotazione strettamente femminile: la fame rappresenta un istinto primario, talora rappresentato come vorace e incontrollabile, che è compito della razionalità maschile controllare e limitare. Il desiderio di cibo e l'oralità appartengono ad una fase classificata come "primitiva", "femminile", nello sviluppo del genere umano, governata da una pura e disordinata istintualità, da un caotico emergere di bisogni primari. La sfera dei consumi gravitante attorno al concetto di appetito, l'acquisto e la preparazione degli alimenti ed il loro consumo hanno acquisito, in definitiva, una posizione screditata e subalterna, allo stesso modo dell'identità femminile.

Date queste premesse, risulta particolarmente interessante esaminare, attraverso il cibo, le figure femminili presenti in *Fasting, Feasting*, suddiviso in due parti asimmetriche (156 pagine la prima, 72 pagine la seconda), corrispondenti a due diverse ambientazioni: l'India e gli Stati Uniti. Protagonista della prima parte del romanzo è Uma, una giovane donna indiana in lotta con una struttura familiare gerarchica e patriarcale. Attorno a lei si muovono altre figure femminili significative: la madre, il cui nome viene indicato come indissolubilmente legato a quello del marito (MamaPapa), la sorella Aruna, la cugina Anamika, la zia Mira. Protagonista della seconda parte del romanzo è invece il fratello di Uma, Arun, temporaneamente residente negli Stati Uniti per gli studi accademici e convivente con una famiglia americana, i Patton. Figure femminili significative sono qui Melanie, la figlia adolescente dei Patton, ammalata di bulimia, e sua madre.

Esaminiamo dapprima la struttura del consumo di cibo e le figure femminili nella prima parte del romanzo. I pasti, nell'India rappresentata in *Fasting, Feasting*, sono in prevalenza collettivi, familiari; Uma consuma individualmente i cibi soltanto quando i genitori sono assenti. Arun ricorda i pasti in India, mentre si trova negli Stati Uniti, come un momento di vita sociale, seppure non esemplare; il cibo è considerato come un legame tra i membri della famiglia, un sostegno. La scelta degli alimenti è anch'essa collettiva, comunitaria; l'unico elemento soggettivo è costituito dalla dieta vegetariana di Arun e della zia Mira.

Il cibo si presenta, inoltre, nell'India del romanzo, come intrinsecamente legato alla figura femminile e ai rapporti affettivi; le storie familiari raccontate dalla madre di Uma, per esempio, riguardano soprattutto dolci e cibo; Uma, da parte sua, viene associata alla cucina soprattutto in relazione ai suoi doveri coniugali presenti e futuri. I pasti vengono raffigurati, da un lato, come l'u-

nico “regno” nel quale la donna può prevalere sull’uomo: nelle discussioni quotidiane fra il padre e la madre di Uma a proposito degli alimenti da mettere in tavola, ad esempio, è sempre la madre a decidere. D’altra parte, la decodificazione del consumo alimentare ci riporta, invariabilmente, a una struttura fortemente gerarchica, nella quale sono facilmente distinguibili elementi di subordinazione femminile rispetto all’uomo:

‘Uma, pass your father the fruit.’

Uma picks up the fruit bowl with both hands and puts it down with a thump before her father. Bananas, oranges, apples—there they are, for him.

Blinking, he ignores them. Folding his hands on the table, he gazes over them with the sphinx-like expression of the blind.

Mama knows what is wrong. She taps Uma on the elbow. ‘Orange,’ she instructs her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa’s needs, Papa’s ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one, to the edge of Papa’s plate. One by one, he lifts them with the tips of his fingers and places them in his mouth. Everyone waits while he repeats the gesture, over and over. Mama’s lips are pursed with the care she gives her actions, and their importance.

When she has done, and only pith and peel and pips lie on her plate, and nothing at all on Papa’s except for the merest smear of juice, she glances over at Uma. Her dark eyes flash with the brightness of her achievement and pride.

‘Where is Papa’s finger bowl?’ she asks loudly.

The finger bowl is placed before Papa. He dips his fingertips in and wipes them on the napkin. He is the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblems of his status.

Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied. (Desai 1999: 23-24)

Subordinazione all’autorità maschile e rispetto emergono, nel brano citato, chiaramente come tratti femminili. Al cibarsi dell’uomo è data importanza estrema; il marito si nutre, la moglie assiste e attende e, nel fare ciò, ella ritualizza l’azione, circondandola di un alone di sacralità. Nel piatto della madre di Uma non rimangono che gli scarti; il piatto del capofamiglia, segno della posizione dell’uomo nel patriarcato, contiene la parte migliore del cibo. È anche possibile leggere il contenuto dei due piatti come un’icona della fun-

zione femminile, consistente nell'abnegazione a favore dell'uomo. Un metaforico digiuno, inteso come sacrificio della donna in nome del simbolico nutrimento maschile, si ritrova più volte reiterato nel tessuto narrativo della prima parte del romanzo. Dopo la nascita del fratello Arun, ad esempio, Uma è obbligata, nonostante i suoi tentativi di ribellione, ad abbandonare gli studi per occuparsi del neonato; la cugina Anamika è costretta a rinunciare a una borsa di studio per sposarsi; la madre di Uma viene indotta a portare a termine una gravidanza difficile per la speranza di dare finalmente alla luce un figlio maschio.

Un altro elemento che è possibile ricavare dalla decodificazione del pasto sopra citato è la domesticità: il luogo deputato al consumo dei pasti è, nel romanzo, quasi esclusivamente la casa di famiglia. La proposta del cugino Ramu di portare Uma a cena in un locale pubblico viene, pertanto, considerata disdicevole e, al suo ritorno a casa, la ragazza viene definita 'disgrace to the family—nothing but disgrace' (53); la stessa madre di Uma, si narra, non ha mai cenato al ristorante in tutta la sua vita. Anche l'invito al *coffee party*, che Mrs O'Henry rivolge a Uma, viene accolto con perplessità da parte dei genitori. Metaforicamente, dunque, si registra un intreccio fra soggetto femminile, cibo e dimensione domestica; il pasto crea, ancora una volta, uno spazio simbolico e una soglia che è consigliabile alla donna non varcare.

*Fasting, Feasting* presenta più d'un tentativo di ribellione contro la reclusione domestica e il dominio del patriarcato: Uma si reca, ad esempio, contro la volontà dei genitori, sia a cena con Ramu, sia al *coffee party* di Mrs O'Henry e tenta di contrastare le decisioni della famiglia sul suo futuro. Uno dei momenti di sfida più significativi passa, ancora una volta, attraverso il cibo:

She sloshes some milk into the coffee. 'Rosebuds. Wild waltz. Passionately,' she screams at them silently. She tosses in sugar. 'Madly. Vows. Fulfil,' her silence roars at them. She clatters a spoon around the cup, spilling some into the saucer, and thrusts it at Papa. (137)

I tentativi di ribellione di Uma sono, però, ingenui, e vengono, alla fine, tutti smorzati. Ella è costretta a interrompere gli studi; le viene impedito di lavorare; rimane, come si sottolinea più volte nel testo, una bambina di sei anni al servizio dei genitori, priva della possibilità di governare il suo destino.

La struttura del consumo di cibo nell'India di *Fasting, Feasting*, se considerata nel suo significato metaforico, si presenta, in definitiva, sintomatica di un ordine sociale collettivo, nel quale le personalità, in particolare quelle femminili, fanno talora fatica a individualizzarsi. Attraverso il linguaggio degli

alimenti è possibile, allo stesso modo, leggere anche la struttura gerarchica dell'India, così come essa ci viene presentata; per quanto sia dato alla donna potere in ambito domestico, la struttura della famiglia e della società è chiaramente sessista. Lo spirito di sacrificio e di abnegazione richiesti dal patriarcato impongono alla donna un metaforico digiuno e, simbolicamente, la divorano.

Diversi sono i soggetti femminili e la struttura del consumo alimentare che ritroviamo nella seconda parte del romanzo, ambientata nel Massachusetts. Nello scenario statunitense descritto dalla Desai, l'acquisto e il consumo, in particolare di cibo, costituiscono elementi prevalenti: la narrazione abbonda di barbecue, pasti, snack, gelati e spese al supermercato. Anita Desai mette l'accento sull'abbondanza del cibo, sul suo eccesso; Arun, osservatore "esterno" della società statunitense, è addirittura intimorito dall'enfasi sul consumo continuo, dalla sovrabbondanza di ogni cosa che vede attorno a sé. La fruizione di cibo viene vissuta con orgoglio, come un'ostentazione di potere economico e di status sociale; l'enfasi è posta sul *quanto* si consuma, piuttosto che sul *cosa* si consuma, come emerge chiaramente dalla citazione che segue:

Mrs Patton, with her hand on the cart that Arun is rolling as rapidly as he can along the aisles of tinned soup, pasta and rice, tries to slow him down. 'We haven't enough yet, Ahroon,' she protests. 'You should have seen the way I'd load a shopping cart when the children were small. I'd have Melanie sitting up here on the shelf, and there'd be such a heap of groceries under her, she'd have to stick her feet right up on top.'

'And do you know, that load wouldn't last us even a week. Three days and I'd be back for more.'

'Do they eat less now?' he asks. There is scarcely room in the cart for another package. He feels revulsion rising in his throat as if from too gigantic a meal.

'My no, they eat all the time,' she laughs, a little out of breath. 'But—but it's different now. We don't sit down to meals like we used to. Everyone eats at different times and wants different meals. We just don't get to eating together much now that they're grown. So I just fill the freezer and let them take down what they like, when they like. Keeping the freezer full—that's my job, Ahroon,' she declares, and grasps the handle to stop him so she can study the labels on the soup cans. (196-197)

Il consumo di cibo fa qui da specchio all'economia dell'edonismo, dell'eccesso, dello spreco, propria del tardo capitalismo. I cibi hanno perduto il proprio valore reale per divenire immagine, simulacro: ad Arun gli alimenti statunitensi appaiono come copie plastificate di quelli indiani. Ancora una volta, il cibo funziona da metafora del reale; ogni cosa, in America, sembra

acquisire una dimensione spettacolare, falsa, teatrale; lo stesso sorriso della signora Patton viene paragonato alla ‘bright plastic copy of a mother-smile’(194). I cibi non vengono acquistati per essere mangiati: il freezer trabocca, e la signora Patton rimane perplessa dinanzi alla proposta di Arun di consumare gli alimenti acquistati prima di comprarne degli altri: ‘Whyever should we do that? What would we do in an *emergency*?’, gli domanda, attonita (207). Ciò che conta è, in definitiva, l’acquisto e il possesso di cibo anziché il suo consumo; non sembra esservi un’ulteriore dimensione, commenta Arun, rispetto a questo primo livello di soddisfazione.

Un secondo elemento che emerge dal brano sopra citato è l’individualizzazione dei pasti: la dieta non rispetta qui un codice alimentare collettivo, ma si presenta come strettamente personale. La scelta del cibo diviene, dunque, mezzo di definizione di un sé individualizzato e autonomo: il signor Patton consuma in prevalenza carne; la signora Patton decide di trascorrere un’estate “vegetariana” assieme ad Arun; Rod, il figlio dei Patton, consuma alimenti altamente proteici, che gli sono necessari per le sue attività sportive; Melanie si nutre esclusivamente di snack dolci e salati. Oltre alla differenziazione dei cibi, il brano rappresenta anche l’individualizzazione degli orari dei pasti; la cena familiare viene, altrove, paragonata a un rito religioso che i membri della congregazione disertano sempre più spesso. La struttura del linguaggio dei cibi riflette qui, nel complesso, l’esasperato individualismo della cultura americana; alla disgregazione della comunità alimentare corrisponde una lacerazione del tessuto sociale, che isola l’individuo, rendendolo più fragile.

Un soggetto indebolito nel romanzo è, in particolare, quello femminile; in conseguenza dell’atomizzazione sociale, la donna si ritrova qui maggiormente esposta ai meccanismi di regolazione del suo corpo e, incapace di reagire, si ammala. La bulimia di Melanie possiede, in tal senso, un forte valore metaforico ed è interpretabile, parafrasando le parole di Jules Henry sulla psicosi (Henry 1963: 322), come il prodotto finale di tutto ciò che non funziona nella cultura statunitense. Nel disturbo alimentare della figlia dei Patton sono distinguibili diversi livelli di significato simbolico: uno strettamente familiare, legato al rapporto conflittuale di Melanie con la madre; un altro, più strettamente associato all’eccesso e all’economia dei cibi tardocapitalistica; un ultimo, infine, connesso al discorso sociale della ‘tirannia della snellezza’ e del controllo della fame femminile. Rispetto al primo livello, si può notare come l’uso del cibo disegni, ancora una volta, uno spazio simbolico di inclusione o esclusione tra il sé e l’altro; rifiutando il cibo cucinato dalla madre, Melanie chiude, simbolicamente, il proprio territorio a ogni possibile intera-

zione con lei; il suo è un distacco dal materno. Riguardo al secondo livello, il rigetto del cibo da parte di Melanie riflette, come osserva Arun, un'inconscia protesta contro l'eccesso, il *troppo* che non riesce a nutrire, né a saziare. Invitata dalla madre a mangiare uova strapazzate, la ragazza protesta contro il consumo ossessivo di cibo, paragonandosi ad una pattumiera riempita all'infinito. Spettacolarizzato, ostentato, il cibo sembra aver perso il suo valore d'uso; esso è divenuto una merce, al pari delle altre, da esibire e tesaurizzare. Melanie protesta contro l'inautenticità, contro la perdita della dimensione reale dei beni di consumo, contro il mancato soddisfacimento dei suoi bisogni più profondi, di attenzione alla sua unicità. Arun l'associa idealmente, vedendola mangiare, a un mendicante indiano, intento ad attirare l'attenzione dei passanti. Con la sua alternanza di controllo e abbandono al piacere, inoltre, la bulimia di Melanie incarna l'ideologia tardocapitalistica in altro senso. Come evidenzia Robert Crawford (1985), la struttura dell'ultimo capitalismo crea una personalità instabile e competitiva, mitizzando al tempo stesso la capacità di produrre in modo efficiente e produttivo, sacrificando i propri impulsi immediati, e quella di abbandonarsi al piacere incontrollato, di spendere e consumare. Ne risulta una personalità alla continua ricerca di un equilibrio fra espansione e limitazione, che si riflette in maniera inquietante nell'oscillazione fra eccesso e rigetto di cibo, propria della sintomatologia bulimica. Il terzo livello di significato della bulimia di Melanie è, infine, da rapportarsi direttamente a un discorso di genere: la ragazza si ammala di bulimia, disturbo "femminile" per eccellenza, per dimagrire. Susan Bordo (1993) ha messo in luce come i disturbi alimentari costituiscano, talora, una 'protesta femminista inconscia', in quanto implicanti un distacco dalla femminilità materna e l'acquisizione di qualità "maschili", quali l'esercizio della volontà, la padronanza, l'autocontrollo e l'autodisciplina, che regalano alla donna l'illusione di un affrancamento da un destino di femminilità tradizionale. Il soggetto femminile è però anche, nel manifestarsi del disturbo alimentare, vittima di una società che pretende, attraverso il cibo e il controllo della fame, di asservire il corpo all'ideale della magrezza. Attraverso la fame viene simbolicamente controllato l'appetito di potere delle donne: spingendo il soggetto femminile a moderare il consumo di cibo, s'insegna alla donna, simbolicamente, ad autorestringersi, a limitare il proprio spazio sociale.

Attraverso il linguaggio metaforico del cibo l'America di Anita Desai si rivela, nel complesso, come una società più individualizzata, ma anche meno autentica e più indifferente, rispetto all'India del romanzo. Il soggetto femminile è più libero ed emancipato, ma anche più fragile e isolato, e perciò più

facilmente vittima delle richieste sociali di normalizzazione del corpo. Per quanto fame e sazietà si rivelino, in definitiva, concetti culturalmente relativi, tanto nell'India quanto negli Stati Uniti di *Fasting, Feasting*, la donna è soggetta, simbolicamente, al controllo del suo appetito e al digiuno.

L'invito, è possibile concludere, è a un autentico affrancamento, a un equilibrio tra la privazione e l'eccesso.

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## Abstract

*Using food as a metaphor, this paper analyzes female subjectivity as it is constructed in Anita Desai's latest novel, Fasting, Feasting. In the Indian family depicted in the first part of the novel, characterized by a collective and hierarchical structure of food consumption, the female subject strives to resist the rules imposed by a patriarchal society. In the American family described in the second part of the novel, women, although apparently free and emancipated in a land of abundance and pleasure, experience new forms of deprivation and control of their body and their hunger.*

## *Female Quest Patterns in Post-Colonial Narratives*

Deborah Saidero

Many feminist-oriented critical studies carried out over the past quarter of a century or so have led a thorough investigation of female quest patterns and have exposed how the journeys undertaken by a female questing hero presents significant variations on the traditional quest-romance form centred on solitary male questers. Illustrious are, for example, Annis Pratt's *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Carol Christ's *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, or Dana Heller's *The Feminisation of Quest-Romance*, which similarly take as their starting point the underlying cultural assumption that in patriarchy women have suffered a colonial position which has relegated them to marginality and has denied them the right to be subjects in their own right. Their narratives, however, enact a search for a post-colonial identity as a self-empowered subject, which often involves a simultaneous search for sexual authenticity, creative and linguistic authority, and political and national stance.

In the context of post-colonial countries like Canada, the reliance on feminised versions of the quest form on the part of women writers signals a dual wish to re-inscribe female identity as meaningful and autonomous against patriarchal representations of the feminine as other, and to subvert stereotypical associations between the feminine and the colonial subjugation of the country and its inhabitants. Following Heller's thesis that the recent feminisation of quest-romance marks a revolutionary step in both cultural and social terms by enabling women to write themselves out of their colonial space and "light out" into new territories of being, in this paper I would like to make some brief considerations on how, transposed to the specificity of the Canadian context, feminised quest patterns posit both a viable theory of female development and provide a psychic space for the re-mapping of a Canadian identity. In particular, I wish to argue that, with its emphasis on rela-

tional collaboration and inter-subjectivity, the recent development of feminised quest patterns revises notions of heroic self-formation and redefines narcissistic models of identity, thus allowing all ex-centric subjects to emerge from entrapment within self/other divides and to re-inscribe their diversity and otherness as a positive value.

In many of the texts written by contemporary female authors in Canada (as well as in many other literatures which have come to be known as 'post-colonial'), the journey/quest theme is often assumed as a rich fulcrum of symbolic, mythical, and allegorical connotations and generally combines several dimensions, including the physical and geographical journey through real or imagined landscapes, the psychological descent into the meanders of consciousness, the historical journey through both individual and collective memory, the literary and cultural journey through traditional myths, legends and texts, and the meta-literary journey through the text itself, which unveils issues related to the act of writing and creating. Having re-appropriated the classical quest motif to articulate women's search for selfhood and self-knowledge, these writers bring to completion a century-long process of feminizing the quest-romance form, by freeing women from their inscription as passive heroines and positing them as active questing heroes. In tracing a female hero's awakening to selfhood, mobility, and influence in the world, their texts celebrate, in fact, a process of self-naming which rejects the patterns of female identity prescribed by male images and desires and resists the totalizing framework of patriarchal logic, in favour of a self-mapping of the female questing ground.

Central to the female quester's journey from invisibility to visibility is an effort to move through, and ultimately out of, what Gilbert and Gubar call "the looking glass", the reflecting mirror of the Narcissus myth, in order to subvert conventional images of femininity and to rediscover new possibilities of self-definition according to an inter-relational model of self as polyvalent, multiple, and dialectical. The journey through the male-inscribed mirror/text, which has the cathartic function of leading the protagonists to discover an autonomous and fractured identity, triggers a gradual process of shattering the reflected images of the angel/demon woman, and the concomitant cultural, mythological, religious, and poetic ideals which foster them, thus enabling the female quester to move out of the initial phase of dissatisfaction and dislocation which Carol Christ identifies as the stage of nothingness and self-negation toward the moment of awakening and rebirth. This movement from entrapment to emergence, which involves a direct confrontation with and

deconstruction of the culturally-constructed portraits of women scattered throughout literature and art, is often carried out through the reliance on extensive parodic inter-textuality and its highly subversive potential, as aptly witnessed, for example, in texts like Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*, Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address*, Marian Engel's *Lunatic Villas*, Audrey Thomas' *Intertidal Life*, or Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World*, where the ironic echoing of canonical texts and myths enables the authors to undermine fixed representations of sexual identity and to convey the female hero's impulse toward dis-inventing herself as a patriarchal female.

If the questing protagonist is a female artist figure, as in novels such as Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Urquhart's *Changing Heaven*, Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Rest Harrow*, Sandra Birdsell's *The Chrome Suite*, or Mary Di Michele's *Under My Skin*, the journey through the looking glass also metaphorically arouses meta-literary preoccupations about women's exclusion from the creative sphere and signals the woman artist's voyage toward artistic and linguistic legitimacy. The ironic play with traditional texts and narrative structures which limit the possibilities of female self-expression is adopted to foster both a redemption and re-appropriation of the female body, as well as to subvert the cultural assumption which, in ascribing authorship and language as exclusive to the domain of the Father, moulds women as male-authored *creations*, in order to re-instate women, instead, as significant and active *subjects* legitimately invested with full creative and linguistic mastery.

The female quester's effort to re-create for herself an authentic sense of self also hinges on a descent journey back into the past, and into childhood in particular, when the rediscovery of an identification with the mother and the maternal allows for the reclamation of a primal female self. Descent, Kim Chernin writes, "is a time of travel within the self" (Chernin 1987: 64); it leads a woman back into time, in search of lost traditions, enabling her to rediscover her mother and to reclaim "the lost self-image that women experience when they come to accept their mothers as weak and their fathers as powerful", in order to complete that "'search for our mother's garden' that informs the female quest" (Heller 1990: 18). On a symbolic level, this descent process is often signalled through the interconnected movements of sinking and surfacing into a body of water, which, being charged with the religious overtones connected to baptism, sign the female hero's rebirth to a new and enlightened life. The rediscovery of the mother figure and of a maternal ancestry enables the questing hero to get beyond the Oedipus complex and

accept her own procreating and mothering functions, which are considered as an integral part of the female's psychic development. Moreover, as novels such as *Changing Heaven* and *Rest Harrow* witness through their inter-textual deployment of literary foremothers such as Emily Brontë and Virginia Woolf as tangible fictional presences, for the female artist the rediscovery of the mother and of mothering has important metaphorical implications, since it enables her to resurrect a matrilineal literary tradition which can secure her with a feeling of creative and linguistic empowerment.

Intimately connected with all the above stages of the feminized quest, namely the re-appropriation of the female body, the subversive deconstruction of patriarchal inscriptions of female identity and sexuality, and the recovery of the mother and of a matrilineal ancestry, is the climactic phase of un-naming and re-naming which culminates in a liberating act of self-naming, of naming, that is the self as subject. Aware of the phallogocentric world-views inscribed in conventional signifiers, many texts set out to revise, more or less subversively, the nature and function of language as a unitary and homogeneous representational system, in order to re-instate it as a discursive site within which individual subjectivity is produced as the result of an active collaboration between the processes of writing and reading. For the questing female hero subjectivity thus reveals itself to be a shared position, a polymorphous fusion of inter-subjective perspectives and pluralistic modes of knowledge.

As Canadians, these writers also employ feminized patterns of the journey motif to incorporate both the post-colonial and the ethnic subject's voyage through the looking glass of imperial centrality and to explore issues which reveal a dialectical conflict toward the power of the centre, represented in Canada by both the British colonial legacy and the capitalistic and cultural imperialism of the United States. Vertical voyages through history and memory, both collective and individual, become the occasion to unbury those processes of 'cultural erasure' brought about not only through the colonial assimilation of peoples and lands, but also through immigration, which often implies the necessity to submit to foreign cultural standards even in a multicultural country like Canada. The common *topos* of the return journey to one's country of origin on the part of second or third generation descendants is, for instance, often assumed to explore and rediscover those ancient ties with one's family history and to re-appropriate a fundamental fragment of one's cultural identity.

Quite significantly, in many novels, like Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven*, Kulyk Keefer's *The Green Library* and *Rest Harrow*, or Caterina

Edward's *The Lion's Mouth*, the protagonists travel to Europe, betraying, at once, a Jamesian fascination with the cultural-artistic, historical, and mythological richness that the old continent offers, and a Bloomian anxiety of influence or, as Sam Solecki prefers to call it, "a post-colonial anxiety of tradition" (Solecki 2001). Discussing typical Canadian responses to Europe, Solecki points out, in fact, how Canadian authors have variously been engaged with Europe "as sign, symbol and historic fact", as a past which must unavoidably be confronted in order to be able to fully accept the legitimacy of a Canadian future. For women writers (of mainly European background) the need for a full encounter and confrontation with Europe is often urged by a dual need to measure themselves against the male tradition and to place themselves in a specifically female line of writing. Their fictional journeys to European countries thus imply a process of demystification of their culturally-constructed visions of Europe and its traditions, and usually end with a return to Canada with a rediscovered sense of self and an enlightened acceptance of their country as a place to call 'home'. From a more nationalistic perspective, the choice of European destinations also symbolically arouses centre/margin dialectics and the need to redefine the relationship with the centre. Under this light, the final act of returning to Canada at the end of the voyage significantly functions to redeem the ex-colony from its subordinate and marginal position in international terms and to endow it with the right to be a significant centre of experience.

In the case of Canadian writers of non-European descent, such as Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Joy Kogawa, Sky Lee, Denise Chong, Dionne Brand and many others, the appeal of European destinations is, for obvious reasons, less strong and superseded by the fascination with other homelands. India, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean are just as frequent destinations of the real or psychic journeys undertaken by their fictional characters as European countries are for the descendants of the old world. In both cases, however, the ethnic return journey pattern to the country of origin is informed by the need to come to terms with a set of cultural traditions and customs which hinder the protagonist's growth as an independent individual in the new country. At times, it is also triggered by the need to confront the terrible events which have marked the history of humanity and have oppressed entire peoples or nations. Slavery, racial or ethnic discrimination, colonial dispossession, war, internment, genocide, forced migration, cultural rape and so forth represent, for many of these writers, legacies which cannot be forgotten, but which need to be documented and remembered through a painful surfacing of a repressed and silenced memory.

The vertical dimension of the journey through time is intimately linked to the horizontal dimension of the journey through space, since the act of remembering necessarily relies upon spatial details which give a sense of security and belonging. The quester's movement through space, whether physical or imaginary, external or internal, familiar or alien, signals an effort to go beyond the sense of strangeness indicted by physical and psychic dislocation and to develop a sense of belonging in the here and now of the Canadian present, through an acknowledgement of the various and multiple places one has moved through as ever-present markers of one's never static or closed identity. For the female subject, the urge to redraw the boundaries of male-defined spaces in search of her new territories of self-discovery and self-understanding results in an attempt to map out a new spatiality, which transcends the symbolic limits of domesticity by moving beyond the dialectic of interior/exterior, open/closed space and is, instead, inclusive of the spaces between women and between individuals, and of the spaces which connect and divide self and other, the maternal and paternal, the body and the outer reality. In the context of the female quester's voyage the recurrence of spatial metaphors, thus, retains a special importance, since they are employed to variously evoke the obscure regions of the female body/womb, the textual spaces of the blank and written page, the psychic dimensions of female consciousness, the womb-like enclosure of the landscape, or the national space represented by Canada.

In Canada the shared experience of displacement that is common to both the colonizer and the immigrant in the face of a vast and mysterious land demands the ability to both adapt physically to the new environment and to spiritually or metaphysically re-order one's interior universe. The impasse created, for instance, by the irreconcilability of European descriptive standards (such as those of the Wordsworthian and Romantic poetic tradition) with the new geographical landscape and climate, entails a unique act of cartography which is both physical and psychological, since the process of exploring the new territory involves a simultaneous process of re-naming one's interior consciousness. The failure of conventional language to establish a meaningful correspondence between the individual's inner space and the outer space that surrounds him/her fosters the need to redraw the contours of these real and psychic spaces by coming to terms with both the past and present places one has inhabited. Space and place thus become for Canadians active participants in a drama of re-worlding, of building, that is, a habitable world where the geophysical environment finds a correlative in the individ-

ual's linguistic and psychic universe. For the ethnic subject, the reliance on spatial memory to reconstruct those lost home-spaces which grant a sense of physical and cultural belonging is a fundamental and necessary aspect of the process of coming to terms with the hyphenated state implicit in the experience of being caught between two worlds, the old home left behind and the new home to be constructed. This need to redefine the relationship between here and there, which is equally shared by the post-colonial subject, entails a recognition of the discrepancy between the values of the old and new lands: the "here" cannot be merely another, inferior version of the "there", but its unknown territory must be both explored and accepted in its difference, and mentally remapped with clearly recognizable landmarks that enable individuals to have a shared knowledge of their place.

In the context of Canadian literature, the revolutionary portent of the feminized quest form, thus, opens up a spectrum of interesting possibilities, which can prove viable for the redefinition of the parameters within which the Canadian consciousness has traditionally been defined and for the development of a more inclusive iconographic model for the definition of national identity than that provided by the much acclaimed mosaic. With its emphasis on inter-subjectivity, the feminized quest may, for instance, provide a way out of the dominance of isolation patterns and the recurrence of isolated individuals or communities, which have been identified as archetypically Canadian. By providing, as Heller states, "a frame for drawing a diversity of cultural experience into the currency of signification" (Heller 1990: 122), the feminization of the quest form can, in fact, serve as a model for the development of a more fully integrated society in which the danger of ghettoization inherent in the mosaic is replaced by a relational interaction between different individuals and communities. Just as "the feminization of the quest does not focus on woman's entrapment in but on her emergence from categorical 'otherness'" (121), the adoption of its patterns to articulate the emergence of other minoritized or colonized groups from their repressed status as ex-centrics within a dominantly hierarchical culture can stimulate a redemption from the prevalent inclination toward victimization and forge the creation of a new national self-image.

At the same time, the feminization of quest-romance also prompts a redefinition of the relation with space which, in the vast Canadian territory, involves more often than not a confrontation with the terrifying and hostile aspects of the wilderness. A much debated and explored topic, the Canadian's relationship with nature has inspired conflicting attitudes, which

can schematically be summarized in the somewhat contrasting trends to view Nature as female—surely not a benevolent and loving mother in the Canadian case, but a cold and antagonistic *femme fatale* which entices the male protagonist to destruction—or, as Gaile McGregor argues, as robed with typically masculine attributes (powerfulness, aggressiveness, destructiveness etc.), which involves a tragic inversion of the society/nature dichotomy and contributes to perpetuate both the doomed failure of the quest and the image of the quester as victim. In both cases, the outcome of the Canadian questing hero's response to the wilderness has, in strident contrast with the American attitude of conquest, been that of the "garrison mentality", with its somewhat vain effort to keep the powerful natural forces out of and away from his secluded and domesticated fort-like kitchen-garden. A third type of response is that found in works such as Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, Joan Barfoot's *Abra*, Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*, Marian Engel's *Bear*, Aritha Van Herk's *Tent Peg*, or Atwood's *Surfacing*, which exemplify the female hero's typical journey-into-the-wilderness pattern, where the wilderness is apt to be sexually neuter. In these texts, however, despite the fact that the experience of going into the bush endows the female protagonists with an authentic and strong self, the wilderness does not provide an alternative world, but is only a mediating redemption ground which the hero must ultimately leave to return to her still strongly patriarchal society. Thus, although their endings remain open, what emerges from these quests is not, as Annis Pratt observes, the formation of a new, redeemed community, but rather the enlightened individual's struggle and confrontation with a traditional masculine society.

With its re-evaluation of the feminine principle *anima* and its emphasis on the need to strive toward its integration and fusion with the masculine *animus* in non-hierarchical terms, the feminisation of quest-romance allows, however, for a redemption of the prototypical Canadian quest and has the potential to subvert its catastrophic outcome. If the feminine principle is viewed in positive rather than negative terms and is stripped of its categorical affiliation with passivity, domesticity, subservience, powerlessness and so forth, and the masculine principle is equally stripped of its identification with power, agency, and mastery, then not only can the Canadian quest pattern that involves a return to a feminine society be redeemed of its fatalistic undertones and imagined as a place of renewal, but even the return of the enlightened female hero to a traditionally masculine society establishes it as a neutral ground. When the masculine and feminine principles

are given equal status and cease to be considered in polarized terms as the focus on relational subjectivity promoted by the feminization of quest-romance calls for, both society and nature are, in fact, freed from their schematic entrapment within self/other binaries and become a *tabula rasa* ready for re-inscription.

Ultimately, therefore, the feminization of the quest form which is undertaken by contemporary Canadian women writers discloses a potential for social, cultural, and political change which paves the way for a significant shift in consciousness which can function to redeem Canada and Canadians from the unfathomable sense of identity lack which has long informed the national psyche. Through the recurrent association of Canada with these new female heroes whose quests are no longer doomed to failure but open to rebirth, the traditional image of Canada as a passive, conservative old maiden can finally be subverted and a new future of international involvement and participation can be imagined into being. Although it is imagined above all in reference to female heroes who search for self-definition, with its questioning of the presupposed categories of gender the feminization of quest-romance does not simply aim at inverting masculine norms, but at establishing new standards of relation-ality between and among different individuals, which admits the active part not only of women but of all ex-centrics (Canadians included) in generating social and political awareness on both a personal and public level.

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**Abstract**

*Il saggio interpreta il motivo della quest nella sua articolazione femminile e postcoloniale nella letteratura canadese contemporanea. Attraverso un'analisi di opere di autrici quali M. Atwood, J. Kulyk Keefer, S. Birdsell, le cui radici sono europee, o A. Rau Badami, S. Singh Baldwin, J. Kogawa, di origini extra-europee, si suggerisce come la femminilizzazione della forma della quest possa offrire un'originale via di uscita dai dilemmi identitari che tradizionalmente affliggono la cultura canadese.*

## *Il romance impossibile: figlie e padri nei romanzi di J.M. Coetzee*

Paola Splendore

Meno frequentemente indagata del rapporto padre-figlio, topos di conflitto archetipico presente in ogni letteratura, è la relazione padre-figlia, che nel romanzo occidentale si iscrive dentro storie di tirannia familiare e spesso occulta il suo carattere incestuoso sotto forma di un gioco di complicità e seduzioni reciproche, inconsce e irrealizzate, come ad esempio nei romanzi di Henry James. Nella letteratura postcoloniale l'intreccio padre-figlia è più esplicitamente rappresentato come relazione di potere, connotato dalla violenza e/o dall'assenza dei sentimenti, emblema e paradigma della sopraffazione coloniale. Nell'opera di Coetzee, in particolare, questa trama costituisce un sottotesto presente in un gran numero di romanzi che, portando in primo piano la figura della figlia, solitamente un personaggio marginale, quello forse più 'mobile' e 'vulnerabile' nella costellazione familiare (Briganti 1995: 17, 63), ridisegna il paradigma edipico in termini postcoloniali, capovolgendo aspettative e convenzioni letterarie.

La maggior parte dei romanzi di Coetzee sembra trovare fondamento nella negazione di una trama originaria, quella del *Familienroman*, una storia che nel contesto sudafricano appare non più raccontabile: "There are no more mothers and fathers" afferma un personaggio di *Age of Iron* (Coetzee 1991: 36), amara metafora dello stato d'emergenza in Sud Africa. Chi parla è una donna del ghetto nero, una madre, costretta ad accettare come segno ineluttabile dei tempi la perdita del ruolo di guida e protezione dei genitori nei confronti dei figli, funzioni che la famiglia non è più in grado di garantire. Nei romanzi di Coetzee padri, madri e figli entrano in trame indicibili, fatte di relazioni distorte, amputate, violente, in cui spesso genitori e figli si cercano senza incontrarsi. *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe*

(1986), *Age og Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Boyhood* (1997), *Disgrace* (1999), sono romanzi in cui la dissoluzione del *family romance* e lo straniamento tra genitori e figli, sono elementi che riflettono non solo il gap generazionale, ma segnalano una frattura ideologica incolmabile.

Torniamo a parlare di figlie: figure di figlie – come personaggi reali o ‘virtuali’ – si trovano in quattro romanzi di Coetzee. In due di questi – *Foe* e *Age of Iron* – le figlie sono personaggi virtuali in quanto non entrano nella trama se non come elemento strutturale, in *Age of Iron* una figlia lontana è la destinataria della lunga lettera in cui è scritto il romanzo, in *Foe* una figlia perduta, forse rapita, costituisce l’antecedente, il motore del plot, ma in ambedue le opere è la figura materna il perno della narrazione. Negli altri due, *In the Heart of the Country* e *Disgrace*, è la figlia a dominare la narrazione, nel primo caso come protagonista e io narrante, nel secondo in qualità di co-protagonista. I due romanzi, distanti nella produzione di Coetzee (*In the Heart of the Country* è il suo secondo romanzo, pubblicato nel 1976, *Disgrace* è l’ultimo, apparso nel 1999), e ancora più distanti per collocazione storica – il primo in un’epoca imprecisata del periodo coloniale, il secondo oggi, nel Sudafrica del post-apartheid – sviluppano un discorso comune che trova il suo punto di forza nel recupero di una figura marginale per statuto biologico e narrativo e nella destituzione del Padre (Dovey 1988, Briganti 1995).

Al centro delle due trame è il rapporto padre-figlia, un rapporto fatto di contrasti e opposizioni non solo sessuali. Non più giovani, le figlie ricalcano in ambedue i romanzi lo stereotipo letterario della “white colonial daughter”, prigioniera di un mondo chiuso che lascia loro poco spazio di autonomia e realizzazione di sé. Magda, protagonista di *In the Heart of the Country*, “an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere”, vive in una fattoria isolata nel veld col padre-padrone, un vedovo che sembra non amarla e che la tiranneggia in vari modi, e due servi neri con cui vorrebbe stabilire un rapporto di scambio e di amicizia. Il suo è tuttavia un discorso di rabbia e furore che nasce da una forza interiore non domata e dalla dolorosa consapevolezza di sé:

I live, I suffer, I am here. With cunning and treachery, if necessary, I fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history. I am a spinster with a locked diary but I am more than that. I am an uneasy consciousness but I am more than that too. When all the lights are out I smile in the dark. My teeth glint, though no one would believe it. (Coetzee 1977: 3-4)

Almeno a parole Magda si ribella al proprio destino dando voce con bruciante lucidità ai desideri di un corpo negato e avvizzito (“What does one do

with desire?”, 114), ma è soprattutto all’indifferenza paterna che rivolge il suo monologo di passione: “Wake up and embrace me! Show me your heart just once and I swear I will never look again... Do you not see that it is only despair, love and despair, that makes me talk this way?” (71) Ed è contro il padre che Magda inscena la sua feroce vendetta (Rody 1994).

Anche Lucy, in *Disgrace*, è costruito come personaggio antagonista, ma a differenza di Magda, è lei ad avere scelto di reincarnare il ‘modello’ della donna coloniale, quello rappresentato dalle sue antenate boere, abbandonando la città per una piccola fattoria isolata nella provincia del Capo. Anche la sua solitudine è una scelta: Lucy è lesbica e ha una compagna da cui si è di recente separata. Sia Lucy che Magda hanno in un certo senso adottato la marginalità, ma sono al tempo stesso donne autonome e disubbidienti, potenziali minacce di un ordine prestabilito e ritenuto immutabile, e non facilmente assimilabili nel paradigma sociale autoritario costruito sui ‘padri’. Figure di potere sociale e sessuale, i padri sfruttano la propria posizione come arma di seduzione indirizzando le proprie attenzioni a donne più giovani delle figlie, una ragazza nera, Klein Anna in *The Heart of the Country*, e una giovane meticcia in *Disgrace*, Melanie. I rapporti, in ambedue i casi subiti dalle ragazze, allontanano lo spettro dell’incesto ma solo sostituendo la figura tabuizzata della figlia con un’altra figura altrettanto vietata, la donna di un’altra razza. La distanza tra padre e figlia, se da un lato può schermare il desiderio incestuoso, un desiderio che viene spostato verso una figura filiale sostitutiva, è anche un modo per tenere a bada la minaccia che deriva dal desiderio di disubbidienza e di autonomia della figlia nei confronti delle leggi patriarcali. La ‘pericolosità’ di Magda deriva dal suo desiderio di sovvertimento dei codici di comunicazione tra bianchi e neri, quella di Lucy dal suo essere lesbica. In tal modo Coetzee ridisegna il paradigma edipico freudiano in chiave postcoloniale inserendovi la figura dell’altro, ma soprattutto inserendo nella trama edipica l’elemento ideologico a segnalare un’alterità che non è solo di genere.

Quello che leggiamo in *In The Heart of the Country* è il monologo farneticante e compulsivo di Magda che introduce personaggi e situazioni dalla prospettiva di una sua logica depistante fatta di gelosia, di desiderio, di frustrazione. Il suo è un racconto ambiguo, impasto di realtà e immaginazione, intessuto di bugie e contraddizioni ma anche di visioni poetiche e materialità fisica, come mostra in particolare la presenza oppressiva del corpo del padre che, vivo o morto, domina il suo immaginario e la sua parola. Anche la trama edipica si realizza nel romanzo sul piano dell’ambiguità: sia la scena del patricidio, un delitto che Magda descrive in ogni suo cruento dettaglio, che quel-

la dello stupro ad opera del servo nero potrebbero essere frutto di una fantasia compensatrice e sostitutiva, in cui il desiderio dell'incesto da parte di Magda viene spostato sul servo Hendrik, che a sua volta vendicherebbe così l'oltraggio subito dal padrone per avergli sottratto la giovane moglie (Dovey 1988). Ma la 'follia' di Magda si esprime soprattutto nel suo desiderio (e tentativo) di utilizzare un linguaggio diverso da quello paterno, gerarchico e paternalistico, un linguaggio che le consenta una comunicazione di scambio paritario con i neri: "The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue." (Coetzee 1977: 97)

Scritto in terza persona *Disgrace* privilegia la prospettiva del padre; è il padre infatti a dominare la narrazione, specialmente nella prima parte. David Lurie, docente all'Università di Cape Town e studioso di George Byron (non a caso modello di una possibile identificazione), ha due matrimoni falliti alle spalle ed è frequentatore abituale di giovani prostitute. Quando una studentessa, Melanie, che ha subito passivamente le sue attenzioni, lo denuncerà per molestia sessuale, David sottoposto dalle autorità accademiche a una sorta di processo sarà costretto a lasciare l'università. Pur ammettendo i fatti, David rifiuta di fare pubblica ammenda appellandosi a non meglio specificati "diritti del desiderio" e, lasciata Cape Town, va a trovare la figlia Lucy che conduce la sua esistenza alternativa, di moderna pioniera, coltivando un pezzo di terra in una parte remota dell'Eastern Cape e si guadagna la vita con un banchetto di frutta al mercato e una pensione per cani. Nonostante le difficoltà di convivenza che presto si manifestano, David si adatta alla nuova precaria esistenza occupandosi di animali ammalati finché un evento imprevisto fa irruzione nello scenario rurale: una banda di giovani neri giunge in casa di Lucy portando morte e devastazione. I ragazzi rubano tutto quello che possono, cospargono David di benzina dandogli fuoco, stuprano Lucy e ammazzano tutti i cani. In contrasto con l'opinione del padre, Lucy rifiuta di denunciare i violentatori, e non abortisce quando scopre di essere incinta. Pur di restare sulla 'sua' terra, accetta di sposare Petrus, un anziano vicino nero che l'aiuta nei campi, in cambio di protezione. Anche in questo romanzo la trama edipica si realizza attraverso sostituzioni e spostamenti, e di nuovo 'abbraccia' figure di neri, giungendo fino al rovesciamento grottesco del paradigma familiare: Lucy con un figlio frutto dello stupro e un marito fittizio.

Nei finali dei due romanzi i ruoli iniziali dei personaggi vengono ribaltati. Non più passive e disprezzate, le figlie diventano le figure dominanti nella

relazione col padre, sottraendosi così all'acquiescenza e alla complicità dei ruoli loro assegnati dalla trama tradizionale. Tale rivendicazione viene espletata anche su un piano metaletterario, come quando in *Disgrace* Lucy, rivolgendosi a suo padre, si riappropria del ruolo di protagonista della propria vita: "You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions." (Coetzee 1999: 198) Anche Magda aveva a sua volta e a più riprese affermato la sua dignità di personaggio rifiutando le possibili alternative del suo destino:

Do I feel rich outrage at my spinster's fate? [...] Or am I, hitherto unbeknown to me, but now alas known, reserved for a more complex fate: to be crucified head downward as a warning to those who love their rage and lack all vision of another tale? But what other tale is there for me? Marriage to the neighbour's second son? I am not a happy peasant. I am a miserable black virgin, and my story is my story, even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning and of all its many possible untapped happy variants. I am I. Character is fate." (Coetzee 1977: 4-5)

Prendendo decisioni importanti per la propria vita, diverse da quelle volute dai padri, le figlie hanno inoltre svolto un ruolo attivo nella destituzione della figura di autorità. Se il finale di *In the Heart of the Country* è ambiguo e ironico, perché vede il padre, un essere ormai incapace di intendere e di volere ("a mannikin of dry bones held together by cobwebs", 136), ridotto alla più completa dipendenza dalla figlia, nel secondo si assiste a un capovolgimento ironico delle funzioni paterne: imbruttito e invecchiato, il padre è trasformato da seduttore di giovani donne in custode di animali moribondi ("What a tale to tell back home: a mad old man who sits among the dogs singing to himself!", Coetzee 1999: 212), ma ha imparato a dare conforto agli animali con un gesto d'amore, a trovare qualcosa per cui valga la pena vivere al di là degli astratti ideali di bellezza e poesia, qualcosa che ha al centro la sofferenza di uomini, donne e animali. Rivalutando da un'ottica di genere la figura marginale e secondaria della figlia e scegliendo la sua prospettiva, Coetzee non solo ribalta l'interesse per il figlio, dominante nella letteratura occidentale, ma ne fa il tramite di valori di opposizione, disubbidienza e resistenza.

La distanza storica tra i due romanzi dà ragione inoltre della maggiore lucidità di intento nell'operato delle due figlie: il desiderio di Magda di uccidere il padre in quanto emblema del vecchio ordine coloniale e patriarcale e

di valicare la barriera razziale non può che restare una fantasia libertaria, un sogno irrealizzabile nell'epoca in cui l'opera è stata scritta (Penner 1989). *Disgrace*, il romanzo del dopo apartheid, non mette in scena fantasmi: è un lucido apologo di sopravvivenza nei mutati equilibri di potere tra bianchi e neri. L'addomesticamento della figura paterna, la sua perdita di ruolo corrisponde così alla scelta di Lucy di resistere, costi quel che costi: "But isn't there another way of looking at it, David? What if... what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves." (158) La necessità di risarcire i neri in qualche modo porta Lucy a guardare davanti a sé, anche se ciò comporta l'accettazione di regole di convivenza imposte dalla nuova situazione e fino a quel punto impensabili. La storia si chiude dunque col recupero beffardo della trama familiare: un padre una madre e un figlio legati solo dalla violenza del caso. Davvero il *family romance* non è più raccontabile.

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## Abstract

*The focus of the article is the way in which Coetzee re-writes the father/daughter plot in two of his novels, In the Heart of the Country (1977) and Disgrace (1999), reinterpreting the Oedipal paradigm from a postcolonial perspective. Emphasis is laid upon the retrieval of the daughter figure, by definition a marginal character because*

*of her gender and her subaltern position in the family. Coetzee's daughters are pivotal characters in both novels: rebellious against their fathers, they embody resisting and oppositional values thus showing the way to a different, though no less bleak, order.*



# **FOCUS CANADA**



## *Problems of Identity: Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood*

Michela Bertilorenzi

The search for identity is a theme that permeates the production of Margaret Atwood, who explores it both on the space axis—by introducing into her novels the pattern of the quest, the journey in search of the Self—and on the time axis, by placing their action either in the future, as in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1974), or in the past. In the latter case, she does it almost always to conjure up disquieting gothic atmospheres, in the assumption (shared by most contemporary novelists) that gothic fiction is particularly apt to explore the most secret areas of the self, to give expression to hidden terrors and impulses.

In the case of such a novel as *Alias Grace*, the term “gothic” might sound inappropriate, since the mystery in the story has nothing to do with the category Todorov has described as “fantastic”, its nature being psychological rather than ontological; there are no supernatural elements in the book and the horror it raises is only inherent in the sheer cold-blood cruelty of the murder here described: in fact Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is one of the models Atwood here seems to have in mind, although the ambiguity that enwraps the figure of the protagonist and her story makes one think of another master of gothic fiction, Henry James.

Yet, while *Alias Grace* on the one hand is related to the gothic tradition, on the other hand can be placed in a typically postmodernist genre, historical metafiction; in fact the fiction that here Atwood creates—about a Canadian girl who, around the middle of the 19th century, was accused of murder and sentenced to life when she was only sixteen years old—is based on historical documents. That she was a murderer, however, was never proved beyond doubt and the case raised an impassioned debate among the contemporaries, who soon divided into two parties: those who saw her as a devil incarnate and those who claimed she was a victim of circumstances.

Atwood's purpose is neither to take side with one of these two parties, nor to establish whether Grace is innocent or guilty. By making her the narrator of her own story she makes this impossible, in that the reader cannot help continually questioning the truth of Grace's account of her own story; in fact, paradoxically, the more she tells about herself, the deeper becomes the mystery about the truth of her story. In a kind of "re-enacting" of the Kinnear-Montgomery trial, the author gives Grace the opportunity to sit at the dock and give her version of the story and makes us hear, beside her voice, those of other people who speak from the witness box, and tell, in turn, their own version of the facts, while the reader sits, metaphorically, in the jury box and is assigned the desperate task to ascertain the truth in this labyrinthine story.

It is interesting to remark that Atwood is not the first writer who has dealt with this story: in fact the novel is, to some extent, a rewriting of Susanna Moodie's *Life in The Clearings* (based, in turn, on newspaper articles and judiciary accounts), a book which leaves no doubt about Grace's guilt, identifying her as the prime mover of the murder. Atwood's choice of depicting her as a mysterious and ambiguous figure, not only introduces a completely different epistemological perspective and a metafictional element into the story (in that it makes us continually question Grace's reliability as a narrator and focuses our attention on the way she uses language and presents facts), but, ultimately raises a problem of identity: who is really Grace?

Thus Atwood's intention here is not, probably, to confute Susanna Moodie's version of the events, not only because she admires the work of her colleague (as she herself has claimed in many interviews), but also because she introduces into her novel several passages taken from *Life in the Clearings*, which she uses as one of the many voices that make themselves heard in the book, another version of the facts.

But if it is not to belie Moodie's version and others', what is really Atwood's intention? Is it just to probe into the mystery of a murder and of the protagonist's personality? The impression conveyed by the book is that her aim goes beyond that, and that somehow the problem of Grace's identity is related to that of her own country, Canada.

If this is true, the form itself of the book, the choice of first person narration, becomes significant: in probing its own history, in investigating its own problems in "the first person", Canada is forced to speak from too close a perspective, and so cannot, like Grace, say the truth about itself, solve its own mysteries and contradictions.

These contradictions, seems to suggest Atwood, are rooted in the fact that Canada, far from being a monolithic reality, is a patchwork of ethnical groups and cultures which find inevitable difficulties in coexisting and communicating because of their intrinsic “difference”, although even difference can become a value and a wealth. This idea is suggested by a paratextual element of the book, that is by the reference to patchwork quilts that Atwood introduces in the title of each chapter: each refers to specific quilts that bear such extravagant names as “Pandora’s Box”, “Tree of Paradise”, “Wild Goose Chase”; each, moreover, is preceded by drawings that reproduce the pattern of patchwork quilts on fashion in 19th century Canada.

Apart from their metaphorical connection to the Canadian prismatic, multifaceted identity, these quilts have other symbolic universal values and their meaning has to do with such existential realities as life, love and death: as Grace herself remarks, it is under these quilts that people make love, that children are born, that people die, and for this reason Canadian women sew them with great care, conscious that they will be present in the most important moments of their life.

Some of the threads of these quilts can be identified, in the novel, as those of destiny: as is often remarked in it, the life of Grace and that of other female characters (Mary, Nancy etc.) are linked by a red thread, a recurring image in the text, which metaphorically joins the destinies of the three women, marks their fatal connection with the colour of blood and murder.

But, as I said before, above all the image of quilts serves to mirror the Canadian social context, made of different groups, which, far from making up a “melting pot”, as in USA, have always been striving to preserve their identity, in the respect of each other’s rights. What is interesting in connection with this idea, is that the author, through the image of quilts, identifies women as the connective, “knitting” element in this society, whose successful politics of tolerance seems to owe much to women who patiently sew together odd patches.

Another important point about quilts is that, beside functioning as a projection of the social and political status of Canada, they metaphorically represent the memory of this country, on which its identity vitally depends: quilts are traditionally made of pieces taken from old garments, each of which has got its own story and is related to those who previously used it or wore it. A patchwork like this is more than a complicated puzzle of meaningless pieces of cloth randomly cut from old garments: it is a sort of family photo album, on which one can see juxtaposed images of one’s beloved, one’s family tree, in one word, one’s identity. In a certain respect, these quilts, which were passed from one generation to the next as a precious memory of the family,

are sorts of family coats of arms: unlike them, however the quilts, while always retaining their individuality, at the same time change from generation to generation, just as a country changes through history.

Finally these quilts can be seen as a metafictional symbol, in that they are the result of a skilful knitting of odd threads, woven into a fabric whose particular “texture” is somehow close to that of this text, a pastiche of literary genres and discursive modalities: not only the story of Grace is told by juxtaposing the most varied sources, but it is the result of the intertwining of two main narrative “threads” constituted by Grace’s voice (autobiographical narration in the first person) and that of Doctor Jordan (third person narration) who is studying her case and makes his considerations about it, thus reconstructing, in part, her story.

Apart from these two main voices, many others are heard in this text where, furthermore, we find several discursive modalities, that is: articles directly taken from the newspapers of the 1840s; passages from Susanna Moodie’s *Life in The Clearings*; an old ballad that tells the story of the murder; letters, songs, etc.

Each of these voices and discourses is, of course, the vehicle of a different version of the story and a different point of view, thus frustrating the reader’s expectation for the *whole truth* and for a story told in a consistent way and led to a clear, satisfactory conclusion. In other words here Atwood uses the form of the novel to question its own institutional identity, and even—in a way which is typical both of modernist and postmodernist fiction—to deconstruct it. By mingling a variety of contradictory voices and narrative modalities, she draws the reader’s attention not so much to the story she narrates, but to its own mechanisms and exposes their inability to produce a coherent narrative.

But beside mingling different voices and kinds of discourses, the author here, as I said above, incorporates different literary genres: in the first part, where Grace tells her story in the first person, the book can be classified as a fictional (or fictionalised) autobiography. But it is also a *Bildungsroman*—in that it presents the interior growth of the protagonist, from her childhood in Ireland to her last days in USA—, a historical metafiction based on real events; an epistolary novel where several letters—among which one written by the heroine herself—are exchanged between the doctors interested in her case.

And of course *Alias Grace* is also a detective story that opens when the crime has already been committed, and is based on the search for the murderer, carried out by means of the traditional technique of detective stories, that

is by supplying the reader with deceitful or elusive information and contradictory evidences, and by raising suspects against different characters.

Yet the dominant genre in *Alias Grace* is the gothic novel, whose structures and techniques are employed both with a mimetic function, in order to convey the violence latent in the apparently peaceful, drowsy life of a provincial town, and with an intertextual function, because Atwood here draws on the whole gamut of forms and formulas handed down by the gothic tradition, mingling 18th century settings with Poe's taste for the macabre, the *doppelgänger* motif and the impending violence which is found in contemporary thrillers.

In particular, one of the settings employed in *Alias Grace*, the prison, recalls a typical iconographical element of gothic fiction, introduced for the first time by Piranesi in his famous prints *Le Prigioni*, and is strictly bond to another favourite gothic theme, mental insanity: it is not by chance that Grace is confined in a mental hospital, and later, when she seems to have recovered from her insanity, is taken back to prison. Significantly, it is one of the characters in the novel, the psychologist doctor Simon Jordan, to compare this dark place to a cloister or to a threatening castle where the heroine is kept prisoner by the villain:

The morning light fell slantingly in through the small windows high up on the wall, illuminating the corner where she stood. It was an image almost medieval in its plain lines, its angular clarity: a nun in a cloister, a maiden in a towered dungeon, awaiting the next day's burning at the stake, or else the last-minute champion come to rescue her (Atwood 1999: 68).

If, in this description, the reference to the 18th century gothic fiction is evident, other elements recall 19th century specimens of it, and this is the case, for example, of the theme of the double personality of Grace/Mary, that inevitably reminds the reader of Stevenson's masterpiece, *The Strange Case of Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde*, and of many other novels presenting the same theme: the very word "alias" in the title of the novel implies that the protagonist has a double identity, that in her two opposite personalities—a pitiless murderer and an innocent scapegoat—paradoxically co-exist.

Among the gothic elements scattered throughout the novel there is also the motif of the veil that hides Grace's faces during the hypnosis and that is an overt reminiscence of M. Lewis' *The Monk*: always introduced as a means to disclose the hidden personality of the character, in the case of *Alias Grace* it reveals that of Mary Whitney. It goes without saying that also this motif has to do with the theme of identity.

However, the most recurrent gothic theme that is found not only in Atwood's production, but also, more generally, in Canadian literature, is the one some critics—notably Frye—refer to as *victimhood*: if Canada, closed in its “garrison mentality”, identifies itself not so much with the ethos of conquering and submitting wilderness, as it is the case of U.S.A, but with a small stronghold lost in a wild territory and besieged in all directions by hostile forces, it is no wonder that one of the recurring figures in its fictional production is the victim. In this respect Atwood's work is undoubtedly exemplary (although she often employs this theme in an ironic or parodic modality): almost all her female characters turn out to be victims not only of circumstances and of destiny, which they cannot but submit to, but also, more often, of male characters. Marian, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, is trapped in a relationship with her *fiancé*; Joan, the central figure of *Lady Oracle*, is a victim both of her family and in particular of her mother, and society, but most of all she suffers her lover's power.

Also *Alias Grace* is, of course, the story of a victim: perhaps of an unjust judiciary system that has used her as a scapegoat, perhaps of society; but even if she were a murderer she is, to a certain extent, a victim: a victim of social entrapment, of male power, of circumstances that somehow have thwarted her personality, have made her different from what she might have been.

As is evident, the theme of victimhood is closely related in the novel to that of isolation, projected in such sinister spatial symbols as the prison, the mental hospital, even the dreary house where the murder is committed; and these places, in turn, relate isolation to alienation, otherness, hostile environments, “disconnection”. Also in this perspective Grace's problem of identity appears closely linked to that of Canada, a country that has not got rid yet of the fear of being victimised and marginalised by USA, its “male”, overwhelming neighbour.

And this is also the situation of Canadian literature, which is striving, like all the new literatures in English, against the threat of marginalisation and does it by trying to reconcile the necessity of presenting its own specific reality with that of grafting itself on the great English and American tradition, by trying to be at the same time national and cosmopolitan: a result that Atwood achieves here by filling the narration of a typically Canadian story with intertextual echoes and making it a “Canadian quilt”, a patchwork of voices and discourses.

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## Abstract

*La comunicazione mette a fuoco le modalità con cui il tema dell'identità viene affrontato in Alias Grace, dove esso si presenta a tre livelli, ossia in rapporto all'identità della protagonista – forse un'assassina, forse un innocente capro espiatorio – alla situazione culturale del Canada, chiuso nella sua "garrison mentality" e infine, autoreferenzialmente, a quella del romanzo d'oggi, e in particolare a quel sottogenere proteiforme e metamorfico che è il gotico.*



## Gender e politica in Elizabeth Rex di Timothy Findley

Caterina Ricciardi

L'evento 2000 del Festival di Stratford, Ontario, si è consumato nella rappresentazione ufficiale dell'ultimo dramma di Timothy Findley, *Elizabeth Rex*, diretto da Martha Henry, già prodotto in anteprima a Toronto con la cura autorevole di Paul Thompson nell'autunno del 1997. In occasione della messa in scena di Stratford il dramma è stato dato alle stampe (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 2000) con l'accompagnamento di un'utile Nota dell'autore. Tempestivo e prezioso è seguito il riconoscimento del Governor General's Award per il Teatro.

L'intuizione di Findley di riproporre (si vedranno le ragioni) la figura della grande Regina precede dunque gli scoop di un'industria cinematografica di successo che nel 1998 ha dato due diverse, ma entrambe apprezzabili, letture di Elisabetta: il solare e pienamente godibile *Shakespeare in Love* (vincitore di numerosi, generosi Oscar) di John Madden e lo storico, più cupo e più mirato *Elizabeth* di Shekar Kapur che si misura con il canonico *Fire Over England* di William K. Howard (1937, *Elisabetta d'Inghilterra*), con Lawrence Olivier e Vivien Leigh. Sappiamo che questo controverso personaggio, Elisabetta, tornato con tanto vigore alla ribalta nel 1998 anche a seguito di sapienti studi biografici, ha molto incuriosito le menti nel corso del tempo (qui da noi, di recente, quella di Nadia Fusini). Basterà menzionare almeno un classico: il ritratto fra verità e *romance* che nel 1928 propone Lytton Strachey in *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic Story*, vicino a quanto Findley ha scelto di indagare nella sua personale occasione scespiriana.

Tuttavia, Findley batte altre strade nella riflessione sulla carismatica Regina e si allontana dalle biografie romantiche e dai feuilleton mescolando sapientemente Storia, letteratura, fantasia e mestiere teatrale (che Findley conosce di prima mano: da attore, come Shakespeare) in una ricerca palesemente puntata sull'identità di genere (ma, si badi bene, non solo su questo).

L'idea, infatti, nasce da un "conundrum" (Findley 2000: 9): chi, egli si chiede, assumeva la maschera di donne forti e mature nel teatro elisabettiano dove i ruoli femminili erano notoriamente affidati ai cosiddetti "boy actors"? Ed ecco che egli s'immagina attori ben al di là di un'imberbe adolescenza impegnati a dar corpo e voce a Cleopatra o Lady Macbeth o Margaret. Senza uomini di questo tipo "would Shakespeare have written such women?" (9). Una domanda appropriata. Di qui, dunque, il suo effeminato Ned Lowenscroft, protagonista "maschile" di *Elizabeth Rex*, interpretato a Stratford da Brent Carver, il Molina di una delle rese teatrali di *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Ormai avanti negli anni, consumato dalla vita e dal teatro, Ned viene destinato a confrontarsi in un serrato e salace duello verbale con la "mascolina" (per scelta?) Regina nella messa in scena di quella che Findley definisce una "contraddizione di generi" (9). Perché, infatti, lei, Elisabetta, amava definirsi "a Prince of Europe", ovvero "more man than woman" (9) nell'aspirazione (o meglio nel dovere) a praticare un fermo controllo sulla monarchia. *Elizabeth Rex*, appunto, nella parola maschile del primo grande impero: Re piuttosto che Regina (ma diversa risulta la lettura, per esempio, di Nadia Fusini).

Findley mira, dunque, a una "glorious, theatrical confrontation—between the woman who throughout her reign had played the role of a man, and a man who in his theatrical career had played the role of a woman" (9). E per rendere la situazione umanamente più tormentata egli decide che i due si debbano trovare in un momento di crisi della propria ambigua identità: l'uno gravemente malato di sifilide, l'AIDS di quei tempi ("Was he man enough to face his own imminent death?", 10) e in lutto per la perdita del compagno (un irlandese morto in una delle tante guerre irlandesi), l'altra alla vigilia – il Mercoledì delle Ceneri del 1601– della morte per sedizione e tradimento dell'amato Conte di Essex ("where did this leave Elizabeth, the woman?", 10). Nell'infelice circostanza, attraverso un aperto, disperato confronto, ciascuno dei due, aiutandosi a vicenda, dovrebbe riconquistare la sua vera identità: "manhood" o "womanhood" (ma possono coesistere entrambe in una sola creatura? È forse questo il nocciolo di tutta la questione, ma non solo questo).

La verità storica offre un altro tocco magistrale a Findley: con il Conte di Essex nella Torre in attesa di esecuzione, anch'egli per ribellione, c'è Harry Wriothsley, il Conte di Southampton, il patrono di Shakespeare, il "fair youth" (almeno secondo una lettura) dei *Sonetti*: le contraddizioni, gli ammiccamenti alle identità, ai ruoli di genere si espandono fino a coinvolgere in prima persona il Bardo, colto qui all'apice della sua creatività ma, invero, anche in momenti di debolezza umana (per il suo Conte) e imprenditoriale

(pare sempre molto preoccupato per i “costi” dei suoi allestimenti). Findley, tuttavia, nella sostanza sembra interessato alla verità che giace sotto la maschera (o l’abito di scena) che ciascuno di noi indossa nella vita/teatro, la più misteriosa e difficile da catturare:

What emerged for me [...] was a sense that neither gender nor sexuality, politics nor ambition, are as important as integrity. As Shrove Tuesday passes into Ash Wednesday, playwright, player, and Queen must come to terms with who they truly are, and how they will cope with the inevitable. This echoes Polonius’s advice in Hamlet: ‘This above all, to thine own self be true.’ Or, as Glenn Gould was to declare to me a year before his death: ‘all that matters is that you become yourself’ (10).

Questa l’essenziale filosofia (con un piccolo contributo canadese) del dramma psicosessuale di Findley: la sottolineatura della propria integrità di fronte a eventi estremi, un’integrità che tuttavia, se fatta specchiare nei termini politici disseminati nel testo (siamo qui agli albori dell’imperialismo inglese e Findley è un canadese di origine irlandese), sembra voler anche accennare all’emersione da sotto la mascheratura del *gender* di una nuova soggettività.

*Elizabeth Rex* si compone di due atti (diciotto scene in tutto) e un Prologo preceduti da una citazione da *Antony and Cleopatra*. È Antonio che parla alla fine del terzo atto prima del giorno decisivo: “Come / Let’s have one other gaudy night: call to me / All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more: / Let’s mock the midnight bell”, III, xiii, 181-84). Ancora una “notte”, dunque, questa volta dentro e fuori il canone scespiriano. Il prologo è ambientato in un granaio di Stratford-upon-Avon nella notte del 22 aprile 1616, la vigilia della morte di Shakespeare (a quanto pare per un’influenza). Will – questo il suo nome qui nel cast – rimpiange antichi “giorni d’estate” presso l’Avon (un’eco di “Shall I compare you to a summer’s day?”), ricorda le parti recitate (“We play so many roles before we die”, 15) e soprattutto rievoca un’altra notte di quindici anni prima, “that unwritten night” (14), da Martedì Grasso al Mercoledì delle Ceneri del 1601 – “The beginning of the ending of my world” (15), un’allusione all’amore perduto per il Conte di Southampton, forse, o alla fase delle “dark comedies” –, quando in un altro granaio, a Londra, ebbe luogo un dramma reale che Will non ha mai voluto scrivere per la scena. Lo fa ora per lui Timothy Findley mentre il palcoscenico di Stratford, Ontario, sulle note dell’inno nazionale canadese (cfr. Shalts 2001) si popola dei Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Inizia così il primo atto.

Arrivano alla spicciolata gli attori, all’apparenza distintamente uomini e donne, ciascuno con i suoi specifici accessori (anche parrucche, corpetti, belletti, posticci), e si uniscono a Will come essi via via si spogliano degli abiti

indossati in *Much Ado About Nothing*, il dramma che hanno appena recitato davanti alla Regina, la quale, questa sera, è in cerca di distrazione perché, per sua volontà, l'amato Essex attende l'esecuzione alle sette del mattino: il dato è storico, sebbene non sia dato sapere quale opera di Shakespeare fosse rappresentata quella faticosa sera di coprifuoco per controllare insurrezioni contro il trono a favore di Essex e dell'Irlanda. La scelta di Findley vuole privilegiare Beatrice (nella finzione interpretata da Ned), che egli ritiene "one of the strongest and most independent women in the Shakesperare canon. This way, I was also able to have the Queen become intrigued by the actor who brought this woman to life" (10). La Regina, infatti, raggiunge gli attori dopo la rappresentazione per consumare nella loro mascherata compagnia l'ultima notte di Essex ("one last gawdy night"), al fine di non farsi tentare dal perdono: "I killed the woman in my heart, that England might survive" (49). Essex e l'Irlanda sono nel suo cuore non di donna ma di monarca.

Il cast ora è completo e le citazioni prendono a cadere sulla pagina limpida di Findley cui Shakespeare dà un tocco pungente e luminoso. Si tesse una guerra dei sessi; un confronto di abiti e abitudini (si veda, per esempio, tutto l'ironico giocare sull'"inchino", 30); una sfida sul potere; un gioco d'amore; un duello con la morte; un dialogo impossibile col tempo; una ricerca di verità; uno svelamento crudele di identità: gesti "umanamente" impietosi, battute come girandole che germinano dal canone (allo spettatore, o meglio al lettore, il divertimento di risalire agli originali: *Twelfth Night*, *Richard the Third*, *Love's Labour's Lost* e così via).

Gli strati intertestuali, le maschere, i costumi, i ruoli qui sono moltiplicati nel mentre che i contesti in cui Findley sceglie di muoversi – scespiriano (il canone) e storico (la ribellione irlandese del 1601 che segnò la fine dell'Irlanda gaelica) – interagiscono in una scrittura che si fa portavoce di pratiche discorsuali revisioniste (postcoloniali?). Ovvero, sotto le mascherature e le storie d'amore serpeggia un tema politico che riguarda l'identità non solo di genere ma anche di popolo.

Se gli attori sono reduci dai ruoli sessualmente camuffati di *Much Ado About Nothing*, sappiamo che invece Shakespeare in quei giorni scriveva *Hamlet*. Findley, tuttavia, preferisce coglierlo nella tormentata gestazione di *Antony and Cleopatra*, una storia di Roma imperiale e colonizzatrice (come l'esordiente Inghilterra di quegli anni) e una storia d'amore indicibile (ma qui sussurrata in anteprima nei suoi passi più attraenti), perchè ricorda tanto quella di Elisabetta e Essex (anche nel sospetto del tradimento). Però, si badi bene, *Antony and Cleopatra* è una storia di passione non di ragione, una storia in cui

l'amore trionfa sulla morte. Nel dramma che Findley mette in atto Elisabetta ha invece deciso di condannare Essex ed è in guerra con l'Irlanda (come Cleopatra con Roma). Will a sua volta ha alle spalle la sua storia segreta con il Conte di Southampton, ora nelle mani maschili e prive di perdono della Regina: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate" (sonetto 18), recita lei (45), mentre Will (e "Will" è il soggetto dei *Sonetti*) poche pagine oltre si fa voce autoriale di "A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted" (sonetto 20), il più controverso testo scespiriano sull'identità di genere. Il confronto fra Ned e la Regina si duplica in quello fra Will e la Regina. Anche la Regina ora chiede svelamenti: di nuovo di identità di genere come pure di debolezze e pene d'amore (e ancora si chiede: chi è l'autore dei *Sonetti*?). Tuttavia, Will è personaggio umile in questo dramma di Findley, mero scriba ("I am attempting to create a monarch, madam. A monarch's words are of interest to me", 52) delle emozioni forti della vita e della politica, ovvero: quelle di Ned e della Regina, una regina che qui inaugura il discorso coloniale inteso quale apparato di potere. Il canone – quello scespiriano – assieme alla Regina, si propongono dunque entrambi come centro del discorso, un centro smascherato e dislocato, tuttavia, dalla nuova voce autorevole di Ned sul palcoscenico di Stratford, Ontario. Non è difficile allora vedere Ned come un soggetto ibrido – almeno sessualmente – e soprattutto sovversivo che agisce in uno spazio capace di generare "the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Bhabha, 1995: 208).

Per il tramite delle parole di Shakespeare, infatti, Ned si prova a minare il controllo univocale del discorso dell'autorità. Così egli non ha scrupoli a colpire la Regina che ha svenduto la sua femminilità per il potere e l'Inghilterra ("You tell me you have killed the woman in your heart ... and now you want to kill the man who gave that woman life. Why?", 50). E d'altro canto ella non risparmia sferzate a chi ha dimenticato la propria mascolinità per amore e per il teatro. Ned e Elisabetta: due antagonisti il cui sesso è incerto per scelta o per natura, impegnati in una sfida che riguarda sì la sfera umana ma non può non implicare anche quella del potere. Perché, ricordiamolo, sullo spazio ibrido della scena Ned è Beatrice ("O, that I were a man", 17; "I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore, I will die a woman with grieving", 32); è Cleopatra ("she came sailing up the river in a barge with a poop of beaten gold", 23; "Ah, women, women, look—our lamp is spent. It's out", 53); è Margaret ("Die neither mother, wife, nor England's

queen”, 40); è Titania: è la Regina, è una donna, è la donna-regina che Elisabetta dovrebbe essere. Con le sue appropriate battute egli si investe del ruolo del suggeritore, della “spalla” di un’attrice inesperta o distratta allo scopo di contaminare il discorso del potere con il sapere dell’Altro. Ma Elisabetta resta invece il Re, il monarca della ragion di Stato che manda a morte il suo amato. Perché? Le chiede Ned. “Because I love him”, è la risposta. “And if, because I love him I spare him, I will then have killed the man in me who is England’s only defence against her enemies. I will not spare him. Nothing will shake me in this. Nothing. Oh, God. Oh, God ... if only I had your capacity for womanhood, Master Lowenscroft. Then at least I could mourn him” (50). Elisabetta non dimentica che il suo rapporto con il mondo è fatto di politica e certamente non è teatro, benché, come si ricorda anche qui, “all the world’s a stage” (19), e lei, ammetterà, ha recitato una sola parte nella vita, quella del monarca. Non si farà, dunque, scuotere (“Nothing will shake me in this”) dalle belle parole di Shakespeare, però una lezione dal teatro vuole impararla. Il primo atto si chiude a mezzanotte con un baratto fra Ned e la Regina: “Your problem”, dice lei, “is that you have forgotten you’re a man. Listen to me. *Listen*. I will strike a bargain with you. If you will teach me how to be a woman ... I will teach you how to be a man” (50). Il compito di Ned nel secondo atto sarà quello di trasformare Elizabeth Rex in Elizabeth Bess (75). Parodiando Amleto (II, ii, 641), nel loro dramma improvvisato: “The play’s the thing”, egli dice, “wherein I’ll catch the woman in the Queen” (58).

Questo l’obiettivo di Ned. Ci riuscirà? Will, che prende note per *Antony and Cleopatra*, inizia invece a sperare nella salvezza del suo Essex, il Conte di Southampton, se, appunto, “that man—that woman—could be found” (51). Sembrano due punti di vista diversi: quello di Ned (che cerca l’uomo in sé e la donna in lei) e quello più ambizioso di Will. Si troverà questa sua creatura così ermafroditicamente composta? Al lettore scoprirlo fra le ambiguità, le sospensioni e le attese che regolano il dettato di Findley.

Al di là dei fatti storici, *Elizabeth Rex* è indubbiamente uno studio in tale direzione. E tuttavia non si tratta qui soltanto della ricerca di una inclinazione di genere o del “to thine own self be true” di Polonio e di Glenn Gould, perché una certezza ci viene comunque consegnata in queste pagine e riguarda Jack (Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*), la sua è, infatti, l’unica identità piena e incontrovertibile: “Whatever else I am—I am still an Irish man” (48), egli afferma con orgoglio alla Regina. Così come c’è un solo potere vincente alla fine (oltre quello lirico delle parole), il potere della

Regina d’Inghilterra (quello della ragione) che alle sette del mattino, Mercoledì delle Ceneri 1601, con la morte di Essex, può dichiarare a Jack: “Ireland is mine” (78), mentre in cambio gli dona un suo ritratto. Forse un’eco tremendamente ironica nella sua dichiarazione del “This island’s mine” (*Tempest*, I, ii, 331) di Calibano a Prospero. Il Conte di Southampton invece è salvo, promette la Regina a Will, al quale lascia infine le sue parole, le parole del potere: “For you, sir, my words. Use them as you will. I cannot offer you more” (78). Ma nel complesso il baratto più grande – quello stipulato con Ned – un baratto che avrebbe forse cambiato almeno la storia dell’Irlanda, non s’è concluso e il “play within the play” ha fallito in parte l’obiettivo: Ned non ha “catturato” in pieno la donna nella Regina (la passionale Cleopatra), e neanche Findley, forse perché, quest’ultimo, a differenza di Will, ha sulle spalle e nel suo cuore d’irlandese-canadese l’amaro sapere postumo della Storia. Tuttavia, Findley è riuscito a creare per i suoi attori —tutti, inclusa la Regina—uno spazio “intermedio” di “negoziazione” e “traduzione” in cui le identità – politiche o di genere – interagiscono in modo dialettico (per esempio, se la Regina non diviene capace di salvare il suo amato può però alla fine almeno piangerlo).

Se prerogativa dello scrittore postcoloniale è lo smascheramento dell’identità europea, la decostruzione del centro dell’autorità sì da ristabilire la propria differenza, in questo dramma Findley tenta tale impresa (ma con quanta o quale consapevolezza “postcoloniale”?) percorrendo due direzioni: l’abile interplay fra identità di genere e identità di popolo e la ripetizione del testo del potere in uno spazio agonale di natura intertestuale. Questo testo, nel caso specifico, è quello di Shakespeare (non nuovo, come sappiamo, nel territorio ibrido del postcolonialismo), un testo che, s’è visto, mentre si fa depositario delle parole della Regina, è capace al contempo di lasciarsi duplicare, dislocare e tradurre fino a rendere problematico il riconoscimento dell’autorità che ha contribuito a crearlo. È questo, credo, il senso che, sotto la mascheratura del *gender* (ma, si rammenti, siamo anche sul finire del Carnevale), il dramma di Findley intende trasmettere, quasi che nell’ibridità del *gender* che egli rappresenta si sia creato quello spazio intermedio in cui, secondo Bhabha, “we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space’, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha 1995: 209).

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## Abstract

*In Timothy Findley's new play, Elizabeth Rex (2000), issues of gender and role playing in the Elizabethan Age open up an intriguing plot that turns into actors Queen Elizabeth herself and her bard, William Shakespeare, on the eve of the execution for treason in 1601 of the Earl of Essex, the Queen's former lover. The event, related to the Irish rebellion of the same year, is a prelude to the imperial destiny of England. "I killed the woman in my heart, that England might survive," Findley's manly Elizabeth ("Rex") admits to Ned Lowenscroft, the actor in the Shakespearean canon who specializes in female roles (in particular the role of queens) and who is dying of syphilis (i. e., AIDS) contracted from his deceased Irish lover. On the stage of Stratford, Ontario, while Ned and the Queen are forced to face questions concerning truth and death, they recognize their own estrangement from their true nature: manhood, womanhood. Clothed in a contemporary sensibility (postcolonial?) and flavour, Elizabeth Rex is also an intertextual masquerade that by exploring sexual hybridity undermines as well the laws of power and politics. The icons (Elizabeth), the meaning and symbols of culture (the Shakespeare canon) are thus brilliantly "translated, rehistoricized and red anew."*

## “*Flesh is a Virtue*”: *Lady Oracle and the Writing of Costume Gothics*

Michela Vanon Alliata

Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (henceforth *LO*) is a postmodernist, polyphonic novel with a complex structure consisting of a frame text and embedded texts which, through the parodic interpolation of structures, conventions and tropes of Gothic or popular romance challenges dominant discourses about literary canon—from which this literary form is excluded—, blurring the boundaries between high and popular art.

In Atwood’s third novel (1976), a comic masterpiece, the techniques of postmodernism—parody of literary forms and subversion of literary expectations—are effectively and brilliantly exploited to explore upsetting psychological issues, questions of identity, gender, and views of femininity.

The narrative is shaped as an autobiography, a *Bildungsroman* relating the life of Joan Foster, the novel’s heroine and first person narrator, interspersed with passages from her “Costume Gothics”—mainly *Stalked by Love*—as well as a sort of parody of *Kunstlerroman*, the story of her career as a writer, both of commercial fiction filled with torrid passions, and later of acclaimed poetry—the inner “Lady Oracle.”

The form of narration Atwood employs has two literary counterparts: the autobiographical form used by celebrities, and the fictional autobiography. “Partaking of the two conventions yet failing to fulfill the expectations generated by either form, *Lady Oracle* calls into question generic expectations in such a way as to make us question not merely what is a novel, but also what is the relation of a novel which purports to be autobiography to autobiography” (Beran 1987: 19).

Through an ingenious use of different temporal levels, Atwood reworks and recombines older and diverse fictional forms—the sentimental novel, the picaresque, Victorian poetry, the “Harlequin” romance and especially the

Gothic, heightening the reader's awareness of the relationship between fantasy and reality, art and life, process and product which is an important meta-fictional issue in *Lady Oracle* as in most Atwood's novels.

Significantly, Atwood makes a parody of the Gothic, a favorite genre for women writers from Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley to the contemporary fiction of Angela Carter and Alice Munro. A completely self-referential form and itself a hybrid genre, incorporating and transforming other literary forms, such as Renaissance drama, Faustian and fairy tales, folklore, picaresque and confessional narratives developing and changing its rules in relation to new modes of writing. As Howells suggests, Gothic "is a devious literature through which to express female desires and dreads, and in Atwood it is easy to see the traditional forms surviving, updated but still retaining their original charge of menace and mystery, while balancing women's urge towards self-discovery and self-assertiveness" (Howells 1996: 65).

Gothic, which has its origin in the tradition of the romance described by Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture*, is a genre particularly suited to Atwood's strategy not only for its freedom from strict realism, but especially because, on the psychological level, it portrays a world of unresolved chaos, continuous transformation, double and divided characters which reflect the break-down of the self. Most importantly, in its erosion of boundaries between the self and the monstrous Other, it subverts the romance's own mythology. "The Gothic fantasy is a fable of identity fragmented and destroyed beyond repair, a fable of the impossibility of identity" (Day 1985: 6).

One of the most important subtexts of *Lady Oracle*, a novel of nearly 350 pages filled with numerous allusions and complex narrative strategies, is Alfred Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallott", an emblematic figure in nineteenth century female iconography, suggesting a Victorian ideal of feminine self-renunciation and sacrifice whose only solution to unrequited love is a passionate love-death. Tennyson's poem "typifies the plight of the woman artist who must choose between participating in life (which includes falling in love) and being an artist" (Gilbert, Simpson-Housely 1997: 237). Isolated within her tower, the Lady of Shallott weaves a tapestry that depicts human life, which she herself can only experience vicariously and at a distance in a mirror. Her story, however, also symbolizes the movement from the protection of childhood into adulthood, the development from innocence to experience which is the path *Lady Oracle*'s heroine follows in her movement from maternal dependence and suffering to self-awareness and tension to self-determination and self-fulfillment.

In Atwood's novel realist conventions are broken through the use of an unreliable narrator who blurs the distinction between the narrator's biography and her fiction. In spite of the use of the first-person narration, which is a common realist convention, the reader is repeatedly driven to question Joan Foster's reliability as a narrator. Most importantly, the real and fictive plot within a plot structure, together with the radical disruption of linear flow of narrative, end by disrupting the main narrative's chronology, thus creating various temporal levels.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the plots of the Gothic romance intertwine more and more with the events in Joan's life and her career as Canada's new superpoet.

The model of growth, linearity and closure that typifies realist fiction is undermined by a narrative which relies on flashbacks and parody. Most readings of *Lady Oracle* highlight this feature of the novel. Linda Hutcheon views it as "an intertextual parody of Atwood's preceding work... one other form of that same modernist self-consciousness" (Hutcheon 1983: 21). Certainly there are echoes from Atwood's brilliant first novel, *The Edible Woman*, "the book about the eating woman" (Patton 1991: 32) that introduced her as a consummate observer of the ironies and absurdities of modern life.

In a typically postmodernist fashion, the author emerges as a playful technician able to retrieve and recombine conventional literary forms. The emphasis lies on the process of writing itself, on the author 'performing' self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness (Hassan 1975: 39-59). As in metafiction, in *Lady Oracle* too, parody signals the presence of textual auto-representation. In its range of intent, "from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing" parody is "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (Hutcheon 1985: 6).

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, reflecting on her secret career as a writer of romances, which Arthur, her "fastidious" (*LO* 168) pseudo-revolutionary intellectual husband, "a melancholy fighter for lost-causes" (*LO* 163), such as Ban-the-bomb, Marxism, Castro, Women's liberation, Quebec separatism, student revolt, and left-wing nationalism, deems "trash of the lowest order" (*LO* 31), insists on the desirability and indeed necessity of escapist literature:

He wouldn't have understood. He wouldn't have been able to understand in the least the desire, the pure quintessential need of my readers for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well. Life had been hard on

them and they had not fought back, they'd collapsed like soufflés in a high wind. Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity (LO 31).

By addressing her readers, whom she imagines to be women, as their "confidante" and "true friend" (LO 32), Joan challenges feminist criticism of this kind of pulp fiction which, as she says, "exploit(s) the masses, corrupt(s) by distracting, and perpetuate(s) degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted".

War, politics and explorations up the Amazon, those other great escapes, were denied them. [...] Why refuse them their castles, their persecutors and their princes, and come to think of it, who the hell was Arthur to talk about social relevance? [...] The truth was that I dealt in hope. I offered a vision of a better world, however preposterous. (LO 32)

Faced with the reprimands of Paul, her first lover, a Polish count in exile and author of "nurse romances" who considers her books "cheap and frivolous" (LO 159), she admits serenely to have never claimed to be "a serious writer". Unlike Paul, a frustrated writer of "a three-volume epic dealing with the fortunes of a petit-aristocratic family (his) before, during and after the war" (LO 153) which never found a publisher, Joan is not ashamed of her new career:

I turned professional and now it's the only way I know of earning a living. As the whores say, why the hell should I be a waitress? (LO 33).

However, the most important issue at stake in the novel, which is intimately related to the writing of Gothic fiction, is Atwood's perceptive exploration of the psychosexual impact that compassionless, contemptuous and abusive mothers have on their daughters, producing a lack of self-esteem that at time fosters desire for punishment and self-destructive behaviour. Incidentally, it is worth remembering that *Lady Oracle* begins with a self-annihilation gesture, namely with the mock death of its depressed heroine. This issue, in its turn, posits crucial questions of identity, sexuality, and gender.

The writing of Gothic romance plays a double role in *Lady Oracle*. On the one hand, the retreat into a world of fantasy, gloomy and mysterious atmospheres, excess and unlicensed passions where imagination and emotional effects exceed reason signified by the Gothic has a liberating and transgressive function (Botting 1996: 1-2). Significantly, the narrator writes under a pseudonym, thus viewing it as a sort of clandestine activity.

When I first met him he talked a lot about wanting a woman whose mind he could respect, and I knew that if he [Arthur] found out I'd written *The Secret of Morgrave Manor* he wouldn't respect mine. I wanted very much to have a respectable mind. Arthur's friends and the books he read, which always had footnotes, and the causes he took up made me feel deficient and somehow absurd, a sort of intellectual village idiot. (LO 31)

On the other hand, the world portrayed in her romances with its emphasis on psychological disintegration, violence, rape, breakdown and sadism, isolated heroines preyed on by unspeakable terrors and sinister villains, are a sort of objective correlative of the profound anxiety besetting the narrator's early life. Of all genres, the Gothic is certainly the one which most consciously exploits female victimization. It has been argued that the Female Gothic, to which Atwood explicitly refers to, is "a category within the genre which specifically deals with female anxieties and conflicts from a female perspective" (Korff 1983: 155).

Certain stock features such as persecuted heroines, lustful aristocrats, spectres and monsters, embody psychological anxieties, but are also disguised projections of sexual fantasies. Thus, writing Gothic fiction becomes for Joan a dramatisation and at the same time a way to exorcise her dramatically unhappy childhood dominated by a harsh and constantly disapproving mother—"Her plans for me weren't specific. They were vague but large, so that whatever I did accomplish was never the right thing" (LO 63)—a way of expelling and objectifying that threatening figure, casting her out and restoring proper limits.

In addition, the tortuous, fragmented narrative of the Gothic, often following a pattern of pursuit and escape, and characterized by multiple stories embedded in the main story, is paralleled by the rambling, picaresque narrative of the author's biography, full of *coups de theatre* and unexpected twists and turns which include the fabrication of a host of identities and false selves. In addition, Joan's fragmented and duplicitous life—she writes under different pen names— "draws largely on the Gothic tradition of dualism and divided selves" (Rao 1993: 65), multiple narrators and shifting points of view.

When Joan becomes a runaway success with the publication of "Lady Oracle", a collection of feminist poetry and the result of her tentative experiment in automatic writing, she is overwhelmed by the sudden rush of publicity and notoriety. Pursued by a celebrity blackmailer who threatens to expose her and reveal her multiple identities, Joan arranges her escape by feigning her own death by drowning in Lake Ontario—another parodic reference to

Tennyson's poem—and flees to Terremoto, Italy, determined to start *incognito* a new life. As in most Gothic canonical fiction, in *Lady Oracle* there is a use of an Italian setting, which “from the Protestant perspective was uncivilized, unenlightened and regressive” (Mighall 1999: xvii).

Joan herself, who views her predicament humorously, sees her whole life as an assemblage of disconnected events:

I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frames of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance. (LO 3)

In the first section of the book, Joan's ironic humour creates a poignant yet amusing description of the anxieties and ordeals of her childhood and adolescence, primarily resulting from the conflict with an overpowering, “anxious”, “prudish” (LO 42) and largely unloving mother.

I can never remember calling her anything but mother, never one of those childish diminutives; I must have, but she must have discouraged it. Our relationship was professionalized early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product. (LO 63)

The issue of identity is immediately and appropriately raised. Joan's mother's decision to name her after Joan Crawford, one of her film idols, reflects not only her projection of a glamorous and predatory femininity—“beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men” (LO 38)- but, most importantly, an ideal of an almost disembodied perfection that is virtually unattainable and which the protagonist will resist:

there was something tragic about Joan Crawford, she had big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones, unfortunate things happened to her. Perhaps that was it. Or, and this is important: Joan Crawford was thin. I was not, and this is one of the many things for which my mother never quite forgave me. (LO 39)

Thus, Joan Crawford who, incidentally, in a desperate need to lose weight in Hollywood was forced to follow a starvation diet, here introduces the larger and pervasive concern of the novel, that of the body, the social imperative of being thin.

With her usual levity and irresistible humour which make her fiction extremely enjoyable, Atwood explores crucial issues investigating how male

and society notions of femininity "enter into women's thinking about themselves, how the expectations of some *other*—culture, a man, a parent—interfere with the process of self-naming and autonomy in women. If choice about identity is constantly subject to other defined expectations, then internal self-image and external self-presentation will be affected in complex ways" (Parsons 1986: 97).

Confronted with a "beautiful", "perfectly coiffed"— "no nests for me among those stiff immaculate curls" (LO 85)— hyper-demanding and controlling mother, and with an absent father (she does not meet him until he returns from the war when she is five), Joan, like Charlotte, one of her heroines, is in some ways an orphan, emotionally starved, "alone and unprotected" (LO 127), agonisingly in search of love, "a sentimentalist ... of the sloppiest kind (LO 11), and "begging for a word of praise" (LO 228).

The day he finally returned I was almost beside myself, torn between hope and fear. Was he a bad man or a nice man? (My mother had two categories: nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you). But when the time came, a stranger walked through the door, kissed my mother and then me and sat down at the table. He seemed very tired and said little. He brought nothing and did nothing, and that remained his pattern. Most of the time he was simply an absence. (LO 65).

The relation between a middle-class mother, neurotically engrossed in obsessive-compulsive rituals of cleanliness and order— "[she] had a hawk's eye for anything out of place"— and her child, who becomes increasingly and painfully aware that she is "a throwback, the walking contradiction of her pretensions to status and elegance" (LO 174), assumes the dimensions of a self-destructive conflict.

Joan, who as a baby was "merely plump" (LO 39), reacts to the lack of affection, to the feeling that she is an unwanted child, an "accident" in her mother's life, by becoming a compulsive eater.

I ate on, trying to get it all down before being discovered. ...I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body... I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her eyes, rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. (LO 65)

As in *The Edible Woman*, Atwood's first novel, food, eating and weight issues, the focus for anxiety, are overt feminist concerns. "In the eyes of her

beautifully thin mother whose values are those of the bourgeoisie, the image of the fat, disproportionate body is disgusting and beyond the pale of decency” (Staels 1995: 71).

Joan’s “gargantuan” (*LO* 97) appetite, as well as her deviant body, triumphantly and defiantly exhibited, however, are also Gothic figures of excess and exaggeration.

I happened to glance at my body... I did not usually look at it in a mirror or in any other way; I snuck glances at parts of it now and then, but the whole thing was too overwhelming. There, staring me in the face, was my thigh. It was enormous, it was gross, it was like a diseased limb, the kind you see in pictures of jungle natives; it spread on forever, like a prairie photographed from a plane, the flesh not green but bluish white, with veins meandering across it like rivers. (*LO* 117)

Significantly, Joan’s parents are portrayed as a couple of Gothic villains, driven by aggressivity, malevolence and even suspected murderous intents. They are set against a household scenario echoing the same atmosphere of fear, uncontrolled feelings, and rage lurking in her romances. While Joan’s mother—whose Gothic analogue is Felicia, the wicked mother in *Stalked by Love*—is depicted as a narcissistic and unforgiving woman who spends most of her time in front of her vanity table, “painting her finger nails a murderous red” and comforting herself with novels about the Borgias while “pretending to read books on child psychology” (*LO* 66), her husband is an anesthetist in the Toronto general hospital.

An indifferent and taciturn man, “a conjurer of spirits, a shaman” (*LO* 72), but with the “thin”, “reckless” mouth of a “gambler” (*LO* 176), to her daughter’s horror, turns out not only to have “killed people in war... in cold blood”, but apparently to have enjoyed doing so. When his wife dies in an accidental fall down the stairs, Joan even wonders whether he might have pushed her.

A “healer” (as an anesthetist) and a “killer” (as a war-veteran), Joan’s father too, along with the daffodil man, “my rescuer and possibly also a pervert” (*LO* 292), her husband and her lover too, has a double nature, thus partaking of one of the characteristic preoccupations of the Gothic.

Here one can see another recurring *topos* of the modern Gothic—the representation of domestic horrors to subvert both the symbolic patriarchal order and conventional expectations concerning coherence of plot and character. Instead of being a refuge, the family becomes the major *locus* of alienation and constant threat.

As in Joan’s formulaic Gothics which depict emotional extremes, charac-

ters are exaggerated beyond reality. Her husband Arthur actually "turns up in her writing, his name occasionally slipping in metaleptically as a substitute for Lord Redmond, who is literally a Lady-Killer" (Restuccia 1996: 368). Similarly, the humour which pervades the novel is only black humour and it retains a singular moral function—that of provoking unease. It has been argued that in *Lady Oracle* humour is "a legitimate response to absurdity", "a survival tactic" for Joan, and a reply to "the mis-match between expectations and reality" (Johnston 1984: 10).

This pattern of parental rejection shaping Joan's childhood, which illuminates typical aspects of Gothic fiction, namely its "focus on family dynamics and generational conflicts" (Mighall 91), reaches its most dramatic and hilarious climax in the ballet recital.

in the short pink skirt, with my waist, arms and legs exposed, I was grotesque... with my jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent; it must have been like watching a decaying stripper... No wonder I fell in love with the 19th century: back then, according to the dirty postcards of the time, flesh was a virtue. (*LO* 42)

Joan, like all the girls in the ballet class, longs to perform the role of the butterfly on stage, but her fat body makes that costume incongruous on her. So she is forced into the role of the mothball—"I felt naked, exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me" (*LO* 46)—a traumatic experience which intensifies her sense of self-doubt, betrayal, vulnerability and certainty about her mother's disavow.

This paradigm of psychological violence verging on sadism continues throughout her adolescence, culminating in an episode at the Brownies when her schoolmates tie her to a bridge on the pretext of initiating her into their club. A man appears, and although Joan realizes that she "can't have been a very exciting sexual object, a fat, snotty-nosed eight-year old in a Brownie outfit" (*LO* 59), he smiles at her while lifting "his daffodils up to reveal his open fly" and flaccid flesh (*LO* 56). Unexpectedly, he unties her and takes her safely home. In a complete reversal of plot expectations, the "daffodil man", instead of causing her sexual trauma, turns out to be not "the bad man", a child molester, an exhibitionist—"as my mother would say which always caused me to have second thoughts about the Canadian National Exhibition" (*LO* 49)—but her rescuer.

Although compulsive eating is to Joan a source of misery, shame, and self-loathing—she realizes that others see it either as "an unfortunate handi-

cap, like a hump or a club foot" (LO 74), or "a disgusting failure of will" and not "as a misfortune" (LO 86) this is her only weapon to humiliate and enrage her mother who "was tired of having a teenaged daughter who looked like a beluga whale and never opened her mouth except to put something into it" (LO 74).

Born out of profound suffering, indicating problems of emotional control, compulsive eating, like all eating disorders, and bulimia especially, is paradoxically a way of gaining control by actually relinquishing it. It causes the sufferer to become increasingly out of control in a wide variety of ways and yet it is the one thing that enables her to feel in control. The fear of being without this protection maintains and increases the severity of the illness which comes to dominate Joan's all emotional experience.

I discovered there was something missing in me. This lack came from having been fat; it was like being without a sense of pain, and pain and fear are protective (LO 138).

Compulsive eating also prevents Joan from experiencing feelings that may be unbearable: "I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic" (74). Becoming and staying fat, asserting herself in the flesh becomes for Joan a rebellious and radical way of saying 'no' to gender expectations, to powerlessness and self-denial. It is her "refutation", her "victory" over her mother because it threatens the value she places on beauty and appearances, and as such it gives her "a morose pleasure" (LO 74).

It is ultimately a self-defense mechanism, the only strategy Joan has to distance herself from the normative, oppressive viewpoint embodied by her mother, leading her to develop exacerbated forms of self-deprecating irony. Her grotesque, unruly, massive body is a defiant and overt violation of traditional codes of proper physical and moral behaviour and of bourgeois normalization. It signals the presence of a disorder, an inner mess which her mother, a tyrannical judge or, in Freudian terms, a manifest Super Ego, wishes to ban from her existence. It is obviously also, a response to the lack of features associated with femininity and maternal love: receptiveness, softness, protectiveness and capacity for feeding.

Compulsive-eating, which expresses disorders connected to self-image and sexuality (Vegetti-Finzi, Battistin 2000: 282-3), also confers on Joan a certain invisibility.

Though immersed in flesh I was regarded as being above its desires, which of course was not true. (LO 91)

I myself had two early sexual experiences, though for the most part I suppressed my interest in sex as completely as I suppressed my interest in war films. There was no available role for me. (LO 93)

Finally, Joan's binging, as well as her chamaleontic ability to change selves, could be viewed as a metaphor for the author's verbal appetite, her desire to omnivorously incorporate in her narrative many different genres and literary modes.

The alter ego of Joan's ferociously unloving mother who will even try to sabotage her diet, is Aunt Lou, the only adult who throughout her childhood and adolescence offers her unconditional support. Unlike her mother for whom "tears were an evidence of stupidity" (LO 75), she is warm, affectionate, messy, sentimental and overweight too.

Aunt Lou took me to the movies a lot. She loved them, especially the ones that made you cry; she did not think a movie was much good unless it made you cry. She rated pictures as two-kleenex, three kleenex or four kleenex ones, like the stars in restaurant guides. (LO 77)

Significantly, it is this good mother figure which allows her to acquire a new identity and a new sense of self. Upon her sudden death, Joan finds out that she will inherit her money only if she loses weight.

Newly slim, unrecognizable, Joan leaves the parental house and flees to Europe to start a new life. In London she meets Paul, her first lover—"I was glad it had happened" she says when she loses her virginity. "It proved to me finally that I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared and I was no longer among the untouchables" (LO 149). A continent away, Joan finds her own voice by starting by chance her career as a writer of romances under her aunt's name, Louisa K. Delacourt, "a kind of memorial to her" (LO 156).

I asked Paul to get me some samples of historical romances from Columbine Books, his publisher, and I set to work. I joined the local library and took out a book on costume design through the ages. I made lists of words like *fichu* and *paletot* and *pelisse*. I thought if I could only get the clothes right, everything else would fall into line. And it did; the hero, a handsome, well-bred man dressed in an immaculately tailored tweed cloak pursued the heroine, crushing his lips to her in a hansom cab and rampling her *pelisse*. The villain, equally well-bred, and similarly clad, did just about the same thing, except that in addition he thrust his hand inside her *fichu*. (LO 155)

The writing of Gothic romances, while fulfilling the immediate need to earn a living, satisfies other, more compelling demands: it allows Joan to keep reality at bay, finally retaining a sense of control over herself and her destiny. It also allows her to acquire a sound “reality principle” and come to terms with her unsatisfactory relationship with her husband:

The other wives wanted their husbands to live up to their own fantasies lives. They wanted their men to be strong, lustful, passionate but also tender and worshipful. They wanted men in mysterious cloaks who would rescue them but they also wanted multiple orgasms and.... help with the dishes... I felt my own arrangement was more satisfactory... Arthur was terrific for one kind, but why demand all things of one man? I'd given up expecting him to be a cloaked, sinuous and menacing stranger. He could not be that: I lived with him, and cloaked strangers did not leave their socks on the floor or stick their finger in the ears". (LO 215)

Joan's tales of darkness and power which give free reign to selfish ambitions and sexual desires beyond the prescriptions of law or familial duty testify to the fascination with transgression and anxiety over constraining social boundaries. They are, in this respect, a response to her puritanical upbringing. They present different, more exciting worlds in which heroines can encounter not only frightening violence but also stimulating excitement and adventurous freedom —like the freedom the narrator experiences when she has a torrid extramarital affair with the “Royal Porcupine”, a Byronic performance artist.

Intrigue, betrayal and revenge perform a cathartic role in Joan's plots, facilitating the expulsion of the object of fear. They become a way of confronting an alarming diminished sense of self, of sublimating the nightmares which plagued her childhood, the phantom of her overwhelmingly wounding mother, introjected to the point that she feels her around “her neck like a rotting albatross” (LO 213) and from whose “visitations” she will not be exempt even after her death.

Gothic fiction, like romance, takes the form, as Northrop Frye said, of “the wandering of desire”, of desire itself which comprises an unlimited imaginative experience marked by universal archetypes and symbols such as “food”, “quest or journey”, “light and darkness” and “sexual fulfilment” (Frye 1973: 118).

Finally, romance, which is “the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream” (Frye 1973: 186), provides for the author's release, a restorative catharsis and a new symbolic order where, through displacement, “the characteristic functioning of the unconscious” (Blanco 1975: 42) and ide-

alisation, which responds "to the need to counteract the projected aggressive tendencies by creating a perfect loveable being" (241-42), it is possible to contain women's losses and self-destructive feelings to regain and reconstitute a complete identity. An imaginary world in which, as in fairy tales everything is absolute (243) and "wounds are only ritual ones" and "love is as final as death"(LO 286).

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### **Abstract**

*Questo articolo analizza l'uso parodico e post-modernista di alcune delle principali convenzioni del genere gotico nel romanzo di Margaret Atwood Lady Oracle. Con finezza psicologica e irresistibile umorismo, l'autrice mette in campo questioni cruciali legate al genere, all'identità, al corpo, alla sessualità e soprattutto al rapporto conflittuale e distruttivo che lega la protagonista, essa stessa scrittrice di romanzi gotici, alla figura materna.*

**POESIA E PERFORMANCE**  
***POETRY AND PERFORMANCE***



## *“The Oral Tradition of a Nation Given to a New Generation”, that is Black Performance Poetry in London*

Cristina Abbio

In our present-day context, transnational migration has become a tangible reality, leading to the recreation of the world (for what concerns ethnic mix) in microcosmos, especially within big urban agglomerates. The actors involved in these migration movements (people displacing themselves, and people staying at home) are continuously dealing with borderline situations, “where centers and peripheries engage in a spatial pattern for socially ordered production and flow of meaning” (Hannerz 1992: 95) and of relationships. As a matter of fact, migration plays an essential role in creating difference; and hybridization—the process where cultural practices, originally distinct, come together and intermingle with a mutual contamination—is a natural consequence. Hence the outcome “is not a replication of uniformity but an organisation of diversity, an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as a development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory” (102).

In postcolonial Britain black intelligentsia (see Hall 1997) and cultural theorists are engaged in imagining and affirming new ways of being ‘British’, which can account for being British plus something else connected to their geographical origin (whether Africa or the Caribbean) and to their historical heritage of slavery, racism, cultural resistance, political rebellion and syncretism (Clifford 1997: 251-2). For Paul Gilroy (who echoes W.E.B. Du Bois) black people live within a “double consciousness”, deriving both from Africa and Europe, surpassing the nation-state territorial ideology, and expanding in what he calls ‘black Atlantic’ (involving Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas), that is the practised space of such a complex multi-layered identity of black people continuously criss-crossing it (Gilroy 1993).

In the last fifteen or twenty years British black performance poetry has acquired such popularity among young, predominantly black audience, that it can be considered as a social movement, trying to embrace and to give space to various voices within the black community. This particular kind of poetry, which differs from literary poetry, in being performed on stage with the aid of other expressive ‘tools’, like music, dance and participation of the listeners, has established itself as a form of popular culture, which speaks for the second generation Black British. These poets try to revive the rich potentials of poetry, especially by reactivating the dynamics of the use of the voice and encouraging an aesthetic, which surpasses the silent distances between poetry and people.

Performance poetry takes its influences from the diaspora as a whole, combining them to create a new dynamic expression. These influences are mainly: toasting from Jamaica, playing the dozens or sounding or rapping from the United States and rhyming from the Caribbean and blending with calypso tones, hip hop, reggae and music-hall, jazz and diaspora poetry. Thus most of the vernacular forms of expression available within the diaspora are adopted to shape a unique form of cultural identity and existence in a socio-political framework most of time hostile to its members. Black performance poetry can also be seen as an evolution of the dub poetry tradition, a kind of poetry very popular in the 1970s and 80s, whose representatives were influenced by Jamaican music, reggae, which was derived from older forms of music such as ska and mento. Dub poetry would use the language and the revolutionary words of Rastafari, combined with rhyming fashion, to speak about the economic decline and the depressing conditions of the ghetto youth in Jamaica; while dub poets in England talked about their alienation from the dominant whites, of racism and inequity, and of violent riots.

From dub tradition performance poetry retained its connection with the popular music and the involvement of the audience in the clubs as a tool to shape poetry. Performance poets have merged their poetry with jazz, hip-hop and rap music, enriching their events with mime, dance and other techniques. Moreover the typical ‘call and response’ mode, drawn from the African-Caribbean tradition, underlines the importance of the audience interaction and of its interpretation of that performance. The so-called “antiphonic communal conversation”, as Gilroy (1992) defined it, transforms the reception of the public into a celebratory active process. Therefore performance poetry draws its strength exactly from the fact that it is ‘performed’. This makes the event unique, and as Malika B, a Caribbean in origin performance poetess based in London, said in a personal interview: “the emphasis is on the live event, the

spoken word, which serves to give performance based poetry a wider scope” (my interview, June 1999), more than on paper. The event usually takes place in various *public* venues, but it is increasingly becoming part of the club culture, where the performers share the stage with Rappers and Jazz musicians. The appropriation of the public space where the distance between the performer and the listener is reduced to the minimum with the active involvement of the latter is an intrinsic element of the Black oral tradition, which demands the “audience to complete the community: the noise and the sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him” (Braithwaite 1984: 19).

Performance events strive to produce unique ephemeral experiences, rather than commodifiable ‘objects’, which enact the spectator’s imagination and identification with what has been represented. This implies a combination of various cultural practices and media, where the performer refuses the textual authority and the conventions of role-playing in order to present himself/herself as a permeable, tactile body, subverting the separation between the stage and the spectator. It is a reinvention of ideas, gestures and rules that patterns social life, along with the negotiation of institutional boundaries and other identity markers, like ethnicity, gender, social class, and nationality.

London offers a vibrant and colourful scene for performance poetry: the city is indeed animated by a myriad of venues, though mostly of minor importance (cafes, clubs, fringe theatres), witnessing a ferment of cultural activities. The poetry agency *Apples & Snakes* continuously provides new voices a forum for creative exploration. During a series of evenings entitled “Rap meets poetry” that I have attended, poets, musicians and rappers were alternating on the stage diffusing their passionate lines in an effervescent atmosphere. As it has been remarked before, the link between the performer and the audience was established straightaway, on the basis not just of an interaction but also of a real feeling between the two. The performers would employ many techniques to achieve this result, like various ways of greeting, almost codified signs and sounds or little phrases, gestures, and idiomatic references to specific cultural forms, being these refrains from popular songs, mottoes or ways of saying of famous culture-makers. Some, like Roger Robinson, would prompt the audience participation, chanting these lines in a musical calypsonian, rhythmical beat:

There is something about this that I don’t like.  
I see you watching the poetry and saying “Bravo, Bravo, Bravo”  
This poetry go make you move your waist

this poetry go make you dance and sing,  
    this poetry go make you break away,  
    make you move something.

And indeed the audience responded straight away: the girls sitting at the front tables started tuning some refrains, followed by others who were whistling and clapping. The more regular and familiar ones would sing along, while the rest of the audience would clap and beat the rhythm. In this way by the end of his introduction he gained the full attention and participation of the audience, and the tension created would remain high for the whole duration of the event. The performer on stage, once finished, would call his brother or sister to whom he/she would pass the microphone with the acclamation of the listeners.

For my experience of these events I can say that, being in a position of almost an ‘outsider’, the sense of community which arose from the interaction of the performer with the audience was palpable, in a way that one could think that all the others were long-term friends. The public seemed to be very much at ease to be taken into the performance itself, to stand up or to say some funny sentence that could initiate a polyphonic dialogue connecting the two spheres of the performance, the stage and the hall. It has to be said that most frequently these poetry sessions take place not in conventional theatre venues, where the stage is distinctly separated from the rest, but rather in clubs, cafes and places which allow a major mobility to the audience—sometimes it could happen that mums had to get up to soothe their crying babies. This last particular shows the heterogeneity of the audience, especially in terms of age, that makes it appear more similar to a community. I think that this sense of unity finds its roots in the notion that performance poetry is a continuum of the various black expressions across the diaspora. Here the use of vernacular expressions together with the appropriation of public space aim at the construction of a cultural identity within a broader picture, most of time white-dominated and Eurocentric.

Performance poets are urban migrant actors who move on the eclectic scene of the city, performing from place to place and gathering in loose collectives, and draw inspiration from diversified cultural typologies and historical pasts that make up the diaspora culture. The poet Ifi Piankhi introduces us to the voyage into performance poetry:

Welcome to the revolution of fusion  
the Syncopation of rhyme and reason  
with a musical vibration  
poetry in motion

The oral tradition of a nation  
given to a new generation  
of Blakk people in Britain  
so let's commence the lesson

...

(Ifi Piankhi of the poetry group: Amazon)

The “lesson” is a discovery of performance poetry as an expression of the Black urban experience, of the search for a new suitable identity for the individual, who has gone through stories of displacement and dislocation, of distance and separation from his/her kin, and who does not correspond exactly to the English model. Thus poetry becomes a way to convey a social message as much as to contemplate and elaborate it.

Identity is a crucial theme with modes of reappropriation of values, habits and customs in forms that vary from overt resistance to more subtle (and now more frequent) attempts to transcend barriers of ethnicity. As Malika B states: “Marginalisation is faced. But it is up to us to make an issue or not. You choose your own battle, not your resignation. Negotiation of your own space and growing an immunity to discrimination are essential” (Malika B, in my interview, June 1999). This approach seems to mark a difference from the previous generation of Black poets and musicians, those of the dub tradition, who aimed primarily to affirm the diversity of black people, claiming a separate identity. Dub poets talk of Jamaica and the other islands as their real country from the point of view of an insider in that context—this becomes the only referential point of view to analyse also the life in Britain. Alternatively, like in the case of Linton Kwesi Johnson, dub poetry is well grounded in the realities of the British urban life, but with a radical denunciatory outlook on it. Black poets of the younger generation are representatives of what has been defined ‘cultural diasporas’ (or ‘diaspora cultures’), that is a multidirectional flow of ‘travelling cultures’ that continuously cross each other (Cohen 1997: 128).

Migration movements are not only geographical, but more and more a research for a suitable identity. The phrase, ‘migrants of identity’, borrowed from Theodore Schwartz (Rapport & Dawson 1998: 3), beautifully exempli-

fies the continual search for such “authentically different identities” (ibid.). The displacement generated is in the first place physical but simultaneously affective and emotional, psychological, intellectual and cultural, and the people need to bridge the distance between the homeland (whether real or imagined) and the new place. In Clifford’s words these liminal spaces of conjunction are borderlands, that is a locus of struggle and transformation, and “The border experience is made to produce powerful political visions: a subversion of binarism” and the replacement of hegemonic orders with syncretic alternatives (Clifford 1997: 37).

The priority of young hybridised cultures is exactly that of transcending this binary opposition with the ‘other’, this alterity between ‘us’ and ‘them’, in order to express their creativity, not constrained by rigid labelling. The synthesis is “The re-creation, the reconstruction of imaginary, knowable places in the face of the global postmodern which has, as it were, destroyed the identities of specific places, [that has] absorbed them into this postmodern flux of diversity” (Hall 1991: 35). Stuart Hall here explains the changing nature of diaspora as the development of the process of what he calls ‘hybridisation’: these new cultures occupy interstitial spaces of balance between global homogenisation on the one hand and the re-affirmation of ethnic localism on the other hand, trying to harmonise old and new (Hall 1992: 310).

Identity and confusion about what memory is and stands for in the present, sense of belonging and of seclusion are crucial for the poetess Bunmi Ogunsiji, who declares: ‘Dualities, dichotomies in me, in life and spirit, guide my hand, make the word...make the whole...’:

a memory / has to / look back  
full circle / to recall itself  
its beginnings and / how it got to stay  
with you / it has to keep  
recurring  
so as / to never forget  
how it survived  
the middle passage  
travelled from the hurting  
hollow of an African  
enslaved  
to the inner city  
wail and moan  
of urban  
descendents

displaced  
inna dis  
babylon....

(B. Ogunsi, *The Wheel*, Sissay 1998)

Although black performance poets reject the label of “black, angry poets”, issues about colour, origins, discrimination/integration are still fundamental. The Nigerian-British (?) poet Patience Agbabi, highly active on the performance poetry scene, puts forward questions of identity with elaborated musicality and singular use of words:

I was desperate  
disparate  
diasporate

Someone said recently  
‘It’s always good to remember details  
from the past’

but I’m always afraid  
of serious pepper  
painful as truth.  
You eat pepper soup on Monday  
And baked potatoes on Tuesday.  
Wednesday morning they say

‘Nigerian English!  
Sounds like you have an identity problem  
People will think you’re mixed race!’.  
...

Belongings are unimportant  
but belonging  
is.

(P.Agabi, *Serious Pepper*, in *Apples & Snakes*, 1992)

Thus issues of nationality, location, identity and historical memory transcend the traditional national boundaries, forging ‘diasporic postcolonials’ who “live and narrate [their] historical realities as discrepant, critical modernities, ... gathering in the global cities ... where new imaginings and politics of community emerge” (Clifford 1997: 264).

However other themes, different from those of identity or oppression of blacks, inspire insightful poems, where the poet tries to surpass the boundaries of the colour of the skin and talks about personal experiences that everyone could live. Let's take the example of Parm Kaur, who presents himself as 'binding disparate strands of kaleidoscopic cultures, weaving ... spellbinding webs across landscapes of time', and his poem "Drinking":

One touch  
headspinning as expensive champagne  
bubbling irreprehensible smile  
exhilarating as the cork popping  
promising sweetness  
soft as Summer dew rain.

Skin  
a sun-ripened plum  
enticing, concealed flesh  
commanding, immediate consumption.

I'm longing  
to be the bare feet drawing  
your juices  
the yeast  
fermenting desire,  
plumbing to the depths  
to refine rainbows  
of deliciousness  
to share

making every year  
a good year  
(P. Kaur, *Drinking*, Sissay, 1998)

The language here is elegant and refined in the use of metaphors evoking a voluptuous experience of senses and pleasure, far beyond the mere act of drinking. The lyricism of these lines marks an evolution from strong political claims, which characterised black art during the '80s. During that decade the main point for black artists and culture activists was to denounce their being different and outsiders in the face of a hostile Establishment, while the '90s marked the beginning of a shift towards a new research for identity. As the poet-performer Roger Robinson maintains, "The end of the Thatcher's period

coincided with the evolution of black writing, which is less about opposition and more aware of the situation of globalisation we are experiencing. Young black writers don't feel excluded, but they realise they live in a mixture of people..." (my interview, June 1999). Such statement marks the distance from a previous position, where black dub poetry was to be socially and politically engaged. The dub poetess Jean Binta Breeze makes a point of it with reference to when she saw her first album rejected because it was "far too personal and there were too many pieces dealing with love" (J.B. Breeze 1990, in Donnell & Welsh 1996: 499).

What results from more recent poems and from the general, though quite eclectic, attitude of younger poets is that British black performance poetry is somehow an innovative phenomenon, making reference to both the material and the social classification of British black culture. Unlike dub poetry, it did not emerge from a climate of social/political unrest or insurrection in the ghetto. Conversely, performance poetry wants to give voice to British Black experiences in their present language that is by using British 'nation language'. Their poetry is set in a British context, through its own idiom, and aims at surpassing the canon (too often fastened by Western academic theorizing centres) of the post-colonial subject as someone who resists and fights in order to affirm his/her own identity.

The situation is changing; this is a fact. The new generation of young black British artists is trying to evolve, challenging all identities that are perceived as 'black'. The stories they want to tell are like all stories: they show all their complexities, all their double-mirrored inner self. Moreover, whether in music or in performing art events, an increasing employment of hybridised forms and media creating new kinds of aesthetics is gaining ground. The appropriation of "master-codes of the dominant culture" and their creolization, "disarticulating given signs and rearticulating their symbolic meaning otherwise" (Mercer 1994: 215), reflect the struggle to formulate all-encompassing identities and imagery.

And now I would like to conclude with a poem by LKJ, who continues to be regarded as an essential reference point also by the younger generation. The title is: "If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet". LKJ wrote this poem in response to the Oxford Companion to XX Century Poetry, where DUB poetry has been described as '...over-compensation for deprivation'.

**If I Woz A Tap-Natch Poet** – Linton Kwesi Johnson

‘dub poetry has been described as ... “over-compensation for deprivation”’  
*Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*

‘mostofthestraighteningisinthetongue’

Bongo Jerry<sup>1</sup>

if I woz a tap-natch poet

like Chris Okigbo<sup>2</sup>

Derek Walcott

ar T.S.Eliot

ah woodah write a poem

soh dam deep

dat it bittah-sweet

like a precious

memory

whe mek yu weep

whe mek yu feel incomplete

like wen yu lovah leave

an dow defeat yu kanseed

still yu beg an yu plead

till yu win a repreve

an yu ready fi rack steady

but di muzik done aready

still

inna di meantime

wid mi riddim

wid mi rime

wid mi ruff base line

wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line

caw Bootahlazy<sup>3</sup> mite a gat couple touzan

but Mandela fi im

touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

if I woz a tap-natch poet

like Kamau Brathwaite<sup>4</sup>

Martin Carter<sup>5</sup>

Jayne Cortez ar Amiri Baraka<sup>6</sup>

ah woodah write a poem  
soh rude  
an rootsy  
an subversive  
dat it mek di goon poet  
tun white wid envy

like a candhumble/ voodoo/ kumina chant<sup>7</sup>  
a ole time calypso ar a slave song  
dat get ban  
but fram granny  
          rite  
          dung  
          to  
          gran  
          pickney

each an evry wan  
can recite dat-dey wan

still  
inna di meantime  
wid mi riddim  
wid mi rime  
wid mi ruff base line  
wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line  
caw Bootahlazy mite a gat couple touzan  
but Mandela fi im  
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

if I woz a tap-natch poet  
like Tchikaya U'tamsi<sup>8</sup>  
Nicholas Guillen<sup>9</sup>  
ar Lorna Goodison<sup>10</sup>

an woodah write a poem  
soh beautiful dat it simple  
like a plain girl  
wid good brains

an nice ways  
wid a sexy dispozishan  
an plenty compahshan  
wid a sweet smile  
an a subtle style

still  
mi naw goh bow an scrape  
an gwan like a ape  
peddlin noh puerile parchment af ethnicity  
wid ongle a vaig fleetin hint af hawtenticity  
like a black Lance Percival<sup>11</sup> in reverse  
ar even worse  
a babblin bafoon whe looze im tongue

no sah  
nat atall  
mi gat mi riddim  
mi gat mi rime  
mi gat mi ruff base line  
mi gat mi own sense a time

goon poet bettah step in line  
caw Bootahlazy mite a gat couple touzan  
but Mandela fi im  
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

**July 1994**

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Pioneering Jamaican rastafarian poet

<sup>2</sup> Nigerian poet who died in the Secessionist war of the 1960s

<sup>3</sup> Chief Buthalezi, Chief of the Zulus during the Anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, militantly opposed to the African National Congress that was led by Nelson Mandela

<sup>4</sup> Barbadian poet and historian, cultural theorist and activist who transformed post-colonial Caribbean verse

<sup>5</sup> Guyanese poet and politician

<sup>6</sup> Afro-American blues/ jazz poets

<sup>7</sup> Afro-Christian religious cults in Brazil, Haiti and Jamaica

<sup>8</sup> Surrealist Congolese poet

<sup>9</sup> Afro-Cuban poet who transformed Cuban poetry by appropriating the rhythms of the son

<sup>10</sup> Celebrated Jamaican poet

<sup>11</sup> English comic actor and recording artist popular in the 1960s

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### **Abstract**

*Il saggio analizza la scena londinese della performance poetry nera, espressione caratteristica della diaspora africana. Oltre a rintracciarne le radici culturali e a sottolinearne i significati politici e identitari, l'autrice mette in evidenza come questo corpo poetico (di cui vengono qui offerti alcuni esempi emblematici) vada inteso più come evento nel quale la presenza e partecipazione del pubblico è elemento essenziale che come somma di oggetti testuali.*

## *Realtà esteriore e interiore nella poesia di P.K. Page*

Silva Del Zotto

Con la sua poesia la Page ha la capacità di distoglierci dal contesto che ci circonda per immetterci in un altrove raro e unico, dove le trame spazio-temporali della nostra esistenza vengono sconvolte e sovvertite; ella ci trasporta con sé in un luogo in cui coesistono mondo fisico, concreto e misurabile, ed un'altra dimensione sostenuta dal sogno e dall'immaginazione. Per ottenere questo coinvolgimento la scrittrice canadese rifugge da una visione della vita basata su un'ottica binaria, tipica della società occidentale, e, pur non evadendo in un mondo simbolico, intraprende un viaggio interiore nei recessi della mente e della memoria, verso un'esperienza di perdita dei confini per scoprire uno spazio "androgino" in cui cade l'antinomia tra mondo fenomenico e simbolico. Secondo la poetessa il reale è rappresentabile con la metafora del caleidoscopio, che, grazie alla sua lente magica, integra le opposizioni e crea una quarta dimensione dove "each single thing is other – / all-ways joined / to every other thing"(Page 1998: 142).

Con questo lavoro mi propongo di analizzare tre poesie, *The Bands and the Beautiful Children* (Page 1998: 68-69), *Freak* (82-85) e *Chinese Boxes* (162-163), in cui i confini tra lo squallore della vita quotidiana e la magia del mondo interiore scompaiono attraverso l'attività immaginativa e onirica, che permette di inoltrarsi in una dimensione di totalità e pienezza.

Dal punto di vista stilistico in queste tre liriche la Page, sotto l'influsso delle teorie moderniste, infrange le forme metriche tradizionali per consentire alle immagini di svilupparsi liberamente, proprio come avviene nelle fantasie oniriche. Le variazioni del ritmo, della lunghezza del verso, l'uso di *enjambements* ed il ricorso a figure retoriche, costituite soprattutto da metafore, allitterazioni e ossimori, hanno lo scopo di ricalcare il ritmo ipnotico e

incontrollabile, i cambiamenti improvvisi ed inaspettati tipici del sogno e di esprimere la conflittualità interiore dei suoi personaggi. In particolare, in *Freak* i paradossi rivestono la funzione di intensificare lo stato d'animo di inquietudine, desiderio e paura del protagonista, il quale, una volta uscito dall'ambiente a lui familiare del circo, si sente escluso dal mondo concreto. Il tono con cui la poetessa canadese si pone verso tale senso di alienazione e perdita è il risultato di una combinazione di comprensione e simpatia, amarezza e rassegnazione. Se in questa lirica domina il registro ironico, in *The Bands and the Beautiful Children* ed in *Chinese Boxes* l'ironia è sottile e controllata, sottintesa più che esplicita. Un'altra caratteristica della produzione artistica della Page è rappresentata dal forte influsso esercitato dai simbolisti francesi sia nelle scelte formali sia negli sviluppi tematici. A questo proposito, Northrop Frye ha giustamente osservato che:

Miss Page has a symbolic language of her own that operates on three levels: a lower level of emotion and instinct, symbolized chiefly by the sea; an upper level of intelligence symbolized by angels and abstract patterns in white; and a middle level of metal and flower, rose garden and barbed wire. (Frye 1995: 40)

Inoltre, l'autrice stessa spiega il ruolo fondamentale occupato dalla metafora nella sua opera in quanto strumento che consente di cogliere il reale nella sua completezza:

[the metaphor] 'gives two for one'— gives two in one. Two or more separate ideas, objects, images, fuse. In so doing generate energy. Illuminate. (Dialog 1973: 18-19)

A livello tematico dalle tre liriche esaminate emerge il tentativo continuo della Page di alleviare il contrasto fra spazio privato e pubblico, motivo portante della sua produzione artistica. A tale contrapposizione di solito corrispondono due paesaggi, siano essi fisici o interiori, e spetterà all'artista il difficile compito di farli convergere in un unico punto di intersezione dove è possibile scorgere un barlume di verità.

In *The Bands and the Beautiful Children* il divario tra la realtà cruda e repellente e la ricchezza della vita interiore è incarnato dall'opposizione tra adulti e bambini. Il momento dell'infanzia è legato alla purezza ("innocence") (Page 1998: 68) ed al candore dei bambini, che si lasciano piacevolmente trasportare dall'estasi della musica, mentre l'età adulta è associata alle figure degli "arthritic old" (Ibid.) che, immersi nella rigida logica razionale imposta

dalla società moderna, non sono più capaci di usare l'immaginazione. La contrapposizione viene resa anche visivamente dall'associazione del colore bianco all'infanzia e del giallo alla "maturità". Il bianco è uno dei simboli più frequenti della poesia della Page perché, essendo neutro e nel contempo la risultante della somma di tutti i colori, è puro e, in quanto tale, indica il percorso potenziale per raggiungere la perfezione della visione interiore, l'inaccessibile e l'assoluto. Al contrario, in questa lirica il giallo connota un'idea di vecchio e stantio, correlata ai terribili effetti dell'oppressione psicologica perpetuata quotidianamente dalla civiltà contemporanea sugli individui, privati in tal modo della capacità istintuale di lasciarsi cadere in balia dell'attrazione e della seduzione dell'illusione artistica:

and the arthritic old  
who, patient behind their windows  
are no longer split by the quick yellow of imagination  
or carried beyond their angular limits of distance. (68)

In *Freak* l'autrice inverte i ruoli del mondo concreto e di quello immaginario, dimostrando la relatività dei punti di vista e il fatto che tanto il circo quanto il contesto esterno possono essere contemporaneamente reali ed irreali. La divisione fra i due mondi viene resa dalla Page anche sul piano strutturale: nella prima parte della poesia (dalla prima alla terza strofa) l'artista canadese descrive la semplicità e la genuinità dei gesti abituali del protagonista all'interno del circo e sottolinea la passione quasi animalesca con cui svolge il suo lavoro ("beast"; "feathery hands"; "his rages, sudden and uncontrolled") (82); nella seconda sezione (dalla quarta all'ultima strofa) descrive la sensazione di violenza, solitudine ed alienazione percepita dal personaggio della lirica durante una giornata di ferie trascorsa nella realtà ordinaria:

everywhere he looks, everywhere, everyone he sees  
is glinting like brass  
and he in their mirrors shining and bright;  
locked in their light,  
trapped in their pupils and pockets  
and many as money. (82)

Secondo il protagonista il circo è una "marvellous cage" (82), mentre la dimensione esterna è la vera "trappola", in quanto, apparentogli aliena, sco-

nosciuta (“everything is new”), claustrofobica e ostile, lo fa sentire “trapped” nello sguardo dei passanti. Così la “gabbia”, ossia l’area separata dello spazio equestre, si trasforma in “a fine and friendly place” e rappresenta una sorta di microcosmo rassicurante in cui egli ritrova quell’identità che non riesce ad esprimere nel mondo reale, dove non ha neppure un nome (“a million names called and each one his”). Il circo diventa un rifugio, un’isola di libertà, serenità e pace, in cui il personaggio riesce sia a conservare lo stupore e l’istintualità dell’infanzia, sia ad entrare in simbiosi con la natura. La dimensione protetta dell’ambiente equestre gli consente di annullare il tempo cronologico per eludere la brutalità della vita di ogni giorno ed evadere in un mondo non contaminato dallo squallore e dalle brutture del contesto sociale; gli permette, insomma, di rendere vivibile una vita altrimenti invivibile.

Infine, anche in *Chinese Boxes* ci troviamo di fronte alla compenetrazione tra due realtà, rappresentate metaforicamente da scatole cinesi. La lirica, composta da due strofe, è nettamente divisa in due parti: la prima dominata da un movimento centripeto con cui le scatole vengono sistemate in ordine decrescente (dalla più grande alla più piccola); la seconda da un moto centrifugo che le dispone in modo crescente (dalla più piccola alla più grande). Lo spostamento all’interno è una metafora del viaggio verso la parte più recondita della psiche, verso il mondo intuitivo ed irrazionale dove viene generata l’energia creativa. Per contrasto, il movimento all’esterno simboleggia un’apertura verso il grigiore del mondo circostante e gli schematismi inflessibili della ragione.

Il *leitmotiv* di tutta la produzione artistica della Page consiste nella ricerca incessante della verità profonda. Secondo le teorie sufiste (Shah 1964), alle quali la poetessa si ispira a partire dagli anni Settanta, affinché ciò avvenga è necessario incrementare un sesto senso basato sulla conoscenza intuitiva, liberarsi dai condizionamenti culturali e lasciarsi guidare dalla forza rigenerante dell’amore e dell’arte. Solo in questo modo è possibile sviluppare un nuovo atteggiamento, che trascenda i limiti dell’esperienza umana e consenta di esplorare una nuova dimensione dell’essere dove avviene la riconciliazione degli opposti.

In *The Bands and the Beautiful Children* la banda in festa trasforma il mondo circostante e sembra riunire, anche se solo per un attimo provvisorio e fugace, i due poli dell’infanzia e dell’età adulta. Le lacrime dei bambini testimoniano il momento di transizione dall’armoniosa coralità della musica al desolante silenzio che subentra. Infatti, non appena la musica viene bruscamente interrotta, ed il “trembling building of sound” (Page 1998: 68) crolla,

si riapre il divario tra gli adulti, “tired and grumbling / on the straggling grass” ed i bambini:

the children, lost, lost,  
in an open space,  
remember the certainty of the anchored home  
and cry on the unknown edge of their own city  
their lips stiff from an imaginary trumpet. (68)

Quando la musica termina, i bambini si trovano all'improvviso nel mondo ignoto e freddo dell'età matura, sottolineato dalla Page anche attraverso il ricorso ad immagini paesaggistiche desolanti (“staggling grass”; “the unknown edge of their own city”). L'innocenza, sebbene fragile e fuggevole come il suono della banda, rappresenta un punto di riferimento sicuro, perché solo attraverso la memoria, ossia il ricordo della certezza di una “anchored home”, è possibile riappropriarsi dell'infanzia e sentirsi ancora i “beautiful children” del titolo.

Seguendo un procedimento analogo, in *Chinese Boxes* la sfera razionale e la sfera intuitiva, di per sé contrapposte, possono essere percepite come unitarie grazie all' “all-ways turning eye” ed al “swift glance” (162). L'occhio interiore, una delle immagini più potenti della poetessa canadese, permette di conciliare gli opposti (“heaven and hell”; “day and night”; birth and death”) e di cogliere l'assoluto:

and imperceptible to any sense  
more coarse than sightings of that inner eye  
which sees the absolute  
in emptiness.

Il ruolo determinante dello sguardo, inteso come punto di intersezione tra due realtà divergenti, è accentuato anche dall'enfasi data alla rapidità di movimento del “swift glance” (162), che evoca l'idea del vortice futurista, dove, al massimo della velocità corrisponde, visivamente, la stasi.

Infine, in *Freak*, a differenza che in *The Bands and the Beautiful Children* e in *Chinese Boxes*, dove la sintesi degli opposti è ottenuta rispettivamente attraverso la musica e lo sguardo, manca un elemento unificante tra il circo ed il mondo esterno, perché il protagonista, una figura astratta e surreale, preferisce ritirarsi nell'illusione rassicurante del suo ambiente equestre. Con que-

sta lirica la Page descrive lo scontro irrisolto tra la percezione individuale e quella collettiva, dimostrando che entrambi i luoghi, il circo e la realtà, sono allo stesso tempo anormali e normali, strani ed ordinari. In questo senso il circo assume le stesse valenze rigeneranti e genuine incarnate dalla musica in *The Bands and the Beautiful Children*, perché esso permette al protagonista di sentirsi “uno”, o perlomeno di indossare un’unica maschera (“his plaster face”) (Ibid. 84), mentre nel mondo esterno egli diviene anche, in un’ottica pirandelliana, “nessuno e centomila”:

A million reflections and his heart in each  
a million names called and each one his,  
falling like blows on his plaster face.

Come il personaggio di *Freak* ci trasporta nel microcosmo rassicurante della sua splendida “gabbia”, in cui il diverso e lo strano possono essere canonizzati dalla percezione individuale, così anche in *The Bands and the Beautiful Children* ed in *Chinese Boxes* la Page ci accompagna con sé in una realtà sempre nuova, in una “rosa dei venti” frastagliata e variopinta, in *Un altro spazio* (153), il suo, quello interiore, più recondito e segreto.

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## Abstract

*P.K. Page's poetry explores a new dimension of human existence, a magic place where the opposites are reconciled into unity. According to the Canadian poetess we can reach this extraordinary world only if we get rid of the cultural conditionings and we follow both intuition and instinct, love and imagination. In this essay I will analyse Ms. Page's three poems The Bands and the Beautiful Children, Chinese Boxes and Freak and, in particular, the way she moves from the bleakness of everyday life to the charming atmosphere of her own world.*

*In these poems the difference between the crude facts and the inner world is respectively embodied by the opposition between adults and children, two Chinese boxes, the external world and the circus. In The Band and the Beautiful Children and in Chinese Boxes the borders between the repellent tangible reality and the inner richness disappear while in the dreamlike state, which is represented by the music and the inner eye. Whereas in Freak the unifying element is deliberately absent, because the protagonist of the poem prefers to coil back to the reassuring illusion of the circus.*



## *Decolonising 'Ulysses' in the Neocolonial Irish Society: Conor McPherson's Plays*

Monica Randaccio

Awam Amkpa's model of social, cultural and political development, is an iterative process of struggle between orders of domination and movements for liberation, which may be summed up as follows: "colonisation – anticolonialism – neocolonialism – postcolonialism – decolonisation" (Amkpa 2002).

Amkpa states that anti-colonial struggle, as social and cultural actions and practices, arises from moments of critical insight. This phase of endeavour is as full of contradiction and brutality as the domination which makes it inevitable. Anti-colonial movements posit a unified people engaged in an onward journey toward self-determination, whose destiny is typically aligned with the achievement of an independent state. Difference is set aside, and cultural nationalism, as an ideology of struggle, inaugurates a self-contradictory process in which the act of imagining a social order is presented as a task of recovering and reinstating an ancient community in a reified narrative of a common past. Nationalism makes recourse to a spurious claim to 'native' authenticity and refuses to engage with actual historical experience of difference, which is fatal to the project of developing a decolonised state. Inevitably, a divided society and an ultimately conflictual social order are engendered, and the tendency "to produce a native subject locked in a pre-historic and hence apolitical past" (Merriman 1999: 310) as the organising motif of citizenship, sets the stage for a neocolonial body politic. In this social order, all sites of resistance are rigorously delegitimised, and the possibility of confronting the contradictions is negated. Amkpa highlights the internal weakness of newly independent state: "Those who lead the anti-colonial revolution frequently take the place of the colonisers and in fact repeat the processes of colonisation" (Vic Merriman 1999: 310). When the neocolonial state repeats the tropes, dynamics and administrative practices of

colonialism, it will also produce a countervailing social consciousness, the post-colonial critique.

Just as the anti-colonial consciousness emerges at that point in colonial relations where their contradictions are subjected to critique, similarly post-colonialism is the assertion of critical subjectivity under neocolonial conditions. Thus, decolonisation is not an event, but “a language of inquiry, a constant process” (Merriman 1999: 310), and is marked by practices acknowledging hybridity and difference in the constitution of the social order. In this way, decolonisation is the route to democratic citizenship. Identity and citizenship are formed and experienced in negotiating the problematic relations between the interests of individual subjects and those of the nation state and its neocolonial projects. Such projects are conceived in the pursuit of the ‘common good’, the historical basis for the legitimacy of the state’s claim on citizen allegiance, and they function as powerful symbolic manifestations of communal identity. To reject such projects is to repudiate consensus, and to exclude oneself from consensus is an effective renunciation of one’s rights to full social participation.

However, with the development of globalised society and capital, practices of consumption are posited as the location of social participation. Inclusion in the social order is then based on economic capital, disposable income and lifestyle. As the capitalist corporations have the resources to communicate their formulations more extensively and with remarkable effectiveness, the contemporary social order sees the proliferation of tropes, discourses and rhetorical figures which serve to align the very goals of liberal democracy in the nation state with the elaboration of capital as a global system. While consumers derive satisfaction from dispersed loyalties easily gratified in acts of consumption, the state can successfully shed its contradictions: “independence is retrospectively revealed... as the ante-room of a global economic order” (311). The revised neocolonial teleology may be figured as follows: “Colonisation – anticolonialism – autonomy in globalisation” (Ibid.) In Amkpa’s model, the critic accords great significance to the theatre as a transformative cultural practice.

Drawing on this model, Victor Merriman firmly condemns Marina Carr’s and Martin McDonagh’s plays which stage “Ireland as a benighted dystopia” (1999: 312). These plays elaborate a world of the poorly educated, coarse and unrefined. In the display of violence inherent in the people themselves, these plays take as their point of departure the condition of being poor in contemporary Ireland, and travesty the experiences of the poor, both urban and rural.

The *dramatis personae* of these plays specifically mark out figures of the poor which are overdetermined in their Irishry. Gross caricatures whose appeal to the new consumer-Irish consensus lies in their ludicrous appearance, provoking the cathartic thought that all of this is past, that 'we have left it all behind'. It is perhaps the same cathartic thought which failed to cross the audience's mind at the *première* of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907, and resulted in the following riots expressing the nationalists' sense of outrage and indignation. Synge, in fact, was striking at the very foundations of orthodox Catholicism which viewed rural Ireland as the repository of the traditional national values. In reality, such an ethos was congenial to the Anglo-Irish bourgeoisie for the access to a controlling vision of Irish life. Synge therefore was overtly revealing that the rural ideology presiding over the national revival, was, in Raymond Williams' definition, a "residual ideology" (Williams 1977: 121-128), that is, a value system which outlives its own era and survives in a new social order. In more recent times, the residual ideology has taken on the form of an invented tradition, termed by Luke Gibbons "neo-traditionalism", a recourse to the past to confer an aura of permanence on the new information order. If traditionalism looks to history for continuity, "neo-traditionalism abolishes not only continuity but history itself" (Gibbons 1996: 89). The deceitfulness of neo-traditionalism has accompanied the process of modernisation in Ireland, and the cathartic thought may have reassured Irish people again. As a matter of fact, the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) in the Eighties was advertising a dynamic image of Ireland co-existing with that of an unspoilt romantic paradise but it was carefully evading the consequences of modernisation itself: the creation of new inequalities, endemic unemployment and an enlightenment without hope for the casualties of this upwardly mobile form of modernity.

Marina Carr's and Martin McDonagh's plays, for example, demonstrate the cultural logic of neocolonialism and 'neo-traditionalism'. Therefore, their stagings, populated by violent child-adults moving in remote rural settings, which are the expression of an invented Irish past, repeat the colonial and neo-traditional stereotypes.

My contention is that Conor McPherson's plays avoid these stereotypes. In fact, the playwright's dystopic visions are always counterbalanced by his protagonists' achievements, however modest they may be, leading to the interrogation of the conditions in which images of the new Irishness are produced.

Each like a modern 'Ulysses', Conor McPherson's troubled heroes embark on their personal 'quest', a journey eventually resulting in the

acknowledgment of difference and hybridity in the neocolonial Irish society. Since McPherson's early monologue pieces, this quest is mainly carried out by means of language which reinforces the speaker's presence. As Scott T. Cummings has keenly observed, Conor McPherson's characters may say: "I have a story, therefore I am" (Cummings 2000: 303).

The importance of storytelling and language is evident from Conor McPherson's first play, *Rum and Vodka* (1992), which caught the public's attention and started McPherson's swift rise to playwriting celebrity when he was only twenty-two. The total emphasis on narrative verges on the anti-dramatic, there is no theatrical fiction, no pretence that the stage represents an imaginary setting. As the young playwright wrote in the 'Author's Note' to his first collection, "the first problem for the actor performing these pieces is probably 'Where am I?' Where is the play set? I've made up my mind about this. These plays are set 'in a theatre'. Why mess about? The character is *on stage*, perfectly aware that he is talking to a group of people. I've always tried to reflect the simplicity in productions" (McPherson 1996: 5).

Consequently, words and their pace are the only elements which can be trusted and which reveal the narrator's identity and motives. McPherson has recently admitted that "he wants his sentences to 'paint clear pictures in people's heads'... I just want the actors to put their faith in the language, just let the words do their work" (Adams 2001: 1), a language whose "phrases are punctuated with pauses and beats... [and where] each sentence occupies a line, building little formal silences into the rhythm of the piece" (3).

*Rum and Vodka* narrates the story of a Dublin officer working for the voting registration department of the local authority on Wellington Quay. He has a wife, two children, a drinking problem, a house in Raheny, and at the age of twenty-four is regretting his lost youth and freedom. At lunch one Friday, he starts a weekend-long drinking session that has him stumbling in and out of pubs all over the town. He retrospectively recalls the gloomy but, nonetheless humorous, circumstances which has led his life in the present state of distress. When his girlfriend got pregnant, he got married, "got a job, hundred and eighty quids a week, got a mortgage and figured my life finally had some direction" (McPherson 1996: 11). Unfortunately, things turned out differently from what he had thought: he has now lost his job and has to tell his wife once at home. However, the sombre atmosphere of the protagonist's situation is relieved by the witty details of his narration because, as has been noted, "beauty is in the detail" (Gardner 2001: 1). This is what happens when he is told to leave the office:

I went red from my shoulders to my scalp and... I picked up my terminal, and I swung it out of the window.

It sailed down two flights and right through the windscreen, and I didn't mean this, of Eamon Meaney's car [his boss's car].

Okay, I had a choice.

I could pretend to have a nervous breakdown and beg everyone's pity, or I could brazen it out.

... I hadn't meant it but I was glad I did it. (McPherson 1996: 16)

Later in the play, this is how the 'revelation' of having been fired gathers momentum during the usual Saturday shopping with his wife:

'Maria...'

'Pampers, Pampers, toilet roll, ... yogurt, cheese'

'I think I've lost my job'

... Maria went white.

She was puzzled.

She wanted to be a joke but she knew it wasn't. And there was nothing I could do.

'I'm sorry'

She hit me across the eye with a can of tuna (21).

This episode prompts him to go on another drinking tour, where he meets Myfanwy, a girl with whom he will end up in bed, and whom he will eventually follow to a party. However, instead of having 'his life cured', he is assailed by anguish and remorse, "a terrible feeling which—in the protagonist's words—I can only describe as homesickness", and leads him desperately back to his wife and children. The 'quest' of this ordinary hero finally ends with the discovery that "he is in thrall to the very thing that he is escaping from—love" (Gardner 2001: 1). His journey towards love is also carefully traced geographically: the topographic reliability of the characters' route is a feature common to McPherson's other plays, but it will be outlined only for *Rum and Vodka*.

The protagonist starts off from his house in Raheny, goes to his work place at Wellington Quay, then to several pubs, The Norseman at the corner of Eustace Street and Essex Street, The Flowing Tide on Abbey Street, and Kehoes on South Anne Street. He then walks along Grafton Street, Suffolk Street, Dame Street, and on to the Temple Bar area, before returning to the Norseman. From there, he goes to yet another pub, The Stag's Head in Dame Court, followed by another drink at the Olympia Theatre on Dame Street. He eventually leaves the city centre and ends up in Clontarf, near Howth, in the

house of the girl he has just met. The following day, his journey takes him from Raheny to Davy Byrne's pub on Duke Street, followed by a walk in Merrion Square and St. Stephen's Green, to Ranelagh, and then to a party in Rathmines, before he finds his way back to his starting point, his house in Raheny. The accuracy of McPherson's description immediately evokes Joyce's masterpiece, *Ulysses*, and the play's circularity owes much to Beckett's legacy. It is not a case that McPherson "has been acclaimed as a natural heir to the great Irish playwright" (Adams 2001: 3).

The search for love also characterises McPherson's later plays, *The Good Thief* (1994) and *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995), in which the language of the two stories, both grotesque, becomes more potent and expressive. In *The Good Thief*, a small-time thug goes out on a job to physically intimidate somebody for his criminal boss and gets caught in an ambush that leads him to kill two people, kidnap a mother and daughter, steal a car, and head for Sligo in an effort to escape both the authorities and the henchmen sent to silence him. When his boss finally tracks him down, his life is spared, but the woman and the child he kidnapped and the entire family of his friend in Sligo who provided a hide-out are all killed. And yet, once in prison, his final words are for his girlfriend, his lifetime love. In *This Lime Tree Bower*, which makes use of three narrators, two brothers, Joe and Frank, and their sister's boyfriend take turn describing their parts in the robbery of a bookie in a small seaside town. Despite their astonishing setbacks, Joe's last comment reasserts his enjoyment of daily existence, which is summed up in the sentence "I can still see the girl" (McPherson 1996: 124), the girl he is in love with.

The epigraph of *This Lime Tree Bower* taken from S.T. Coleridge, "no sound is dissonant which tells life", seems to anticipate McPherson's subsequent plays, *St. Nicholas* (1997), *The Weir* (1997) and *Dublin Carol* (2000).

*St. Nicholas* is the monologue of a Dublin theatre critic standing on a bare stage and telling the audience about 'a detail of his life', one summer spent in the custody of vampires. His story ends when he realises that the rudeness of his reviews has always been effective, whether he was sincere in his criticism or merely indulging his fondness for wordplay. So, he returns to the life he has abandoned, a happier and a wiser man, resigned to his faults and insufficiencies. The emphasis in *St. Nicholas* is still on the words through which the hero's achievement is accomplished, but it is only in *The Weir* and *Dublin Carol* that they have a healing effect on the protagonists.

These full-length plays, both produced by the Royal Court Theatre, are more conventional: *The Weir*, in particular, is recognisably an Irish play. Its

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small rural pub scene is familiar from as far back as Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, and its full-length action has a precedent in Murphy's *Conversations on an Homecoming*. Moreover, it is written in the idiom of the Irish play, relying on certain standard recurrent motifs associated with an Irish rural setting: the opposition of country and city, village and small town, persistent celibacy, woman as desired sex-object in a heavily repressed society.

In Brendan's pub in County Sligo, which is the home of faery stories in Ireland—rural, undeveloped, weather-beaten, and at night pitch-black and deadly quiet, save for the hard-blowing wind, three characters gather at the bar to tell ghost stories and impress the only woman who is there with local legend and lore. The two regulars in the pub are Jack, a crusty old bachelor who runs a small garage, and Jim, a grown-up country boy who still lives with his aged mother. Like Jack, both Brendan and Jim are single, which adds a particular energy to their reception of Valerie, an attractive Dublin woman who has just moved in an old house nearby and has been accompanied to the pub by Finbar Mack, the local real estate businessman who has city airs. Jack starts with a story about the house where Valerie is to live, how a knock was heard but nobody was there. Finbar follows this with the tale about the night eighteen years ago that he went to the rescue of a neighbour, who claimed to see a ghost on the stairs. Jim launches into an account of the time he took a job in a neighbouring town digging up a grave where a man was to be buried with his parents. There he was approached by a man who said he was opening the wrong grave and directed him to a little girl's new grave. Jim later recognised the man as the deceased, who turned out to be a child-molester, seemingly eager to carry on his perversion in the after-life. Valerie eventually tells a story of her own, much more personal than the others. Months after her daughter's accidental death, she received a phone call and heard her daughter's voice asking her to come and fetch her at her Nana's. As Hal Jensen as commented, "[in *The Weir*] McPherson achieves something remarkable; at a time when frantic visual stimulation seems to drive every form of entertainment, and concentration is an all-but-forgotten art, he allows us to remember, and indulge in, the pleasures of listening" (Hal Jensen 1997: 20). Furthermore, *The Weir*, which has been seen as "a metaphor for Ireland" (Billington 2000: 2) or as "the ways in which social change can create a rural backwater" (Stokes 2000: 20), is, most of all, a chance of redemption allowed to its characters, as Jack's final story makes clear. As a young man, he abandoned the love of his life and then was resentful when she married another man. Full of pride and regret, he attended the wedding in Dublin, where he

foresaw his future as a vast, empty desert. However, he was ‘rescued’ in a brief anonymous encounter by a backstreet bartender, who after serving him a couple silent pints, asked him if he was all right and then made him a sandwich, a simple gesture of care so profound that it fortified Jack to face his life.

In *Dublin Carol*, McPherson again suggests that redemption is possible, even for the loneliest soul. The play, which has Dickensian echoes, focusses on John Plunkett, a middle-aged Irishman in a state of desperation. He is an alcoholic Dublin undertaker confronted on Christmas Eve with the ghosts of his past, his ruined marriage and his children who are alienated from him. His final resolution to go to the bedside of his dying wife, however, testifies that his journey toward an emotional healing has begun.

It has been noted that McPherson’s “protagonists are, in plain language, shits and fuck-ups” (Cummings 2000: 305) but they belong neither to the rural arcadia of traditional Irish values, nor to the fully modern society of the Celtic Tiger. They inhabit an Ireland, which is, in Nicholas Grene’s words, “a world elsewhere” (Grene 1999: 262), a world perhaps which might be the hospitable location for postcolonial critique. Whether they search for “a plea for sympathy, an act of expiation, an affirmation of sanity, an effort to conquer or seduce, or a confession” (Cummings 2000: 311), what they achieve in their journey is, more importantly, the restoration in Irish theatre of their centrality, the centrality of those characters who still occupy and redefine the co-ordinates of cultural spaces.

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## Abstract

*Il modello postcoloniale di sviluppo sociale, culturale e politico proposto da Awam Amkpa sottolinea come 'la decolonizzazione non è un evento, ma un processo continuo' che riconosce l'importanza della ibridizzazione e della differenza.*

*Questo lavoro dimostra come i lavori teatrali del giovane drammaturgo Conor McPherson abbandonino proprio gli stereotipi coloniali tanto deprecati da Amkpa e molto diffusi nella società neocoloniale irlandese, che ancora lontana dall'affermare una coscienza postcoloniale, ha eletto la globalizzazione quale luogo privilegiato di partecipazione sociale.*

*Come Ulisse moderni, gli eroi comuni di McPherson intraprendono un viaggio personale che si conclude con il riconoscimento della condizione di differenza e ibridità nella loro società neocoloniale.*

*Sia nei testi teatrali d'esordio, quali *Rum and Vodka* (1992), *The Good Thief* (1994) e *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995), come in quelli più recenti – *St. Nicholas* (1997), *The Weir* (1997) e *Dublin Carol* (2000) – McPherson pone l'enfasi sul linguaggio e sulla capacità dei protagonisti di 'raccontare storie', di rappresentare un'Irlanda che potrebbe diventare 'un posto ospitale' per la critica postcoloniale, di restituire al teatro irlandese la loro centralità, la centralità di quei personaggi che ancora occupano e ridefiniscono le coordinate degli spazi culturali.*





