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FOREWORD

Dear reader:

It is with pleasure (and some reasonable pride) that we offer to our readers this new issue of *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies*. It was fifteen years ago that we started with our first issue, from the recently created Universidad de Jaén, and the also quite young Research Group HUM 0271, funded by the Andalusian Government. In that first issue, after an address by the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and a preface by the-then editor Dr Luciano García, the journal opened with an article by Prof. Stephen C. Arch (from Michigan State University) and ended with an interview by Dr. Nieves Pascual (from the Universidad de Jaén) to the critic and novelist Gene H. Bell-Villada. Initiating a tradition alive to these days, we ended that issue with some poetry by the American Book Award recipient, and Michigan State University professor, Prof. Gordon Henry Jr.

Today, we are glad to say that we all (editors, contributors and readers) have positioned this journal among the leading scholarly publications in Spain, and we are hopeful that we will be increasingly present in additional repertoires and indexes, both nationally and world-wide. This present issue (number 17) includes articles and reviews by scholars from a good number of different national and international universities, a diversity that clearly manifests the academic interest in our journal. These are hard times for the humanities, and so we are reasonably proud of the success of our publication, which is not only surviving but growing in its visibility and quality.

Our commitment with the publication of original poetry and short stories side by side with the critical work, and the enthusiastic reception of the poetry by Daud Kamal previously published by *The Grove* (number 13) have led us –thanks to the generosity of Prof. Ali S.

Zaidi from the State University of New York and expert on Kamal– to publish some more poetry by this excellent Pakistani poet.

Finally, and as always, our gratitude goes to our referees, editorial board, contributors, assistants (very especially Primavera Cuder for her invaluable help), the 'Servicio de Publicaciones' of the Universidad de Jaén, the Research Group HUM 0271 and Caja Rural (institution that co-sponsors the journal), for their support.

We devote this issue to the memory of Profossor Archie Loss, scholar and friend.

YOLANDA CABALLERO
JUAN RÁEZ
JESÚS LÓPEZ-PELÁEZ
Editors

Archie Krug Loss, Hanover, Pa., January 31, 1939 – Erie, Pa., July 23, 2010.

When Professor Archie K. Loss passed away in July we felt we had lost a great scholar as well as a friend. Archie was a visiting scholar at the University of Jaén, Spain. During his stay he took an active part in the academic activities organized by our English Department. We remember his brilliant plenary lecture at the Popular Cultural Conference which took place at our University; as a leading figure in the field he had been expressly invited. After the Tulsa gathering in 1972, which was followed by those in Honolulu and Buffalo, it was Professor Loss who in 1978 organized in Behrend College, Erie, Pennsylvania the Joyce North American Conference; since that date these conferences have become fixtures in the academic calendar. Our own students of English Literature were privileged to have been taught Joyce by him during his stay in Jaén. He also contributed with his articles in this journal, *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies* and in the international journal published in Spain, *Papers on Joyce*. Recently, he was invited and he accepted to come regularly to Spain to continue his collaboration with our English Department teaching in the postgraduate courses organized by our University. His untimely death interrupted this collaboration. He is someone we consider an extraordinary professor and academic researcher.

We wish to pay tribute to his honesty, his wide knowledge of the most diverse subjects and his friendly approach to opening discussions. Furthermore, on a more personal note, we praise his and his wife's Suzanne's exquisite manners which we witnessed from both here in Spain and in the United States. In particular, we shall always remember the time we were together in Jaén and our visits together to historical sites in Andalusia talking about social, traditional and cultural topics.

Archie, always open to new cultural and social experiences, enjoyed everything in Andalucia, from bull-fighting to food, from flamenco music to architecture. We, on our part, have especially fond memories of our visits to the Losses in the US. Whenever we were in Erie, both Archie and Suzanne were the warmest and most generous hosts, be it on the occasion of the Joyce North American Conference and research stay at SUNY Buffalo, with visits to Erie at the weekends (Spring-Summer of 2009, by Carmelo), or during a visiting scholarship at PSU Erie (Summer of 2005, with Jesus and his whole family). They were always for us the perfect friends abroad, and meeting up with them in the United States remains one of the highlights of our research stays there.

Archie. K. Loss was Professor of English and American Studies at Penn State Erie, Behrend College, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Pop Dreams: Music, Movies and the Media in the 1960s*; *Joyce's visible Art: The Work of Joyce and the Visual Arts, 1904-1922*, as well as other books. He also wrote numerous essays, which have been published in various books and journals.

CARMELO MEDINA CASADO
JESÚS LÓPEZ-PELÁEZ CASELLAS

DEVIATION AND MEANING DISTORTION IN THEODORE ROETHKE'S *THE LOST SON AND OTHER POEMS*' FOURTH SEQUENCE

Borja Aguiló Obrador
University of Salamanca

Abstract

Although *The Lost Son and Other Poems* is divided into four sections that are clearly differentiated in their approach to the poet's childhood, it is in the last section, the so-called "Lost Son" sequence, that Theodore Roethke's language becomes more difficult and demanding. The American poet had to break the linearity of rational discourse and introduce eccentric and distorted usages of language in order to represent the shape of the human mind itself. The purpose of this essay is to show how these apparently violent ruptures of discourse have a conscious and structural function within the poems in the fourth section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.

Keywords: deviation, distortion, transgression, Roethke, Eliot, Lowell, confessional, auto-referentiality, childhood, nursery rhymes, illness, memory, past, sexuality, circularity.

Resumen

Aunque *The Lost Son and Other Poems* está dividido en cuatro secciones que se diferencian claramente en su aproximación a la infancia del poeta, es en la última sección, la llamada "Lost Son", que el lenguaje de Theodore Roethke se vuelve más difícil y exigente. El poeta americano tuvo que romper la linealidad del discurso racional e introducir usos del lenguaje excéntricos y distorsionados para poder representar la forma de la mente humana. El propósito de este ensayo es el de mostrar cómo estas aparentes violentas rupturas del discurso tienen una función

consciente y estructural dentro de los poemas de la cuarta sección de *The Lost Son and Other Poems.*

Palabras clave: desviación, distorsión, transgresión, Roethke, Eliot, Lowell, confesional, auto-referencialidad, infancia, canción infantil, enfermedad, memoria, pasado, sexualidad, circularidad.

For a better understanding of what is going on in the very structure of language reflected in a poem, one should undertake the analysis of the poetic act through the idea of poetic language as deviation. Furthermore, in the work of determinate authors this linguistic behavior radicalizes itself and becomes the most characteristic and problematic feature of their poetics.

Since the first developments of language, the poetic principle has been associated to magic and secrecy, that is, to the eccentric linguistic usages only available to a set of initiates that would share a common knowledge. In a sense, one could speak of the poetic language as a private practice that paradoxically has at its core a strong social basis. Most of the poetry cultivated during the Augustan Age in England would constitute an example of a strongly marked language (which stands on the margins of common usage and is governed by certain rules) that is only known among a determinate group of neophytes (the Augustan poets themselves: Pope, Dryden, etc.). In this case, the notion of deviation was grounded on the use of a set of fixed norms and strategies that would allow a backward and necessary cognitive movement, destined to restore the text's initial transgression (phonic or semantic).[1]

The same emphasis on formal rule and literary tradition can be seen in the work of the great modernists, such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, or even Wallace Stevens. These writers developed a poetics of impersonality that tended to disintegrate personal identity into an amalgam of history, philosophy and art to the point that one could talk of the internalization of external experience. Poems such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) or Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) are texts that have a strong social and cultural background at its core and thus their characteristic deviation is safeguarded by the referential axis around which they gravitate. For this reason, the

interpretative difficulty of these poems remains to a great degree within the socio-cultural context in which they are inscribed.

The generation of American poets that was to follow the Modernists went through an important change in their artistic conception. The publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959 is generally considered to be the historic literary event that summons the coordinates of the new aesthetics, which had been born a few years earlier.[2] "Confessional" or "Personal Poetry" reacted against the New Critics filtered notion of impersonality as a poetic strategy, and turned to autobiography as a thematic source for the composition of the poem. Nonetheless, it would be an error to consider this poetic transformation a mere matter of content. Personal introspection required of a new and different set of formal schemes in order to be represented in the act of writing.

In contrast with their predecessors, writers such as Lowell, Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton underwent a creative process that entailed an externalization of internal experience, turning in this way referentiality into auto-referentiality. At this point, the initial concept of deviation posed at the onset of this paper would be thus enriched by a variation of one of the factors in the paradigm: the introduction of a body of private knowledge that is not shared in a social level. As a consequence, in some places of the poem meaning is distorted and becomes an enigma or a challenge for a reader that has to develop different interpretative skills.[3]

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) should be regarded as a transitional figure between the two tendencies: he was twenty years younger than Eliot and nine older than Lowell. His first book of poems, *Open House* (1941), constitutes an initial point of departure towards a new aesthetics but it is not until the apparition of his second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) that he shows the characteristic features of his poetics. His poetry became a dramatic dialogue with his past experiences in the "fertile flat country" of Michigan. Roethke was to construct a sense of self he had been eluding since the traumatic death of his father Otto when he was fifteen.

Although *The Lost Son and Other Poems* is divided into four sections that are clearly differentiated in their approach to the poet's childhood, it is in the last section, the so-called "Lost Son" sequence, that Roethke's language becomes more difficult and demanding. In these long poems,

which are often divided into five parts, the poetic impulse transfigures itself into a quest for identity that explores in its unfolding the depths of memory and personality by means of a series of regressive techniques. As Roethke himself said, “I believe that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward. The way is circuitous, and sometimes lost, but invariably returned to” (25). In order to do so, he had to break the linearity of rational discourse and introduce eccentric and distorted usages of language that may confuse and frustrate the unprepared reader in his apprehension of the poem as a whole. Furthermore, there is the need to acknowledge the fact that Roethke was working within the poetic complex of the human mind: “A poem that is the shape of the psyche itself; in times of great stress, that’s what I tried to write” (84).

The purpose of this essay is to show how these apparently violent ruptures of discourse have a conscious and structural function within the poems in the fourth section of *The Lost Son and Other Poems.* As it will be noticed further on, these uncanny moments of uncertainty in relation to meaning are not present in all the poems in the series. However, this same absence is to be considered a qualitative feature of individual compositions that are inscribed within a sequence of formal and thematic concurrence. The analysis will follow a dispositional order, as it is the one left by the same poet.

The “Lost Son” sequence roughly follows a mythic and narrative pattern that is being continuously metamorphosed and varied throughout the different parts of each poem. According to Jay Parini, “It tells a story, the backward journey of the poet through memory toward self-realization. It is a version of what Bloom calls the interior quest-romance” (70), the importance of this quote lying in what is not being said rather than what is actually stated. On the one hand, although the poems enact a passage through the halls of memory towards a reconstituted sense of self, the journey is discontinuous and not just backwards. The writing persona, that is, the one who “tells the story”, is immersed in a fluctuating mental swing that is constantly reshaping both the remote memories of the past and the unstable reality of the present. In this sense, it is true that there is a movement towards self-realization but one must be aware of the complexities therein.

On the other hand, what is Parini exactly saying in relation to Harold Bloom’s “quest-romance”? Taking Sigmund Freud as the initial point of departure for his theoretical analysis, Bloom describes the

Romantic or internalized romance as a process of maturation that implies a descent into the deepest strata of the self:

> The hero of internalized quest is the poet himself, the antagonists of quest are everything in the self that blocks imaginative work, and the fulfillment is never the poem itself but the poem beyond that is made possible by the apocalypse of imagination. (19)

It is in this sense that the reader may relate Roethke's "Lost Son" sequence to the Romantic structure that has its origins in compositions such as William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* or William Blake's *Jerusalem*. Roethke's poems express a promise or a desire to overcome the psychic obstacles that sprang from his father's early death and the sexual solipsism attached to it. The dialectic established between the mythical pattern of the lost son and the poet's reconciliatory longings could thus be said to generate the meaning of the sequence.

From an structural point of view, the "Lost Son" sequence is also very much influenced by *The Waste Land* metamorphic transitions in which a thematic motive is continually being varied and reformulated throughout the poem. Although Roethke was always ready to dismiss Eliot's imprint in his poems, it seems clear that he made the most of a procedure that according to Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías, had its origins in Goethe's transformations of the *Urphänomen*.

The German word *Urphänomen* refers to the original great theme from which all the others are just variations and transfigurations. This philosophical idea had a great impact in the late music of Robert Schumann. From 1845 on, the patterns of annihilation and redemption became an obsession for the German musician who was locked up in a mental institution and his works became a testimony of this primordial phenomenon Goethe had conceived.[4] Afterwards, the paradigm of the *Urphänomen* was recreated and reinterpreted in the music of Schumann's successors, Johannes Brahms and Franz Liszt. It is at this point when the figure of the young Richard Wagner appears into scene. Enriched by the new formal discoveries of the latter,[5] he developed what has been subsequently called the *leitmotiv* structure. Conforming to this method, Wagner divided his operas into a series of themes that suffered various transformations along with the action of the drama, that is, with time. The idea is exposed, annihilated and then resurrected in a cyclic swing across the dark waters of time. It is the end of the nineteenth century

and the coming together of the different arts brought Goethe's original thought back to literature and particularly, to poetry.

T. S. Eliot studied the works of Wagner and tried to recreate the cycle of transformations and variations he had observed in his two most important books, *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1945). Eliot developed a hermeneutics of time that found its redemption in the ecstatic moment of love's surrender and thus, his works became a transfiguring journey through a textual time that was deprived of redemption but pointed towards it.

Theodore Roethke retained the idea of the transfiguring journey and pretended to represent the drama of a mind that is in constant dialogue with its memories by means of a language that, according to the poet, needs "to take really desperate jumps" (76). One could even talk of a rhetoric of mental instability that would require of disruptive mimetic language structures in order to symbolize the errands of the self in constant redefinition. Kenneth Burke, one of Roethke's philosophical mentors, said that a "poet will naturally tend to write about that which most deeply engrosses him—and nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his *burdens*, including those of a physical nature, such as disease" (17). Of course this is not to say that Roethke only wrote about his manic-depressive torments but that his mental crisis might be symbolically transfigured in the form of a poem. Taking this into consideration, the reader will easily notice that along the progressive Eliot-like variations that one finds in the poems, Roethke introduces significant leaps of discourse that break the sense of continuity and resist meaningful interpretation. A good example is provided by the first part of "The Lost Son", the poem that also gives the name to the sequence:

> Hunting along the river,
> Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
> By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog holes,
> By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.
>
> The shape of a rat?
> It's bigger than that.
> It's less than a leg
> And more than a nose,
> Just under the water
> It usually goes. ... (41-50)

The name of this section is "The Flight" and curiously enough, there is a literal "flight" from the narrative line that had been initiated at the beginning. The lyrical persona establishes a dramatic situation at a crossroads of experience (wood, bridge, river). He is disoriented and helpless, running and hunting along "the kingdom of bang and blab" (34) where he can find no answers to his anxieties. There is a descent into a primitive "underworld" and the tempo of the scene is reduced by means of the use of hyphenated compounds (bug-riddled, pond-edge, bog-holes) and commas. After this, there is a violent break in the structure and in the narrative: four regularly rhymed stanzas made up of iambic dimeters that obliquely refer to an unknown entity and close the first section. It is useful to turn to Roethke for explanatory claims:

> A word or two about habits of mind or technical effects peculiar to this sequence. ("Peculiar" is not used in the sense of odd, for they are traditional poems. Their ancestors: German and English folk literature, particularly Mother Goose; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, especially the songs and rants; the Bible; Blake and Traherne; Dürer.) Much of the action is implied or, particularly in the case of erotic experience, rendered obliquely. ... Disassociation often precedes a new state of clarity. (53)

A whole tradition relates to these closing stanzas. Even in these moments when meaning is suspended, the poet acknowledges a dialogue with an external field of reference that might help in the interpretation of the poem as a whole. Nonetheless, the function of this passage is still to be elucidated and explained in detail.

On the one hand, the "nursery rhymes" that Roethke is employing here try to imitate the language of a child from the point of view of the adult person, the poet, who is writing them. In this sense, what this linguistic construct will do is to conceal and foreshadow the urges and anxieties of the adolescent world that pulses behind the rhymed bars of the stanza. Obviously, the method must obey to indirect and oblique techniques that seem to have a synecdochic nature, as it is seen in the references to individual features one finds in the stanza above such as shape or size.

On the other hand, from the point of view of structural function, the introduction of this kind of discourse could be interpreted as a return to an infantile state of mind. Using Julia Kristeva's terminology one could consider these nursery rhymes as prominently semiotic

clusters: that is, linguistic structures that are partly originated in the unconscious and, thus, constitute a deviation from a rational and pragmatic use of language. As a matter of fact, according to the same Kristeva, “the semiotic precedes the establishment of the sign; it is not, therefore, cognitive in the sense of being assumed by a knowing, already constituted subject” (Kristeva 27). It is because of the contraposition of the pre-symbolic semiotic articulation with the conventional linguistic structures that the signifying process is made possible. From this point of view, while infancy would be a time when the semiotic energy is much stronger and the subject is beginning to internalize the symbolic structures of his language, adolescence would represent the traumatic space of the crash between these two modalities.

In this sense, “The Lost Son” would enact a symbolic return to infancy in an attempt to escape from the anxieties of adolescence, represented by “the heat of summer”.

A similar transition is enacted in the third section of “The Long Alley”. Nevertheless it is more gradual and less violent:

> A waiting ghost warms up the dead
> Until they creak their knees:
> So up and away and what do we do
> But barley-break and squeeze.
>
> Tricksy comes and tricksy goes
> Bold in fear therefore;
> The hay hops in the horse’s mouth,
> The chin jumps to the nose.
>
> Rich me cherries a fondling’s kiss,
> The summer bumps of ha:
> Hand me a feather, I’ll fan you warm,
> I’m happy with my paws. (35-46)
>
> [...]
>
> If we detach
> The head of a match
> What do we do
> To the cat’s wish?
> Do we rout the fish?
> Will the goat’s mouth
> Have the last laugh? (55-61)

Although these scenes appear in the third part of the poem, the dramatic situation might seem very similar to the one in "The Lost Son": a moment of hesitation and doubt precedes a moment of regression into the realm of infancy. However, one must be aware of the fact that in this case the poem does not present a flight but a gradual passage to the nursery rhyme stanza where the two types of discourse blend.

The ghost of the father appears as an active agent that stirs "memory and desire", to use Eliot's phrase, as he puts the deceased into motion and warms them up, in an image that echoes the "heat of summer". At this stage the lyric persona is not prepared to endure the company of the dead and protects himself against them with a different type of discourse. Nevertheless, the sexual tensions that haunt the self at this moment are not completely sublimated in a full regressive turn. It is true that there is a "summer hunt" but in this case the uncontrollable passions take possession of a language that becomes highly suggestive: Roethke uses phrases such as "barley-break", "squeeze", "tricksy", "horse's mouth" or "chin", "nose". Therefore, the ominous presence of the dead father destabilizes the lyric persona who probably surrenders to masturbation in an attempt to fulfill his death wish, for according to Roethke, "onanism equals death" (52).

One could even consider this fragment as a dance, a musical transition that permits the regressive movement to the last stanza of the part, which expresses a change from an egotistic perspective to the curious questioning of the child that avoids individualization. The irrational and surrealistic questions take up again the linguistic function they had in "The Lost Son": they symbolically ease the adolescent persona's anguish over those sexual impulses that are related to the presence of death.

Even in this last transition from adolescence to childhood, there seems to be a certain correspondence between the different states of mind and their linguistic counterparts. However, in "The Shape of the Fire" one could talk of a more ambiguous presentation that gradually acquires the prosodic rhythms of interior monologue:

> Where's the eye?
> The eye's in the sty.
> The ear's not here
> Beneath the hair.
> When I took off my clothes
> To find a nose,

> There was only one shoe
> For the waltz of To,
> The pinch of Where.
>
> Time for the flat-headed man. I recognize that listener,
> Him with the platitudes and rubber doughnuts,
> Melting at my knees, a varicose horror.
> Hello, hello. My nerves knew you, dear boy. ... (20-31)

The second part of the poem begins with a question in the same way as in “The Pit” from “The Lost Son”. In this case though, the reader does not find the existential anxieties of the latter but childish and surrealistic forms that relate to the third part of “The Long Alley”. Despite this structural variation, there also seems to be a psychological motivation behind the use of this type of language since the previous part ends with the line “the warm comes without sound” (19). In contrast with the other examples, the warmth the poet mentions might refer in this case to the prenatal state of the womb, from which the self is trying to be released: “Mother me out of here. What more will the bones allow?” (7).

In this way, the poem moves from the distress of the unborn to the impersonal nature of childhood. This might be because the first stanza above enacts a destabilization of individual coordinates that leads to a cubistic dissolution of the self into parts of the body: eye, ear, hair, nose, etc. The rhymed lines and the enigmatic abstractions at the end, “the waltz of To” and “the pinch of Where”, are closer to the nursery rhymes or “mother goose” constructions but in this example the appearance of sexuality and death is postponed until the next section.

The rhythm is accelerated and the line is lengthened to a point where poetic form acquires the hues of interior monologue. At this moment, the poem abandons any particular design or rhetoric and is overtaken by the fears and terrors of a mind that abandons itself to nightmare. Entrapped in these moors that extend over a deceptive and distorted past, the lost son encounters his father and is again unable to cope with its presence. He escapes through a viaduct and reaches a rock where he listens to a song:

> Pleasure on ground
> Has no sound,
> Easily maddens
> The uneasy man.

> Who, careless, slips
> In coiling ooze
> Is trapped to the lips
> Leaves more than shoes;
>
> Must pull off clothes
> To jerk like a frog
> On belly and nose
> From the sucking bog. (41-52)

As it happened in "The Long Alley", the language in this poem is changed in an attempt to escape the nightmarish and haunting presence of death. In this case, the interior drama in the previous stanza is contrasted with a song and an unknown presence pours over the troubled brow of the lost son. One thinks of the dream-song of Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or even in Philomel's song from Eliot's *The Waste Land,* revelations of some transcendent reality that try to soothe the minds of its hearers. However, Roethke's song does not produce the same effect and, thus, the listener falls back into hallucination: "My meat eats me. Who waits at the gate?" (53). One could affirm that the remedy contains in itself the poison that might destroy it, as in the case of Plato's "pharmakon".[6] The three-stanza song has marked sexual connotations (pleasure, slips, ooze, lips, pull off, jerk, etc.) that reflect the poet's most inner desires. From a psychological perspective, the powerful drives of the id are mirrored in the mesmerizing language of the song. For this reason, this fragment cannot be analyzed from the point of view of the redemptive function of language but as a mirror-like transfiguration of the death wish (masturbation).

Similarly, another song appears again in the second part of "Praise to the End":

> Mips and ma the mooly moo,
> The likes of him is biting who,
> A cow's a care and who's a coo? —
> What footie does is final.
>
> My dearest dear my fairest fair,
> Your father tossed a cat in air,
> Though neither you nor I was there, —
> What footie does is final.

> Be large as an owl, be slick as a frog,
> Be good as a goose, be big as a hog,
> Be sleek as a heifer, be long as a hog, —
> What footie will do will be final. (31-42)

In this passage, the enigmatic quality of the language is even higher and the possible sexual references are obscured. A distinct linguistic deviation brings the reader close to tempos and moods of infancy and game.

The poem enacts the already-known circular journey through infancy and adolescence. Yet, the attitude towards the painful experiences of the past is gradually modified throughout the same poem. While in the previous example from "The Shape of the Fire" the lyric persona listened to a song that functioned as an obstacle (and so it behaved accordingly), on this occasion the poet asks a paternal figure for relief and help, and therefore, the poem achieves a different effect: "Rock me to sleep, the weather's wrong/ Speak to me, frosty beard. / Sing to me sweet" (28-30). Due to this change, the language of the song loses its sharpness and becomes supportive and playful. Even when the literal meaning of the lines remains inaccessible, it is because of the melodious character of its language that the self seems to take a decision: "I conclude! I conclude! / My dearest dust, I can't stay here" (43-44). In this way, the lost son/poet is able to regress to a blissful moment in the past that might help him get reconciled with his own demons.

The other poems from the "Lost Son" section, "A Field of Light", "Unfold! Unfold!" "I Cry, Love! Love!" and "O, Thou Opening, O" do not present the same regressive strategies because they focus on the path to illumination and thus, they avoid convulsive and nervous passages. However, they maintain a dialogue with the past experiences of the poet.

Roethke's nursery rhymes and songs do create a stressed linguistic deviation from the common usages of language that apparently seems difficult to restore. However, taking into account the poet's own affirmations about his work, one is able to retrace his steps and understand the structural function of these fragments that are far from being nonsensical.

The American poet conceived the "Lost Son" sequence as the spiritual quest of a mind striving to reach a sense of identity. The

poems dramatize a conflictive dialogue between the self and the tormenting memories of the past, symbolically represented by the contraposition of different modes of discourse. As I have tried to show in this essay, the moments of regression into infancy are often marked by a turn to traditional rhymed stanzas that try to transfigure and sublimate adolescent sexual passions with uneven results. It is clear that these constructs function as transitions between different mental and temporal states and in "Praise to the End", they might lead to a moment of reconciliation. In this sense, Theodore Roethke was able to compose faithful representations of an afflicted mind that needed to go back in order to go forward.

NOTES

[1] I am following Jean Cohen's description of the poetic creative act as a two-way process that would be composed of the linguistic deviation and a consequent reduction of the initial deviation (Cohen 199).

[2] The year of publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* constitutes a convention that is used for historiographic purposes. Theodore Roethke himself published his most important and autobiographical work, *The Lost Son and Other poems,* in 1948. In turn, the words "confessional" and "personal" are also to be considered as convenient categorical terms that inevitably present their own limitations.

[3] This is not simply to say that Modernist texts are "easy" to interpret because they present a great deal of external referentiality. The poet's interpretation of the socio-cultural experience captured in those poems is radically subjective and personal and in some cases it is also mixed with the autobiographical.

[4] Schumann's interest in Goethe culminated in the oratorio *Scenes from Goethe's Faust* (1844-1856) and it is also no coincidence that he named one of his piano compositions *Papillons* (1829-1831) in a clear reference to the idea of metamorphosis.

[5] Basically I am referring to Brahms's symphonies and Liszt's orchestral poems.

[6] In Plato's *Phaedrus* a theory of logos is developed by means of the idea of the *pharmakon*, a term which constitutes a paradox in itself for it has two different meanings: medicine and poison. Thus, the function of writing will depend of the use it is made of.

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"TODO ES ESPEJO": ARTE Y DUPLICIDAD EN DOS CUENTOS FANTÁSTICOS DE HOFFMANN Y POE

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Abstract

This article aims to summarize, from a comparative standpoint, the evolution of the motif of the magical portrait in the short narrative of Romanticism in Germany and North America. The works selected in order to highlight the expression of this element in different cultures and literatures are: "The Jesuit Church in G." (1816), by E.T.A. Hoffmann, and "The Oval Portrait" (1842), by E.A. Poe. The enchanted portrait was adopted by the Romantics as a sign of their interest in the duality inherent in human beings, which they discovered. As a complement or substitute to the individual, the portrait/mirror leads the observer to feelings of horror and uncanniness (*das Unheimliche*, in Freudian terms), since the animation of the portrait means the supernatural transformation of a common object. In the present study we analyze the main circumstances which allowed the permutation of this motif on the occasion of Edgar Allan Poe's bicentennial anniversary, focusing on how each of these authors introduces variations from within the aesthetics of the supernatural in Romantic short stories.

Key words: Hoffmann, Poe, magical, portrait, sinister, common.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende sintetizar, desde una perspectiva comparatista, la evolución del motivo del retrato mágico en la narrativa breve del Romanticismo alemán y norteamericano. Las obras elegidas para poner de relieve la expresión de este elemento en diferentes culturas y literaturas son dos relatos: "La iglesia jesuita de G." (1816), de E.T.A. Hoffmann y "El retrato oval" (1842), de E.A. Poe. El retrato encantado

fue acogido por los románticos como reflejo de la preocupación por la dualidad inherente al ser humano que ellos mismos descubrieron. El retrato/espejo como complemento o sustituto del individuo produce en el espectador efectos de horror y extrañamiento (*das Unheimliche*, en términos freudianos), puesto que la animación del retrato supone la transformación sobrenatural de un objeto cotidiano. En el presente estudio analizamos las principales circunstancias que permitieron la traslación de este motivo con ocasión del centenario de Edgar Allan Poe, observando cómo cada uno de los autores tratados aporta una nueva configuración al retrato encantado dentro de la estética de lo sobrenatural en el cuento romántico.

Palabras clave: Hoffmann, Poe, retrato, mágico, siniestro, cotidiano.

> Quizá consiga, como un buen retratista, dar a algún personaje un toque expresivo de manera que al verlo lo encuentres parecido al original, aún sin conocerlo, y te parecerá verlo en persona.
> (E.T.A. Hoffmann. *El hombre de arena*)

Decía Octavio Paz que "todo es espejo" (109). Al reflejar la realidad de forma puramente figurativa, la finalidad del retrato se asemeja a la del espejo. El retrato (del it. *ritrarre*, retraer [Corominas 577]) como expresión pictórica es la representación artística de los rasgos faciales y de la expresión de un individuo. Según se recoge en el *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, la esencia del retrato radica en la similitud entre la obra y el modelo representado, poniendo en juego el concepto artístico de 'mímesis'.[1] Esta intrínseca relación de semejanza 'especular' entre el modelo y el retrato ha cobrado, a lo largo del tiempo, un significado misterioso y enigmático por cuanto viene a representar el problema de la identidad del ser humano.

Si bien es cierto que los retratos han estado presentes en las manifestaciones literarias desde tiempos inmemoriales, es en el Romanticismo[2] cuando estos objetos se erigen como verdaderos complementos o sustitutos del individuo, que, por oposición a la visión dieciochesca, pasa en este momento a ser considerado un sujeto fragmentado. Los retratos reflejan esta escisión y, aunque son elementos de la vida cotidiana, desde la estética de lo fantástico sobrenatural, ponen de relieve lo que de siniestro, extraño e inexplicable tiene la

propia existencia. El retrato constituye, pues, un elemento perturbador que guarda una íntima relación con su modelo y con el artista/creador cuyo genio (tomando aquí una expresión puramente romántica) casi profético ha proyectado en el cuadro una visión desgarrada de la dualidad humana (Pérez y Fortea 10). Oscar Wilde en su ensayo “El crítico como artista” (1890) insiste en la labor interpretativa del espectador y su reflejo en la obra de arte contemplada, lo que implica un proceso de auto-conocimiento. Esta perspectiva sería ampliada en *El retrato de Dorian Gray* (1891) donde se presenta una ficción alegórica sobre la asociación de la conciencia y el alma del modelo que es captada por el artista y plasmada en la obra con fatales consecuencias.

En esta coyuntura, el retrato se convierte en un símbolo de la alteridad del ‘yo’, actualizando el tópico literario del *Doppelgänger* (literalmente, “doble andante”, es decir, el doble externo, o el ser desdoblado), término que se remonta, en su origen, a la obra de Jean Paul Richter *Siebenkäs* (1796).[3] Más adelante, Otto Rank, en *Der Doppelgänger* (1925) distingue dos tipos de doble: por un lado, el verdadero doble o sosias, una persona de carne y hueso que se encuentra con su original, al que se opone (Santos 76; González 148). Esta vertiente aparece ejemplificada en la obra de E.T.A. Hoffmann *Los elixires del diablo* (1815) y en el cuento *William Wilson* (1839) de E.A. Poe. Por otro lado, Rank habla del ‘otro’ misterioso que se separa del ‘yo’ y se hace independiente, en forma de retrato, reflejo o sombra (Jourde y Tortonese 59) pues, como apunta Gubern, el reflejo está en el origen del retrato (38). Nuestro estudio se sitúa en esta perspectiva. Para ilustrar el tema del doble como reflejo pictórico, pasaremos a analizar dos obras que, a nuestro juicio, resultan esclarecedoras de este fenómeno, “La iglesia jesuita de G.” (1816), de Hoffmann y “El retrato oval” (1842), de Poe.[4]

E.T.A. Hoffmann es, sin duda, el romántico que ejerció una mayor influencia en generaciones posteriores tanto alemanas como continentales por cuanto su obra cuentística constituye un epítome de la estética propia del movimiento.[5] El profesor Herrero lo incluye junto con Von Arnim, Nodier, Gautier o Poe en la lista de iniciadores de la estética de lo fantástico moderno (29). Poe, que renegó de la influencia del romanticismo alemán al afirmar que “el horror no viene de Alemania, sino del alma” (“Cuentos” 42), dio lugar a un debate crítico que pareció cerrarse a principios del siglo XX, cuando el profesor Palmer Cobb demostró en su libro *The Influence of E.T.A. Hoffmann in the Tales of*

Edgar Allan Poe (1908) que varios argumentos y recursos estructurales de las obras fantásticas de Poe fueron tomados del autor alemán.[6] Asegura Mª Ángeles González que Poe tuvo conocimiento de Hoffmann, al menos a través de Thomas Carlyle y Walter Scott, y concluye que "si el maestro de Hawthorne fue Tieck, tal como indicó Poe, el maestro de Poe fue Hoffmann" (21, 23, 43). Tanto Cobb como González se detienen en señalar la extraordinaria similitud argumental entre las dos historias, aunque pasan por alto el retrato como elemento cohesionador que trasciende las fronteras transcontinentales para representar una misma visión del arte.

En este trabajo intentaremos demostrar que, a pesar de la distancia espacio-temporal que separa estas dos obras y de la deliberada intención de Poe de negar esta influencia, ambos relatos coinciden en la búsqueda del ideal estético, a la vez que expresan una similar inquietud por la labor del artista, planteando, además, cuestiones sobre la misión del arte, la fugacidad de la vida y la imposibilidad de amar, que se derivan de la animación del producto de la creación artística, el retrato.

El estudio del retrato mágico o encantado como motivo literario y su transformación en un tema *per se* ha sido abordado en profundidad por Theodore Ziolkowski en su obra *Imágenes desencantadas: una iconología literaria* (1980). Esta obra constituye, según nuestro parecer, una referencia obligada para el estudio de temas y motivos de la literatura gótica y fantástica junto con el manual sobre *Estética y pragmática del relato fantástico* (2000), donde el profesor Juan Herrero aborda las principales cuestiones sobre el género.

Hemos de señalar que este tipo de manifestación pictórica cobró un auge especial en la Edad Media, cuando se creía que los retratos podían proteger a los retratados, llegando, incluso, a sufrir en su lugar aquellos acontecimientos desgraciados que el fatídico destino les deparaba. La suerte podía también tornarse desfavorable, puesto que esta íntima y extraordinaria relación también podía producir el efecto contrario: lo que de malo le sucede al retrato puede traspasarse al modelo.[7] Más allá de la superstición del Medievo, el arte pictórico del retrato moderno nace en Holanda en el siglo XV (Gubern 39). En el Renacimiento es dotado de efecto psicológico y se desarrolla el autorretrato. Este tipo de producciones encontraron posteriormente un cierto vigor en el periodo Barroco y Rococó, cuando la burguesía, los aristócratas y monarcas

solicitaban retratos por encargo a los artistas más reputados. Los pintores admirados por Hoffmann, a los que alude con frecuencia, pertenecen a distintas épocas y movimientos (Rubens, Rembrandt, Corregio, Van Dyck y Brueghel), pero todos coinciden en mostrar en sus retratos individuos a la luz de las velas, anticipando los efectos lumínicos de claroscuro y el contraste efectivo de luces y sombras que regirán también la estética romántica (Pérez y Fortea 33).

Ya en el siglo diecinueve, explica Theodore Ziolkowski, los distintos avances en el campo de la imagen, tales como la fotografía o el daguerrotipo, junto con la estética del Romanticismo, propiciaron la animación del espejo y del retrato. En efecto, los románticos compartían una cierta obsesión por los objetos que deformaban la realidad ante la visión del sujeto, tales como el espejo o los instrumentos de óptica (Herrero 47). Por todo ello se produjo la introducción del retrato en el universo literario, llegando a constituir el tópico del *tableau vivant*,[8] reflejo de la metáfora romántica del individuo que refleja a otro o a sí mismo (Ziolkowski 151).

Con el cambio de siglo y con las nuevas tendencias estéticas y literarias, el retrato encantado conoció una cierta desmitificación, pues, como apunta Ziolkowski, cada vez se impuso más la creencia en que los dobles físicos eran improbables y era mucho más prudente recurrir a la magia que a "la repentina aparición de un pariente de extraordinario parecido" para justificar la extraña presencia del doble (157).

La imaginación romántica, período en el que se sitúa nuestro estudio, estableció dos tipos de espacios de lo fantástico: lo exterior, a través de visiones angustiosas y demoníacas, y lo interior, como estado de ánimo o conjetura. Esta doble vertiente, que Poe asimiló, derivó en una paulatina interiorización de lo sobrenatural para dar lugar a lo fantástico cotidiano (Calvino 15). De ahí proviene la gran ironía explorada por Hoffmann, pues como afirma en *El Hombre de arena* (1816): "nada hay que contenga más aspectos maravillosos ni más fantásticos que la vida real, y el poeta sólo puede captar sus secretas relaciones con el reflejo borroso de un espejo mal azogado" (Herrero 47).

La animación del retrato (que se puede retrotraer hasta el mito de Pigmalión)[9], tema relacionado con lo fantástico exterior, participaría de la temática del doble, que representa lo fantástico interior, según

expone Juan Herrero (131, 34), constituyéndose así como un motivo que sintetiza estas dos polaridades de la estética de lo fantástico. Además, el retrato que cobra vida se torna inquietante puesto que resulta, en palabras de Eugenio Trías, "algo que, al revelarse, se muestra en su faz siniestra, pese a ser, en realidad, en profundidad, muy familiar, lo más propiamente familiar, íntimo y reconocible" (Carrasco). En esta distorsión sobrecogedora de la realidad más próxima radica la sensación de extrañeza que Freud señaló al estudiar las connotaciones del término *das Unheimliche.*[10] Este vocablo vendría a significar lo siniestro, lo inquietante y lo espeluznante de la vida real, es decir, todo aquello que la estética de lo fantástico sobrenatural pone en juego en sus relatos, en los cuales el motivo del retrato encantado ocupa un lugar de excepción.

Si bien es cierto que el retrato es el dominio artístico donde la libertad creadora del artista está más limitada, ya que su labor se reduce a 'copiar' o 'imitar' la realidad lo más fielmente posible, la inexplicable animación de este objeto supone una excepción del orden natural del mundo hasta el punto de que el retrato encantado se erige como un tipo de antagonista del individuo retratado. La elevación de un mero objeto (en su propia esencia, decorativo) a un personaje con identidad propia que, en ocasiones, consume la del protagonista, sólo puede darse bajo unos planteamientos estéticos (los del Romanticismo) que defiendan la supremacía del Arte sobre la Vida. En el caso de Hoffmann, las aspiraciones al arte como vía de escape ante la mediocridad burguesa es una constante en su obra cuentística y hasta en su propia vida (Pérez y Fortea 15), pues de manera recurrente Hoffmann traza una línea divisoria entre el hombre artístico, que es capaz de aprehender el auténtico ser de las cosas, y el hombre vulgar, el que vive inmerso en la realidad burguesa, incapaz de sentir nada (Hernández y Maldonado 127), lo que le llevó a afirmar que

> El arte es una vía de acceso a la unidad primigenia del hombre con la naturaleza. A la vez, el arte constituye una exploración del inconsciente humano, del sueño, de los estados intermedios como el sonambulismo, la adivinación profética o visionaria, la telepatía, el hipnotismo, etc., que se convierten en instrumentos de la posible salvación del hombre y la nueva unidad (Pérez y Fortea 27).

Hoffmann entendió que el ser humano está dividido en dos polaridades, la consciente y la inconsciente, y abogó por el arte como vía de acceso a la realidad íntima que escapa a los dictados de la razón. Esta

preferencia por el retrato sobre el original (y por el Arte sobre la Vida), que correrá paralela al avance del siglo, tendrá terribles consecuencias (Ziolkowski 84). Uno de los más preclaros ejemplos es *Retrato de Dorian Gray* (1891), de Oscar Wilde, que hemos citado anteriormente, donde se nos muestra una visión alegórica del arte destructivo, reflejo de la decadencia moral y ética del momento de la que el pintor se hace eco en su proceso creativo, pues, como anuncia el autor en el controvertido "Prefacio", "el artista puede expresar todo".[11] El cuadro, producto de la creación artística, está imbuido de la magia que el artista visionario logra plasmar en él. Esta situación 'privilegiada' del arte sobre la vida hace que la fiel duplicación del modelo en el lienzo suponga, en ciertos casos, una amenaza para el retratado, pues, para bien o para mal, este objeto condiciona inexorablemente su existencia.

En su "Introducción" a la antología de *Cuentos fantásticos del XIX*, Italo Calvino explica: "el cuento fantástico es uno de los productos más característicos de la narrativa del siglo XIX, […] pues es el que más nos dice sobre la interioridad del individuo y de la simbología colectiva" (9). El territorio de la fantasía penetró con un énfasis especial en el género del *Kunstmärchen* o cuento de autor, que tenía unas características peculiares en oposición al cuento popular o *Volksmärchen*, basado en historias tradicionales o de transmisión oral.[12] El cuento de autor recoge toda una serie de tópicos ya anteriormente explorados por la novela 'gótica' inglesa a finales del XVIII (lo macabro, lo sobrenatural, lo fantasmagórico, lo terrible, etc.), y pretende representar la realidad del mundo interior, el subjetivismo y el imaginario del individuo, iluminando así la preocupación romántica por lo irracional, lo inconsciente y lo ambivalente. Añaden Pérez y Fortea una serie de características propias: "la anulación de la lógica cotidiana, la alteración de la coherencia espacio-temporal, la metamorfosis, la animación de lo inanimado, la capacidad verbal de objetos y animales y el surgimiento de espacios mágicos en regiones desconocidas" (25). La finalidad principal trasciende el mero juego de ficción para convertirse en una respuesta ante "el reto de hacerse atractivo para el lector y suscitar en él la inquietud ante lo narrado y la identificación con el narrador o con el personaje" (Herrero 31).

La presencia de seres o hechos extraordinarios, que provocan miedo o repulsión, sólo es posible cuando un personaje da crédito y trata de asimilar la llegada perturbadora del elemento extraño. De ahí

la ambigüedad que sustenta la visión siniestra de la animación de un retrato, puesto que rompe los esquemas lógicos del personaje, a la vez que fuerza al lector a interpretar la situación y caracterizar al personaje, bien como un ser excepcional, testigo de un hecho extraordinario, o bien como un demente o alucinado que por algún motivo sufre este trastorno en su entendimiento. El retrato animado es, por tanto, uno de esos elementos que ponen en duda hasta la consistencia del lector. En efecto, esta visión insólita no sólo confunde al personaje, sino también al propio lector, que, a través de la lectura, lleva a cabo un juicio, desde la lógica, de la creencia de lo inverosímil, lo que lleva a Italo Calvino a subrayar que el verdadero tema del cuento fantástico es "la realidad de lo que se ve: creer o no creer" (14).

Hoffmann, a quien fascinó el tema del doble, proyectó toda una estética del yo distorsionado y enigmático en muchas de sus obras. Además el tema del espejo mágico o el hombre sin sombra asociado a la catroptomancia[13] aparece reiteradamente en algunos de sus cuentos, entre los cuales hemos de destacar: "El caldero de oro" (1814), "Don Juan" (1813) "La historia del reflejo perdido" (1815) o "El Consejero Krespel" (1817).[14] Gran conocedor y admirador de todas las formas de arte, Hoffmann reitera las referencias explícitas a los maestros barrocos flamencos y holandeses en la mayoría de sus obras, destacando sus *Nocturnos* (1816). Aún en sus retratos ficcionales, Hoffmann rehúsa una mímesis de lo visible, dejando en suspensión unos mundos narrativos coherentes.

La extraordinaria relación de similitud argumental entre "La iglesia jesuita de G." y "El retrato oval" refleja una concepción común que afirma la superioridad del arte sobre la vida. Estos dos cuentos versan sobre el tema de labor artística y cómo ésta puede llegar a tornarse destructiva, denunciando, por tanto, el egoísmo del artista. Hoffmann añade sus propias ideas sobre el arte, convirtiéndolo así en un cuento que algunos críticos han tildado de "didáctico" (González 199). La obra apareció incluida en el primer volumen de los *Nocturnos* (1816), y de ella toma Poe la visión del ideal artístico. A esto hay que añadir la reformulación poeniana del motivo del retrato encantado, que se remonta a "El salón del rey Arturo" (1816), que aparecía en la recopilación *Los hermanos de San Serapión* (1819).[15] Aquí encontramos de nuevo el tema de la búsqueda del ideal y su incompatibilidad con la vida, incluyendo el motivo del *tableau vivant*.

Pasamos a ocuparnos de las dos obras que hemos seleccionado para nuestro estudio, “La iglesia jesuita de G.” y “El retrato oval”. El inicio de estas dos historias parece estar movido por una aparente casualidad, pues en Poe el herido visitante llega en mitad de la noche a un misterioso castillo abandonado donde busca refugio. En el caso de Hoffmann, es una avería la que obliga al visitante a pasar unos días con los jesuitas del pueblo. El ambiente nocturno (medianoche) y misterioso en que la acción se abre ya nos hace intuir la posible presencia de lo sobrenatural.[16] En efecto, el retrato como elemento decorativo de espacios misteriosos connota “un siniestro terror” (Hoffmann, “Iglesia” 160): la casa (en Hoffmann) y el castillo (en Poe), recrean ambientes habituales de las novelas góticas. Esta ambientación hace más factible la extraña animación de objetos inertes (estatuas, muñecos, cuadros, autómatas, casas…), que Jourde y Tortonese denominan “simulacros” por ser imitaciones del hombre, al igual que éste es copia de Dios (62).

La ostentosa decoración de los aposentos del castillo y de la iglesia jesuita, constituida por trofeos, esculturas y pinturas les imprime un aire de antiguo mausoleo. De entre todas estas antigüedades, hay un cuadro que llama particularmente la atención de los visitantes, aunque ninguno se fija en ellos en un principio. En el caso de Hoffman, sólo lo mira cuando el pintor se ha ido. En Poe, el visitante sólo lo ve al posar sobre él la luz del candelabro. Su primer impulso es cerrar los ojos, conmovido por el horror de encontrar en el retrato oval “el hechizo de una absoluta posibilidad de vida” (Poe, “Retrato” 132), que le atrapa en el espejismo de la tela.

Más adelante, la verdadera historia se desvela a través de un manuscrito y un libro respectivamente, lo que sirve para autentificar la magia que los cuadros desprenden mediante la técnica del texto dentro del texto o puesta en abismo. Por tanto, en ambos casos encontramos dos historias: la del artista y la del cuadro, que se complementan mutuamente. La ambivalencia del argumento se configura a través de visiones contradictorias: las historias son narradas en analepsis por el visitante, que cuenta su historia en primera persona. Se trata de un narrador homodiegético, en el caso de Poe, que a diferencia de la mayoría de sus cuentos, no está presente como personaje. En Hoffmann el visitante sí se presenta al pintor Berthold y se ofrece como ayudante suyo.

Un cambio de instancia narrativa nos coloca a un narrador heterodiegético en mitad de la acción, puesto que el manuscrito/libro está relatado por otra persona, lo que le imprime un aire de leyenda a la vez que nos deja ver que ha habido, al menos, otro visitante en la iglesia/castillo que ha conocido la historia del desgraciado pintor y ha querido inmortalizarla. Así, la atención pasa al relato secundario, donde se nos revelan los verdaderos protagonistas y el hilo argumental, que se van haciendo conocidos tanto a los visitantes como al lector, consiguiendo así la identificación de dos niveles de lectura dentro y fuera de la historia.

En los relatos secundarios se narra la historia de dos jóvenes pintores, "espíritus superiores" (Hoffmann, "Iglesia" 176), de personalidad vehemente, austera y enfermiza que realizan con celo el retrato de su amada, que representa el ideal. El artista de Hoffmann, Berthold, que busca el verdadero espíritu del arte, puede ver las figuras que desea pintar sólo en sueños. Al intentar reproducirlas en el óleo, se desvanecen. Sin embargo, ha iniciado un impresionante retrato de una Santa Catalina movido por su ideal de belleza, que después encuentra personalizado en la princesa Angiola: "a mí se me reveló lo Absoluto en una visión maravillosa, fue un instante de verdadera inspiración artística […] los rayos del sol iluminaban su rostro angelical. Me observaba con una mirada indescriptible… era Santa Catalina… pero no, era mucho más que eso… era mi idea, ¡era mi ideal!" ("Iglesia" 178). Este ideal trasciende en cada una de sus creaciones, que lucen un brillo y resplandor inigualables.

Tras salvar a esta princesa de la muerte y casarse con ella el pintor pierde la inspiración, puesto que el ideal materializado queda desposeído de su valor iluminador. Como se concluye en "El salón del rey Arturo", lo que busca el pintor es "una eterna morada íntima para la amada..., nunca una posesión física" (171-72). Una vez que la mujer ideal es alcanzada, su presencia se torna nefasta, pues como asevera Berthold: "¡Ella, sólo ella era la causa de mi desgracia! ¡No, no había sido el ideal lo que se me había aparecido!" (Hoffmann, "Iglesia" 181). Así, la belleza representada en el cuadro supone un "simulacro", parafraseando a Jourde y Tortonese, del ideal humano.[17]

En el caso de Poe la Belleza absoluta se le revela al artista en su mujer, que intenta plasmar a través de su obra. Este ideal mimético de perfección (en el que Poe pone un especial énfasis) lleva al artista a imprimir un aire de 'viveza' y de extrema verosimilitud en su retrato,

hasta el punto de que, pincelada a pincelada, va otorgando vida propia al lienzo, mientras que la existencia de su amada se va apagando gradualmente. Aunque expuesto desde puntos de vista dispares, ambas obras nos revelan la incompatibilidad del Arte y la Vida, del ideal y la realidad que lo anula.[18] La oposición en Poe es más violenta, y concluye con un asesinato simbólico que se lleva a cabo a través del lienzo.

Otro punto en común es la voluntaria inactividad de las amadas, que, como indica Poe, a pesar de recelar del Arte "que era su rival" ("Retrato" 133), no emiten una sola queja. Hoffmann refleja la terrible tristeza de la princesa: "¿Cómo podía ser que ante esos ojos maravillosos, aureolados de profunda sombra, no brotara en el corazón humano ese anhelo eternamente insatisfecho?" ("Iglesia" 168). Angiola llega a morir brutalmente de manos de su amado, sacrificio necesario para que éste recupere su talento y sea capaz de finalizar el cuadro, consiguiendo el efecto de sobrecogimiento en el observador. El joven artista de Poe, a cada pincelada que imprime en la tela, provoca la debilitación de su amada, que, al último trazo, muere. El momento de anagnórisis final ("¡estaba muerta!" ["Retrato" 133]) supone un golpe de efecto, transmitiendo al lector la mayor sensación de extrañamiento y sorpresa. El artista ha logrado terminar el retrato de su amada imprimiendo en él ese deseado aire de 'verosimilitud' o 'vivacidad' que exige este tipo de producción, sin notar la decadencia que conllevaba en la modelo. La constatación del visitante, que siente esa misma presencia sobrenatural al iluminar el retrato con el candelabro, refleja cómo la belleza ideal de la mujer se mantiene en la inmortalidad, lo que nos recuerda a la máxima hipocrática, *ars longa, vita brevis*.

Las historias cuentan cómo los artistas se enamoran de sus mujeres sólo porque representan el ideal del arte. Pero esta admiración se torna destructiva, puesto que ambos pintores están enamorados del propio arte y no de sus esposas (González 198). La imposibilidad de amar es provocada por la metafórica ceguera del artista, que le impide ver el funesto vínculo que se establece entre la realidad y la representación, el modelo y el retrato, lo que Jourde y Tortonese denominan "delirio de poder" (175). En efecto, la creación del retrato como duplicación de uno mismo supone una transgresión prometeica del orden natural (pues Berthold se identifica con este titán de la mitología clásica [Hoffmann, "Iglesia" 165]), un intento de inmortalizar en el lienzo la bella imagen de la juventud y la inocencia que sobrevivirá al individuo cuando éste

haya muerto. Como ocurre con el resto de los objetos 'simuladores', el retrato cobra una vida enigmática y persigue o 'castiga' al transgresor de una norma más o menos sagrada (Herrero 50). En este sentido, las obras de arte son el producto, afirman Jourde y Tortonese, de la pretensión blasfematoria del artista creador y los peligros que éste debe correr para conseguir la salvación. Esta transgresión, unida a la malévola fascinación que provoca lo sobrenatural, refleja también una cierta angustia o claustrofobia y pone de relieve las flaquezas del personaje, cuyas fuerzas son llevadas al límite (Santos 121).

La duplicación en el retrato supone, en el caso de Hoffmann y Poe, el fin de la disociación entre cuerpo y alma, ya que la belleza de la mujer alcanza la inmortalidad a través del cuadro, pese a la necesidad de morir que ello implique. Desde esta perspectiva, la búsqueda estético-espiritual encubre un asesinato (metafísico en el caso de Poe; real, en el caso de Hoffmann), puesto que, a través de la creación pictórica, el artista está matando a su amada para otorgarle vida eterna en el lienzo, haciendo triunfar sobre la existencia terrenal el ideal superior del Arte. Como advierte Berthold, la aspiración al ideal es el fin sagrado del Arte: "la aprehensión y comprensión de la naturaleza según el profundo significado de su más alta esencia, la cual incita a todos los seres a una existencia superior" ("Iglesia" 175). Se explica así una misteriosa relación de causa y efecto entre el modelo y el retrato, con el artista-visionario como mediador.

Si el personaje principal en los cuentos fantásticos suele aparecer caracterizado como un ser vacío o desarraigado, la imagen que ofrecen Poe y Hoffmann del artista-creador es la de un ser excepcionalmente apasionado,[19] cuyo énfasis creativo produce (a través de una sublime ironía) el efecto contrario al deseado, pues la búsqueda de la Belleza absoluta le convierte en un desdichado (que, en el caso de Berthold, termina suicidándose). Esto sólo es posible entendiendo el arte como un proceso literalmente creador, por lo que el artista se erige como un ser privilegiado, al que la fatalidad del sino le lleva a cometer un error irremediable. Para estos artistas, que intentan superar el nivel mimético de la creación, "el mero ejercicio de copiar ya no les sirve de nada" (Hoffmann, "Iglesia" 171). Sienten "el impulso hacia lo alto, hacia el ideal" (175), y tratan de mostrarlo al resto de los hombres en sus obras. Javier Sáez de Ibarra, quien escribe la "Introducción" al breve relato poeniano en la excelente traducción de Julio Cortázar, afirma que

el cuento condensa una múltiple experiencia del terror: “presentido por la mujer, asalta al viajero y toca al artista cuando descubre lo sucedido” (Poe, “Retrato” 129). Es evidente que el impacto en el artista es más explícito en la descripción de Hoffmann, quien describe minuciosamente su autodestrucción.

Los temas de los celos del arte, del egoísmo y de la contradicción entre el arte y la vida, que aparecen colocados en dimensiones contrapuestas, se desprenden de estos relatos donde la amada se desdobla en el retrato y en la propia existencia. En ambos casos, como bien apunta Mª Ángeles González, el precio del cuadro es la vida de la modelo (201), acabando así con la alteridad que el artista percibe y plasma en su obra. Por lo tanto, si en un principio tomábamos como doble al cuadro, finalmente comprendemos que las mujeres de carne y hueso son las meras imitaciones del ideal, al que no pueden llegar a asimilarse ni sustituir. La relación de los dobles se subvierte, provocando un golpe de efecto en el lector. Esta transmigración de almas[20] de la mujer al retrato ofrece una visión del doble en consonancia con Hoffmann, para quien “el cristal representa el genio, el ‘yo’ puro y verdadero ya que la existencia no es más que un espacio reflejado irreal” (Santos 99).

Finalmente, hemos de señalar que la pervivencia de los amables rasgos de la amada en el retrato viviente simboliza, sarcásticamente, la metáfora de la belleza inmortal, que es celebrada a través del tiempo por la creación artística. Como reconoce Traugott, el aprendiz de artista en “El Salón del rey Arturo” al referirse al ideal, “seguirás siendo siempre mía, pues eres el arte creador que vive en mí” (Hoffmann 175).

Por lo tanto, además de coincidir en temas semejantes y un desarrollo argumental similar, ambos relatos utilizan los mismos motivos y símbolos. Mientras que Hoffmann adorna la historia con infinitos detalles y tramas ‘secundarias’ que no afectan al argumento principal, el breve relato poeniano, de apenas tres páginas de extensión, y con tan sólo dos personajes, tiene una precisión absolutamente contundente. Consigue tener una mayor efectividad, puesto que cada palabra aparece minuciosamente escogida, recreando la atmósfera y desarrollando el argumento a través de los principales procedimientos del cuento fantástico, condensándolo magistralmente sin perder un ápice de misterio. El hilo de similitudes temáticas que podemos trazar entre ambos relatos no sólo se limita a la concepción

del arte, sino que los dos reflejan una misma configuración del retrato como doble y caracterizan a la mujer como una entidad espiritual (Santos 87).

La generación romántica, que ampliamente debatió en sus obras la cuestión de la identidad del individuo como un ser mutable, inestable y escindido, cuya personalidad escapaba a las interpretaciones lógicas de la razón ilustrada, inmortalizó en múltiples relatos el retrato que cobra vida a través de fuerzas que, del mismo modo, trascienden las reglas del raciocinio humano.

Como hemos señalado al analizar estos dos cuentos, el motivo del retrato encantado aparece intrínsecamente ligado al tema del doble del mismo modo que sucede con el espejo, lo que les convierte en parábolas literarias sobre la función del arte en su época. Se trata de narraciones de dos figuras con un extraordinario parecido entre sí, siendo una de éstas el producto de la expresión artística y otra una mujer de excepcional belleza. El contraste entre estas dos figuras suscita el eterno debate entre el Arte y la Vida, y más en concreto, el arte como vía de escape a la mediocridad de la existencia y acceso al ideal visionario, pues, como expone Traugott en "El salón del rey Arturo"

> [El artista] ve el ideal y siente la impotencia de captarlo; éste huye, cree el artista, sin posible recuperación. Pero entonces siente de nuevo un valor divino, lucha, combate y la desesperación se disuelve en una dulce añoranza que le da fuerzas y le impulsa a seguir siempre en busca de la amada, a la que se aproxima cada vez más y más, sin poderla alcanzar nunca (Hoffmann, "Salón" 157).

Hoffmann, a quien el tiempo ha confirmado como el más universal y más extremo de los 'románticos' alemanes anticipó, junto a Poe, muchos de los tópicos de lo fantástico moderno (Herrero 32), a través de "una extraña tensión o una inexplicable confusión de las fronteras entre lo natural y lo sobrenatural, entre lo racional y lo suprarracional, entre el mundo soñado o imaginado y el mundo de la experiencia real" (Herrero 49). La cercanía de lo fantástico a la vida real se convierte, pues, en punto de partida del cuento moderno. La presencia de lo extraño e insólito se ha de explicar a partir de esa realidad, de manera que el lector crea que no hay nada más extraño y fantástico que la propia existencia. Como opinó Todorov, para Hoffmann, "las manifestaciones reales de la vida son más maravillosas que todo lo que pueda imaginarse de forma fantástica" (González 107).

El retrato representa en estas obras el intersticio por donde se cuela la irrealidad, provocando una sensación de extrañamiento ante la ambivalencia entre el mundo real y el imaginario. El juego del doble representado en el retrato se sitúa en una dimensión paralela y contribuye a crear una atmósfera de desconcierto sobre la que se sustenta la propia esencia de lo fantástico. El retrato animado se convierte en una forma de espejo o la voluntaria clonación pictórica del individuo. Sin embargo, el juego literario del doble reflejado en el espejo o inmortalizado en el lienzo representa una visión del ser humano caracterizado por una despersonalización o disolución identitaria. De este modo, Hoffmann y Poe dan expresión a una preocupación que los románticos observaban en el mundo posterior a la Ilustración. Como se deduce de la teoría del doble de Jourde y Tortonese, el retrato, en tanto que simulacro o *non-moi*, supone una ruptura del equilibrio racionalista que origina una doble inquietud: plantea dudas sobre la autonomía del sujeto y provoca un sentimiento de desposesión de uno mismo (9, 181). Por su parte, Sáez de Ibarra apunta varias cuestiones cruciales sobre la producción artística que se derivan de estos relatos, tales como: ¿cuál es el límite del arte? ¿Cómo podemos liberarnos de su poder absoluto? (Poe, "Retrato" 130). Gerardo Pérez explica a este respecto que el artista, al componer un retrato, realiza una imitación de los rasgos físicos de aquél a quien considera superior, intentando otorgarle sus cualidades. El arte posibilita ese transitivismo (291), pero, ¿a qué precio? Baudelaire, el hermano espiritual de Poe, manifiesta en un bellísimo poema en prosa llamado "El *confiteor* del artista" (1855) esta misma preocupación, al concluir que "el estudio de lo bello es un duelo en el que el artista grita de espanto antes de ser vencido" (Baudelaire 53).[21] Bajo el prisma del romanticismo el artista se posiciona de un modo hasta entonces inimaginable, por lo que podemos concluir que estos relatos inspirados en la pintura recrean el misterio, la gloria y el fracaso de la creación artística.

NOTAS

[1] La propia creación artística se basa en el juego expresivo de la "mímesis" y la "diégesis", que, en el caso del retrato supone reflejar la realidad (en este caso para hacer reconocible a una persona) pasada por el tamiz del artista creador que, desde su propia sensibilidad, percibe esta realidad (el modelo) de una manera determinada.

[2] Término que empleamos de forma anacrónica, puesto que los primeros autores del período nunca se autodenominaron así (Marí 469).

[3] Influencia declarada en Hoffmann, a quien prologó sus *Historias Fantásticas*

de 1814. En ambos autores encontramos dos aspectos capitales del tema: "la manía destructora de un Doble perseguidor … y el papel de la mujer como desencadenante de la catástrofe" (Bargalló 18).

[4] Obras que aparecen conjuntamente en la antología *Relatos célebres sobre la pintura*. Barcelona: Áltera, 1997. 11-38 y 127-31.

[5] Asegura Calvino que, dada la difusión e influencia de su obra en distintas literaturas, "al menos en la primera mitad del siglo XIX, cuento fantástico es sinónimo de cuento a lo Hoffman" (12). Este autor es además considerado creador del género (Pérez y Fortea 28) hasta el punto de que el Diccionario de Émile Littré (1863) define cuento fantástico como "cuentos de hadas, de aparecidos y, en particular, cuentos puestos de moda por el alemán Hoffmann, en los que lo sobrenatural tiene un gran papel" (Jourde y Tortonese 34; Pérez y Fortea 29). Poe, a su vez, penetró de lleno en la estética romántica europea a través de la traducción de Baudelaire hasta llegar a ser, en palabras de Italo Calvino, "el autor que más ha influido sobre el género después de Hoffmann" (15).

[6] En esta obra, Cobb reelabora los principales argumentos de su tesis doctoral, defendida en la Universidad de Columbia. El libro gozó de una cierta fama en el centenario del nacimiento de Poe, y fue recomendado con frecuencia a los estudiantes de dicha universidad. *Vid.* Referencias.

[7] En una vieja crónica se explica la aventura de cierto gentilhombre parisino: "un día, mientras paseaba tranquilamente por los muelles del Sena en compañía de sus amigos, de pronto empezó a gritar de dolor y corrió a tirarse al río, de donde se le sacó con grandes dificultades. Cuando le preguntaron si se había vuelto loco, pronunció esta extraña respuesta: 'Mi casa está ardiendo y mi retrato ya no es más que cenizas'. En efecto, poco tiempo después sus compañeros constataron la veracidad de su aserto y conocieron con pavor la eficacia de las ciencias secretas. También el gentilhombre aprendió, a costa suya, que la magia es reversible, ya que después de encargar su retrato mágico para que recibiera en su lugar los golpes que le llegasen, le sorprendió constatar que lo contrario también podía ocurrir y que había corrido el riesgo de quemarse en lugar de su imagen extrañamente rebelde a las llamas. El hecho de tirarse al agua detuvo la magia y restableció la norma, con gran perjuicio para la imagen pero para consuelo del interesado" (Louis Cattiaux [2009]). "Capítulo X: Origen". *Física y la metafísica de la pintura*. Trad. Raimón Arola. El URL de este documento es: http://www.lapuertaonline.es/bifm7.html).

[8] Este tema cobró un gran auge tras la publicación de la obra *Las afinidades electivas* (1809) de Goethe donde éste comenta la sensación que suscita en los espectadores la confusión entre realidad e ilusión y la ambivalencia que hay tras los retratos encantados (Ziolkowski 90).

[9] Este mito, que ya aparece en las *Metamorfosis* de Ovidio, cuenta cómo Galatea, escultura realizada por Pigmalión, cobra vida humana por intercesión de Afrodita.

[10] En su ensayo, "Das Unheimliche" (1919), Freud explica esta noción de extraña familiaridad, el reconocimiento de un elemento familiar que parece extraño por inhibición (Jourde y Tortonese 62).

[11] Traducción nuestra. Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Penguin, 2003. 3.

[12] El interés por los *Märchen* en general reflejaba la preocupación romántica por lo popular, lo infantil y lo irracional. Para una discusión más pormenorizada, remitimos al lector a los siguientes estudios: Sonia Santos Vila. *E.T.A. Hoffmann en sus narraciones fantásticas*. 77 & ss. (*Vid.* Referencias); Ángela García Canelles. "Memoria del cuento: Evolución y significación del cuento en el romanticismo alemán". *Memòria, escriptura i imatge*. Eds. Joan Manuel Verdegal y Josep Roderic Guzmán. Castellón: Universitat Jaume I (1996): 49-62.

[13] Adivinación mediante el espejo. "Catroptomancia". Diccionario de la Lengua Española. Vigésimo segunda edición. 10 de mayo de 2010.
<http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO_BUS=3&LEMA=catroptomancia>.

[14] La configuración del retrato animado influyó en la ópera de Jacques Offenbach centrada en la figura del autor y en sus personajes, *Los cuentos de Hoffmann* (1881). El

segundo acto, *Antonia Canta*, reformula la historia de “El Consejero Krespel”, añadiendo el retrato viviente de la madre de la cantante en el clímax de la representación. Esta estética del doble, que también influyó en *Peter Schlemihl*, de Adalvert von Chamisso (1814), provocó la reacción de Clemens Brentano, quien confesó en una carta a Hoffmann el miedo que le provocaba su propia sombra a la luz de las velas, tras la lectura de “Las aventuras de la noche de San Silvestre” (1815).

[15] El principio serapióntico, derivado de esta compilación, sirve para designar en Hoffmann el máximo criterio artístico (Pérez y Fortea 35), que consiste en transportar lo desconocido y lo fantástico a la realidad. Este principio, poco estudiado en España, ha sido recogido en la obra de Michele Cometa. *Descrizione e Desiderio: I quadri viventi di E.T.A. Hofmmann*. Roma: Meltemi, 2005.

[16] En “La iglesia jesuita de G.”, la primera visita a la iglesia y el encuentro con Berthold, el misterioso pintor, se produce de madrugada y en medio de una tormenta, aunque más adelante, cuando conoce su terrible historia, decide verle sólo de día.

[17] Théophile Gautier, en “El toisón de oro” (1839), cuenta una historia que recuerda, en mucho, a la de Hoffmann. Un joven se encuentra dividido entre su amor ideal hacia un cuadro de una Magdalena de Rubens y un amor físico por una joven llamada Gretchen, de gran similitud a aquélla y cuya belleza refleja. El joven pintor realiza el retrato de Gretchen, quien, al convertirse en modelo, logra cautivar al artista y anular su “devoción” amorosa por la Magdalena.

[18] Théophile Gautier, admirador del autor, refiere en “Onofrio o la imaginaria desazón de un admirador de Hoffmann” (1832) la historia de un joven pintor y poeta totalmente entregado al cultivo de su imaginación que acaba volviéndose loco. Hoffmann en “El salón del rey Arturo” (obra que Ziolkowski menciona brevemente [84]) recrea el tema del misterio del retrato andante. El protagonista se enamora del retrato de una joven vestida a la usanza medieval alemana. Se entera de que la joven retratada era la hija del artista, que había fallecido no hacía mucho. La sensación de extrañamiento sobrecoge al joven cuando, un día, se la encuentra cara a cara. El artista se la lleva y la casa con un magistrado. En este periodo de ausencia el joven sigue amando a su ideal, que, en un giro típicamente romántico, sigue existiendo en el reino del arte (Ziolkowski 84). Esta visión sobrenatural que es, en apariencia, un retrato andante, se racionaliza al descubrir que el supuesto doble no es sino el original del retrato.

[19] En *Los elixires del diablo* es el pintor el que aparece como entidad fantasmal (Casanova 63).

[20] La transmigración del alma supone la reencarnación del alma inmortal, que pasa de un cuerpo muerto a otro vivo, integrando así lo espiritual y lo material. La transmigración de almas, o metempsícosis, que tiene que ver con el ocultismo y las teorías del karma hindú y el brahmanismo, también se basa en nuevas tendencias, como el mesmerismo poeniano. La cuestión del hipnotismo y las ciencias ocultas pone en relación a Hoffmann y Poe con Novalis.

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CALIBAN AND FERDINAND'S BLENDING: TWO WAYS OF *SERVITIUM* UNDER THE SAME SPEECH MODEL IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*

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Abstract

Caliban and Ferdinand play the role of servants in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Caliban is forced to serve Prospero and his daughter Miranda since his mother's banishment. He is son to Sycorax, the witch who ruled the island before Prospero and Miranda first arrived and forced him to slavery. Being tired of serving them, though, he does not hesitate to offer his service to Trinculo right after his arrival and will remind his willingness to serve Trinculo throughout the play. Caliban wants Prospero dead and the newcomer is only expected to kill him in exchange for his joyful service. Ferdinand, on the other hand, is also forced to serve Prospero and his daughter Miranda soon after his arrival and until he falls in love with the lady. From this point onwards, he starts serving them in exchange for the lady's favour. He is pleased with his new role as a love servant despite his noble origins. And as such, both Ferdinand and Caliban end up happily playing the role of the slave-in-exchange-for-joy despite their initially differentiated social positions. In this sense, they both follow the same classical model pointed out in Eclogue II by Virgil which, at the same time, blurs the possible differences separating them. More specifically when it allows the audience's blending of the two speech models.

Keywords: speech models, cognitive scenario, blending.

Resumen

Caliban y Ferdinand representan el papel de esclavos por amor en *La Tempestad* de William Shakespeare. Caliban se ve forzado a servir a

Próspero y su hija Miranda desde que su madre fuera desterrada de la isla. La madre, Sycorax, gobernaba allí antes de la llegada de Próspero y Miranda por lo que Caliban se considera a sí mismo como el legítimo heredero. Cansado de servirles, no duda en ofrecer sus servicios a Trínculo desde la llegada de éste a la isla y durante toda la obra. Su único objetivo es la muerte de Próspero y por eso espera que Trínculo lo mate a cambio de servirlo. Ferdinand, por otro lado, también se ve forzado a servir a Próspero y su hija desde su llegada a la isla y hasta que se enamora de Miranda. Desde ese momento en adelante su servicio se convierte en un servicio amoroso altamente gratificante. Por tanto, Ferdinand y Caliban terminan siendo esclavos a cambio de jugosas recompensas a pesar de sus posiciones inicialmente alejadas. En este sentido, ambos siguen el mismo patrón clásico representado por la Égloga II de Virgilio que, a su vez, ayuda a borrar también las diferencias que parecían separarlos al principio. Y es que este patrón favorece el hecho de que la audiencia relacione estos dos modelos discursivos.

Palabras clave: modelos discursivos, escenario cognitivo, “blending”.

The act of reading implies an open-ended invitation to the reader to join the author in the co-creation of the story, by filling in the holes that the text leaves open. But the reader’s act of understanding is not always dependent on what is found in the actual text (or co-text) in so many words, but on the total context in which those words are found – and are found to make sense, through an active, pragmatic collaboration between author and reader (Mey 255). We can say in this sense that Caliban and Ferdinand end up playing the same role of slave-in-exchange-for-joy in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* despite their apparently different motivations and backgrounds. It is not surprising then that they both follow the same speech model established by Virgil’s second Eclogue in order to try to get relief and joy through service, their common use of this Virgilian source being also a good authorial hint for intended readers and audience to be able to blur the possible differences which seem to separate them throughout the story.

Contradictorily enough, Prospero is an exiled, a refugee who takes the island for a place for tyranny. He reproduces there the same patterns of control that he is supposed to have left behind through exile. Not in

vain, as Caliban explains himself in his claim to the island, Prospero first banished the witch Sycorax, the previous legitimate ruler, to force the witch's actual heir –Caliban– to slavery later on:

> CALIBAN. I must eat my dinner.
> This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
> Which thou tak'st from me. When thou came'st first,
> Thou strok'st me and made much of me; would'st give me
> Water with berries in't, and teach me how
> To name the bigger and how the less,
> That burn by day and night; and then I loved thee,
> And showed thee all the qualities o'th' isle,
> The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile-
> Cursed be I that I did so! All the charms
> Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats light on you!
> For I am all the subjects that you have,
> Which first was mine own king, and here you sty me
> In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
> The rest o'th'island. (1.2.330-44)

Though apparently stronger than Caliban, these two Shakespearean characters are not as different as Prospero will manifest the whole play through when trying to diminish his responsibility for Caliban's inhuman life conditions. Kevin Pask has already set the connections between Prospero and Sycorax, Caliban's mother, pointing to examples like: "Sycorax imprisoned Ariel in a tree trunk; Prospero threatens Ariel with the same punishment" (391). Besides, Caliban's dynastic claim comes from his mother Sycorax and it is based on magic in the same way as Prospero's ruling power is based no less on his supernatural powers. He rules the climate and spirits of the air, Ariel included, and his magic has the power to negate anything that the eyes may see.

For Prospero, "The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, The solemn temples, the great globe itself, / Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, / And like the substantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with sleep" (4.1.152-58). He states that he can flatter the enemies to be defeated with imaginary banquets and inexistent delicacies: "[…] My high charms work / And these mine enemies are all knit up / In their distractions; they now are in my power; / And in these fits I leave them, while I visit / Young Ferdinand, whom they suppose is drown'd, / And his and mine loved darling" (3.3.98b-103).

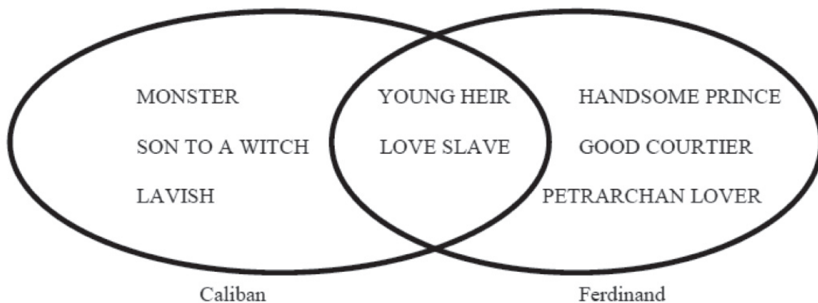
Caliban's claim on the island is supported indeed by his intention to get the love favour of Properous' daughter, Miranda, aware as he is of being the legitimate heir to Sycorax, and hence the actual ruler of the island. Yet Prospero wants his daughter Miranda to get her lost in exile courtly position back through her marriage to Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Naples and recently arrived in the island through shipwreck (Greenblatt, 154). The ruler "tries to insert his daughter Miranda into the dynastic system of alliance" by means of promoting her marriage to Ferdinand (Pask 397). Pask explains indeed that "The abhorred Caliban is exchanged for Ferdinand as soon as Caliban's exit is staged at the same moment as Ferdinand's entrance in Act I, Scene 2, 373" (391). Ferdinand, in the meantime, "increasingly inserts himself into an extraordinary idealised homosocial relationship to Prospero" (Pask 391). The father's preference is thus implicitly staged and consequently perceived by the intended audience as unfair. Needless is to say that Prospero only answers to Caliban's claim in terms of mistreatment. As Pask also explains, he never dares mention Sycorax to try to avoid discussing Caliban's legitimate rights on the island (391): "Thou most lying slave, / Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee, / Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee / In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child" (1.2.344-48).

Ferdinand is son to King Alonso. He arrives in Prospero's island after shipwreck and, according to Ariel's version to Prospero, he stays there alone and convinced that his father passed away with the rest of the crew: "And for the rest o'th'fleet, / Which I dispersed, they all have met again, / And are upon the Mediterranean float, / Bound sadly home for Naples, / Supposing that they saw the King's wrecked, / And his great person perish" (1.2: 231-35). Like Caliban, Ferdinand thinks himself to be the King of Naples after his father's death: "He does hear me, / And that he does, I weep: myself am Naples, / Who with mine eyes, never since at ebb, beheld / The King my father wrecked". But he falls in love with Miranda soon after his arrival, being that the reason why he is always pleased with the idea of serving her and her father despite his noble condition: "Might I but through my prison once a day / Behold this maid. All corners else o'th'earth / Let liberty make use of space enough / Have I in such a prison" (1.2.491-94).

Caliban, meanwhile, has been abovementioned to be son to the witch of the island, Sycorax, who was "banished for one thing she did"

(1.2.267) and claims to be the owner of the island. He is a "freckled whelp, hag-born-not honoured with / A human shape" (1.2.283-84) who was obliged to serve Prospero and his daughter Miranda after he had been blamed with trying to force her virtue. Miranda shares her father's part and tries to justify him saying that Caliban is actually a savage who never took into consideration the fact that she had always pitied him, thus deserving his present life conditions: "I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known. But thy vile race- / Though thou didst learn-had that in't which good natures / Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou / Deservedly confined into this rock, / Who hadst deserved more than a prison" (1.2.356b-61).

Despite the differences pointed by Prospero and Miranda, though, the audience can now perceive Caliban and Ferdinand as two young heirs forced into slavery for love reasons. Ferdinand is so in love with Miranda that he is happy to serve her and her father in exchange for her love favours. Caliban has been turned into a slave after he showed his intentions to marry Miranda openly.



Both of them are young heirs turned into love slaves then. Following Fauconnier and Turner's model when trying to depict the cognitive scenario in the audience's mind, we can say that at any moment in the construction of the conceptual network the structure that the inputs seem to share is captured in a generic space, which, in turn, maps onto each of the inputs (47). This means Caliban and Ferdinand and their love for Miranda. A given element in the generic space maps onto paired counterparts in the two input spaces. That is to say: Caliban and his most defining characteristics on the one hand, and Ferdinand on the other, the first being a lavish monster son to a witch and the second a handsome prince who, at the same time, is also a good courtier

and a Petrarchan lover. In Blending Theory, structure from two inputs mental spaces is projected to a new space, the blend, here consisting of coincidental features characterizing both Caliban and Ferdinand. They both are young heirs turned into love slaves.

With classical and mythological references throughout, *The Tempest* has been commonly considered to be the most Virgilian of Shakespeare's plays. Some passages from Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's account of Medea in Book VII of his *Metamorphoses* are probably the most important Latin sources. But Virgil's Eclogue II plays also a very important role in this work being the speech model shared by Caliban and Ferdinand.[1] And the fact that they are both able to use the same speech model as well as the same Latin source does not only dissipate the possible differences between them in an implicit but quite obvious manner for the intended audience, but also contributes to call Prospero's favouritism into question one more time.

His noble condition given, Ferdinand wooes and worships Miranda as if he was at court despite the wilderness and the isolation of the island. His courtly love speech makes sense in this context thanks only to Miranda's education. She comes from court in spite of having been rised by Prospero in the island. As he tells his daughter: "Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit / Than other princes can that have more time / For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful" (1.2.171-74). Thus Ferdinand can sing Miranda's superlative beauty according to the courtly conventions: "But you, O you, / So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature's best" (3.1.37-48). He does even show his willingness to serve her in exchange for her favour according to the *Servitium amoris* –Love service– convention:

> FERDINAND. There be some sports are painful, and their labour
> Delight in set off; some kinds of baseness
> Are nobly undergone; and most poor matters
> Point to rich ends. This my mean task
> Would be as heavy to me, as odious, but
> The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead,
> And makes my labours pleasures. O she is
> Ten times more gentle than her father's crabbed,
> And he is composed of harshness. I must remove
> Some thousands of these logs and pile them up,
> Upon a sore injunction. My sweet mistress
> Weeps when she sees me work, and says such baseness

> Had never like executor. I forget.
> But these sweet thoughts do even refresh my labours,
> Most busil'est when I do it. (3.1.1-15)

Caliban, meanwhile, hates serving Prospero and his daughter Miranda to the point that he does not hesitate to try to convince another character in the play, Trinculo, to take him as his servant. In exchange, he only expects him to kill Prospero and get relieved from his oppression. In fact, he feels such a need for freedom that his speech resembles that of an insistent lover trying to convince his beloved to go with him and be his love:

> CALIBAN. I'll show thee the best springs; I'll pluck thee berries;
> I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough.
> A plague upon the tyrant that I serve!
> I'll bear him no more sticks, but follow thee,
> Thou wondrous man. (2.2.154-58)
>
> I prithee let me bring thee where crabs grow,
> And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts,
> Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
> To snare the nimble marmoset. I'll bring thee
> To clust'ring filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee
> Young scamels from the rock. Wilt thou go with me? (2.2.161-66)

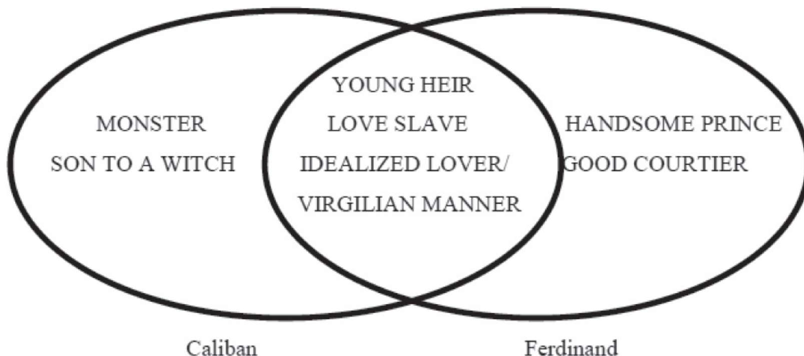
Caliban's invitation is quite much in the light of the catalogue –*Munera amoris*– used by Corydon in Eclogue II by Latin Virgil; one of the most important sources for catalogues ever:

> Come hither, lovely boy! See, for you the Nymphs bring lilies in heaped-up baskets; for you the fair Naiad, plucking pale violets and poppy-heads, blends narcissus and sweet scented fennel-flower; then, twinning them with cassia and other sweet herbs, sets off the delicate hyacinth with the golden marigold. My own hands will gather quinces, pale with tender down, and chestnuts, which my Amaryllis loved. Waxen plums I will add –this fruit, too, shall have its honour. You too, O laurels, I will pluck, and you, their neighbour myrtle, for so placed you blend sweet fragrance.[2]

Caliban is "a deeply un-Virgilian creation" (Bate 247); a monster who can hardly express himself thanks to Miranda's efforts to teach him how to speak properly. Despite his desperate invitation and his catalogue of offerings, Trinculo cannot avoid thinking of him in terms of the money that he could make in case that he took him to England with him:

> What have we here-a man or a fish?-dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday-fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man-any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. Legged like a man, and his fins like arms! Warm, o' my troth! I do now let loose my opinion, hold it no longer: this is no fish, but an islander, that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt. (2.2.24-35)

It is highly surprising then that Caliban has enough knowledge of the Classics to follow Virgil's model in order to try to convince Trinculo to kill Prospero in exchange for his service and idolatry. But the fact that Ferdinand does also go to Virgil's Eclogue II for the conclusion of his love speech is no doubt even more striking. Corydon concludes Eclogue II with the words: "See, the bullocks return with the ploughs tilted from the yoke, and the sinking sun doubles the lengthening shadows: yet me love burns; for what bound may be set to love?"[3] Quite similarly, Ferdinand concludes his speech by pointing out: "O most dear mistress, / The sun will set before I shall discharge / What I must strive to do" (3.1.22-24). And, in doing so, he is actually rounding off Caliban's catalogue. The catalogue of offerings in Caliban's invitation corresponds with lines 45-55 in Eclogue II by Virgil whereas Ferdinand's words –"The sun will set before I shall discharge / What I must strive to do" (3.1.23-24)– match the end of Corydon's song. They do not only follow the same classical model despite their different cultural and social backgrounds. Their speeches also complement each other so that Ferdinand's words are the perfect end to Caliban's persuasive speech.



Caliban and Ferdinand follow the same classical source as well as the same speech model despite their initial differences. The first is a savage man with the intention of getting rid of Prospero through murder:

> CALIBAN. No more dams I'll make for fish,
> Nor fetch in firing
> At requiring,
> Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish:
> 'Ban, 'Ban, Ca-Caliban
> Has a new master-get a new man!
> Freedom, high-day! High-day, freedom!
> Freedom, high-day, freedom! (2.2.175-81)

He asks Trinculo to accept him as his new master with affectionate invitations. Prospero is to be killed so that Caliban can get the freedom he craves for. But he only manages to be the target of Trinculo's jokes. Trinculo always refers to Caliban throughout the play as: "An abominable monster!" (2.2.152-53), "A most ridiculous monster, to make a wonder of a poor drunkard!" (2.2.159-60), or even "A howling monster; a drunken monster!" (2.2.172).

Ferdinand, on the other hand, is actually a courtly man in love with Miranda. His words can easily adopt the common structure of a love speech because the beloved is learned enough and ready for courtship despite her isolated life in the island. But this speech works only as long as Miranda answers positively to his service and courtship and allows him to obtain her favour:

> FERDINAND. I am, in my condition,
> A prince, Miranda; I do think a king-
> I would not so!-and would no more endure
> This wooden slavery than to suffer
> The flesh-fly blow my mouth. Hear my soul speak:
> The very instant that I saw you did
> My heart fly to your service, there resides
> To make me slave to it, and for your sake
> Am I this patient log-man. (3.1.59-67)
> FERDINAND. O heaven, O earth, bear witness to this sound,
> And crown what I profess with kind event
> If I speak true; if hollowly, invert
> What best is boded me to mischief: I,
> Beyond all limit of what else i' th' world,
> Do love, prize, honour you. (3.1.68-73)

> MIRANDA. I am your wife if you will marry me;
> If not, I'll die your maid. To be your fellow
> You may deny me, but I'll be your servant
> Whether you will or no. (3.1.83-86)

Caliban and Ferdinand end up playing the same role of slave-in exchange-for-joy despite their supposed different social conditions in this play by Shakespeare. They both follow the same classical model pointed out in Eclogue II by Virgil when they try to get relieve and joy through service. And the fact that they are able to use the same speech model as well as the same Latin source does not only dissipate possible differences, but also ridicules Prospero's political favouritism or preference of one character and his social class to the other. Though implicit in the reference to this common classical source, it is Shakespeare's clear intention to achieve this goal. It is definitely not by chance that the two speeches blend and the author's expectations are met once the intended audience is able to decode this apparently invisible, implicit direction.

NOTES

[1] See Wilson-Okamura, 703. This author provides a whole bibliographical list concerning the relations of Virgil and *The Tempest*. But there are some other authors and editors such as David Lindley who "think harder about how much the play owes to travel literature rather than the romances fiction" (Sherman 2).

[2] In the Latin version: "huc ades, o formose puer: tibi lilia plenis / ecce ferunt Nymphae calathis, tibi candida Nais, / pallentis violas et summa papavera carpens, / narcissum et florem iungit bene olentis anethi; / tum, cassia atque aliis intexens suavibus herbis, / mollia luteola pingit vaccinia caltha. / ipse ego cana legam tenera lanugine mala / castaneasque nuces, mea quas Amaryllis amabat; / addam cerea pruna: honos erit huic qupque pomo; / et vos, o lauri, carpam et te, proxima myrte, / sic positae quoniam suavis miscetis odores" (II: 45-55). Virgil's quotations and translations are taken from Fairclough.

[3] In the Latin version: "Aspice: aratra iugo referunt suspensa iuuenci, / et sol crescentis decedens duplicat umbras; / me tamen urit amor; quis enim modus adsit amori?" (II: 66-68).

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IF THE YOUNG KNEW... IF THE OLD COULD: DORIS LESSING'S *THE DIARY OF A GOOD NEIGHBOUR* AND DISABILITY STUDIES

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's novel *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983)[1] is an example of social realism that is suitable for analysis within the framework of disability studies. In this novel, based on her personal experiences in London, Lessing brings a dispassionate but understanding eye to the plight of women who become physically impaired and societally disadvantaged (or 'disabled') with age. I argue that literature has a role to play in Disability Studies, as it not only informs us about the world but also enables us to empathize with others and therefore start to overcome the barriers to understanding the difficulties experienced by the disabled, and that this was one of Lessing's aims in writing the novel.

Key words: Doris Lessing, disability studies, old age, contemporary British fiction

Resumen

La novela de Doris Lessing *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) es un ejemplo del realismo social que se presta al análisis dentro del marco de los estudios sobre la discapacidad. En esta novela, basándose en sus propias experiencias en Londres, Lessing observa, de manera desapasionada pero comprensiva, la situación inquietante de las mujeres que, al envejecer, llegan a estar físicamente discapacitadas y socialmente desfavorecidas. Sostengo que hay un papel para la literatura en los estudios sobre la discapacidad. No sólo nos informa del mundo sino que facilita la empatía que nos ayuda a superar las barreras

que impiden la comprensión de las dificultades experimentadas por los discapacitados. Además, creo que éste fue uno de los objetivos de Lessing al escribir la novela.

Palabras claves: Doris Lessing, estudios sobre la discapacidad, vejez, ficción británica contemporánea.

In *Under My Skin* (1994), the first volume of Doris Lessing's autobiography, she comments on the role of literature as a vehicle for knowledge about the world and about other people:

> Literature provides more complex knowledge about the world than *It isn't fair,* but this lives in a different part of the brain. I had begun, in short, to colour in the map of the world with the hues and tints of literature. Which does two things (at least). One is to refine your knowledge of your fellow human beings. The other is to tell you about societies, countries, classes, ways of living. A bad book cannot tell you about people – only about the author. (88)

Lessing carries on to distinguish between bad literature, which can transmit information as facts but nothing about the reality of other people's experience and good literature, which can transmit both. Undeniably, Lessing's writing belongs to the second, 'good' category. She has tackled many socio-political issues in a variety of literary genres, and in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983) she produced a text which deals with the questions of ageing and the treatment of the elderly in our (Western) society, without resorting to sentimentality and pathos. This is an issue that has become increasingly important in the quarter century since the novel's publication and, over this period, the development of Disability Studies has provided us with a critical (and social) framework for a reassessment of Lessing's novel.

I propose to begin with a description of what is meant by the term 'Disability studies' and its possible relevance to the study of literature before assessing Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* from this perspective. In this novel, Lessing addresses the situation of some very elderly women in London, suffering from varying degrees of age-related disability. She is often very good at foreseeing the zeitgeist of the future and she has written works that seem ahead of their time on topics such as post-colonialism, politics, feminism, environmental

problems, and mental illness. Therefore it is unsurprising that this novel, first published in 1983, can now be considered in terms of a discipline that only started to emerge in the 1980s and so is still a comparatively new approach. But what does the term mean?

The following definition of what 'Disability studies' means, and what its aims should be, is taken from a call for papers for a conference on Disability Studies at Lancaster University, UK, in 2008:

> Disability Studies is concerned with the inter-disciplinary development of an increasing body of knowledge and practice, which has arisen from the activities of the disabled people's movement, and which has come to be known as 'the social model of disability'. The social model of disability locates the changing character of disability, which is viewed as an important dimension of inequality, in the social and economic structure and culture of the society in which it is found, rather than in individual limitations.[2]

There are obvious parallels to be drawn between this 'social model' and other critical frameworks and areas of political activism such as feminism, civil rights and post-colonialism (to mention just a few), all of which are being fruitfully applied to the analysis of literary works. However, Catherine Prendergast, in her response to an article by Susan Schweik, (2008) comments that there is some difficulty in convincing people of the appropriateness and usefulness of literary departments concerning themselves with disability. She says that people who query the role of this approach "are not entirely ignorant of basic tenets of disability studies: they do recognize disability as social and political rather than merely medical, but they presume for this very reason, disability studies rightly belongs in departments of sociology and political science" (Prendergast 239).

Nonetheless, she is convinced of the rightness of disability studies being applied to literature. One obvious area of overlap between these two areas is that literature can encourage empathy, by enabling readers to understand different points of view. However, many members of 'oppressed' groups resent being the objects of pity, so authors have to tread a sensitive line where this is concerned. Prendergast comments on the politicisation of pity and pathos by the disability studies movement, whose representatives have argued that "Sentimentality and pity reinforce the dominance of those of normalized ability, allowing for the performance of socially correct emotions without any

political concessions" (241). She feels that this is oversimplified and that "Disability studies' clarion call of 'no pity' has generated its own form of pathos, the very 'intensity' with which departments of literature have taken up consideration of disability" (Prendergast 243).

In Ria Cheyne's conference report on another UK conference, in Manchester July 2008, there are arguments in favour of extending the application of disability studies:

> Rather than focusing on sociology or social policy, as much of UK disability studies writing has done, a critical disability studies involves reconnecting with social science and humanities disciplines. It offers a means of moving beyond tired debates for and against the social model, while still recognising the debt owed to the activism of disabled people. (Cheyne 103)

Clearly, there is a battle going on within disability studies, and the question of the role of literature within this discipline is being debated. In the same report, Cheyne refers to a paper which argues for "a more powerful and formative role for literary and narrative analysis. Making links with moral philosophy, they [Lucy Burke and David Bolt] argued that an engagement with novelistic discourse can alert us to the multiple and complex ways in which care can signify" (103). As a literary portrayal of both disability and care, Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* can be read as a text that helps to bridge the gap between the humanities and social sciences within the framework of disability studies. One of the novel's main themes is the difficulty that able-bodied people of all ages may have in trying to understand the disabilities experienced by others and this lack of comprehension is one of the principal hurdles that face the disabled. As was pointed out above, Disability Studies in the UK has been associated with the disabled people's movement. However, within literature, writers may contribute to the aims of this movement despite being able-bodied themselves. Where the physical impairment and societal disability linked with old age are concerned, novelists like Lessing who are concerned with social issues can draw on the personal experiences of their friends and family as well as their awareness that most of us will experience these problems in the future, if we live long enough.

Gayle Greene points out that in this novel Lessing "breaks what Simone de Beauvoir calls 'the conspiracy of silence' surrounding old age and celebrates old age in a way unprecedented in fiction" (147).

We choose to ignore the inevitable fact that one day we will be old, “but it is our denial of this commonplace that reduces old people to ‘other’ and so excuses our indifference and cruelty ... whereas it is the recognition that ‘one day we will be old’ that allows us to understand the aged as ourselves at a later stage” (Greene 147). The protagonist of *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, Jane/ Janna Somers, works on a glossy women’s magazine in which an article has been prepared on images of women. Shortly before it goes to press, she realises that there are no images of old women and shocks her (female) editor by mentioning this omission.

> Then she, as it were, switched herself off, became vague, and her eyes turned away from me. She sighed: “Oh, but why? It’s not our age group.” I said, watching myself in her, “They all have mothers or grandmothers.” How afraid we are of old age: how we avert our eyes! “No,” she said, still rather vague, with an abstracted air, as if she were doing justice to an immensely difficult subject to which she had given infinite thought.”No, on the whole not, but perhaps we’ll do a feature on Elderly Relations later. I’ll make a note.” (Lessing, “Diary” 28)

Reading Lessing’s novel forces us no longer to avert our eyes.

If one considers that one of the strengths of literature is that it enables readers to empathise with the predicaments and perspectives of others, it is clear that Prendergast is right to believe that pathos has “inherent literariness” (242). When we read Lessing’s book, this point needs to be considered: to what extent does she exploit pathos and sentiment, and does she deal with disability in a way that would be regarded as appropriate within disability studies? The younger of the two main characters, Janna, steadfastly resists the use of a ‘humorous’ or condescending tone when she talks to her elderly friend, treating her sympathetically (sometimes angrily) and as a responsible adult. This reflects Lessing’s attitude towards her characters in this book. Pity is often associated with condescension, and at one point Janna comments on how the elderly are often addressed, “it’s the formula, insulting, used in all hospitals and Homes, by everyone working with the old, who have to be treated like small children” (Lessing, “Diary” 86), but Lessing avoids both pity and condescension. As we shall see, the pathos and sentiment inherent in this story are diverted into a text within a text, *The Milliners of Marylebone*, which is the novel that Janna writes, rather than being exploited within *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*.

Lastly, another issue to consider is the use of the term 'disability'. In this politically correct age, terminology that avoids offending anybody can be difficult to find. The use of the 'social model' is linked to a reassessment of the term 'disability'. As Dena S. Davis puts it in her review of *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006) by Tom Shakespeare:

> The social model claims that people are not disabled by some inherent mental or physical impairment, but rather that they are oppressed by societal barriers. In this theoretical universe, a person may be 'impaired' because she does not have the use of her legs, but she is 'disabled' because of societal arrangements such as narrow doorways, a lack of elevators, and so on. (Davis 54)

She quotes Tom Shakespeare as making the point that, despite the political force of stressing the similarities between the disabled and other oppressed groups, this approach can lead to a refusal to acknowledge the range of impairments that people may suffer, not all of which can be solved by social and physical arrangements. This distinction between physical impairment and socially imposed disability is a relevant one in Lessing's novel, as one might expect, considering her long history of interest in social and political problems. Also, it is a truism that although nobody can avoid getting old, the ageing process is likely to be harder for elderly people who are also impoverished, living in sub-standard housing and without access to quality care.[3]

So, by a circuitous route, we return to Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*. This is the first of two books (since published in one volume as *The Diaries of Jane Somers*) which were originally published pseudonymously in 1983 and 1984. In the preface to the joint edition, Lessing says that she published them under another name because she "wanted to be reviewed on merit" and "to cheer up young writers … by illustrating that certain attitudes and processes they have to submit to are mechanical, and have nothing to do with them personally, or with their kind or degree of talent" (Preface, *Diaries* 5). No doubt this is true, but in 1986 she asserted that there was also another reason:

> I wanted to write a book about certain experiences I'd had with old people and with the social services in London, and I didn't want anyone going to certain old people I knew saying "Doris has put you into a book," which they would have found very distressing. ("Doris" 3)

In this comment, Lessing makes it clear that the main topics of the book (the elderly, their lives, their relationships with others and the

work of the Social Services in the UK at that time) are based on her personal experience.

At the time of writing these two books, Lessing was already in her sixties, an age at which one might begin to consider one's own mortality and the ageing process. Germaine Greer in *The Change* (1992) sees the age of fifty as a critical point when women suddenly become aware of growing older and of losing control over their own lives. Speaking of herself and a friend, Julia, she writes:

> We had both sailed through our forties with very little awareness of growing older. We had each buried a parent; she had shed a husband, but we had both remained at the centre of the life that we had built. Suddenly something was slipping away so fast that we had not had time quite to register what it might be. (Greer 12)

That "it" could be control over their own lives, the downward slide towards old age and dependence. Julia is determined to avoid becoming "grey and invisible", and Greer goes on to quote Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* (1973) as a good example of the "apprehensive melancholy" that she perceives in other middle-aged women.

Middle-age and old age are both portrayed in *The Diaries of Jane Somers,* in which Lessing writes about four years in the life of Janna (a.k.a. Jane) Somers, a forty-nine-year-old journalist, after she befriends a woman in her nineties, called Maudie Fisher, who is living in poverty and is suffering from increasing frailness and an inability to cope unaided. The physical disability / impairment associated with old age is the main link between this novel and disability studies, together with Lessing's interest in how other people regard the elderly and / or infirm.[4] Many women in their fifties find that their new-found freedom from childrearing disappears because they become carers for their own parents. In Janna's case, she has no children, and she has already failed to provide adequate emotional and physical support for her terminally ill mother, but her voluntary assumption of the caring role for her new friend mirrors that of many women of her age who have to adopt such a role within the family.

Maudie and Janna's relationship develops into a complex friendship based on different types of mutual need. Janna's colleague, Joyce, and her niece, Jill, are unable to understand why Janna spends time on Maudie. Jill reaches the obvious conclusion that her aunt feels a need

to make amends for her selfish inability to care for her mother when she was dying of cancer (Lessing, "Diary" 239). The important point for Janna is that, even if she has got "a hang-up" of her own (as she points out to a certain social worker) at least the "geriatric" in question can benefit from the attention ("Diary" 150). Presumably, the same would be true for Doris Lessing and her elderly friends.

It has also been suggested by some critics that Lessing's fraught relationship with her own mother, a theme that appears repeatedly in her work, is the basis for this relationship, perhaps a chance for expiation. Virginia Tiger and Gayle Greene both discuss the ways in which Lessing used her own mother as a model for the characters of Janna and Maudie, and the extent to which Lessing seems to be reassessing her mother from a more positive standpoint than she did in youth and middle age. Gayle Greene contrasts the inability of Martha Quest to nurture her father or sustain her mother in *Landlocked* (1965), the fourth novel in *The Children of Violence,* with the very different situation of Jane Somers in her relationship with her elderly friend and links this with Lessing's own guilt as a daughter:

> Martha withdraws from the 'physical awfulness' of her father's long illness and from the pain of her mother, of which she has occasional glimpses too intolerable to sustain: Martha allowed herself to think, for a few short moments, of her mother's life, the brutal awfulness of it- but could not afford to think for long. ... it may be that, behind Jane Somers's atonement for her failure to enter into her mother's painful experience – her mother's nursing of her mother, her death from cancer- is some personal regret on the part of Lessing for withdrawing from the pain of a mother whose life was one long round of tending the ill. (Greene 143)

Certainly, as the author ages, she seems more able to empathise with her mother, who provided her with certain traits for the characters of Janna as well as Maudie. In the preface to *The Diaries of Jane Somers* Lessing observed that:

> Another influence that went to make Jane Somers was reflections about what my mother would be like if she lived now: that practical, efficient, energetic woman, by temperament conservative, a little sentimental, and only with difficulty (and a lot of practice at it) able to understand weakness and failure, though always kind. No, Jane Somers is not my mother, but thoughts of women like my mother did feed Jane Somers. (*Diaries* 6)

Virginia Tiger explores parallels between the names and pseudonyms of Lessing, her characters and her mother and concludes that:

> From the perspective of this biographically complicitous schema, Maudie Fowler becomes generating mother/author to Doris Lessing, representing both a laying to rest of the mother-ghost (and mother's ghost) by the haunted daughter and the latter's emancipatory release into aesthetic autonomy. (14)

It seems likely that the source for Lessing's concern for the disabled elderly has its basis in her own family as well as in her encounters with ageing women in the UK, as she revealed in her preface to the novel.

The Diary of a Good Neighbour is constructed around Janna and Maudie's friendship, during which Janna's life improves and Maudie's worsens after some initial improvement.[5] At the beginning, Maudie is coping, despite certain problems which are largely associated with her poverty rather than any chronic illness or physical disability. On the other hand, Janna is aware of being emotionally barren despite her professional success. She has no life outside her work and most of her memories lead to a regretful reassessment of her past. She failed her husband and her mother when they needed her and now recognises that she has never really grown up emotionally.

Maudie, however, has repeatedly suffered disappointment and hardship, culminating in her small son's being abducted by her ne'er-do-well husband. Her life has been a series of tragedies, and yet her tales of the past tend to focus on discrete moments which were happy: a picnic in the country with a boyfriend, the satisfaction of doing a job well, the delight of looking after her new-born son while her husband was still around. On the other hand, she also reveals how ephemeral each of these moments was and how precarious her happiness. These stories serve to furnish Janna with ideas for her journalism and a burgeoning career as a novelist. While Janna develops and grows in awareness and emotional maturity, as well as benefiting professionally from her friendship with Maudie, the older woman grows increasingly dependent and frail, finally dying of cancer. One could argue that, at the beginning of the novel, while Maudie is impaired and disabled in the physical and social senses, Janna is emotionally impaired. Cynthia Port comments "After Maudie's long history of exploitation and dispossession and Janna's experience of emotional isolation, their intergenerational

and interclass friendship fulfils a profound need for each of them" (115). What she does not mention is the fact that its being an intergenerational friendship also involves Janna's being a carer, which implies a level of intimacy beyond common friendship. It is this aspect which brings the novel into the area of disability studies.

Relevant to the question of disability studies is the fact that Lessing lived with the presence of physical disability throughout her childhood and adolescence. In the first volume of her autobiography, *Under my Skin* (1994), Lessing describes how her parents met in the hospital where her mother was a nurse after her father had lost his leg in the First World War. Although he declared that he had been lucky, because a shell landed on his leg shortly before Passchendaele, a battle in which "no one was left of his company" (Lessing, *Under* 6), he was shell-shocked and very ill and later always said that he owed his sanity and his life to his future wife's nursing. Later on, he suffered from diabetes.

Lessing has said that she wanted to use the narrative voice of somebody like Janna Somers because she needed it to be written:

> [B]y someone to whom hardship and the conditions of the old would be shocking and surprising. It would be no good to have me writing it because this is not a surprise to me, because I did not have what is known as a 'gentle upbringing': you know, hardship, poverty and so on is not anything that I am ever surprised about. ("Doris" 5)

It is clear that Lessing had long been familiar with both the care of the physically impaired and the problems resulting from disability as part of a 'social model', both of which issues are addressed in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*.

In Maudie Fowler's case, she is suffering from physical impairment which is the result of ageing. She is still mobile, but with difficulty. It has become more and more tiring for her to do the shopping, look after her home and care for herself. All of these problems are exacerbated by the squalid conditions in which she lives, in a basement flat near Janna's home. The grime and the stench turn Janna's stomach, and when Maudie gives her a cup of tea, she feels that "It was the hardest thing I ever did, to drink out of the dirty cup" (Lessing, "Diary" 22).

In "Ages of Anxiety", Virginia Tiger mistakenly comments that the distances (in all senses) between Janna and Maudie are "metonymically mapped by the difference between two physical places – an elegant

West End flat and a malodourous East End basement" (7). It is a minor quibble, as it is true that their living conditions do serve to emphasise all their differences, but in fact, they are neighbours, and so do not live in the West and East end respectively. Janna specifically refers to this "she lived near me" (Lessing, "Diary" 21). Maudie's flat is in the basement of one of those many Victorian or Edwardian four and five storey houses, now split up into bedsits and flats, that abound in British cities. Maudie herself has known better times and so "knows how things should be" (22) and suffers, seeing her home through Janna's eyes. The houses have also fallen on hard times. In fact, the houses are a metaphor for the aging process. Just as the house is probably scheduled for demolition, being worthless in the view of most people, but to Maudie it represents her home, so the question of "what's the use of people that old ?" is raised about the elderly. This also relates to the fact that the young and healthy of today will be the disabled elderly of tomorrow. Young and old live in mutually unaware juxtaposition now, just like the Victorian mansions of the past, around the corner from Janna's elegant apartment.

Maudie has no bathroom, just a cold toilet at the end of the corridor. Her only heating is a fire for which she has to fill the coalscuttle and drag it along to the living-room. She can no longer keep herself clean, or wash her clothes, so her skin becomes grimier and grimier, while she shoves clothes back into the drawers unwashed, wearing them again another day. However, she resolutely refuses to be re-housed or to have the Social Services send in a Home Help. The one service she finally accepts is Meals on Wheels. It is clear that her physical impairment is worsened by the 'disabling' that results from her living conditions, but her determination to stay independent leads her to reject most offers of help.

Here, of course, is the crux of Disability Studies. A physical disability renders the sufferer physically powerless and subject to the humiliation of having to depend on others. Maudie is willing to accept help from Janna because she is her friend, neither a paid helper nor a representative of the Medical and Social Services establishment. In effect, Janna has become her family. Also, the younger woman comes to understand how important it is for Maudie to stay in her home:

> I've given up even thinking that she ought to agree to be 'rehoused'; I said it just once, and it took her three days to stop seeing me as

> an enemy, as one of 'them'. I *am* housed, says she, cough, cough, cough from having to go out at the back all weathers in the freezing lavatory, from standing to wash in the unheated kitchen. But why do I say this? Women of ninety who live in luxury cough and are frail. (Lessing, "Diary" 94)

The rite of passage for Janna as a carer comes the first time she washes Maudie. There is no bathroom, so the old woman must stand in the living-room, leaning heavily against the table for support while she is washed. Because "she had been too weak or ill to move, she had shat her pants, had shat everything" (Lessing, "Diary" 60) and must suffer the indignity of having her private parts washed too. Janna "thought about that phrase for the first time: for she was suffering most terribly because this stranger was invading her privateness" ("Diary" 60). Now, Janna realises how difficult it must have been for her mother to wash herself, before going into hospital, but that only her elder sister had ever given their mother a wash. The next stage in her understanding of the helplessness of the disabled comes when Janna is incapacitated with lumbago and experiences the limitations of being in pain and bedridden, with the humiliation of depending on others for her bodily needs, her routine established "around the animal's needs … For two weeks I was exactly like Maudie … I knew that for two weeks I had experienced, but absolutely, their [the elderly's] helplessness" ("Diary" 138-40).

In a 1987 study on the quality of life of disabled elderly adults in New England, it is observed that "among those over 65 years of age living outside institutions, 85% have at least one chronic condition. Forty-six percent of those 65 years and over have a chronic, activity-limiting disability, and 16% are unable to carry on a major activity" (Osberg et al. 228). These are alarming figures which indicate the high likelihood of any of us being disabled at some point in our lives. Moreover, if we enjoy good health we rarely stop to consider how fragile the line is between our mobility and possible immobility. Janna discovers this when she suffers from lumbago.

The QOL (Quality Of Life) study was based on several indicators such as the Barthel Index[6] (which measures self-care and mobility skills), income, age, marital status, activity and a Life Satisfaction questionnaire in order to discover which variables were the most accurate in predicting the QOL of the elderly disabled. Income and

education are critical factors amongst the very poor and deprived, but much less so once “people pass the basic literacy and subsistence level” (Osberg et al. 229). The key variable is ‘functional capacity’, based on the Barthel Index, and the application of this index to the stages of Maudie’s increasing impairment / disability reveals how accurately Lessing has considered the process of her ‘deterioration’.

The degree of social activity is also a significant factor, but the degree of independence that the disabled have in looking after their ‘animal needs’, amongst other tasks, is the most important variable. This is unsurprising, but the following comment merits some attention:

> Although functional capacity is not a good predictor [of QOL] among young, able-bodied persons *who take good health and high capacity for granted*, it is an important factor among the disabled. (Osberg et al. 229, my emphasis)

Not only do we take it for granted, but we cannot imagine being any other way and we generally fail to perceive, much less find a remedy for, the difficulties that the disabled (old or young) must cope with. One of the biggest problems is that we often fail even to notice the presence in our society of these social groups. After Janna meets Maudie Fowler, for the first time her eyes are opened to the ubiquity of old age.

> [I] had never seen Mrs Fowler, but she lived near me, and suddenly I looked up and down the streets and saw – old women. Old men, too, but mostly old women. They walked slowly along. They stood in pairs or groups, talking …I had not seen them. That was because I was afraid of being like them. (Lessing, “Diary” 21)

This is a reflection of our society’s attitude towards the old and/or disabled. Ignorance and fear give rise to a willingness not to see, not to become involved and even to be cruel.

Before long, Janna has come far enough in her understanding of Mrs Fowler’s life to be able to write “Maudie’s Day” (121), an account of one day (reminiscent of other ‘days’ in *The Golden Notebook*) that includes the smallest details of how carefully she must plan every action, every movement, in order to outwit her physical frailty. In “A Day in the Life of a Home Help”, Janna includes the plight of a young mother, Hilda Brent, who is part-paralysed and almost entirely dependent on her carers. Although still in her twenties, her degree of disability is even greater than Maudie’s (Lessing, “Diary” 199). Therefore, Lessing

widens the scope for our empathy beyond ourselves at a later stage (i.e. the elderly), to others who are disabled.

Janna's first encounter with Maudie takes place near her flat in a chemist's, where the old woman is struggling to understand her prescription. At this moment Janna perceives her as being the incarnation of a witch, "a tiny bent-over woman, with a nose nearly meeting her chin, in heavy dusty clothes, and something not far off a bonnet" (Lessing, "Diary" 20). In part due to her "fierce blue eyes, under great, craggy brows, but there was something wonderfully sweet in them" ("Diary" 20), Janna likes her immediately, even though when she got home, after committing herself to return to see Maudie another day, she "was in a panic" ("Diary" 22), so on some level she is aware of what that commitment will mean.

Maudie needs a pain-killer, but has been prescribed Valium "a stupefier" as she puts it, while she only wants some aspirin. In this way, Lessing immediately addresses an important issue for the elderly and the disabled: that of medication, which is often seen as a means of control.[7] Maudie repeatedly resists attempts to over-medicate her and fights to maintain her independence of the medical establishment. When she is clearly ill later (Lessing, "Diary" 145), she flushes some of the medication down the toilet, rejects the offer of a nurse who can wash her at home, and resists all attempts to hospitalise her in what she still regards as "The Workhouse". One of the things she most fears about the hospital is that "They fill you up with pills and pills and pills, you feel as if your mind has been taken from you, they treat you like a child. I don't want it…" ("Diary" 51).

The question of medication is also raised in the account of another elderly lady who is battling with illness, Eliza Bates, whose Home Help is:

> horrified at the number of pills she [Eliza] has to take, is sure that they must all quarrel together in the poor old thing's stomach, but the doctor says so, the nurse does what the doctor orders, and she, the Home Help, at the bottom of the heap, cannot disobey ("Diary" 198).

The elderly and infirm can feel at the mercy of the medical establishment, which is portrayed by Lessing as being part of patriarchy, being overtly hierarchical and often tyrannical in its application of

power. Although the nurses and social workers are all female in this book, the doctors are male and, often, overbearing in their treatment of the elderly.[8]

Maudie develops cancer of the stomach and Janna takes her to hospital to be examined by the consultant. Despite her having said that Maudie was not prepared to be examined in front of students, this is what the doctor tries to impose on her. The following dialogue is significant because it encapsulates the thoughtlessness and lack of empathy that some doctors exhibit:

> When our turn came, I was called in first. Large many-windowed room, the table of Authority, the big doctor, the many students. Their *young* unknowing faces…
> "How am I going to teach my students if I can't show them any patients?" he asked me.
> I said, "It's too much for her."
> He said, "Why is it? It's not too much for me, and I am sure it's not too much for you when you're sick."
> This was so stupid, that I decided not to bother. "She's very old and very frightened," I said, and left it at that.
> "Hmmmmmmmmm!" And then, to the students, "So, I suppose I'll have to order you to take yourselves off."
> This was my cue to give in, but I wasn't going to. (Lessing, "Diary" 185)

The same doctor browbeats the charming and considerate junior doctor, an Indian, who has gained Maudie's trust. She is told that she is suffering from a stomach ulcer, although really it is cancer. An undercurrent of the novel is the theme of how much to tell the sick and their carers. Years earlier, when Janna's husband had been terminally ill, "The doctors said to me, cancer, and now I see that my reaction meant they would not go on to talk about whether to tell him or not. I don't know whether they told him" (Lessing, "Diary" 13). By the time she has learnt to care for Maudie, she has matured from being one of those who cannot be told the truth to the carer who can be relied upon and who is told the truth about the old woman's illness. However, Maudie is not told, and even at the end she "knows and does not know that she has cancer of the stomach and is dying" (Lessing, "Diary" 252). In order to be empowered and take rational decisions about their own treatment, the sick and disabled need to have access to information about their conditions, but Lessing's approach is sympathetic to both, to patients and to the dilemma of the medical professionals who try to avoid distressing the terminally ill.[9]

When Maudie is near death, the consultant arrives at her bedside "the big doctor and his neophytes" (Lessing, "Diary" 250), who is supposed to be an expert on the aged. To Janna and the nurse's astonishment, he informs the students that Mrs. Fowler is now in a coma and "will slip away in her sleep", whereas they are fully aware that Maudie is usually awake, battling against pain and the grogginess induced by the painkilling "potion". The significant description is that of the nurse's reaction:

> The nurse is angry. Her discipline makes it impossible for her to exchange a glance with me, but we vibrate with understanding. Because, of course, it is the nurses who monitor, the changes of need, of mood, of the patients, and the doctors appear from time to time, issuing commands. (Lessing, "Diary" 259)

Janna is amazed to observe that there is an enormous gap between the doctors and nurses, with the latter adjusting the commands from above as they deem appropriate or, often, ignoring them "How did this extraordinary system grow up, where those who issue the orders don't know what is really going on?" ("Diary" 251).[10]

However, this is at the end of Maudie's life. Her death comes shortly after the publication of Janna's novel, based on her friend's stories of life as a milliner in the early twentieth century, but which have been turned into something "gallantly light-hearted", unlike Maudie's "relentless life" (Lessing, "Diary" 252). Janna reflects that Maudie would have loved her life, "as reconstructed by me" (252). But that is a romantic novel, whereas *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* is a novel in the realist tradition that poses the question of "how do we value ourselves?" Janna's young electrician, sent round to render the wiring in Maudie's flat less dangerous, is appalled at the old woman's living conditions, but his only solution is to say that she should be put in a home, meaning "where we can't see her". He shamefacedly asks, "What's the good of people that old?" ("Diary" 32).

It is a question that, implicitly, other characters ask Janna, as they fail to understand her interest in or affection for Maudie or for the other elderly women she later befriends. By extension, it can be applied to all of those people who suffer from some kind of disability that marginalises them. Lessing never openly answers the question, but the whole thrust of her novel leads us to understand that it is through our relationships with others and our willingness to care for them if necessary that we

give meaning to our lives. Janna benefits from their friendship at least as much as Maudie.

Cynthia Port considers this question, “What’s the good of people that old?”, and comments:

> Jane determines that it cannot be answered by the familiar “yardsticks and measures” (33), such as the individual’s capacity for production and reproduction. Instead, Lessing’s novel suggests that new notions of value, new ‘yardsticks and measures’ of human worth, need to be established to account for and sustain the value of the old. One way to develop these recalibrated measures, she suggests, is by initiating new circuits of reciprocal exchange across the perceived boundaries of generation and class. (Port 123)

One could add, the boundaries between the able-bodied and the disabled, carers and non-carers.

People who work in Disability Studies are usually activists for a fair deal for the disabled, and the role of literature can be both a vehicle for information and a means of helping us empathise with others. Lessing makes the point that disability not only affects the elderly (whose place we shall take, if we live long enough) but also the young (like paralysed Hilda Brent) and the middle-aged who take their able-bodied condition for granted, until some accident incapacitates them. Of course, the next step is for us to act differently towards the disabled, but at least it is a first step to achieve some understanding of their problems. In *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, Lessing opens a window on the lives of both the disabled and of their carers. As a result, both the young and the not so young may know a little more.

NOTES

[1] *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* was originally published pseudonymously in 1983, as was the second part, entitled *If The Old Could …* , the following year. In 1984 both novels were published together in one volume: *The Diaries of Jane Somers* and acknowledged as a work by Doris Lessing. It is this edition which is referred to in this article.

[2] It should be added that in the UK, this discipline tends to be regarded as an area in which disabled people themselves work, in order to find their own voice, right across other disciplinary barriers, although in the USA it is a field open to the enabled as well. This call for papers can be found at <http://pepin-uk.net/viewtopic.php?t=149>.

[3] Gayle Greene points out that Jane’s awareness that Maudie ought to be allowed to die surrounded by her family and that old people might have been better off in a workhouse than bored to death in “homes” “suggest that age is made worse by the loneliness, isolation and inactivity imposed on old people in this society.” And that this implies that “old age is at least to some extent socially constructed” (Greene 153).

[4] Doris Lessing, who has been awarded both the Príncipe de Asturias prize for Literature and the Nobel Prize for Literature in the last few years, was ninety years old in 2009, the same age as Maudie Fowler at the start of the novel. It would be interesting to have Lessing's current assessment of the issues faced by women in their nineties in the UK.

[5] One day, Maudie shocks Janna by saying that "this is the best time of my life" (130). She goes on to say that she's not talking about "the short joyful days" like her pregnancy or "the odd picnic", but that it's true because she knows that Janna "will always come, and we can be together." This is what I am referring to by "after some improvement", because Janna's intervention does improve Maudie's quality of life.

[6] The Barthel Index is available at <http://www.strokecenter.org/trials/scales/barthel.pdf>

[7] Two other books which relate to this are Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and Marge Piercey's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).Both deal with the use of medication to control those who are believed to be subversive in some way: immigrant women, homosexuals, immigrants and convicts.

[8] Exceptions to this are the two doctors who make home visits, (to Maudie and to Janna) as they are both at the lower end of the medical establishment's "ranking".

[9] These days, an important development in the rights of patients (which of course includes many of the disabled) is the use of Internet sites which provide professionally approved resources of patients' and carers' narratives in order to aid others in decisions about their treatment and conditions. <http://www.healthtalkonline.org/> is a rich resource of such annotated narratives, which are also used in scientific research.

[10] This is one of the moments that reveal this book as having been written by Lessing. One of her key themes is this constant inquiry as to how things really work, who is really in charge. It crops up in her analysis of the functioning of the magazine that Janna is editor of, and also appears with reference to the Social Services in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*. The issue of the Social Services and their work with the elderly disabled is a critical one in Lessing's novel, and one which has much to do with the social side of disability studies. She is clearly arguing for more understanding and better resources for social workers, but also compares the conditions of the 1980s very favourably with the dire poverty and neglect of earlier periods.

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SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM IN ISHMAEL REED'S NEO-HOODOO AESTHETICS

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Abstract

Throughout his literary career, African American novelist Ishmael Reed has shown constant concern for historical issues and for their expression through reflexive narratives. This blend of the historical and the aesthetic is one of the many amalgamations that are achieved in his texts. In terms of both form and ideology his work is characterized by syncretism. In form, all novels he has published to date overstep the boundaries among genres, as well as the gulf between academic and popular culture; in ideology, Reed supports multiculturalism as an expression of the plurality that constitutes US society. This essay explores how Reed's novels seek to produce a narrative hybrid that blends fiction and reality, satire and mysticism, the mass media and the African and Western literary traditions.

Key words: self-reflexivity, metafiction, history, revisionism, Neo-HooDoo, aesthetics, satire

Resumen

A lo largo de su carrera literaria, el novelista afroamericano Ishmael Reed ha mostrado un constante interés en temas históricos y en su expresión mediante narrativas metaficticias. Esta combinación de lo histórico y lo estético es una de las múltiples amalgamas que configuran sus textos. Tanto desde un punto de vista formal como ideológico, su obra se caracteriza por el sincretismo. Formalmente todas las novelas que ha publicado transgreden las barreras entre los géneros, así como la separación entre la cultura académica y la cultura popular.

Ideológicamente Reed propone el multiculturalismo como expresión de la pluralidad que constituye la sociedad norteamericana. El presente ensayo estudia la forma en que las novelas de Reed aspiran a producir un híbrido narrativo que mezcla la ficción y la realidad, la sátira y el misticismo, los medios de comunicación de masas y las tradiciones literarias de África y Occidente.

Palabras clave: Autorreferencialidad, metaficción, historia, revisionismo, Neo-HooDoo, estética, sátira

In each of his novels, as well as in his poetry and essays, Ishmael Reed has outlined a personal theory of art and literature that he refers to as Neo-HooDoo aesthetics. In point of fact, terms such as voodoo, hoodoo, and Neo-HooDoo occur throughout Reed's fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Voodoo is a word that originated from the Dahomey language and originally signified "the unknown," "spirit," or "deity". For the purpose of this essay voodooism is defined as a set of beliefs and religious rituals practiced by most blacks who were brought to the New World and that is still alive today in many places in the Americas, especially Haiti and Brazil. Voodooism incorporates the language, mythologies, rituals, folklore, and knowledge of many cultures that came to the New World as a result of the slave trade. Yet, although most of its symbols and images originated in western Africa, it is actually a phenomenon characteristic of the Americas. Voodoo emerged from the cultural interchange that occurred when members of tribes such as the Senegalese, Bambara, Quiamba, Wolof, Foulbe, Arada, Mina, Caplau, Fon, Mahi, Congo, Mondongue, Ibo, Loango, and Fula, among others, were split up and disseminated throughout Haiti and other Caribbean and New World countries.[1] Consequently, it is a combination of those beliefs and customs shared by a wide variety of African peoples and transplanted to an alien continent. In spite of the many tribal differences, these groups had certain common beliefs–ancestor worship, the use of dance and music in their religious ceremonies, and the adept's possession by the god (Deren 58)–around which they began to develop the ritual forms of what today we know as voodoo.

The Haitian voodoo pantheon is divided into two classes of deities: the Rada and the Petro. Each group traces its roots to a different

region of Africa. According to Hurston (116), Rada deities come from Dahomey and are benevolent gods commanded by Damballah (the supreme mystery whose symbol is the serpent). Petro gods, conversely, are said to come from the Congo and have the power of evil. The most popular Petro deities are the three Barons: Baron Samedi (Lord of the Saturday), Baron Cimitière (Lord of the cemetery) and Baron Croix (Lord of the Cross).

Most voodoo rituals are acts of piety offered to particular *loas* (spirits), or long celebrations that take place in the *ounfó* (temple). Unlike other religions, voodoo lacks a complex hierarchy of celebrants. Although there is a priest (*houngan* or *mambo*, depending on whether a priest or a priestess is being referred to), his/her function is simply to ascertain that the *loas* are properly fed. In this sense, sacrificial offerings and dances play a central role. Offerings generally consist of food, alcohol, and animals that are given to the *loas* to appease them and win their favors. Dances are performed in the center of the temple to the rhythm of drums. The climax of the ceremony takes place when one of the worshippers ("horses") is possessed ("mounted") by a *loa*.

As a result of the slave trade, voodooism arrived in the United States through New Orleans. The form practiced in North America is known as hoodoo, and it reached its peak during the 1890s. According to Reed, hoodoo challenged the civil authorities' ability to maintain control and was therefore forced to go underground, which explains its persistence in the US black ghettos until the present (*New and Collected Poems* 20). Because it adds elements of North American culture to the already hybrid Haitian rites, hoodoo represents one more step in the syncretic tradition of voodoo. Its center, New Orleans, is also a multicultural paradigm, since its cultural personality was formed by the blend of French, Spanish, North American, and African American traditions. In spite of the secretive character of its practices, hoodoo pervades the culture and folklore of the city, from its gastronomy to its music, as well as its festive carnivals. For Reed, New Orleans' carnivals exemplify the most flamboyant manifestation of hoodoo spirit and serve to further develop his concept of voodoo/hoodoo as a metaphor for his cultural utopia. While Reed emphasizes the syncretic and popular qualities of voodoo, he recognizes that Mardi Gras also exemplifies its participatory character, and this spectacle becomes the epitome of Reed's communal concept of art: "Mardi Gras is the one American art I have witnessed in

which the audience doesn't sit intimidated or wait for the critics to tell them what to see. The Mardi Gras audience talks back to the performers instead of sitting there like dummies, and can even participate in the action" (*Shrovetide* 26).

Reed's hypothesis about the voodooistic vision of culture does not stop here, because voodoo beliefs and practices are not simply a relic of the past invoked yearly in festive celebrations. Indeed, they have survived under new forms, one of which is Neo-HooDoo. With this label, Reed refers to the contemporary manifestations of hoodoo that are the result of the blending of its beliefs and practices with US popular culture. The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic agenda is exemplified by Reed and other writers who belong to the 'Manhattan Project' of writing (*New and Collected Poems* 26). In music, Charlie Parker is, for Reed, a prime example of the Neo-HooDoo artist as an innovator and improviser; to his name Reed adds a long list of jazz, blues, and rock-and-roll musicians. Among its theoreticians, Reed mentions Zora Neale Hurston and Julia Jackson, the former for her studies on Haitian voodoo and on hoodoo in African American folklore, the latter for having "stripped" hoodoo of its oppressive Christian influences. Neo-HooDoo is, therefore, described as a highly flexible construct in which a common base–which is seen as multicultural, pluralistic, and participatory–is permanently enriched by new contributions. Its open character is best illustrated in Reed's poem "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," which ends with the exclamation: "The proportions of the ingredients used depend upon the cook!" (*New and Collected Poems* 26)

This configuration of Neo-HooDoo aesthetic doctrine is part of a sequence that Reginald Martin (107) has organized chronologically into five stages: 1) The pantheistic and syncretic worship of Osiris in Ancient Egypt; 2) West African religions (especially Yoruba and Fon) until the beginning of the Arabian and European slave market; 3) Voodoo, as the result of the transplantation of tribes from the Gulf of Guinea to the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; 4) Hoodoo, as a consequence of the Diaspora of African Americans in the US (nineteenth and twentieth century); 5) Neo-HooDoo, proposed by Reed as the syncretism between voodoo-hoodoo forms and US popular culture.

In each of these five stages, the different manifestations of voodoo have suffered persecution by fanatic followers of Judeo-Christian

culture, which is represented as monolithic, hierarchical, rigid, foreboding, and repressive.[2] Neo-HooDoo sensibility, on the other hand, is plural, participatory, open, lively, and tolerant. In Reed's vision of religious history, Judeo-Christian civilization defends orthodoxy and cultural and religious dogmas. The Neo-HooDoo world view, in contrast, values dissension and syncretism on all possible levels. In opposition to the Western manipulation of the environment, Neo-Hoodoism advocates absolute respect for Nature. Finally, if the Judeo-Christian world privileges rationalism and cold scientific analysis, Reed's counter-system favors intuition, mystery, and emotion.

In his first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), Reed establishes some of the techniques and motifs present throughout his later works. If there is one single element that clearly stands out in this early narrative experiment, it is the use of satire and parody. At this early stage of his career, Reed focuses on a satiric portrayal of nineteen-sixties US history and literature. The novel's plot reveals his caustic view of cultural and political history. Its protagonist, Booka Doopeyduk, is an African-American youth who, after a life of sacrifice and humiliation, rebels against the Nazarene Creed (a parody of Christianity) and the absolute power exercised by Harry Sam (an embodiment of the United States). Although his revolt succeeds in deposing the tyrant, Doopeyduk is ultimately crucified in front of television cameras, and a new despot restores Sam's police regime.

From a historical point of view, the satirical component of the novel is aimed at two main targets: US political institutions, and certain sectors of the black community. As a satire of political power, *Pallbearers* criticizes the monolithic power structures embodied by Harry Sam, who rules omnipotent over a wasteland. As a satire of African-American opposition movements, Reed reveals the corruption of some of their leaders and the "embourgeoisment" of North American black culture (Fox 42). His humorous denouncement culminates in the novel's final scene, in which Doopeyduk is betrayed and crucified by his own people.

Reed's satirical thrust is similarly manifested through a caustic parody of both Western and African American literary traditions. The novel's portrayal of Doopeyduk's passion and sacrifice and of Sam's death parodies the Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Rites of initiation

and the great mythic voyage are distorted to the point that their original sacredness is grotesquely mocked. *Pallbearers* has also been interpreted as a multifarious parody of many other motifs, genres, and specific works. These include Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Fox 40), the popular subgenres (gothic, horror, fantasy, science fiction, B movies), African American confessional narratives (Gates 297), the traditional American success-story (Byerman 219), black popular literature of the sixties, literary criticism, and the academic profession in general (Martin 66; Collins 423).[3]

Numerous reflexive images and self-referential devices complete the dense web of intertextual allusions and give the book its metafictional dimension. One example of these reflexive techniques is the use of allegorical names. Thus, the novel's protagonist, Bukka (book), encounters doom as a result of the wrong reading of the wrong books (especially the Nazarene Manual), and one of the most authoritarian characters is called Mr. Spellman, a veiled allusion to what Reed considers the repressive power of writing codes.

In *Pallbearers*, episodes are superimposed to form a collage in which the linear sequence of events or cause-effect relationships lack the importance they may have in more traditional fiction. In fact, the novel's dynamic and lively language recalls cinematic and television montage rather than other more proper literary models.[4] Besides these media techniques, *Pallbearers* evokes the universe of cartoons and science fiction.[5] The general impression is that of a hybrid in which ultimate success depends not on specific components, but on the sum of its parts. It is precisely the successful interaction between the historical and experimental components that creates such originality and impact in Reed's first novel.

US political and literary history and the myths of Christianity are again targeted in Reed's next novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). However, unlike *Pallbearers*, which takes place in the sixties, in *Radio* the action is set in the far West during the nineteenth century. The work presents the adventures of Loop Garoo Kid, a black cowboy initiated into the secrets of voodoo, who must confront the aggression of tyrannical landowner Drag Gibson and his underlings in the army (Field Marshal) and in Congress (Pete the Peek). This basic story line conceals a complex discourse about the conflict between Judeo-Christian

civilization and African American culture. As in *Pallbearers* and each of Reed's subsequent novels, this conflict has important repercussions on both historical and aesthetic levels.

From a historical reflectionist point of view, *Radio* presents a fantastic version of North American history, from the times of Cabeza de Vaca's extraordinary "pilgrimage" in the sixteenth century to the present. Among the myriad of events that take place between these two extremes, Reed proves especially interested in those elements ignored by official chronicles. *Radio* valorizes, for example, the presence of blacks in the expansion of the US frontier and the importance of African heritage in the cultural tradition of the Americas. Reed contrasts the tolerant syncretism of African American culture with the exclusive and authoritarian ideology of the US establishment, represented in the novel by capitalism and Christianity.

Regarding the metafictional aspect, *Radio* continues the parody of popular genres begun in *Pallbearers*. In this case, the most obvious intertextual code is provided by Westerns and science-fiction novels; literary discussions also occur throughout the novel. In particular, *Radio* establishes Reed's position in relation to the type of black aesthetics advocated by critics such as Houston Baker Jr., Addison Gayle, and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones). A debate between Loop Garoo and the members of the so-called neo-social realist gang lays out Reed's aesthetic opinions within the text itself. Realist leader Bo Shmo's criticism of Loop Garoo closely parallels the type of charges made by the "new black aesthetic critics" against Reed: "The trouble with you Loop is that you're too abstract . . . Crazy dada nigger that's what you are. You are given to fantasy and are off in matters of detail. Far out esoteric bullshit is where you're at. Why in those suffering books that I write about my old neighborhood and how hard was every gumdrop machine is in place while your work is a blur and a doodle" (35-36). Loop Garoo's response offers important clues to understanding Reed's aesthetic views, views in which literature is conceived as a playful liberating activity, inclusive and not exclusive, open and not closed, in which the artist's creative freedom should be respected above all else: ". . . what if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons" (36). *Radio* is the first novel in which Reed associates his aesthetic and cultural program

with voodooism, and from this point on, voodoo (hoodoo in the North American version) will recur in Reed's works as a metaphor for his amalgamating artistic utopia.

It is in his following novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), that Reed systematizes his historical view of the black world. Through a complex detective plot, *Mumbo Jumbo* allegorizes the search for a genuinely African American aesthetics. The intricate web of references is skillfully articulated through endless reflexive motifs, which makes this novel Reed's masterpiece and his greatest experimental undertaking to date.[6] Its pages contain an endless series of discursive modes, including, among others, fantasy, history, mythology, religion, and popular culture. Literary elements coexist alongside an array of visual paratextual materials, such as photographs, posters, drawings, graphics, symbols, Tarot cards, telegrams, party invitations, headlines, and newspaper clippings. *Mumbo Jumbo* conveys the impression of an interdisciplinary collage and, in this way, informs the reader that the novel does not only refer to the literary tradition, but also includes a multifarious cultural context.[7] This complexity in the novel's nature requires a clarification of its structural level and story line.

Mumbo Jumbo is organized into fifty-four narrative segments of very different lengths, ranging from a simple paragraph to a chapter of over thirty pages. The bulk of the novel is framed by a prologue (chapter 1) and an epilogue. The prologue offers some significant details about the plot and establishes its most important themes. After this false beginning, the novel lists its credits and provides a group of epigraphs that announce future events. Toward the end, it closes with an epilogue in which the action returns to the time when the novel was written, and several of the central motifs are recapitulated. A "Partial Bibliography," in which the author displays most of his documentary sources, concludes the narrative.

In terms of the story line, the action is initially set in New Orleans during the roaring twenties. An epidemic called Jes Grew has broken out and is spreading dangerously in the direction of the great urban centers of Chicago and New York. The infection's most obvious symptom is a frantic desire to dance. This inclination toward spontaneous frenzied dancing is often described in terms similar to those of "possession" in voodoo. From the beginning, the origin of this outbreak is identified

with the reemergence of the "Text," which refers to the Book of Thoth, a sacred anthology that recounts the mysteries of ancient Egypt. However, the Text soon acquires a metaphorical value and is ultimately identified with the code of the new African American aesthetics that Reed seeks. The central plot deals precisely with the search for the Text, a search that has two antagonists: on the one hand, PaPa LaBas, a hoodoo detective trying to find it in order to unleash the beneficial effects of Jes Grew; on the other, Hinckle Von Vampton, a Knight Templar who wants to ritually destroy the Text and in this way stop the epidemic forever.

Parallel to this central story line, the novel develops several subplots whose mutual relationship is revealed as the reading progresses. In one of these subplots a powerful secret society, the Atonist Path, and its militant arm, the Wallflower Order (a pun alluding to the Ivy League), attempt to create a fake black intellectual—a Talking Android—to discredit the true protagonists of the African American cultural Renaissance. At the other extreme of the ideological spectrum, another subplot introduces the activities of the Mu'tafikah, a multicultural urban guerrilla group that seeks to return artworks kept in museums (known in the novel as Art Detention Centers) to their places of origin in the Third World. The fictitious activities of the Atonist Path and the Mu'tafikah alternate with historical and pseudo-historical subplots, such as the ancestry, Administration, and death of President Warren G. Harding and the occupation of Haiti by US troops.

However, the central action in *Mumbo Jumbo* revolves around the history of the Text (from its origin in ancient Egypt to its reappearance in North America in the twenties), and LaBas' and Von Vampton's search for the text. In Von Vampton's possession since the Middle Ages, the book passes accidentally to the black nationalist Abdul Sufi Amid, who translates it and is killed soon after. Abdul dies grasping in his hands an epigram in which the key to locating the Book is encoded. LaBas deciphers this message and finds the Book, buried in the very center of the Cotton Club.

In an episode that parodies the "recognition" scene of traditional detective novels, LaBas reveals some of the novel's central mysteries: the nature and meaning of Jes Grew, the origin and history of the Book of Thoth, and the plots of several secret societies to exploit the book's wisdom. In front of an audience composed of the novel's main characters,

LaBas ties up some of the novel's loose ends. Finally, he opens the box found in the Cotton Club and finds that the Text is gone. A letter written by Abdul just before his death and reproduced at the end of the novel tells us that Abdul himself had burned the Text on the grounds that it was obscene. We also discover that Abdul's translation had been lost in the labyrinthine postal service, after having been rejected by an editor who considered it outdated and not "Nation" enough. With the book's destruction the Atonists believe the epidemic has been extinguished, but, as LaBas finally reveals, the spirit of Jes Grew is invincible and will always make use of new texts to manifest itself. The epilogue of *Mumbo Jumbo* presents LaBas as a hundred year old man giving a lecture on Jes Grew to a group of students in the sixties or seventies (the years during which the novel was written). After several decades of oblivion, Jes Grew begins to show signs of reemerging.

Mumbo Jumbo combines real historical events, documented—but probably false—gossip, and fantasies completely invented by Reed. Although most of the characters that are part of the main action (the search for the Text) are fictional, they are frequently representative of historical figures. The novel's two antagonists, for example, allude to mythical and/or historical characters. In terms of his name, physical aspect, and function, PaPa LaBas represents the voodoo trickster deity Papa Legba (Gates 300; Byerman 225; Shadle 20). Labas is in reality the name that this Haitian *loa* (spirit) has been given in the United States.[8] This character is also described in the novel in the same way as Papa Legba—he is an experienced old man who likes to wear showy hats and sunglasses and walks leaning on a stick or crutch (Cosentino 265): "He is a familiar sight in Harlem, wearing his frock coat, opera hat, smoked glasses and carrying a cane" (Reed 26). In voodoo, Papa Legba is the lord of the crossroads, the messenger of the gods, the guardian of the threshold, who regulates traffic between the visible and the invisible worlds (Métraux 101; Hurston 129). LaBas is, significantly, the character in charge of resolving the novel's principal mystery: the meaning and the origin of the Text. In order to do so, he puts the characters, and therefore the readers themselves, in contact with the spiritual world of African American tradition. LaBas is the guide who allows us access to the dark areas of myth and history.

LaBas' antagonist, Hinckle Von Vampton, is reminiscent of Carl Van Vechten (De Filippo 125; Gates, 302).[9] Van Vechten was one of the

controversial white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance who popularized the black arts through his articles in fashionable magazines, such as *Vanity Fair*; a novel (*Nigger Heaven*, 1926), praised by Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson and strongly criticized by W.E.B. Du Bois; numerous soirees in which black artists, musicians, and writers interacted with art dealers, producers, and publishers; and many photographs of almost all well-known African Americans in the United States (Douglas 287-91; Kellner 368).[10] Van Vechten is representative of a wave of curious whites who invaded Harlem in the twenties in search of the exotic and primitive, and who then commercially exploited its creative potential (Ottley and Weatherby 246). In this sense, his fictionalization in *Mumbo Jumbo* enables Reed to attack not only the manipulation by this kind of patron, who was so typical of the time, but also something he considers endemic of the white intelligentsia: the tendency to exploit, manipulate, and enrich themselves at the expense of the black world's creative efforts.

Another character associated with Harlem patronage, in this case black, has escaped the attention of most of Reed's critics: the anonymous hostess at whose party LaBas solves the novel's main mysteries. This character is clearly a synthesis of Sarah Breedlove Walker and A'Lelia Walker Robinson, mother and daughter, respectively. The former, better known as Madame C.J. Walker, was the founder of the first dynasty of black plutocrats (Douglas 289; Ottley and Weatherby 255). Although formerly a washerwoman, she became wealthy after discovering and marketing a hair straightening process (the "Walker system"). With part of her immense fortune, she built a sumptuous palace known as Villa Lewaro, where the novel's famous recognition scene takes place.[11] A'Lelia Walker Robinson was well known in her own right for her sponsorship of young black artists. Her mansion on 136th Street became one of Harlem's social centers for many writers and artists. At her cultural soirees she offered these young creators an opportunity to meet the influential whites who were sympathetic to the new trends in African American arts (Ottley and Weatherby 257; Kellner 371-72).

Some religious and political leaders of the time are represented by the dogmatic Abdul Sufi Hamid. Abdul's career primarily recalls that of Malcolm X. Both are ex-convicts who became self-educated while in prison, and both are Islamic black activists whose rhetoric has a wide audience among the black masses (De Filippo 132). Gates also points

to the figures of the editor Duse Mohammed Ali and W.D. Fard (Elijah Muhammad's mentor) as possible historical references for Reed's character (302). However, all of Reed's critics overlook the fact that a Sufi Abdul Hamid actually existed. Known also as Bishop Conshankin, or just "the Bishop," Hamid was a charismatic cult leader in Chicago in the late twenties. He soon became involved with Muslim organizations and led a movement to force business owners in black neighborhoods to hire black employees. In 1932 Hamid moved to Harlem, where he tried to repeat the success of the Chicago campaign, yet there he found strong opposition from the Left and from conservative African Americans. After being arrested in 1935, he became disillusioned with political activism and returned to his former mysticism. In addition to representing the flourishing religious cults in the Harlem of the twenties and thirties, Hamid has come to be remembered as the organizer of the first black consumer boycotts in the United States (Ottley and Weatherby 252; Kellner 150-51). In *Mumbo Jumbo* the characterization of the fictional Abdul is quite ambivalent. While the novel openly mocks his deeply moralistic view and censors his dogmatic tendencies, it evaluates positively the recuperation and embracement of African origins that characterizes black nationalism.[12]

The character Benoit Battraville, a fictionalization of the historical leader of the fight against the North American occupation, is important for the novel's exposure of the dirty war the United States waged in Haiti. Through his dialogue with PaPa LaBas in chapter 42, we obtain several important keys to understanding both the significance of voodoo in the history of the Americas and the effect secret societies have had on US politics. Among these societies, the Wallflower Order is the most active in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Its chieftain Walter Mellon, to whom the novel refers often as "the Sphinx," is pointedly reminiscent of Andrew Mellon, the US Secretary of Treasury during the twenties and early thirties who had amassed one of the largest fortunes in North America. Mellon's inclusion within the conspiratorial schemes of the novel allows Reed to reinforce his fictionalized version of US reality, in which the highest hierarchical power position is occupied by big business, with political and military groups offering behind-the-scenes support.

Some other minor characters are also vaguely reminiscent of historical figures of the times. Dutch Schlitz, for example, is a fictitious reconstruction of Dutch Schultz, a famous Prohibition Era gangster.

According to De Filippo, the name Harry "Safecracker" Gould suggests railway tycoon Jay Gould, while LaBas' assistant, Charlotte, evokes Mademoiselle Charlotte, one of the few white *loas* in the voodoo pantheon (125). However, as Gates has rightfully pointed out, Reed's fictional characters serve to exemplify attitudes and personalities within the great cultural conflict they dramatize, because although their names and attitudes are sometimes reminiscent of historical or mythological figures, their personalities and interrelations are mostly fictional. Many of the historical characters, such as presidents (Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge), black leaders (James Weldon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois), black musicians (Scott Joplin, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker), and European thinkers (Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung), help make up the historical background of the novel, but are not main agents in its major story line, which is the search for the Text and the deciphering of its mysteries.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed lays the foundation for the historical and aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout the rest of his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of cultural systems, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to undermine some of the dominant assumptions regarding the role of blacks in history. The novel's goals must ultimately be understood in light of this oppositional nature. Rather than attempting to impose a new cultural system, Reed focuses on the relentless critique of prevailing views. Byerman synthesizes Reed's oppositional drive when he states that "the test for the power of his art is his ability to expose and negate, not to assert and control" (221). In his negation of the dominant forms, Reed targets the conventions of traditional historical and fictional discourses. As do other postmodernist historical novels, *Mumbo Jumbo* articulates historical reflection and metafictional experimentation without encountering a contradiction between the two. On the contrary, reflexive metaphors are used to clarify historical motifs, and historical motifs are used to exemplify the novel's inner workings. Reed's use of both history and metafiction is ultimately aimed at directing the reader's attention to the textual nature of the received versions of the past.

From a historiographic point of view, Reed's novel seeks to displace the prevailing notions of history. *Mumbo Jumbo* was originally conceived as a response to those who denied the existence of a unique

African American cultural tradition and accused black artists of being derivative. In this novel, Reed undertakes the task of reconstructing the origin and history of that tradition. To that end, he recreates a past in which documented and apocryphal characters and events coexist, the result being a hybrid that inverts stereotypes about African American cultural inferiority. In Reed's version, the cradle of civilization is located in the black world, which has been immemorially plundered and exploited by the West. Although Reed frequently resorts to apocryphal data, he also supports his version with others that are empirically demonstrable. His intention is to make the boundaries between fact and fiction problematic so as to question the legitimacy of those discourses that have been used to validate the dominant ideology.

Regarding its metafictional aspect, the novel's radical reflexiveness stems from its main allegorical structure. This structure depicts a novel (*Mumbo Jumbo*) in which an archetypal reader (LaBas) seeks a book, produced by an archetypal writer (Thoth), which inaugurates literature, and which, all seems to suggest, is a book with the same characteristics as *Mumbo Jumbo*. The result of this self-begetting plot is a most complex reflexive figure: the endless spiral that originates in what Dällenbach calls aporetic duplication ("a sequence that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it"). As a consequence of this mechanism of paradoxical duplication, *Mumbo Jumbo* spotlights the textual nature of its whole referential universe, including the historical referent itself. Both the novel's starting point (supposedly The Book of Thoth) and its end (*Mumbo Jumbo*) underscore the textual nature of all cultural constructions, be they historical or fictional.

This revisionist concept of history and fiction is integrated into a cultural project that Reed calls Neo-HooDooism. Built on the contributions of West African cultures, Haitian and North American voodoo/hoodoo, and some forms of US popular culture, this project seeks to update the artistic expressions of African American culture. Unlike other world views, Neo-HooDooism resists restrictive encodings. Reed thus avoids open definitions of the term and prefers, instead, to demonstrate it through the works of many modern artists. From these examples and their manifestations in *Mumbo Jumbo*, we can identify a series of tendencies that constitute Neo-HooDooism, including: 1) formal and ideological syncretism, which results in the use of interdisciplinary collage and the amalgamation of different cultural systems; 2) openness

on all possible levels, which leads to a conception of history and literature as discourses that are susceptible to new interpretations; 3) subjectivity, intuition, mystery, and emotion, as opposed to the rational and logical patterns of Western thought; 4) improvisation and expressive freedom, both of which reject the value of pre-established codes and seek, instead, endless variations; 5) participation, which considers art as a communal experience and not as the privilege of an intellectual elite; and 6) a hedonist world view, according to which the most important value is to enjoy the pleasures of life intensely. All these characteristics form a historical-aesthetic counter-system that seeks to rewrite historical and literary traditions in order to demystify the hegemonic forms of representation.

After a work as ambitious and innovative as *Mumbo Jumbo*, it is not surprising that critics were less enthusiastic about *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974).[13] While *Mumbo Jumbo* is a groundbreaking novel that offers a complete view of African American history and culture, *Louisiana* is limited in that it simply re-elaborates (in a rather limited way) the mythical and aesthetic counter-system already established in Reed's previous novels. Like *Mumbo Jumbo*, this new novel is structured along a detective story line, in which two parallel plots are united in a final resolution. In the central plot, PaPa LaBas, *Mumbo Jumbo*'s hoodoo detective, investigates a murder in the town of Berkeley during the sixties. The victim, Ed Yellings, is representative of the industrious black bourgeoisie. The novel suggests that Yellings had been a member of a secret society at war with a conglomerate of multinational capitalism and Judeo-Christian culture known as the Louisiana Red Corporation.

Parallel to this central plot, the novel describes the fight of a character named Chorus to regain his importance in contemporary society. Chorus is representative of the situation of blacks in a white world, caught in a restricted role and permanently threatened with expulsion. According to Reed, the origin of this loss dates back to the Greek play *Antigone*, in which monologues first began to usurp the dominant place previously occupied by the chorus in Aeschylus' works. The progressive diminishing of the importance of the chorus in Greek drama allows Reed to reflect upon the inherent evils of Western culture. Besides PaPa LaBas' detective story and Chorus' aesthetic struggle, the novel creates an allegorical subtext in which each of the characters

corresponds to the protagonists of Sophocles' play. However, Reed does not reproduce Antigone's drama but instead reworks it in his own personal way, making Creon the hero and Antigone the protagonist of an unjustified rebellion. In actuality, however, Reed is attacking the tragic sense of life that has permeated both Judeo-Christian culture and black liberation movements. Through the so-called Moochers, Reed criticizes the intolerant attitudes and gratuitous violence rampant among the most radical sectors of the black nationalist movements, something he had already condemned in each of his previous novels, and that now becomes the main focus of his satire.[14]

The publication of *Flight to Canada* in 1976 signaled a return to the levels of quality and originality in Reed's first three novels. In this great example of historiographic metafiction (Harris 461), Reed once again uses parody to chronicle US history. Published the same year as the Bicentennial, *Flight to Canada* contains Reed's response to two hundred years of official history. In its pages he attacks the most untouchable myths of US tradition, focusing on the period of the Civil War. Both the Union world view and the Confederate ideals are undermined by Reed's biting satire. Lincoln is portrayed as an illiterate and opportunist who declares emancipation of the slaves in an act of cunning political pragmatism. Harriet Beecher Stowe is a snob who becomes rich at the expense of others' suffering (her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "lifted" from Josiah Henson, who appears in the novel as Uncle Robin). The new capitalist order introduced after the Union victory is personified by Yankee Jack, a plutocrat who controls the nation's destiny. Southern values are embodied by Swille, the ruler of a decadent empire that is haunted by Edgar Allan Poe's ghost and modeled on the image of King Arthur's Camelot. Along with nineteenth-century characters and situations, the novel introduces elements from twentieth-century technology (telephones, walkie-talkies, microphones, cassettes, xerox machines, radios, TVs, videos, computers, cars, airplanes, and helicopters). Raven Quickskill, the protagonist, escapes to Canada in a jumbo jet. Lincoln's assassination is broadcast live and replayed as part of a TV broadcast of the play *My American Cousins*. The novel's language is not typical of traditional historical fiction, but is instead composed of contemporary colloquialisms and slang. The result is one of the most aggressive expressions of what Brian McHale has called the postmodernist revisionism of the historical novel. In introducing

twentieth-century material culture into the past, the novel undermines conventional chronology and thereby twists the linear logic of discourse that dominates canonical historiography. Above all, Reed's apocryphal version of the events allows the reader to witness a rewriting of US political history that identifies the past's true protagonists and rescues its true victims.

Regarding its metafictional nature, *Flight to Canada*--together with *Mumbo Jumbo*-- contains the greatest concentration of reflexive metaphors in all of Reed's works. This work presents a self-referential dynamic that likens its own basic situation to the "self-begetting novel," that is, the type of novel that takes credit for a character's development to the point at which he or she is able to begin writing the novel we have just finished reading (Kellman 3). *Flight to Canada* describes the process of its own writing. It begins with a poem called "Flight to Canada" that summarizes its main motifs. The first chapter then opens with the protagonist, Raven Quickskill, as he begins to write Uncle Robin's (Uncle Tom's) biography (Robin's story had been stolen and falsified by Harriet Beecher Stowe). The novel Quickskill writes is most probably *Flight to Canada*, and its narration takes up the subsequent pages. In addition to this proleptic *mise en abyme*, similar to the one that begins *Mumbo Jumbo*, from its first pages the novel offers all possible levels of self-reflection.[15] Raven's poem incorporates *Flight to Canada* with its commentary (reflection of the enunciation), establishes the code according to which the novel must be interpreted (reflection of the code), and introduces the trickster (the cultural hero associated with myths of origin in Native American and African American traditions). The spatial and temporal coordinates soon acquire an overtly metafictional quality. Quickskill's flight to Canada allegorizes the search for an aesthetic utopia represented by writing in a state of liberty, an ideal for which Reed has fought in all his works. The novel ends with its protagonist coming to an understanding of his own condition: Canada is only a state of mind, a desirable ideal the black writer has to strive for, no matter where he may be physically. The fact that Reed has his protagonist return to the South and devote himself to rewriting history is symbolic of the author's engagement with his immediate reality and contradicts the charges of escapism that social-realist critics have launched against him.

Flight to Canada is simultaneously a declaration in favor of creative freedom and a denunciation of the plunder of black culture by

the white cultural establishment. In its pages Reed develops tendencies he had outlined in previous novels, especially *Mumbo Jumbo*. In terms of plot, however, Reed abandons the detective genre as the novel's structuring convention in order to focus on the recreation of slave narratives. The successful result of this work (Reed's best after *Mumbo Jumbo*) stems from the multiplicity of its levels of interpretation, from the inexhaustible richness of its network of allusions, and, above all, from the effective interaction between parodic play and historiographic reflection.

Reed's experimental leanings, which culminated in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada*, are interrupted in *The Terrible Twos* (1982). Although witty and humorous, this new work rehashes the basic schemes and ideas presented in Reed's early works, giving one the impression that his technical and thematic repertoire was starting to shrink. *The Terrible Twos* chronicles a conspiracy launched by big business and the White House to monopolize the Christmas market. Using this trivial plot as a pretext, Reed again dismantles the most sacred elements of US politics (the presidency and lobbyists), economics (capitalism and large corporations), and folklore (St. Nicholas, Christmas, and Thanksgiving). The action in *The Terrible Twos* is set in the present and immediate future (the eighties and nineties), and at first glance may be considered a commentary on the Reagan era and its aftermath. Metaphorically, however, Reed's work censors the monopolizing tendencies in North American culture. The United States is portrayed as a self-centered two-year old child who sees the world as an extension of himself; the diversity and depth of African American legends and myths serves as a contrast to this narcissistic and egocentric view of contemporary North America.

Although in *The Terrible Twos* Reed recycles the detective plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Louisiana Red*, in this case it is a new character, Nance Saturday, who must discover the intricacies that make up the novel's tangled plot. One of the central enigmas of the novel is "Operation Two Birds," a conspiracy organized by a gang of businessmen, corrupt politicians, mock missionary men, and paranoid militarists. The plan entails a holy war against the "surplus people" in the United States (the homeless, the poor, women, blacks, Hispanics, and Jews) and a West African country (most likely Nigeria, the original land of the Yorubas). In this way Reed continues his traditional inclination–initiated in

Pallbearers but most extremely manifested in *Mumbo Jumbo*–toward a conspiratorial view of North American politics.

The Terrible Twos has a logical, yet somewhat disappointing, continuation in *The Terrible Threes* (1989), where the motifs and situations of the first are reintroduced seven years later. Reed's satire persists in targeting the same sectors of US society: the military, the White House, feminists, Miltonian critics, writers of minimalist fiction, biblical scholars, TV evangelists, and anyone else with politically and culturally conservative leanings. Aside from several new characters and the humorous plot circumvolutions, *The Terrible Threes* does not offer any substantial changes in relation to Reed's previous work. The fact that it is a sequel limits the novel even more, since it presupposes the reader's familiarity not only with Reed's counter-system, as expressed in *Mumbo Jumbo*, but also with the characters and situations presented in *The Terrible Twos*.

Between the two *Terribles*, Reed published what seems to be his most straightforward—and probably most unsuccessful—novel: *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). The setting is an imaginary present where intellectuals are victims of an aggressive wave of neo-Nazism and a fanatic feminist conspiracy. Once more, Reed blends fiction and reality to make a fiery and impassioned statement against authoritarian attitudes within the cultural establishment. The novel's protagonist, Ian Ball, is a black playwright whose work (*Reckless Eyeballing*) reflects his own situation as well as Reed's actual creative problems. In this case, the metafictional effect is achieved through playful interaction on three levels: the diegetic (the story of Ball's misfortunes), the metadiegetic (the story told in Ball's play) and the extradiegetic (the author's well-known and long-standing dispute with feminists). However, other than the witty dialogues and a few clever comic scenes, Reed's satiric potential falls short. Too frequently *Reckless Eyeballing* seems to be an attempt to settle old personal scores with his personal enemies (the white intelligentsia, the social realist critics, and the feminist movement).

Similar concerns provide the dominant motifs in *Japanese By Spring* (1993), Reed's most recent novel to date. In this work Reed takes on the subject of intolerance in the academic world. Neo-conservatism, racism, cultural imperialism, intellectual turncoats, literary fashions, political correctness, black and white nationalists, and radical middle-class feminism are now some of the objects of Reed's relentless satire. In each

of these cases, *Japanese* proposes the celebration of multiculturalism that has its most irrefutable expression in the California setting of the novel.

In both ideological and formal terms *Japanese* is replete with metafictional devices. The novel as a whole is a reflection on the role of literature and criticism in North American society. It also raises ideas that occur throughout each of Reed's novels: the importance of the African influence on Western culture, the distortion of aesthetic ideals in contemporary society, the literary critic's overly important role in academia (which sometimes even overshadows the creative writer himself/herself), and the need for a syncretic vision of US cultural reality. A brief cameo appearance by the author also spotlights the novel's self-reference. When invited to lecture at the fictitious Jack London College in California, Reed discusses his work and again presents his own literary theory.

In general *Japanese* demonstrates the satirical features that have characterized its author's style thus far. It is unlikely, however, that his work would be of any interest for a reader who is not part of the academic world or who is not already familiar with Reed's other works. In fact, this last novel is a confirmation of his already noted tendency to condense his frame of reference and therefore limit his target audience. His basic aesthetics was already outlined in his first two novels and more definitely established in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In his later works, except for *Flight to Canada*, Reed has merely developed those elements further.

All of Reed's novels follow a process of continuity in terms of aspects of the postmodernist historical novel. They frequently refer to the dark areas of the past in order to understand present reality. Indeed, history is seen as the eternal conflict between the tragic and repressive spirit of Judeo-Christian civilization and the humorous and liberating forces represented by African American culture and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Reed's historical revisionism causes him to reveal and question the conventions and norms of canonical history; it is a historiographic revisionism as well, aimed at demystifying and deconstructing the myth-making mechanisms of cultural history.

In metafictional terms, Reed shapes his novels into scenarios where aesthetic and cultural projects are debated. By repeatedly dramatizing

the acts of reading and writing and using all types of specular metaphors, Reed rejects the traditional forms of representation of both white monoculturalists and black social-realists. What he ultimately proposes is an oppositional aesthetics free from any kind of formal or ideological constriction. This search for freedom on all domains leads him to experimentation with all genres–especially those of popular culture–remodeling them into a new blend of a hybrid and original nature.

NOTES

[1] It is this vision of voodoo as a collective creation from different cultures (Deren 59) that has led Reed to make it into "the perfect metaphor for the multiculture" (*Shrovetide* 232).

[2] Judeo-Christian dogmas are the ongoing target of Reed's criticism in all of his works, and he frequently aims his satire against their most sacred myths. Thus, the God of the Hebrews is described as "a dangerous paranoid pain-in-the-neck a CopGod from the git-go, Jeho-vah was the successful law and order candidate in the mythological relay of the 4th century A.D. Jeho-vah is the God of punishment. The H-Bomb is a typical Jeho-vah "miracle." Jeho-vah is why we are in Vietnam. He told Moses to go out and 'subdue' the world" (*New and Collected Poems* 24). The figure of Christ, whom Reed considers to be an "impostor" (97), is subjected to a similar treatment in his irreverent style: "Neo-HooDoo tells Christ to get lost (Judas Iscariot holds an honorary degree from Neo-HooDoo)" (*New and Collected Poems* 21).

[3] Reginald Martin alludes to Reed's use of colloquial diction, emotionalism, various perspectives on the improvement of social conditions for blacks, and automatic writing as some of the elements that were debated in African American cultural circles during the sixties, and that are the target of satire in *Pallbearers*.

[4] Reed himself has frequently commented on the influence of the visual media (especially television editing and film montage) in his work. See, for example, O'Brien (175-76).

[5] For a discussion of the impact of cartoons and comic books on the writing of *Pallbearers*, see Nazareth's interview with Reed (117).

[6] For a consideration of *Mumbo Jumbo* as Reed's masterpiece see, for example, Byerman (219), Shadle (18), Fox (49), Martin (93), and De Filippo (112).

[7] These complex intertextual and intratextual networks have led Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to define *Mumbo Jumbo* as, "a book about texts and a book of texts, a composite narrative composed of sub-texts pre-texts, post-texts, and narratives-within-narratives" (299).

[8] According to Gates, Legba is invoked through the phrase "eh là-bas" in New Orleans jazz recordings of the twenties and thirties (300). In a self-interview, Reed himself has identified LaBas as the name by which Legba is identified in North America (*Shrovetide* 132).

[9] Gates has also pointed to German engraver Hermann Knackfuss as another possible historical model for Von Vampton. In fact, page 155 of the Atheneum edition (1988) of *Mumbo Jumbo* reproduces Knakfuss' famous heliogravure "People of Europe, protect that which is most holy to you," in which the German artist justified European domination over Asia (Gates 302-03).

[10] On Carl Van Vechten and his relations with Harlem, see Lueders (1965), Huggins (1971), and Van Vechten (1955).

[11] Most details in the description of this scene--e.g. the name of the villa created by Caruso or the luxurious 24-karat-gold-decorated piano--are taken from the description that Ottley and Weatherby give of Madame Walker's palace (254). Reed also mentions Madam Walker in his article "Harlem Renaissance Day" (*Shrovetide* 256). For more information on Madam Sarah Walker and Harlem's middle class tastes with its predilections for hair straighteners and skin lighteners, see Anderson (1982).

[12] The life and personality of the historical Hamid must have fascinated Reed. Both McKay (1987) and Kellner (1984) provide many details about Hamid that define him as a novelistic figure very much attuned to Reed's penchant for the eccentric. Like the characters of LaBas' "Egyptian legend," Hamid claimed to be born in the Sudan (when in fact he was a native of the US South). His death—he died trying to demonstrate his mystical powers while aloft in an airplane—seems to have been taken from a Reed novel, rather than from real life.

[13] Houston A. Baker, for example, points out that *Louisiana Red* is modeled on the same patterns used in *Mumbo Jumbo*, but it lacks the interest and ambition of the previous novel (51-52). For other negative reviews of *Louisiana Red* see Peter Dreyer (1974), George E. Kent (1975), Christopher Herron Lee (1975), and Neil Schmitz (1975).

[14] This probably explains what provoked some of the most hostile attacks on the novel. Houston Baker, in his review of *Louisiana Red* for the journal *Black World*, underscores the lack of originality and ambition of Reed's novel in comparison with his previous work. Reviews like Baker's set a controversy into motion. For a summary, see Martin (1988).

[15] The forms and possibilities of the *mise en abyme* have been thoroughly studied by Lucien Dällenbach in *The Mirror in the Text*. In his examination of the ways in which one element of a work can mirror the work as a whole, Dällenbach establishes a typology of both the modalities of duplication and of the structural levels of reflection. On the the basis of examples drawn from painting (Van Eyck and Velázquez) and literary works (the New French Novel), he defines the *mise en abyme* as "any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication" (36).

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MESMERISED AND UNDEAD, LADYLIKE AND INVALID: ENGENDERING AGEING BODIES IN EDGAR ALLAN POE AND EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

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Abstract

Poe's tales often explore transitional conditions, featuring beings that undergo trances whereby concepts of gender, nation, and ageing are questioned and ultimately subverted. Similarly, in his gothic novel *A Strange Story* (1861), the Victorian writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton explores the limits of the body, the mind, and the soul in a post-Darwinian text that dwells on the discourses of religion and science in Victorian England. The aim of this paper is to gain insight into subversions of Victorian politics of gender and ageing through Poe's tales and Bulwer-Lytton's novel, pointing at transatlantic similarities and departures from the cult of invalidism, female catalepsy, mesmeric trances and vampiric immortality as pivotal transitional states in gothic literature that betray double-handed Victorian conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity through the process of ageing.

Key words: gender; ageing; Victorian period; gothic literature; invalidism; mesmerism; vampiricism; catalepsy; metempsychosis; transitional states; insanity; medicine; religion; transatlanticism.

Resumen

Los relatos de Poe a menudo exploran estados transitorios, dando protagonismo a sujetos que experimentan trances mediante los cuales se cuestionan, a la par que se subvierten, conceptos de género, nación y envejecimiento. De forma similar, en su novela gótica *A Strange Story* (1861), el escritor victoriano Edward Bulwer-Lytton explora los límites del cuerpo, la mente y el alma en un texto post-Darwiniano que versa

sobre los discursos de la religión y la ciencia en la Inglaterra victoriana. El objetivo de este artículo es tomar conciencia de la subversión de las políticas victorianas en cuanto al género y el envejecimiento en los relatos de Poe y la novela de Bulwer-Lytton, apuntando a las similitudes transatlánticas y las diferencias con respecto al culto del invalidismo, la catalepsia femenina, los trances mesméricos y la inmortalidad vampírica como estados cruciales de transición en la literatura gótica que subrayan concepciones duales victorianas acerca de la feminidad y la masculinidad através del proceso de envejecimiento.

Palabras clave: género; envejecimiento; periodo victoriano; literatura gótica; invalidismo; mesmerismo; vampirismo; catalepsia; metempsicosis; estados transitorios; demencia; medicina; religión; transatlanticismo.

As Massé (2000) claims, the gothic genre has proved particularly fruitful to psychoanalytic critical inquiry not merely for its popularity and its recognisable motifs, but also for the many central issues it bears in common with those of psychoanalysis (230). Gothic narratives illuminate psychoanalysis, while psychoanalytic endeavours consider the central points that tend to be examined within the gothic genre. In psychoanalysis, interpretation moves from the isolated act or symbol to consideration in relation to other symbols of the psyche. Freud developed the structural model of id/ego/superego, and following Freud's lead, Jung coined a similar tripartite system shaped by archetypes such as the shadow, the persona and the anima (Massé 233). Similarly, in literary critical terms, if the assignation of fixed meanings to single elements is known as the metaphoric, their consideration in relation to other elements of the narratological universe is called the allegorical. Massé admits that, because characters in gothic narratives are commonly flat, the genre lends itself to allegorical interpretation whereby characters, structural features or settings are perceived as significant precisely because of what they represent (233). Thus, through psychoanalytic interpretations, gothic narratives are decoded as particularly allegorical and, it is precisely through this allegorical quality pertaining to the gothic genre, that issues such as sex, class, race, and culture are examined, revised and subverted.

Bearing in mind this parallelism between psychoanalysis and the gothic, Poe's tales have particularly gained from psychoanalytic interpretation. As Freud himself mentioned in the foreword to Marie Bonaparte's seminal psychoanalytic analysis of Poe's tales, "few tasks are as appealing as enquiry into the laws that govern the psyche of exceptionally endowed individuals" (xi). Poe's tales are particularly fertile to explore the fragmentation of the self and identity, especially those portraying the demise of a young woman, and the narrator's conflicted response to her death through his wife's reincarnation in the figure of her daughter. As Kahane (1985) asserts, the daughter-and-mother bond becomes a mirror for the fragmentation of identity since merging with a mother imago threatens all boundaries between the self and the other (340). For the male narrator, the separation of a mother figure through her demise implies the development of his masculine ego through the narrator's ultimate rejection of the mother, an abject figure no longer identified with the self. It is this abjection what disturbs identity, system, and order, thus becoming the in-between, the ambiguous, and the composite (Kristeva 1980). These early psychoanalytic interpretations of Poe's women's tales seemed to raise troubling questions about inherent misogyny so as to confirm the development of the masculine ego. Nonetheless, the gothic, as a domain whereby boundaries are constantly blurred, is particularly prone to accept alternative readings. As Massé admits, if male characters are portrayed through dynamic representations of the ego development, it is also in the gothic that female characters begin to stir and come to life (237). Thus, as Gerald Kennedy (1995) points out, through feminist theory, recent criticism has tended to regard Poe's poetics as a deliberate and ironic critique of patriarchal attitudes toward women (113). Likewise, Richards (2004) argues that Poe often suffers delusions of masculine strength while inadvertently exposing the psychic femininity he hides from himself (35).

These allegorical interpretations not only apply to the evolution of the individual subject but also extend to the social psyche of the nation. The relation established between fiction and its wider contextual culture has often been explored in cultural studies (Williams 1961). From a wider point of view, Poe's portrayal of the fragmentation of the self may also apply to the fragmentation of a nation after the American War of Independence, leaving behind a past of subjection and

entanglement with a mother figure, the metropolis, and propelling the advance of the independent American nation. Taking into consideration the extrapolation of psychoanalytic readings from the individual to the collective psyche within the gothic, Hurley (1997) applied Kristeva's semiotics to consider both the gothic and Darwin's theory of evolution bearing in mind the dissolution of all boundaries. Darwinian ideas made a great impact on the Victorian society of the time. Thus, if the American nation had left behind a past of subjection to start developing as an independent nation, in Victorian England, the current cultural issues at the time were particularly concerned about Darwin's evolutionary ideas, which exerted an important influence on all spheres from the individual subject to the British society as a whole.

Consequently, if Poe's tales may appeal to the fragmentation of the self through psychoanalytic interpretations, on the other shore of the Atlantic, the contemporary Victorian writer Bulwer-Lytton also contributed to the gothic genre with novels that explored the development of young individuals, as well as examined cultural issues of the time through his novels of ideas. As a domain particularly prone to explore fragmentation, Bulwer-Lytton's gothic romances explored metaphysical issues which were particularly addressed to the Victorian society of the time. In the preface to his earlier novel *Zanoni*, Bulwer-Lytton had already claimed he intended to explore the union between the plain things of the day, performed by the earthly bodies, and the invisible and latent qualities of the soul. Subsequently, Bulwer-Lytton further explored metaphysics in *A Strange Story*, which Campbell (1986) defined as a both occult and scientific romance, focused on the dilemma between the evolutionary theory and the existence of the human soul. As Mitchell (2003) argues, Bulwer-Lytton approached the philosophical debate between materialists and idealists that had preoccupied so much European writing in the eighteenth-century, and especially, his own time, through the advent of Darwin's theory of evolution (136). In this sense, according to Christensen (1976), Bulwer-Lytton ascertained that Darwin and science had discovered the actuality of a cosmic first principle, while proving its materialist and anti-ideal quality at the same time (174), thus expressing the writer's increasing uneasiness about this recent discovery.

Poe's women's tales explored the fragmentation of the self through the dynamics of life, death and metempsychosis or reincarnation, and

the development of the ego as a result. Bulwer-Lytton's novel, through the gothic, focused on the fragmentation of the body, the mind, and the soul, propelled by the Darwinian theory, and the ultimate need to amalgamate these three elements to age and become an accomplished human being. In Christensen's words, Bulwer-Lytton pointed out that the same cosmic energy operated on the metaphysical level as sympathy – ideas – also operated on the physical level as volition – material forms (175). Similarly, critics such as Gerald Kennedy have read Poe's heroines as reifications of ideas (the mind), and dilapidated houses as embodiments of male characters (the body); a case in point would be Madeline and Roderick in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". Thus, both Poe's and Bulwer-Lytton's textual portraits of the self are particularly prone to psychoanalytic interpretations, as both seem to reflect and subvert Freud's tripartite classification of id/ego/superego, and Lacan's subsequent categorisation of shadow/persona/anima through the fragmentation and the union of the self into the body, the mind and the soul. This article aims at pursuing a transatlantic comparative analysis which underlines both authors' involvement in the gothic genre through the portrayal of transient conditions and blurring boundaries that reflect the fragmentation of the self, as well as the cultural anxiety of both the American nation in the nineteenth-century and Victorian England, due to historical reasons and the current advance of the evolutionary theories.

This cultural anxiety is often portrayed in fiction through illness and invalidism. As a case in point, Bailin (1994) noticed the pervasive presence of the sickroom scene in Victorian fiction as performing a crucial therapeutic function. These narratives transpose social pathologies into bodily ailments as reflecting transitional stages in Victorian transformations of the self (Bailin 6). As Bailin admits, the condition of being ill dwells on images and explanations with regard to the spirit, the mind, the social body and the body politic, to the extent narratives of illness address paradoxes of unity and the duality of body and mind, the ambiguity of the self as subject and object, as well as the opposition between natural and social beings (8). In both Poe's women's tales and Bulwer-Lytton's occult romance *A Strange Story*, a female invalid undergoes a transient state through which issues such as the fragmentation of the self, processes of emasculation and feminisation, and cultural anxieties are called into question so as to gain insight into

the ageing process of both individuals, in Poe's narratives, and social beings, in Bulwer-Lytton's novel of ideas.

Poe's cataleptic heroines present a transient condition whereby they assume a dead appearance, while truly lying dormant. The Victorian cult of invalidism and the ethics of true womanhood rendered women as tamed invalids that were required to disregard their own will to comply with femininity. In Poe's tales, women are only apparently granted some power once they become mothers, and give birth to a child, who becomes the abject for mesmerised narrators and widowers. Through psychoanalytic theories, the fact of beholding childbirth, the separation of the mother and the child, recalls latent memories of their own disentanglement with the mother figure. Male narrators recall this separation from the mother's womb which inevitably endows them with life, and consequently, with mortality. Horrified male narrators behold women undergo transformations from maidens to mothers through a rite of passage that is thus literally enacted in a coffin. To use Gubar's and Gilbert's terminology, the tomb becomes the womb and vice versa. Nonetheless, this apparently reactionary discourse can also be subverted. In nineteenth-century America, Poe made use of female catalepsy to portray dead-looking women who turned to be much more alive than their mournful male counterparts expected, while the latter strove to exorcise their fear at the thought of inescapable death and being buried alive.

In Victorian England, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story* (1861) featured Lilian as a female invalid in need of the care and attention of both male doctors Allen and Margrave. Bulwer-Lytton himself provided explanations of the symbolic meanings of each character in the preface to the novel. As a true materialist, Margrave, the villain of the novel, stands for nature and body; Fenwick mainly relies on intellect and the powers of the mind, while Lilian, as an embodiment of the true visionary, stands for the soul. These three characters, following Maine de Biran's theories of materialism, exemplify the three faculties that should remain in accord and harmony. In Campbell's opinion, through Fenwick's spiritual reeducation, Bulwer-Lytton tried to refute Darwin's theory of evolution by employing science to document the existence of the human soul and bolster Christianity's authority (122). Bulwer-Lytton's novel can thus be interpreted as an allegory of the need to unite body, mind and soul to become an accomplished human being,

while calling into question the evolutionary theories that were being discussed in Victorian times.

Poe's narrators often appear as mesmerised by his ever-lasting devoted worship of a young dead woman, the most poetical topic, thus living a life of permanent mourning, a life-in-death. In Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story*, Margrave arises as an (un)dead man who manages to attain immortality through dubious endeavours, while paying frequent visits to (in)valid Lilian. While Margrave is dead but immortal, Poe's narrators are alive but 'buried in thought'. Poe's cataleptic ladies lie in a dormant state that shortly comes to a close through an overpowering outburst of strength and resilience. Bulwer-Lytton's Lilian, despite her fragility and dependence, demands total attention from male counterparts, thus (un)willingly absorbing all their male thoughts and energies into finding a cure to unravel the puzzle of her malady. What follows is a succinct comparative analysis of both Poe's and Bulwer-Lytton's portrayal of transient states through both Poe's heroines and Bulwer-Lytton's female protagonist, Lilian, so as to explore and call into question the fragmentation of the self, and the aim to reunite the tripartite human structure of shadow-persona-anima, id-ego-superego, and body-mind-soul.

Poe's cataleptic ladies lie in a dormant state that shortly comes to a close through an overpowering outburst of strength and resilience. Consequently, they are not truly dead, but dead in appearance, they are therefore undead, and thus able to come back to life at their own volition. Morella makes use of her immortal will to reincarnate in her daughter. Through metempsychosis, she is able to overextend her earthly life.

> 'It is a day of days,' she said, as I approached; 'a day of all days either to live or die. It is a fair day for the sons of earth and life – ah, more fair for the daughters of heaven and death! […] And when my spirit departs shall the child live – thy child and mine, Morella's'. (Poe 221)

In other cases, Poe's cataleptic ladies are not reincarnated into their own daughters but they undergo a process of transformation through the rite of passage of premature burial. They are reborn again and brought back to life to a new existence, from children to women. Through enclosure, they are literally taught the ways of feminine behaviour, which often resemble the condition of life-in-death, that is, the cataleptic condition:

> Sometimes the patient lies, for a day only, or even for a shorter period, in a species of exaggerated lethargy. He is senseless and externally motionless; but the pulsation of the heart is still faintly perceptible; some traces of warmth remain; a slight color lingers within the centre of the cheek; and, upon application of a mirror to the lips, we can detect a torpid, unequal, and vacillating action of the lungs […] the closest scrutiny, and the most rigorous medical tests, fail to establish any material distinction between the state of the sufferer and what we conceive of absolute death. (Poe, "The Premature Burial" 181-82)

Nonetheless, despite the apparent stiffness of the cataleptic condition and the (in)valid, or rather, (non)valid state, these transient states may also give way to female empowerment. Thus, according to Harriet Martineau's *Life in the Sickroom*, invalidism could be interpreted as a way to gain insight into one's situation and the higher domains of existence taking advantage of the self-willed vanishment from the public sphere. When Martineau became an invalid, her independence was under threat. Superficially, she became the epitome of the Victorian woman, ruled over by her reproductive system and languishing delicately on a couch. But through her convalescence she managed to extricate herself from the custodial role of her family, friends, patrons, and readers (Winter 602). Similarly, in Poe's tales, catalepsy was also a transient state through which women were born to life again through a newer appearance. They truly become new women, and so mesmerised narrators, buried in thought, are unable to recognise them properly as they become a source of fear and anxiety.

> It was the work of the rushing gust – but then without those doors there DID stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold, then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 267).

Nonetheless it may also be the case women's transition from life to death is heralded as one of the most poetic themes. Poe's cult of the dead mother can be identified through dead women who become a source of inspiration for his poetry instead of a personification of the abject:

> She said to me not many days afterwards, tranquilly dying, that, because of what I had done for the comfort of her spirit, she would watch over me in that spirit when departed, and, if so it were permitted her, return to me visibly in the watches of the night; but, if this thing were, indeed, beyond the power of the souls in Paradise, that she would, at least, give me frequent indications of her presence (Poe, "Eleonora" 100)

And yet ghostly visits from the afterlife are often coupled with obsessed male narrators who cling to the hope that their loved ones may still be alive. In the Victorian period, families often kept the portrait of their loved ones which was taken shortly after their death. These post-mortem portraits often aided in creating the illusion that their recently-departed relatives were still alive, and so their dead bodies were often shaped so as to bestow a virtual sensation of life through artistic endeavours.

> The painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved: – She was dead! (Poe, "The Oval Portrait" 106)

Actually, Poe's mesmerised characters are often male, buried-in-thought, buried in a past from which they feel unable to escape. They lead a life-in-death as they often lose touch with their present reality. "Mesmeric Revelation", published in 1844, and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar", published in 1845, reflect both a continuing interest in mesmerism on Poe's part (Lind 1078). "Mesmeric Revelation" concerns itself with metaphysical discussion between the narrator and his mesmerised subject, who dies while in the trance; and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" goes yet further in applying mesmerism to keep alive a man who should, according to the doctors attending him, have expired (Lind 1078-79).

As opposed to mesme(rised) male narrators, female invalids corresponded responded to women who were apparently alive, but truly, were considered to be non-valid, thus dead for the rest of society. They had no visibility outside of the walls of the Victorian home. They either conformed to the Victorian morals of domesticity or they were aptly termed as madwomen in the attic, or maniacs in the cellar, often diagnosed with hysteria, depression, or a morbid acuteness of the

senses, a diagnosis which is also shared by Poe's Roderick Usher, as well as many of his mesmerised or opium-consumer narrators. In this sense Poe's depiction of the politics of gender proves more subversive than Bulwer's portrayal of Lilian as an invalid with mediumistic powers, and subservient to the overall Victorian politics of gender of the time. Invalid females were regarded as the epitome of femininity, while ostracised if they indulged in frenetic activity or dared to trespass the behaviour clearly delimited for young females. As Mrs Ashleigh narrates as regards her own daughter Lilian:

> I then went upstairs to join my daughter, and to my terror found her apparently lifeless in her chair. She had fainted away. […] when she recovered she seemed bewildered, disinclined to speak. I got her to bed, and as she then fell quietly to sleep, my mind was relieved. I thought it only a passing effect of excitement, in a change of abode […] About three quarters of an hour ago she woke up with a loud cry, and has been ever since in a state of great agitation, weeping violently, and answering none of my questions. Yet she does not seem lightheaded, but rather what we call hysterical. (Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* 46)

Lilian is only given credit once Margrave discovers her capacity to gain access into the higher spheres of existence. In Bulwer-Lytton's novel of ideas, Lilian represents the objectification of the soul which together with the intellect, Fenwick, and the body, Margrave, results in a completed human being. As a Rosicrucian, Bulwer-Lytton felt the need to juxtapose the different spheres of existence, the mind, the soul, and the body as necessary to gain insight into the full meaning of existence on earth. Lilian, though her kindness and commitment to her duty, represents the embodiment of femininity in the Victorian society. Nonetheless, as happens with Fenwick, she is also compelled to face the dark aspects of life before resuming her former existence. Lilian feels mesmerised by Margrave, thus, by the charm of the body, which unsurprisingly coincides with her marriage to Fenwick. She beholds Margrave's ritual to produce his elixir of life and through his failure and ultimate death, Lilian is liberated from the burden of the body. It is worth noticing that as a Victorian heroine, Lilian is mesmerised, a metaphor that seems to be pointing at sexual arousal, and consequently, at death for virginal Lilian:

> How serious, then, is the danger to a young girl, at the age in which imagination is most active, most intense, if you force upon her a

> belief that she is in danger of a mortal disease! It is a peculiarity of youth to brood over the thought of early death much more resignedly, much more complacently, than we do in maturer years. (Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* 66)

It is through Margrave's powers to mesmerise Lilian she faces her sexuality to discover lately demonic powers were trying to tease her and tempt her into sin. Actually, the struggle that takes place between Fenwick, the mind, and Margrave, the body, towards the end of the novel proves sufficiently self-explicit. Fenwick can prevent Margrave from abducting Lilian only by physically grappling with him and taking away his magic wand. In this respect, Bulwer-Lytton's gothic novel of the occult and the supernatural goes hand in hand with the contemporary Victorian discourse of the angel of the house, the cult of invalidism, and female domesticity. After all, he resented how his wife Rosina threatened to destabilise the politics of gender of the time, accusing him in public of unfaithfulness; an episode which terminated in Rosina's commitment to a lunatic asylum. Thus, Lilian, after her flirtations to discover her own sexuality, once she is married to Fenwick, recovers her status as a minor again, unable to grow up, but merely to grow up female. Actually, Lilian's inability to grow up and gain maturity is enacted in the novel when she recovers her youthful appearance and leaves behind her emaciated state after struggling with Margrave's dark powers.

By contrast, both Margrave and Fenwick are enabled to come of age. Fenwick discovers his faithful reliance on the powers of the mind should be counterbalanced by the importance given to the physical senses. In his case, Margrave is compelled to admit that his will to transcend the occult in nature must be punished. Actually, Margrave is presented as an entanglement of the common gothic figures of Faust and Dracula, several decades prior to the publication of Stoker's novel. Margrave is granted immortality through an elixir of life, which bears some points in common with the Saint Grail and thus with the tradition of the Arthurian legends. Actually, Bulwer-Lytton himself had published a book entitled King Arthur. Nonetheless, Margrave's elixir of life is used for dubious purposes, thus moving forward the high ideals of the Arthurian knights. Like Faust, Margrave wishes to make a deal with Mephistopheles in order to achieve eternal life.

Bulwer-Lytton himself might have felt identified with Margrave and his will to extend his life exponentially so as to be able to learn and

gather as much knowledge as to gain insight into the true meanings of life. Like Faust and Victor Frankenstein, Margrave plays the role of God, and therefore, he is harshly punished. His youthful appearance while he drinks the elixir and he is near Lilian and drinks some power out of her are also reminiscent of Dorian Gray, whose apparent youth conceals his reprobate morality as reflected on the aging of his portrait, his alter ego, his true self. Margrave's young appearance also hides his lack of morality and his unconditional reliance on the demonic powers of nature.

> In Margrave's character there seemed no special vices, no special virtues; but a wonderful vivacity, joyousness, animal good-humour. He was singularly temperate, having a dislike to wine, perhaps from that purity of taste which belongs to health absolutely perfect. No healthful child likes alcohol; no animal, except man, prefers wine to water. But his main moral defect seemed to me in a want of sympathy, even where he professed attachment. He who could feel so acutely for himself […], and sob at the thought that he should one day die, was as callous to the sufferings of another as a deer who deserts and butts from him a wounded comrade. (Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* 114)

And yet, Fenwick also admits that:

> The fascination – I can give it no other name – which Margrave exercised, was not confined to me; it was universal, – old, young, high, low, man, woman, child, all felt it. (Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* 115)

Actually, as Fradin (1961) admits, *A Strange Story* expresses an essential disease, and it attacks the prevailing scientific materialism of the age. *A Strange Story* came only two years after Darwin's *Origin of Species*, when Bulwer-Lytton could not have escaped the Origin's impact. Indeed some of the melodramatic excesses of *A Strange Story* seem to be the result of Bulwer-Lytton's intense reaction to evolutionary theory – a kind of overflow of nervous anxiety (Fradin 5). Moreover, Bulwer-Lytton believed in the power of the unconscious to break through to new perceptions. Underlying *A Strange Story* there is the idea that man's experience in trance and dream may be as revealing of his essential nature and the nature of reality as the daylight experience of his senses. Thus, the reality of the dream, consequently, may be embraced with the same kind of assurance that the scientific materialist brings to the objective world of sensations; from trance may well up the most profound truths (Fradin 13).

Therefore, we should not forget that gothic narratives were frequently conceived as textual, and therefore, unconscious reflections of social anxieties of the time. If effective, the source of the fear they aspired to arise in the readership was mainly based on commonly-shared social anxieties, so that readers would also be able to identify the source of anxiety the narrator was disclosing through his narrative. During the Victorian period, the English Empire was considered one of the great potencies of the world, while scientific advances were rapidly changing former ideologies and long-life accepted truths. Moreover, the United States had recently become independent from the English metropolis. As a nation, England faced a period of stability and powerfulness, which was inevitably threatened by the fear this alluring situation would finally be brought to a halt. Thus, social anxiety lied in the future to come after such splendorous past. Bulwer-Lytton himself felt this anguish throughout his own life. Brought up in his family manor, Knebworth, he was constantly reminded of the historical legacy he received from his family, especially through the overwhelming presence of his mother, even after her death. In Knebworth, Bulwer-Lytton was very concerned to preserve his mother's room unchanged for years to come. This inheritance compelled him to write and achieve fame so as to match his family's predecessors. Nonetheless, he felt the need to project all his past onto the future to ascertain his purposes in life will have some continuity in the days to come. He became fervidly interested in the occult to the extent he took part in séances to contact the dead. As an heir to a glorious dynasty, he felt trapped by the past, but also felt the necessity to continue his family saga. He searched into the past so as to find the means to overextend his life. Despite the fact he seemed rather sceptical as regards immortality and eternal life, he felt overwhelmed by his own interest in the occult and the afterlife. In a way, Bulwer-Lytton reflected the aging of a nation, while subverting the complacency to be buried alive in a glorious past. In his will, Bulwer-Lytton actually asked his family to preserve his body for three days before interment, and if you visit Knebworth House, you will be able to see his white death mask as an amulet exhibiting Bulwer-Lytton's appearance in death. His fear of being buried alive, somehow shared with Poe, through for different reasons, thus reflect some social and national anxieties.

> no event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death. The unendurable oppression of the lungs – the stifling fumes from the

> damp earth – the clinging of the death garments – the rigid embrace of the narrow house – the blackness of the absolute Night – the silence like a sea that overwhelms – the unseen but palpable presence of the Conqueror Worm (Poe, "The Premature Burial" 181)

Bulwer-Lytton spent his life buried in thought, caught up between the burden of his glorious past and the will to prolong his life through bathing in thermal waters. Thus, his will and eagerness to disclose the secrets of human existence were not so unlike Margrave's volition to find the secrets of eternal life.

Bulwer-Lytton has often been heralded as one of the representatives of the Victorian man of letters whose rise and fall reflected the success and ultimate failure of an era. His fame as a writer gradually fell into oblivion, probably due to his intricate style and his extravagant verbosity, unable to match any modernist demands. He in a way was also able to mesmerise his readers to the point of admiration first and to the extent of outrage later. In any case he will always be remembered as one of the great Victorians. Poe, however, has often been at odds to be considered properly American. Through his letters to his foster father John Allan, he aspired to become a Southern gentleman and inherit his fortune. Some people would say he aspired to be English. After the recent American war of independence, the United States as nation underwent a period of transition, a period of aging, from being a dependent child of the metropolis to grow up as an adult nation. Poe seemed to remain dependent on his foster father John, on his aunt Muddie, and especially, on women. Some of his male narrators are mesmerisers who exert dominion over hypnotised men and women. Nonetheless, their attempts at exerting power over them often end in failure. Their hypnotised victims die while being in the mesmeric trance. Thus, the narrator only exerts dominion over past human beings, over corpses and dead matter.

> his whole frame at once – within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity. (Poe, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" 279-80).

Drawing on psychoanalytical readings, Poe is caught in the transient period of coming of age as an adult and as a citizen of a newly-created nation. His apparently powerful dominion vanishes when the

body disintegrates. He is only able to exert influence and control over the dead, those no longer existing, that is, stiff matter. Nonetheless, this interpretation differs in the case of Poe's stories featuring females such as Morella, Berenice, Eleanora, Ligeia, and Madeline. All these heroines undergo a process of transformation from life to death, or rather apparent death, to be reborn again as 'new women': "I found food for consuming thought and horror – for a worm that would not die" (Poe, "Morella" 223).

Poe's women are able to subvert patriarchal power to come back to life again. They leave behind their feminine role to be reborn and lead an existence of their own. Poe himself betrayed his own dependence on women from his aunt Muddie to his wife Virginia. Virginia Poe remained an invalid throughout her short life. Despite her youth, her countenance closely resembled that of a dead person, to the extent her quietness in life reminded of her stiff appearance in death. And yet, either in life or death, Poe felt overwhelmed by his own mental dependence on his wife. Poe was the truly mesmerised one, buried in thought, while the women of his life were constantly brought back to life through metempsychosis. The transformation from mother to daughter and back to mother again is clearly exemplified in Poe's tales such as "Morella" and "Ligeia":

> But she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second – Morella. (Poe, "Morella" 224-25)
>
> And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. 'Here then, at least,' I shrieked aloud, 'can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the LADY LIGEIA'. (Poe, "Ligeia" 244)

From his own mother Eliza to his wife Virginia, from his aunt Muddie to Helen, the women in Poe's life changed in appearance but his mesmerised condition, his continuous dependence on women remained throughout all his life. He was even engaged to be married when he died. Marie Bonaparte claims Poe's fixation and dependence on women was rooted on his Oedipus complex, his infatuation with his mother Eliza as he beheld the death of her own mother at an unusually young age. Mesmeric trances, cataleptic states, undead conditions, somnambulist walkings and invalid situations frequently found in Victorian narratives

have in common their transient nature. They present transitional situations while questioning any Victorian attempt at reification and dichotomised classification.

> The boundaries which divide Life from Death, are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins? We know that there are diseases in which occur total cessations of all the apparent functions of vitality, and yet in which these cessations are merely suspensions, properly so called. (Poe, "The Premature Burial" 174)

It is precisely through transient conditions that contextual cultural discourses are problematised and called into question. Current Neo-Victorian theories often draw their focus of attention back to the past so as to cast a suspicious glance over any clearly-assumed and commonly-accepted state of affairs. Thus, popular narratives, and especially, gothic texts subvert mainstream Victorian discourses as regards the cult of domesticity and the ethics of true womanhood. Lilian as an (in)valid woman, Morella as a ladylike cataleptic, Margrave as a pre-vampirical and post-Faustian figure, and Valdemar as a mesmerised-in-death individual personify nineteenth-century national and engendered types that aim at both reflecting and undermining widely-accepted assumptions about the British Empire, the American experience of independence, the cult of domesticity, and the rise of the woman's question.

Invalids are unable to grow up as female adults and thus remain minors all their life; while cataleptic ladies undergo a deadly rite of passage from angels of the house to new women as they are reborn despite their presumed death, and trespass the threshold of morality, remaining beyond the boundaries of femininity in their afterlife condition. Mesmerised narrators are hooked onto life through their powerful will as the American psyche drew back to its former metropolis through their process of emancipation. America's virtual conception of Britain is brought back to life through hypnotic, somnambulist and mesmerised states. Meanwhile, formerly British individuals insist on surviving in the newly-shaped American psyche, remaining in an (un)dead condition and aspiring to achieve immortal existence.

All in all, the tripartite division of the human being into body, mind and soul is disrupted through Bulwer-Lytton's narrative, as well as Poe's women's tales whereby embodiments of idealised women and undead

individuals are subverted when they die to be brought back to life in an ever-permanent cycle. Through these transitional conditions, gothic narrators provide insight into mythical interpretations of national, gender and aging distinctions through gothic archetypes and tapestry, demonstrating borders and clearly-established distinctions are blurred so that some ultimate meaning can be reified and be brought to light.

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REAL AND IMAGINARY SPACES IN MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

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Abstract

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is a *bildungsroman* that concentrates on Nazneen's personal development from being a teenager to becoming a fully mature and self-assertive woman. The growing process that the protagonist undergoes is influenced by the fact that Nazneen undergoes a compulsory diasporic experience at quite a young age and, therefore, is compelled to re/define her identity and her self in a new location. In this essay, I shall investigate space and the way in which it is presented in Ali's novel with particular emphasis on the manner in which real and imaginary spaces are connected to the protagonist's process of identity formation. In this respect, I shall argue how the novel deals both with an outside diasporic journey in the real space as much as with a journey inside Nazneen's interior space.

Key words: diasporic experience, identity, real space, imaginary space, *Brick Lane*

Resumen

La novela de Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, es una *bildungsroman* que narra el desarrollo personal de Nazneen desde su adolescencia hasta que se convierte en una mujer madura y segura de sí misma. Este proceso de crecimiento está directamente ligado al hecho de que Nazneen sufre una experiencia migratoria a una edad temprana y, por lo tanto, se ve obligada a redefinir su identidad en una nueva localización. En este artículo estudiaré el espacio y los modos en los que éste se representa en la novela. Prestaré especial atención a la manera en el que el espacio real y el espacio imaginario están ligados al proceso de formación

identitario de la protagonista. Así, argumentaré que la novela relata un desplazamiento migratorio en el espacio real así como en el espacio interior de Nazneen.

Palabras clave*:* experiencia migratoria, identidad, espacio real, espacio imaginario, *Brick Lane*

Ali's debut novel, *Brick Lane*, focuses on the Bangladeshi community inhabiting the area in London (from which it takes its title) as it depicts the life of a young Bangladeshi woman, Nazneen. Ali's novel is a *bildungsroman*[1] that concentrates on the growing process of Nazneen and her personal development from being a teenager to becoming a mature and self-assertive woman. The novel, thus, raises topics and issues that refer to the protagonist's innermost personal feelings, emotions, ideas and doubts. In this essay I shall investigate space and the way in which it is presented in *Brick Lane* with particular emphasis on the manner in which real and imaginary space are connected to the protagonist's process of identity formation. The growing process that the main character undergoes is influenced by a geographical movement and a change of location. This issue is complicated by the fact that Nazneen suffers a compulsory diasporic experience at quite a young age and this has important implications for the development of her identity; she is only eighteen years old when she is uprooted from her family and her native land and forced to travel to London as a consequence of her arranged marriage to Chanu, a Bangladeshi settled in England who is described to be "at least forty years old" (*Brick Lane* 17). The process of displacement that Nazneen endures when she leaves her home renders her in a position in which she has to come to terms with a different culture and a completely different language. In this new location she has to re/define her identity and her self. The novel deals, in this respect, both with an outside diasporic journey in the real space as much as with a journey inside Nazneen's interior space.

Brick Lane, first published in 2003, was a huge literary success when it broke onto the British contemporary literary scene. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the year of its publication and Ali was included in the Granta list of novelists. Even before its release,

Ali's novel was thought to be a literary success. This brought about Ali being considered one of the forthcoming leading figures in the literary scene. Nevertheless, the reception of Ali's novel has been characterised by a great deal of expectation as well as debate and controversy. *Brick Lane* has been praised as much as it has been criticised. It has been acclaimed for its portrait of the Bengali diaspora in Britain by part of the literary critic (Lane; Wood) and rejected by some members of the Asian community who showed their disagreement with the manner in which Ali reflects their way of life.

Ali depicts and puts in the limelight a part of the Bangladeshi community that had been invisibilised and silenced: the life of a young immigrant woman incarcerated at home. From the whole gamut of topics the novel deals with, its outspoken detractors were especially offended by Ali's inclusion of an extra-marital relation on the part of the female protagonist. They considered this to be an "immoral" depiction of Bangladeshi women's lives: "Our women, most of them, 99 percent, respect their husbands and respect their tradition, claims Abdus Salique, chair of the Brick Lane Traders' Association, who coordinated the campaign against the filming of an adaptation of Ali's novel (Katz).[2] Many articles were published in different newspapers at the time the novel was released and when three years after its publication the novel was turned into a film script the criticisms arose again (Lea and Lewis; Cohen; Lea; Katz). During the summer of 2006 when the film was being shot, the social climate in the vicinity of Brick Lane was marked by demonstrations against the film and a high degree of social controversy that prompted the shooting company, Ruby Films, to move outside the area.

This limited understanding of Ali's work apparently led to a great deal of intra-community upheaval which was followed by an exaggerated interest on the part of the media, as Ali herself commented on ("A Conversation with Monica..." n. pag.). Likewise, Sarah Gavron, director of the film *Brick Lane*, stated in an interview:

> We spent months working with the community. We had lots of Bangladeshi crew and cast …. Nonetheless, just when we were about to start shooting on Brick Lane itself, we got a phone call at midnight reporting threats against us if we went ahead. It was a lesson in how the person who shouts the loudest gets the most attention (Gavron 14).

A number of well-known novelists such as Salman Rushdie, Hari Kunzru and Lisa Appignanesi viewed these attitudes as an act of censorship (Lea 2006) and condemned the manipulation of part of the population who participated in the demonstrations without having even read Ali's novel: "community leaders such as Salique … have read Ali's book in both English and Bangladeshi but many of those who live in and around Brick Lane and are protesting against the film have not" (Cohen n. pag.). Other well-off members of the community, such as Shiraj Hoque (a local millionaire who owns three curry houses in the area), contested Salique's views and pointed out that the Bengali community is a big one and that there are more people who favour freedom of speech and consider Ali's novel as a free exercise of that right (Lea n. pag.).

Ali's work has also been disapproved of for being a westernised depiction of Bangladeshi culture. In this respect, *Brick Lane* was disapproved of for being a literary work whose aim was to respond to the commercial needs of a particularly white literary audience (Hussain 108). Such critiques focus on the novel's lack of genuineness and accuracy. This is related to the issue of representations of cultural otherness in contemporary British literature. The debates surrounding the representation of cultural otherness move around ideas of the degree that those representations comply with stereotypes or break with them and the extent to which such representations "have come to be considered as either 'progressive' or as 'reductive'" (Perfect 111). Underlying these matters are the notions of the "authentic" versus the "commodified". The novel is deemed as being the outcome of the approach of an author who locates outside of the Bangladeshi community:

> In this sense its 'authenticity' as a text from within the Bangladeshi diaspora is a marketing myth…. it provides an outsider's view of the Bangladeshi community and a rather negative one. … it presents an image of Britain's Bangladeshi community which is a textbook definition and it is not a book which is written from 'within' the community it explores (Hussain 92).

These opposite and controversial views about the novel are in tune with Ali's acknowledgement of her own situation as a writer. She described herself as being situated in an in-between position; she is neither fully English nor fully Bangladeshi, she finds herself in a peripheral location ("Where I'm Coming from" n. pag.). She is the

daughter of a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, born in East Pakistan and forced to migrate to Britain as a war refugee with her mother and brother when she was three years old. Her ambivalent condition both enables and disables her to write about the Bengali community in Britain. On the one hand, as the daughter of a Bangladeshi father who lived in Bangladesh, she has reverberations of her life that inspire her work. However, on the other hand, she has been criticised for being an outsider, a foreigner who ignores Bangladeshi women's conditions and who has not experienced any of the things she portrays in the novel:

> I could set lines of inquiry about my book into two broad camps. Tell us about 'them', is one. *The tyranny of representation … means that when I speak, my brown skin is the dominant signifier*. The other reaction is rather different. What gives you the right to write about 'us', when you're clearly one of 'them'? .... How can I write about a community to which I do not truly belong? Perhaps, the answer is I can write about it because I do not truly belong. Growing up with an English mother and a Bengali father means never being an insider. *Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things, but rather in the shadow of a doorway, is a good place from which to observe*. ("Where I'm Coming from" n. pag.; emphasis added)

Ali's supposed responsibility would be that of participating in the making of a positive ('authentic') depiction of a community to which, to some extent, she belongs, rather than matching a British pre-established ('commodified') vision of Asian traditions. As Jane Hiddleston, in her analysis of the critiques to Ali's work, points out: "this tendency is perhaps particularly notable in the context of'minority literatures', as, according to Nicholas Harrison, 'it is indeed 'members' of minority groups who are most liable to be read as representative" (Hiddleston 70). As far as I am concerned, Ali's novel should be contextualised as the literary production of a female novelist from an ethnically diverse background who is accounting for the identity problematics that affect first – and second – generation immigrants in Great Britain and who is particularly interested in portraying the repercussions that migration has for female characters. Regardless of the appraisals and criticisms that Ali's work received, the novel is interesting from a literary and theoretical point of view, not least because it is a good example of the importance of space and the modes in which space and identity interact.

Identity and space are, undoubtedly, interrelated issues. It is necessary to take into consideration the direct connection that space has on everyone's process of identity formation. As Liz Bondi points out, there is a relation between identity and space. For her, in order to be able to answer the question "who am I?" one should first refer to the query "Where am I?" (Bondi 84) and this is such a relevant factor that it might determine a person's identity possibilities. The spaces that affect the individual cover a wide range of possibilities that goes from the most immediate one, the body, to the interaction of the latter with a broad and more general space in which a person lives, society. Nowadays, identity is no longer considered as something fixed and firm per se but as something malleable and its development depends very much on a learning process and the circumstances surrounding the life of the person. Accordingly, the notion of individual subject ceased to be regarded as stable, universal and degendered, as it was described in Cartesian thought. With the theoretical changes brought about by postmodern and poststructuralist theories the individual subject was viewed as an entity in a continuous process of formation (Grosz; Mercer; McDowell). Consequently, "the individual subject is not, and cannot be, a coherent, unified being, but is always divided and displaced" (Bondi 85).

This process of identity formation is reflected in the novel, not only because its structure encompasses and follows Nazneen's life and personal experiences from the moment of her birth to the moment she finds a space of her own, but also because Nazneen is not the same woman at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Her identity and her perception of herself and of her possibilities change. This development on the part of the protagonist is connected to space in the sense that the place and the social environment where one is born and which one inhabits determine to a great extend one's choices and opportunities for change. For instance, as Doreen Massey argues, even though this is considered the century of a more violent phase of the possibility of movement and communication across space, of what David Harvey (1989) called "time-space compression", the likelihood that a sub-Saharan woman forced to walk every day to get water could have any chances to global flows of connections and movements is remote (Massey 149).

It is a paradox, then, that despite the fact that Nazneen has completed a long journey from her native home in a little village of a

"third world country" to the capital city of a "first world one", this does not bring about any improvement in her. Apparently, her father, who "was the second wealthiest man in the village" (*Brick Lane* 21), sees his marrying her daughter to a man living in London as a positive act for his daughter's future. Nevertheless, movement does not entail an opening of opportunities for her. It does not broaden her horizons or better her living circumstances. It is a reversal of expectations for her and it rather means confinement and subservience. This is shown through the narrative by contrasting the description of her present situation and the real space in which she is located to the recollections of her past life in Gouripur. The idea of going back home is a constant presence in the mind of Nazneen at the beginning of the narrative. This presence is highlighted through the letters of Hasina, Nazneen's sister.[3]

There are two kinds of spaces where Nazneen dwells. On the one hand, the real space of her apartment in London which brings about feelings of fatality and death. On the other hand, an imaginary space that is associated with her past reality in Gouripur and is equated with brightness and life. This imaginary space is used as an escape resource and as a counter-space to the real space that surrounds her. It is the safe haven in which she finds refuge from sadness and despair, it keeps her alive. Nazneen resorts to this alternative reality, which is full of life and possibilities, to soothe her mind:

> Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade-green rice fields and swam in the cool dark lake. She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina, and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. And the mynah birds called from the trees, and the goats fretted by, and the big sad water buffaloes passed like a funeral. And heaven, which was above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it, where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line. (21)

By contrast to the above-mentioned spaces, Nazneen's place once she arrives in London is the domestic realm. I consider her house as a domestic space and not a private space. The private is thought to be that which is opposed to the public; it is the space in which a person can develop their own personal self; it is a place of rest, of self enjoyment, of meditation. Nevertheless, in the case of many women, such as Nazneen, the private space becomes for them a domestic one, since it is equated with housework and confinement. For those women incarcerated at

home and with no other personal developing roles than those of being subservient wives and abnegated mothers, the house does not serve the function of being a place of retirement from the drudgeries of the outside world, but is a place of labour in and of itself (Murillo 119).

As an immigrant woman with no knowledge of English: "Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you" (*Brick Lane* 19), she is entirely under the control of her husband. Therefore, during the first six months in London Nazneen is completely isolated, she is confined at home and she is characterised as a passive woman who sees the world through the window of the little apartment she shares with her husband. Although she contemplates the outside world, she does not interact with it. The window becomes a symbol of imprisonment and reclusion, and the walls of the house are the barriers that set her apart from the rest of the world: "this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her" (24).

Imaginary space becomes for Nazneen more real than reality in London. The narrative at these moments is much more vivid, poetic and positive and her descriptions are full of adjectives that denote brightness, happiness, movement and life. The contrast between imaginary space and the real one is a resource that Ali uses from the very beginning of the novel. Homesickness, the drudgeries of domestic work and the loneliness she has to endure are worsened when Nazneen is pregnant and she starts to think more frequently about her native land and her previous life in Gouripur in order to prevent herself from becoming insane:

> She looked at her stomach that hid her feet and forced her to lean back to counter its weight. She looked and saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity. They had nothing to do with her. For a couple of beats, she closed her eyes and smelled the jasmine that grew close to the well, heard the chickens scratching in the hot earth, felt the sunlight that warmed her cheeks and made dancing patterns on her eyelids. (76)

In *Brick Lane*, thus, "as in many diasporic texts, dreams and memories of the lost homeland play a positive role in securing identity and survival" (Weedon 27). This experience, in fact, is a common-day reality to Asian women, as one of the women interviewed by Amrit

Wilson called Zubeida pointed out: "In these lonely hours, sitting in Brick Lane in the East End or Lumb Lane in Bradford, vivid memories come flooding in from the past, from the life before this semi-existence" (Wilson 17).

Nazneen does not like Brick Lane, its buildings, the streets, the tattooed lady. They contribute to her feeling of isolation and depression. There is neither physical nor emotional connection between her and the space she inhabits. She cannot identify herself in that space; the connection established between space, identity and self is broken at this moment. She can only understand and negotiate life within the context of her native land: "You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel that earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved" (*Brick Lane* 87). Nazneen suffers from what Daphne Spain has named "spatial segregation" because she does not have access to all social spaces when she arrives in London. For Spain, space has been used and is still used as a way of maintaining a spatial segregation that sanctions an asymmetrical relation between women and space, and men and space: "*spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created*, and when they provide access to valued knowledge for men while reducing access to that knowledge for women, the organization of space may perpetuate status differences" (Spain 3; emphasis added).

This spatial segregation that is common to social organisations is taken to the limit in the case of women immigrants such as Nazneen, because it leaves them more vulnerable and powerless. They are left totally under the control of their husbands and this decreases their possibilities of independence and freedom (Wilson 31). Moreover, ignoring the language of the country in which they live makes them dependent on the community and subjected to their rules and traditions. This isolation which incarcerates Nazneen is more than the mere fact of being forced to stay at home for cultural reasons and not being able to speak English; it is a state of mind that brings about depression. As a consequence of this fact, the narration at the beginning of the novel describes an oppressive, gloomy and sad environment where references to death and suicide are quite suggestive: "Blood spotted through from the cut. She discarded the kitchen roll and watched the red drops fall on the silver sink… How long would it take to empty her finger of blood,

drop by drop? How long for the arm? And for the body, an entire body?" (*Brick Lane* 24).

The first time Nazneen leaves the private space, while Chanu is working, and walks down the street into public space, she is completely lost both literally and metaphorically speaking. London becomes like a jungle to her. She feels doubly displaced in urban space. On the one hand, she comes from a society based on a rural environment and she lacks the specific spatial competence and performance that she needs to move about in the city of London. Nazneen's social practice is inadequate for the new environment and she is unable to codify the space that surrounds her, for as Henri Lefebvre pointed out: "the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space" (Lefebvre 38). On the other hand, urban spaces have been traditionally constructed as masculine: "both the external and internal design and layout of the City symbolise male power and authority and men's legitimate occupations of these spaces. In these spaces, feminine bodies are out of place'" (McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* 145).

An immense space of possibility and interaction is opened up for her in the city space but she is scared and confused. The streets of London become a maze for Nazneen. Urban cities have been described as a labyrinth by Elizabeth Wilson. They are like a labyrinth for they are characterised by a continual flux of people that move on "an endlessly circular journey" (Wilson 270). In this sense, cities have been traditionally described as men's space (Cortés 24). The urban environment has been defined as a dangerous place for women (McDowell 148). However, as in the case of Nazneen, cities can become spaces of possibilities for women. The novel represents with great detail every single step and every single space that separates Nazneen's little flat in Tower Hamlets and the outside urban space. The first thing she experiences once she is outside is the mist. The next thing she perceives are some pigeons. They are portrayed, like her, as prisoners: "outside, small patches of mist bearded the lamp-post and a gang of pigeons turned weary circles on the grass like prisoners in an exercise yard" (*Brick Lane* 54). These two elements lead to a sense of confusion in Nazneen. Nonetheless, this new space she is about to discover is not only magnificent in its excessive materiality – from huge buildings like skyscrapers to the city's infrastructure such as traffic lights or lamp posts – but it is also described by Nazneen as a

space of opportunities: "A space opened up before her. God is great, said Nazneen under her breath. She ran" (54).

Nazneen feels invisible among the people in the street. She negotiates the new reality that is in front of her eyes by relating it to the only environment she knows. She describes the streets full of people rushing from one place to another and compares the traffic to monsoon rains (54). At this moment, the reader witnesses Nazneen's first instance of agency when she manages to interact with another person by using her limited knowledge of the English language. This is a crucial moment that Nazneen sees as a victory. She learns that urban space, public space, offers other possibilities to her:

> It rained then. And in spite of the rain, and the wind which whipped it into her face, and in spite of the pain in her ankle and arm, and her bladder, and in spite of the fact that she was lost and cold and stupid, she began to feel a little pleased. She had spoken, in English, to a stranger, and she had been understood and acknowledged. It was very little. But it was something. (61)

After she walks alone in the streets for the first time, the instances of agency on her part increase. She starts a domestic rebellion at home in order to make Chanu change his mind and help her to find her sister Hasina back in Dhaka. She acknowledges that the personal is something political in that she draws a parallel between her actions and those of peasants who seek to prompt a revolution within the state: "Nazneen dropped the promotion from her prayers.… All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within" (63).

Nazneen begins to be integrated in London. The spaces outside her flat offer her, in fact, the possibility of establishing relations, outside the space of her marriage, with different members of the community. In this sense, it should be pointed out that it is mainly through her relation to other people that Nazneen's connection to her new environment is established and her assertiveness grows. These four people are mainly her best friend and neighbour, Razia, Nazneen's two daughters, Shahana and Bibi, and Karim, a young British-born man of Bangladeshi origins who later becomes her lover. In the company of Karim, Nazneen starts becoming politicised and she attends the first meeting of the "Bengal Tigers" group. This event signifies an increase in her level of confidence in the public space. At the end of the meeting,

the attendees have to vote to decide the name of the group and this act of voting becomes a symbol of her entering the public world: "She felt it a momentous thing. By raising her hand, or not raising it, she could alter the course of events, of affairs in the world of which she knew nothing" (242). Having the right to vote was, in fact, a crucial issue of the feminist movement. It meant leaving aside the condition of being constantly considered as a minor; it implied being a fully mature person with the right to make choices in life. Moreover, thanks to Razia, Nazneen discovers that sewing provides her with economic independence. Shahana's and Bibi's oppose Chanu's idea of going back to Dhaka and Nazneen faces an interior struggle as she has to make her own decision. At this point in the narrative Nazneen spends time looking through the window again as she had done at the beginning of the novel (364). Yet, at this time, Nazneen does no longer depend on any other person but herself to make her own choices in life; she is firm in her resolution and chooses not to return to Dhaka with Chanu. Furthermore, she is strong enough to reject the proposal of her lover to get divorced from her husband and marry him.

Nazneen feels identification with space when she creates her own network of social relations. The above-mentioned characters contribute to her integration in the real space because, as Doreen Massey argues, spaces have to be understood as the product of relations and, therefore, in this sense, space is a process because it is always being made (Massey, *Space, Place...*, *For Space*). It is then that Nazneen acknowledges that London has become her home, that there is no place to return to, home in the sense of her place of origin has disappeared since there is no one back home to identify with. As Avtar Brah points out, the notion of home for people who undergo a diasporic experience is problematic:

> 'Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality (Brah 192).

Nazneen is aware of this fact and therefore, after drifting off to her imaginary space, she claims that "by now she knew that where she wanted to go was not a different place but a different time. She was free to wish it but it would never be" (*Brick Lane* 45). As long as she begins to integrate herself in the social space rather than staying confined

at home, she does not resort to the imaginary space as she did at the beginning:

> The village was leaving her. Sometimes a picture would come. Vivid; so strong she could smell it. More often, she tried to see and could not. It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman's net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of things she knew but no longer saw. It was only in her sleep that the village came whole again. (217)

Nazneen's identification with the real space in which she is located (London), and the fact that she leaves her native village behind, coincides with her being able to establish social connections and with her leaving the private space of the house and gaining confidence and competence in public spaces. These changes of space go hand in hand with her growing process and her moving away from being an inexperienced and immature young woman to becoming a self-sufficient and assertive one. It is important to consider that this evolution takes place within the context of a diasporic experience and to take into account the ambivalence behind Nazneen's relation to space at throughout the novel. As Brah points out, diasporic space is ambivalent:

> The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation …But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure (Brah 193).

The main revolution that happens in the novel takes place inside Nazneen for, in the final pages of *Brick Lane*, she has developed an identity of her own as much as she has developed her own sense of place. Accordingly, in the end, Nazneen diasporic journey turns into a positive experience that offers her the possibility of change. There is an important prolepsis at the beginning of the narration that, in my opinion, summarizes Nazneen's evolution:

> What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge. So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a

> young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (*Brick Lane* 16)

The novel ends with Nazneen fulfilling her dream of going ice-skating: "in front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice…. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there" (492). The ice skating rink is a metaphor of the whole world now opened to Nazneen; her future will only be created by her own will. She can follow many paths, there might be different things for her to do; yet, if she slips on the ice, it is her own responsibility. She has learned that fate depends on one's actions. She has finally become free.

NOTES

[1] It is worth noting that the novel has recently been defined as a "multicultural Bildungsroman" as a way of stressing the migratory movement undergone by the protagonist and her ability to adapt and integrate herself into the new environment (Perfect 110).

[2] Despite campaigns led against the shooting of the film, *Brick Lane*, the movie, directed by Sarah Gavron and produced by Chris Collins was released in the United Kingdom on 16 November 2007.

[3] In this essay, I do not explore the character of Hasina at length as my main concern is that of analysing the character of Nazneen. For further reading on Hasina and her significance in the narrative see Perfect and Hiddlestone.

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HOW CHINUA ACHEBE PUTS THINGS BACK TOGETHER

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) embodies and advances post-colonial thinking. It tells the history of the colonized people from within, upending the conventional notion of the Self and the Other, and reclaiming the value of African culture and tradition. Itself a keenly aware product of colonialism, this novel serves as an agent of *de*colonization for many Africans, reconciling its own hybridity as a written work that employs the English language for an essentially African purpose and setting the stage to regain their particular African identity.

Keywords: Reclamation, Postcolonial, counter discourse, African traditions.

Resumen

La novela *Things Fall Apart* (1959) de Chinua Achebe ejemplifica y sirve como detonante para el avance de los estudios post-coloniales. Cuenta la historia de la colonización desde la perspectiva interna del individuo colonizado, cambia los papeles convencionales de las figura del 'Yo' y del 'Otro', y reclama el reconocimiento que merecen la cultura Africana y sus tradiciones. Claramente un resultado del colonialismo, esta obra sirve como discurso decolonizador para muchos africanos, logrando integrar sus aspectos híbridos como texto escrito que se reapropia del inglés para representar aspectos culturales esencialmente africanos y estableciendo la base para la recuperación de su propia identidad africana.

Palabras clave: Reivindicación, Postcolonial, discurso alternativo, tradiciones africanas

Colonialism most assuredly ravaged peoples and cultures throughout the world, and its terrible effects persist today. Many peoples, for instance those in Ghana and South Africa, have been forced to learn not only their native language, but also the English language as a means of communicating and transmitting their culture. Many are poor as the result of new political boundaries that required their ancestors to accept non-tribal lifestyles, move to cities and work for white men (paid and unpaid). In South Africa many are poor because under Apartheid their homes were bulldozed for the sake of white businesses. They were herded off to townships where they could be accessed when needed for labor, but where they were out of sight and mind so white families could enjoy their bourgeois lifestyle in homes. Colonialism even threw out the old gods and ancestors as mere apparitions, heralding the one true God to save the so-called savages from their primitive ways. Yet arising throughout the last two decades is a body of literature and a swelling movement to progress beyond colonialism. It is a movement epitomized by Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959), a novel, perhaps better conceived as a written oration, which embodies and advances post-colonial thinking. It is a written work telling the history of the colonized, upending the conventional notion of the Self and the Other, and reclaiming the value of African culture and tradition. Itself a product of colonialism, *Things Fall Apart* serves as an agent of *de*colonization for Africans, reconciling its own hybridity as a written work and setting the stage for a new, uniquely African identity.

One of the central successes of *Things Fall Apart* is capturing history as a driving force of culture. Writing in the third person, Achebe creates a sense of a past, of a story that once was. Since many books before the 1900's were written by white, European writers, the histories that were being told were one sided. They told of the triumph of the 'civilizing mission' and of great adventures had by Spanish and British explorers who discovered new lands and goods. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), all these were

telling the story and the philosophies of white men, the colonizers. In writing his story, Achebe revives the story of the African as he once was. The long line of ancestors who remain as spirits and protectors of their son's *obi* are rejuvenated. Okonkwo's journey from boyhood with a lazy father to his rising status as a man with several wives tells the story of custom in African tribes. It captures the tale of how not only Okonkwo, but also the entire Ibo tribe, lived their lives and came to have their traditions slowly extinguished by colonists. Such focus on the lives and motivations of the characters, on the traditions and the parables of the Ibo, enables Achebe to tell a uniquely African tale.

Perhaps summing it up best is when Achebe writes about the District Commissioner's forthcoming book, wherein "[t]he story of this man [Okonkwo] who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading…Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate" (Achebe 191). Western literature mitigated the importance of Africans, reducing them down to mere mentions in paragraphs by outsiders. Achebe is able to write Okonkwo's story as an insider, using the tribal language for descriptions and depicting "one of the greatest men in Umuofia" (191) as an admirable, though flawed character that falls to the imperial hand. As Dennis Walder indicates:

> Until the withdrawal of colonial rule, the colonized seemed to accept that they were always the objects of someone else's story, indeed, someone else's history. It was precisely the project of *Things Fall Apart* to resist and reject this assumption; by telling the story of the colonized, to retrieve their history. And more than that: by retrieving their history to regain an identity. (7)

One comes away from reading Achebe's story remembering *African* characteristics, rather than the *European* ones, the *traditions* rather than the *pacification*.

Things Fall Apart provides a glimpse into a culture under attack. This is valuable for two reasons, both of which are critical to post-colonial studies: first, the book preserves and immortalizes the culture that was attacked, and second, the book illustrates and warns us about the process of how a culture can be destroyed. Chinua Achebe wrote to show his culture to the world, remind Nigerians of their heritage, and warn the world about the harms of colonization. These are the strengths of the novel.

Achebe's primary and best method of showing the value of the Igbo culture is the simple and straightforward narration of everyday life in the village of Umuofia. Using simple, short, direct sentences, Achebe spends a large portion of the novel showing basic facts of life, like social rituals and patterns of conversation (such as the breaking of the kola nut or the use of proverbs), cultural ceremonies (like the presentation of palm wine before a marriage), athletic games (wrestling competitions), and the basics about fundamental parts of life such as agriculture, religion, and warfare. The reader also glimpses the institutions that keep the village running smoothly, such as a ritualized court of law and the practice of granting titles.

By writing from within the culture, Achebe shows the reader not only different practices but a different value system compared to the western canon. Okonkwo earns value and respect for himself by becoming a wrestling champion, a fearless warrior, and a successful and rich yam farmer. He has his weaknesses, but his fellow villagers still call him a 'great man' at the novel's end. Western culture respects analogous accomplishments; we have our great athletes, fighters, and procurers of wealth. But our sports look very different, our soldiers do not fight like the warriors of Umuofia, and our businessmen do not show their wealth by supporting multiple wives or buying titles. Yet because Achebe describes the culture from a perspective within that culture, these differences do not prevent the reader from understanding how the system of the culture can function.

By showing this system running smoothly, Achebe reclaims pride in Igbo culture. It is a rebuttal against those who might say that African culture is broken, worthless, or nonexistent, and it acts as a reminder to those Nigerians who have forgotten that their ancestors once built a successful culture and found value there. Moreover, as F. Abiola Irele points out,

> Achebe's depiction of a particularized African community engaged in its own social processes, carried out entirely on its own terms, with all the internal tensions this entailed, challenged the simplified representation that the West offered of Africa as a formless area of life, 'an area of darkness' devoid of human significance (115).

Here, we can also think of Edward Said's prominent approach in his work *Orientalism* (1978), a groundbreaking critique of the West's historical, cultural, and political perceptions of the East or, in this case,

of those who are not part of the west. Western perceptions, as Said puts it, represent a discourse which constructs the image of non-westerners as inferiors. Orientalism is, in his words, "a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (Said 12). In this sense, because the image of Africa that Achebe presented was quite unprecedented, it caused a considerable ideological debate on previous European theories and stereotypes.

Achebe does not illustrate the village of Umuofia in utopian terms, however. His is a negative-enough portrayal as to still seem realistic. Okonkwo, the main character, is a strong man only because he is deathly afraid of weakness and femininity. As Simon Gikandi comment, "Okonwo's blind commitment to his culture and his obliviousness to alternative values and interpretations […] can be seen in the killing of Ikemefuna, his adopted son" (4). He kills him in the name of tradition and the moral order of his community without thinking about his own ideas or feelings. The practices of Umuofia are not entirely amenable to the moral judgments of most readers either, with the subjugation of women and the ritual infanticide of twins taking prominent places in the book. *Things Fall Apart* thus presents the colonial experience "without romanticizing the African past" (Gikandi 4).

Nevertheless, Achebe's portrayal of these negative aspects of the ultimately serves his objectives as well. When the white man makes his appearance in Umuofia in the form of a missionary, some villagers, including Okonkwo's son, are sympathetic and join with the man. And, indeed, the missionary is mostly successful in living alongside the villagers and spreading his faith. Yet when the missionary is replaced by a more aggressive one, things fall apart. When colonizers stop *offering* an alternative culture and start *demanding* that the natives conform to a new value system, conflicts spiral out of control. This is Achebe's warning: that forced colonization cannot bring the cultural change that it seeks. It only serves to push factions away from each other, to destroy the valuable parts of the colonized people's culture, and to bring ruin to their lives.

Through the historicizing of African culture, Achebe successfully uproots the conventional labels of the Self and Other. He redefines them not as an alternative to the European-Self and African-Other, but

as a rejection of this ideological paradigm. He writes in terms of the Ibo or, in other words, he normalizes the Ibo traditions while obscuring the white man's. We read for instance, "The church had come and led many astray. [...] Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians" (Achebe 159). This passage shows that the white man's religion is foreign and foolish to follow when the traditions that made Ogbuefi a respected man are thrown away, making him an outcast to his people. Even more vivid is when "it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power. It was said that he wore glasses on his eyes so that he could see and talk to evil spirits" (Achebe 139). The fact that the men built their church in the Evil Forest and did not die is astonishing because it is not supposed to be that way. These men are supposed to be dead, according to the Ibo belief. That is the key—'according to Ibo belief.' The white man's belief is a mere 'fetish,' and his unusual spectacles are viewed in terms of Ibo understanding, for use in seeing 'evil spirits.' These missionaries are outsiders, Others who 'do not understand' the culture they have come to be identified against (Achebe 139).

Achebe's story sets the white man in opposition to the Ibo, rather than the Ibo in opposition to the white man. This literary move reasserts an African identity not only as normal, but also as one of value, with a history and customs that are admirable and provide a certain order to society. Written for a largely white, English-speaking audience at the time, Achebe selects some aspects of the Ibo Self that are identifiable and well understood by his readers. The scene of the trial between Uzowulu and Odukwe in Chapter Ten is such an example. He writes of the trial's proceedings, how each party has an opportunity to speak in their defense, and how the elders, or *egwugu*, are the neutral arbiters: "'Your words are good,' said the leader of the *egwugwu*. 'Let us hear Odukwe. His words may also be good'" (Achebe 87). Essentially, Achebe demonstrates a system of justice very similar to that of the Europeans. It is in this way that he both asserts an African-Self and deconstructs the Self-Other paradigm. He reveals that there is value and order in the African system of justice, that it does make 'sense' if it needs to, but it is also largely similar to the European system. It is a trial with defendants, adjudicated by neutral parties of authority, with a verdict that is handed down and followed according to tradition (or in European

terms, according to the rule of law). Achebe offers an indirect comparison between the two cultures, an interaction between readers and the textualized story, that blurs the line between the Self and Other. While he seeks to define the African-Self, or at least demonstrate its valid existence, he also enables a critique of the dichotomy itself, showing that perhaps neither 'side' can be defined by simplistic opposition to an Other.

In the same way as the trial scene, much of Achebe's work represents a reclamation of African tradition. An obvious example is using the tortoise fable in Chapter Eleven to warn Ezinma of the dangers of selfishness. This form of passing on values is ubiquitous throughout western literature, but the fable used is a traditional African one. Moreover, though Achebe writes down the fable, Ekwefi is telling it to Ezinma. Achebe effectively illustrates Ibo values through a traditional fable while keeping its original form of transmission intact. While the oral culture of the Ibo is not readily available to western readers, the effect of that culture is maintained through Achebe's use of monologue. According to Abdul Janmohamed, the novel thus constitutes a representation of oral culture that not only helps to preserve it but also symbolizes the creation of a new syncretic form (21). English readers can at some level access the ideals of the Ibo and appreciate them as they are. This entrance into the culture, encouraged by Achebe, allows for the preservation of Ibo values. Though these values are now conveyed in English, Achebe bends the language to conform to Ibo tradition and thereby celebrates its significance. He ultimately creates an appreciation for the Ibo virtue of selflessness and the importance of teaching children such values.

One more important example of cultural reclamation is in how Achebe portrays the Ibo ancestors and spirits. From the *chi* to the *egwugwu*, Achebe upholds these spirits as central to the Ibo way of life, representing them as highly positive protectors and adjudicators. He relates the importance of the *chi* as we read, "[a]t the most one could say that his [Okonkwo's] *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also" (Achebe 29). Okonkwo's success in his clan is tightly interwoven with his relationship to his personal god. He is a great man because of his *chi*, but his own diligence contributes to the encouragement by his *chi*. Linking the spirituality of the Ibo people to their social relationships and

their measures of right and wrong, success and failure, Achebe fleshes out a rich culture in touch with itself. He demonstrates the complexities of interactions and beliefs that are otherwise inaccessible to outsiders such as his readers. This same scene describes Okonkwo's selection "to carry a message of war to their enemies unless they agreed to give up a young man and a virgin to atone for the murder of Udo's wife" (Achebe 29). While an outsider may describe the scene as a man being chosen to deliver a message of revenge, Achebe prefaces it with the honor that Okonkwo holds amongst the clan, and describes this charge as a meaningful task to explain the custom being carried out. Whereas a messenger in western literature is typically of minor importance, the tradition of the Ibo says only a man of highest regard can communicate such a message. Explaining such cultural nuances is vital to Achebe's means and ends, as he both recounts the Ibo traditions and upholds them as noble and necessary constituents of the African-Self.

Finally, while the subject of Achebe's work is post-colonial, so too is the text itself. Achebe grapples with the concept of hybridity as he attempts to relay an African oral tradition through written English. He seems to reconcile this with ease, just as the Moroccans have found a unique identity with both the Arabic and French languages, or the Ghanaians with English and their local languages. Achebe himself has been quoted saying, "[For] me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it" (Tyson 422). This text, in the end, serves to employ the English language for an essentially African purpose. While it may confine the telling of an African tale, it paradoxically liberates that tale to be understood in many more places, by many more people. It embodies the resistance to colonialism and even begins to reclaim ground from the colonizer. The English words are ironically turned on the colonizer to critique his malevolence and display his ignorance to the depth and beauty of African culture.

As much as the text is an upheaval against colonialism typically conceived, it is also an attempt to throw off the shackles of cultural colonization. As stated earlier, the text is a reclamation of African culture and tradition. Similarly, it is an attempt to reverse or resist at least part of "the inculcation of a British system of government and education, British culture, and British values that denigrate the culture, morals, and even physical appearance of formerly subjugated peoples" (Tyson 419). Achebe describes the Ibo people with respect and admiration,

characterizing them as honorable and just, spiritual and reasonable. He even critiques the British rule as strange and incoherent, “where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance,” imprisoning some Umuofia “men of title who should be above such mean occupation” (Achebe 179). Achebe’s acute use of the English language and forms undermines the colonization of African culture, reclaiming and reconciling in an ultimately hybrid post-colonial text. The very writing of his novel is a resistance to psychological colonialism, reworking the language of the colonizer to tell the story of the colonized. In this way, Achebe achieves a partial decolonization of the African mind. He reasserts African culture throughout the novel, and by the existence of the text itself, working to eliminate that negative self-image that the colonizer enforced. Ultimately, Achebe is able to both shed the negative colonial effects on African identity while reconciling with its history. The book ultimately embodies an African identity, unique in its own textual form, and indeed establishes a post-colonial Self for Africans.

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"YOU ARE THE TRUE MESSIAH": REVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY AND IMMANENT TRANSCENDENCE IN MICHAEL GOLD'S *JEWS WITHOUT MONEY*

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Abstract

Michael Gold's novel *Jews Without Money* offers a radical counterpoint to the ideological narratives of upward mobility and material success encoded in the discourse of the American Dream. It resolves its naturalistic representation of the underbelly of modern capitalism through a messianic-utopian endorsement of revolutionary socialism. In its inflection of the socialist promise, this messianism reproduces aspects of a received religious heritage. Whilst renouncing the theological transcendence of faith in the divine, Gold's socialism substitutes a peculiar half-breed of "immanent transcendence" in keeping with the "native" traditions of the Jewish-American labour movement.

Key words: America, Socialism, Judaism, immanent transcendence.

Resumen

La novela de Michael Gold *Judíos sin dinero* ofrece un contrapunto radical a las narrativas sobre movilidad social y éxito material vinculadas al discurso del Sueño Americano. Gold resuelve una representación naturalista de los bajos fondos del capitalismo moderno mediante una llamada utópico-mesiánica a la revolución socialista. Este mesianismo reproduce aspectos de un bagaje religioso heredado. Al tiempo que se rechaza la dimensión teológico-transcendente de la fe en lo divino, el socialismo goldiano ofrece una peculiar formulación intermedia de "transcendencia inmanente" profundamente arraigada en la tradición "nativa" del movimiento obrero judío-americano.

Palabras clave: América, socialismo, judaísmo, transcendencia inmanente

Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* can be regarded as a paradigmatic attempt to fuse the politics of revolutionary socialism with the cultural ethos of the Jewish-American immigrant experience. Between the opposing poles of a secular teleology informed by Marxism and a traditionalist attachment to Hebraic piety, there lies a structural link or formal parallel in the notion of transcendence. The novel's reconstruction of urban poverty and Jewish identity tends to privilege – albeit from an "enlightened" distance – the religious dimension of a received and relatively backward-looking culture, constantly pressing it for its utopian consequences. As will be argued in this article, the oppositional experience supplied in the novel by a residual and decadent religiosity animates and informs the resulting turn to secular messianism in the form of revolutionary socialism. Part of this narrative trajectory is contextualised by the historical developments of the Jewish-American labour movement in the early decades of the twentieth century. As an analytical tool I will rely on the notion of "immanent transcendence" (Santner 10): Gold, it will be claimed, manages to expose the limitations of a failed theological outlook (which is nevertheless recognised as offering a native idiom of resistance to the predatory nature of American capitalism) whilst retaining its messianic projection of a redemptive telos.

Published in 1930, Gold's autobiographical novel has been alternatively hailed as a powerful instance of proletarian literature telling the "other side" of the all-American story of immigrant success, and criticised for its allegedly simplistic rendition of working-class experience and deliverance via revolutionary politics. Critics such as Alfred Kazin (3, 4), for example, whilst praising Gold's capacity for acute observation as well as the impressive candour and vividness of his vignettes of immigrant life in New York City, have remarked that his literary craft is without "the slightest literary finesse, without second thoughts about anything he believes", a solid blow delivered in "'strong' simple words", "the briefest of sentences" and "the shortest of paragraphs" (3-4).

Gold's naturalistic prose takes its cue from the vibrant immediacy of lived experience (that is, the experience of exile from the "American Dream") and processes it as the rabid impulse to decry its affronts in the simple, didactic mode of Manichean moralism. His construction of clear-cut, unambiguous types amounts to a – "primitive" yet forceful –

“natural history” of American modernity from the contrived viewpoint of the underdog. Gold’s characteristic articulation of the subaltern relies on a structural outsiderness of the New York Jew as a repository of concrete features (biographical or semi-biographical) and of general/symbolic validating qualities.

The poverty with which this type is associated functions as an ontological second nature rather than as a circumstantial predicate. The Lower East Side is the fertile ground in which poverty thrives, an implacable “condition” branding its victims in a supra-individual dynamic of enslavement. The impersonal forces of History – embodied in apocalyptic images of physical and spiritual devastation – conspire to make individual fortunes and individual substance itself a mere offshoot of their “objective” workings.

Gold’s lurid and often poignant depiction of the modern Babylon rests on a brisk, visceral indictment of “America” – often figured as a floating signifier or a metonymic stand-in for the abstract condition of which pauperism and degradation are structural components. His resounding evocation of the “lived” America conflates the direct, sensorial contact with the street – the customary filth of everyday life – and the mythical dimension of a brutal milieu which is nothing but a synecdoche of the traumatic “real” of modernity:

> Our East River is a sun-spangled open sewer running with oily scum and garbage… It stinks with the many deaths of New York… New York is a devil’s dream, the most urbanized city in the world. It is all geometry angles and stone. It is mythical, a city buried by a volcano. No grass is found in this petrified city, no big living trees, no flowers, no bird but the drab little lecherous sparrow, no soil, loam, earth; fresh earth to smell, earth to walk on, to roll on, and love like a woman.
>
> Just stone. It is the ruins of Pompeii (sic), except that seven million animals full of earth-love must dwell in the dead lava streets. (*Jews Without Money* 40)

New York’s embodied nightmare is exposed as the internal limit and negative obverse of the American Dream. It displays the material contours of a realised dystopia in symmetry and sharp contrast to the projected utopia of the foundational narratives.

In a series of tropological permutations, we could claim that the shift or transition from the natural, pre-ordained and pre-modern “city

upon a hill" of Puritan teleology to the prospective New Jerusalem of modern Jewish-American progressivism is mediated by a secular eschatology encoded in images and figures of the great urban Babylon. In other words, the road to redemption is open, the paths of utopia are clearly marked for the modern Jew, even if the available moral and cognitive structures are articulated for and from within a thoroughly secular and urban radical culture.

Gold's literary and political intervention in *Jews Without Money* (and elsewhere) must be considered within the broader context of early twentieth century Jewish radicalism in America. It should be noted that, by the late 1920s, the latter constituted a powerful evolution of Jewish America, doubly committed, in what may be seen as a paradox, to "purely secular" principles on the one hand and a "thoroughly Jewish" identity on the other, as prominent Yiddish activist Yankev Levin pointed out in 1918 (Michels 179). This cultural outgrowth was fundamentally linked to the fortunes of the Yiddish language (especially in the New York area) and to an organic flourishing of institutional manifestations such as political parties, unions, literary and dramatic clubs, mutual aid societies, etc.

In the broader context of American leftwing politics, the Jewish element was instrumental in bringing about a particularly advanced version of radicalism, which often drew its inspiration from an earlier experience of immigration and a re-symbolisation of their identity as dislocated East European Jews. The embrace of radical politics was often achieved through the broader process of acculturation in the new American milieu, as, indeed, part of an over-arching Americanisation of their original Jewishness. For the radical intelligentsia of the New York Jewry in the latter part of the nineteenth century, for example, this process involved a set of cultural displacements (including the re-acquisition of Yiddish over their native Russian as a primary vehicle of communication with the mainstream of Ashkenazi immigration) which ended up characterising their newly found identity as essentially American or American-constituted as opposed to pre-given. While this eminently intellectual and conscious process was true of a number of labour organisers and early socialists, for a vast majority of these working-class immigrants, the circuitous route of assimilation implied a middle passage of material as well as spiritual exile in the gutter of modern civilisation. In other words, this process entailed a fracture

concomitant with the experience of urban life, with the daily trudge through "gray lava streets" of a sterility and oppressiveness only commensurate with their mythical status.

The great American Nightmare (eloquently described by other authors of Gold's generation, such as Henry Miller) took on, in the fictional East Side of *Jews Without Money*, a specific quality of purposeful monstrosity – a mythopoeic dimension with a very precise role assignment in the moral cartography of Gold's universe. This is punctuated by an acute lyricism which is but part of a larger moral and political strategy of messianic justification – with a frequent occurrence of terse, condensed verse-like pronouncements: "it was a world of violence and stone, there were too many cats, there were too many children" (*Jews Without Money* 63). Admittedly, poverty functions as the discursive mantle with which every expression of iniquity, depravity and cruelty is covered. Its place is not to be found in an analytical approach to cause and effect, but in the larger-than-life, impersonal forces which mould character and experience.

The great American Nightmare of New York's Lower East Side rehearses the crude effects of capitalist "civilisation" on the existential realm of individuals, collectives, bodies and souls. Gold's representational strategy focuses on the naked brutality of modern society, rather than on the subtle workings of ideology: destitution, exclusion and oppression converge as focal expressions of an alienated condition arising from the mainspring of poverty – that is, systemically (capitalist) induced poverty. Rampant amorality and degeneration of all kinds are thus ontologically linked to the condition of exploitation in which the silent armies of the excluded are forced to share. Beneath the legitimating layers of ideology which buttress the American Dream lies the "gray lava" of collective failure, with its human and urban jungle of despair, alienation and spite.

A cursory look through Gold's shocking gallery of types reveals his intentional construction of a human limit or boundary, a "degree zero" of modern humanity, as it were, with the double function of exposing the ultimate effects of the "civilizing" project and isolating a point of radical negativity (of rampant ethical devastation) from which a "new life" – that is, a new ethics and a new paradigm of social interaction – may be constructed.

Gold's depiction of the ravages of actually existing society upon concrete human beings is indeed apocalyptic. It may suffice to mention, by way of example, the role reserved for the State in this broad context of moral dehumanisation which is the Lower East Side. In retelling the story of one of the prominent pimps and criminals of the neighbourhood, Louis One Eye, and how he was sent to a reformatory at the age of fourteen, Gold remarks, in his characteristically raw style:

> There the State "reformed" him by carefully teaching him to be a criminal, and by robbing him of his eye.
>
> Is there any gangster who is as cruel and heartless as the present legal State?
>
> No. A keeper once lashed Louis for an hour with a leather belt. The boy had broken some "rule". The flying buckle cracked open an eyeball. The boy screamed in pain. But the insane and legal gangster of the State continued the "punishment" [...] Louis had been know as One eye ever since. His remaining eye had become fierce and large. It was black, and from it poured hate, lust, scorn and suspicion, as from a deadly headlight to shrivel the world [...] The State had turned a moody unhappy boy into this evil rattlesnake, that struck a deathblow at the slightest touch of man. (*Jews Without Money* 128, 129)

The State is thus construed as a power adjunct of a social system premised on the brutalisation of essential humanity. In Gold's descriptive universe, exploitation reaches beyond the cash nexus and the Marxian analysis of reified interpersonal relations. The colonisation of private spaces operates at a more basic level, as an intimately corrupting force which robs marginal subjects of their last hold on decency and attachment, turning them into specular reflections (and instrumental appurtenances) of the great machine of modern society. Against this general background of corruption and degeneracy, the embedded narrative of immigrant nostalgia (signalled in the novel by the father's old country memories and cautionary tales) and a conservative sense of inherited community issue in a lingering effect of pathos. Interspersed with these are the testimonies of failure – according to the standardised structure of the "rags-to-riches" discourse – and a persistent sense of ineffectuality which the generation of immigrant parents hope to redeem through their American-born children.

The natural corollary of this modern myth of exilic Jewishness is expressed as a Manichean disjunctive of theological provenance which

nevertheless manages to combine its messianic teleology with elements of the radical secular culture of turn-of-the-century Jewish America. In effect, Gold’s novel is pregnant with allusions to the wider context of Jewish religion, with a notable presence of Orthodox references. Thus, for example, the narrator himself, young Mikey, is sent to a *Chaider* (the Yiddish term for *Yeshiva*, or Jewish religious school), where he is first put in contact with a native expression of the prevailing atmosphere of decay and meaninglessness in immigrant New York City. Even Orthodox Judaism – perhaps the characteristic expression of an insular and, in principle, resilient form of cultural resistance in the face of modern uniformity – falls prey to the general collapse of values. The character of Reb Moisha, the religious teacher, symbolises the pitiful state of a pious tradition which has proved unable to either adapt or adequately react against the monstrous forces of an alien, vilifying culture:

> Reb Moisha was my teacher. This man was a walking, belching symbol of the decay of Orthodox Judaism. What could such a man teach any one? He was ignorant as a rat. He was a foul smelling, emaciated beggar who had never read anything, or seen anything, who knew absolutely nothing but this sterile memory course in dead Hebrew which he whipped into the heads and backsides of little boys (*Jews Without Money* 65)

Gold’s doctrinal answer to the challenge and insurmountable contradictions of capitalist society does not borrow directly from religious traditionalism. His bid is consciously secular, atheistic and socialist. However, it may be fruitful to consider those aspects of a native, traditional background in Jewish mannerisms and figures which lend a powerful operative structure for the articulation of a radical language of revolutionary transformation. Thus, I would claim that one of the strongest sources of fascination in the novel (somewhat diffident, somewhat veiled, of course, given the abysmal ideological distance between their respective stances) is exerted precisely by religious piety. This is the fascination exerted, for example, by the character of the Chassidic scholar Reb Samuel, who emerges as a radically hopeful (if at the same time poignant) figure of immanent resistance, or, at a more immediate level, by the narrator’s mother and her sincere (Orthodox) faith in God. The case of Reb Samuel is telling: a consistently deluded man, betrayed by the institutional expression of his moral universe (namely, the new rabbi his congregation manages to bring from Europe with a view to redeeming the Lower East Side), he attains a degree of

"saintly" resistance which, far from ringing as merely pathetic, strikes a radical counterpoint to that great cosmogony of depravity into which America has turned its human world:

> For the next ten years, while I was growing up, Reb Samuel lay in bed and rested. He could not stir, he could not speak above a painful whisper… He lay by the window. My father arranged three mirrors in such a fashion that everything below reflected into a mirror hung from the ceiling. Without turning his eyes, Reb Samuel could see everything in the street. He was a man at a never-ending play. He was a spectator, a ghost watching our crazy world.
>
> He was still gentle. He would smile and whisper, "Ach, America! Who can understand America?" (*Jews Without Money* 204, 205)

True, heartfelt, pious religiosity seems to offer, in spite of a plethora of contradictions and alienations of its own, a substantive mode of antagonism and defensive alterity (even for the convinced atheist) to the ritual – and far more bitter – alienations of decrepit capitalist modernity. Even if the final outcome is – quite inevitably in this book – one of utter failure and forlorn acknowledgement of the inability to resist America without a radically new political programme and "structure of feeling" (Williams 132), religion (that is, "true" heartfelt religion) offers itself as a native cipher – adorned with irrationality, superstition and general backwardness – which paradoxically, or perhaps consequently, lays its claim on what Eric L. Santner has called the "enigmatic density of desire" (9); that blind spot in the make-up of interpersonal ethics which warrants, for the secular, post-traditional subject of redemption, the possibility of transcendence without the validating premise of divine transcendence. In other words, what I call the logic of immanent transcendence, which, I think, informs the utopian structure of Gold's narrative. By immanent transcendence in the context of this novel I mean the seemingly contradictory indictment of theological irrationality, on the one hand, and the dependence upon its messianic structures for the articulation of an independent radical voice, on the other. For indeed, the narrative's utopian resolution – which has been criticised on account of its alleged opportunism (Foley 312) – rests on a messianic opening onto the realm of possibility – a grammar of futurity which is in turn warranted by a preparatory work in eschatological imagery and the construction of a negative paradigm of human ethicality (the gallery of "degenerate" types which populate the urban "jungle" of the Lower East Side).

This messianic form of secular Jewish utopianism is easily recognizable. It can be related to Walter Benjamin's theory of temporality, in his well-known "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in which he claims that the notion of redemption is already embedded in the experience of the historical past, as the latter contains an "index" of future realization of its latent hopes and desires. In this text, Benjamin famously argues that a solid revolutionary theory must inevitably enlist – albeit secretly, in disguise – the services of theology and its conceptual structures. The future, according to Benjamin, falls without the moulds of "homogeneous, empty time" (395), that is, outside the linear narratives of prediction. On the contrary, the future pulsates within every fold of the present and of the past, offering an immanent and imminent gateway to salvation. The coming of the Messiah (the Communist Revolution, for both Benjamin and Gold) lies beyond the narrative of historical progress. Its promise of transcendence is consequently internal to those moments of burning despair and oppressive danger – to that "state of exception" which Benjamin theorised as the current historical norm. The "emergency situation" in which Gold's characters are trapped is both the condition of possibility of the new life, of the "great beginning" of a new civilisation, and the ontological buttress of the present American Nightmare.

The social experience of dissolution – generally speaking, the semantic force field in which personal and collective crises are articulated in this novel as part of an over-arching moral language – is tied, as we have seen, to the corrosive impact of capitalist modernity upon inherited traditional structures of kinship and affiliation. Politically considered, the logical corollary of this is double-edged. On the one hand, it displays a contrastive pattern of backward social (and moral) rules in conflict with the a-social drives of American reality, and on the other, it paves the ground for a utopian resolution of the disjunctive. As a result, we could claim that "dissolution" facilitates the "resolution" of social contradictions by supplying a degree zero – a negative foundation – upon which a new, better, sociality may be erected.

Marx told us in *The Communist Manifesto*, and we were duly reminded by Marshall Berman, that "all that is solid melts into air". Indeed, this may serve as the universal warning as well as the functional rule of thumb of modernity itself – as Zygmunt Bauman has insisted, in more recent times. Yet it is an ontological condition which harbours

an ineffable, as well as tantalising, promise of reconstruction; it is also the notional key supplied by modernist temporalities – whether in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, filmic montage, narrative technique or, as we have seen, secular uses of theology – in their endorsement of ever so many dislocations. The premise of negativity – the realm of the excluded and inassimilable "other" – which constitutes the subject of experience in *Jews Without Money* – provides the necessary condition for the "coming of the Messiah"; a coming, of course, which no longer replicates tradition, but rather extends its redemptive logic to fresh territories of the human mind.

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SEX, DRUGS, AND SOCIAL DETACHMENT IN *STORY OF MY LIFE*: A HINDERED PROGRESSION TOWARDS MATURITY

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Abstract

Story of My Life deals with the tribulations of Alison Poole, its main character and narrator, as she goes through a series of intense experiences within Manhattan's fun-seeking youth scene during the 1980's. McInerney presents the mishaps of this young hedonistic female as a sign of modern consumerism's failure, due to its superficiality and materialism. There is an underlying childish perception of what society should be like in her actions, owing to a naïve or infantile view of reality that handicaps her progress towards a truly positive social self-realization. The novel, in this manner, portrays the inner conflict experienced by immature individuals who are misled by seemingly fashionable lifestyles, and are caught within the vicious cycle of a deluding consumerist culture, primarily based on materialistic values and the rapid pursuit of pleasure. The purpose of the present article is to analyse the evolution of the main character's thwarted process of maturing, emphasising on her mistakenly self-centred behaviour.

Key words: McInerney, youth, addictions, alienation, childishness, consumerism, society.

Resumen

La novela *Story of My Lif*e versa sobre las tribulaciones de Alison Poole, personaje principal y narradora de la misma, a medida que atraviesa una serie de experiencias en el seno del ambiente juvenil de ocio en el Manhattan de los años 1980. McInerney presenta los avatares de esta joven hedonista como evidencia del fracaso de la sociedad de

consumo contemporánea, debido a la superficialidad y el materialismo que la caracterizan. Existe una subyacente visión inmadura, tanto de la identidad individual como de la sociedad, así como una noción ingenua o infantil de la realidad, que impiden el natural proceso de desarrollo personal de la protagonista. La obra muestra el conflicto interior experimentado por aquellos jóvenes que, llevados por su equivocada admiración hacia estilos de vida socialmente sugerentes, se ven atrapados en la espiral de una dinámica consumista ilusoria, centrándose exclusivamente en valores materiales y el cumplimiento rápido de sus deseos. El propósito del presente trabajo es el de analizar la evolución de la protagonista en su frustrado camino hacia la madurez personal, haciendo hincapié en sus erróneas opiniones auto-complacientes.

Palabras clave: McInerney, juventud, adicciones, alineación, infantilismo, consumismo, sociedad.

Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis both belong to that group of American novelists which has been known as New York's literary 'brat pack'. These writers achieved early success with their portraits of solitary characters moving about in the glimmering city scene of the 1980's. Ellis is exceptionally famous for his novels *Less Than Zero* (1985) and *American Psycho* (1991), in which the main ingredients are usually money, drugs, sex and violence, always involving young people. McInerney's *Story of My Life* (1988) also deals with the historically well-known theme of the troubled American youth, bearing a certain resemblance to his first literary success, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). In that previous novel, the main character is a successful young man called Jamie, who becomes trapped in a world of nightclubs and drugs. He eventually loses his job, his wife and his friends, only to wind up back in the beginning, having to start from scratch all over again. Likewise, the misadventures of Alison Poole, protagonist and narrator in *Story of My Life*, depict the experience of another youngster making the most of Manhattan's big time during the decade mentioned. The twenty-year-old 'brat' is a spoilt, but also frustrated, middle-upper-class girl who spends time roaming New York seeking handsome boys and controlled substances. However, she is actually craving to find an authentic

meaning for life within the turmoil of her existence. McInerney focuses on her struggle to understand the mishaps, emotional conflicts and disagreeable experiences that have determined her life, concentrating on the eight-week period just before her twenty-first birthday. As the plot unfolds, we witness the decline of this self-proclaimed post-modern girl, as she slips further into alcoholism and cocaine dependency. Alison's first-person monologue describes her unhappy upbringing, escalating drug habit, and preoccupations with sex, fashion, and shallow stockbrokers. Abandoned by her father -a mature playboy who molested her as a child and poisoned her pet horse to obtain insurance indemnity-, she briefly seems to find motivation and naïve self-awareness in her acting lessons. Unfortunately, her sexually promiscuous, excessive and expensive lifestyle, along with her continuous cocaine abuse, serve as an obstacle for her personal development, and Alison's attempts to discover positive motivations in her life end up thwarted, just as her desire to seriously attend her drama school sessions. Suffering a progressive accumulation of problems, involving arguments with her boyfriend, financial troubles, and an ever-increasing cocaine addiction, she tops things off by having to go through an abortion. All these events subsequently bring her to a physical and mental collapse during her birthday celebration.

The present article proposes to take a closer look at the gradual process of Alison's decay, enhancing the frequent child-like reactions in her behaviour, in order to prove that the tribulations of this young hedonistic female suggest a criticism against contemporary consumerist society, which is likewise coming to pieces due to its superficial and materialistic doctrine -a feature which this novel also happens to have in common with Ellis' *American Psycho*, as Mike Grimshaw explains:

> We desire that which we consume -and which in turn consumes us- because in it we see ourselves in both actual presence and potential actuality. Yet this act of consumption masks a deadly reality, for the violence of consumption is indicative of the violence with which we interact … This act of consumption as communicative violence reaches its apogee in *American Psycho.* Patrick Bateman's obsessive chronicling of his and everyone else's consumption is indicative of a limited existence that can only be overcome by acts of psychotic, diabolic violence that seek to reduce victims to the level of dehumanised commodities for (at one point, literal) consumption … It is in the face of such 'immoralism' that Ellis writes, locating himself not as a detached observer but as a willing

> participant seeking a redemptive transgression where only an act of participation will free the self from terminal decline. On one level he and his characters are attempting to act heroically in the face of late twentieth century modern life. (Grimshaw)

In *Story of My Life*, the protagonist acquires implicitly infantile ideas regarding individual and social perspectives, determining her behaviour and handicapping her possibilities for a responsible self-realization and a truly coherent understanding of adult reality. A correct notion of adulthood requires a wider scope to interpret human relations, contrary to any narrow view of what these imply, and such knowledge can only develop in young people once they reject any limited or naïve pre-conception of life in favour of a much more rational approach. It is mainly in the dangerous aspects of Alison's lifestyle that she exhibits her simple-minded childishness, combined with an irresponsible penchant for pleasure, whilst pursuing the immediate satisfaction of her whimsical desires. Such hazardous territories are none other than those related to sex and drugs. As a result, Alison's attitude leads her to an ever-growing state of self-alienation that impedes her psychological coming of age. The fact that the immature protagonist is turning twenty-one is quite significant in this sense, because it is precisely the legal age required for complete adulthood in New York State. Right from the start, Alison feels that her life is progressively becoming more chaotic and her habits are steadily enslaving her, so she proposes to seize full control of her affairs, aiming to firmly steer her destiny. This determination has its reasons if we consider her situation from a socially competitive point of view and bear in mind her surrounding environment, since Alison's behaviour is conditioned by several confrontations she engages in. Although she is very keen on seeking quick and complete satisfaction for every specific need or wish, she eventually becomes convinced that such a lifestyle may simultaneously be a threat to her personal independence, as Gregor Weibels-Balthaus suggests (296). Similarly, David Foster Wallace sees this submission or gradual loss of autonomy as a very common feature in people's general response to the different stimuli cast by modern media in all its forms, enslaving their will to choose:

> We're conditioned accordingly. We have an innate predilection for visual stimulation, colored movement, a frenetic variety, a beat you can dance to ... the breadth of our attentions greater as attention spans themselves shorten. Raised on an activity at least partly

> passive, we experience a degree of manipulation as neutral, a fact of life. However, wooed artfully as we are for not just our loyalty but our very *attention*, we reserve for that attention the status of a commodity, a measure of power; and our choices to bestow or withhold it carry for us great weight. (Wallace 41)

Within Alison's particular social sphere relationships are characterized by a continuous re-assertion of dominion, especially in those areas where people depend on each other for the fulfilment of their respective desires. Moreover, these sceneries usually deal with money, sex and drugs, which are precisely her weak points, so Alison decides that she must handle each need in a way that ensures her self-determination amidst such circumstances. She acknowledges that her never-ending hunger for partying, taking drugs and having sex is a nerve-racking pleasure hunt that ultimately exhausts her, both physically and mentally, depriving her of the necessary energy to get organised and establish priorities:

> My friends are still pretty much that way which is why I'm so desperate to get this check because if I don't then there's no reason to wake up early Monday morning and Jeannie will get home and somebody will call up and the next thing I know it will be three days from now with no sleep in between, brain in orbit, nose in traction (*Story of My Life* 8).

In an attempt to self-analyse her personality, she becomes quite convinced that her free-spirited lifestyle is a consequence of the way she was brought up by her parents. Alison comfortably comes to this conclusion by simply recognizing that they have always secured her economic welfare, but assumes absolutely no responsibility in the matter as far as her own personal initiative is concerned. Quite the contrary, she amusedly admits never having been really employed or in the need of having her own job, while she cynically agrees that a spoilt child will not be suitably prepared to face the world in terms of work: "Sorry, I just wasn't raised to work" (*Story of My Life* 50). She quickly identifies the same family situation in the case of her friend Jeannie, reacting angrily when this girl's father refuses to give her any extra money. As a materially pampered child herself, Alison has always taken such benefits for granted and is outraged by his decision: "But it's like, these goddamned fathers, they give us everything for a while and then suddenly they change the rules. Like, we grow up thinking we're princesses and suddenly they're amazed that we aren't happy to live like peasants" (*Story of My Life* 115).

We must bear in mind that Alison is essentially a product of her surroundings, during that significant historical period known as the Reagan era, "a time and place obsessed by money" (Martin). Generally speaking, people were quite convinced that money could buy anything – if not everything –, and such is "how the social and moral temper of the 1980's serves to maintain an already complicated existence", as Anna Magnusson puts it (76). Money is precisely one of the issues that make Alison desperately aware of her lack of autonomy, because it renders her materially dependent on others and limits her freedom and self-determination. On several occasions, she painfully admits that she is unable to find a lasting solution for her mounting financial problems, as she begs pecuniary help from her boyfriend Dean, her ex-boyfriend Alex, her friend Mark in the solarium, and so on: "I call up my friend Didi to see if she can lend me the money… Which is when I go – what am I, crazy? I'm never going to get a cent out of Didi." (*Story of My Life* 6-7). This feeling persists throughout the plot until the decisive moment when, perceiving the irony of her situation, she acquiescently uses the tuition funds from her father to cover the expenses of her abortion, thus strengthening her conviction that her dependence is the result of forces beyond her will. Essentially, she builds up the idea of being a victim, considering herself to be under the influence of others, who also happen to be in continuous pursuit of their own selfish pleasures, and starts to believe she cannot permanently emancipate herself moneywise. Alongside this, Jefferson Faye states that Alison's feeling of being at other people's mercy leads her to proceed with great care in all her social affairs: "Every one of her relationships is a power struggle in which she sees herself as the subject of aggressive behavior" (Faye 129). This competition also characterises her social activities related to drug consumption, as she occasionally exasperates people when they come asking for some cocaine of her own provision, dominating them to a certain extent: "The next minute, Rebecca says, Alison, do you have any Valium?" (*Story of My Life* 39). Such situations can often become quite tense, and even violent at some point: "Who else is holding drugs? Didi screams. Doesn't anybody but me buy drugs anymore? I know you all still do drugs, you cheap, sleazy bastards" (*Story of My Life* 148).

Similarly, power clashes reach an almost obsessive degree in relation to Alison's sexual affairs. She is overtly determined to avoid being a mere object of sexual desire in the hands of any male chauvinist, and strives to keep any attempt of this kind at bay (Weibels-Balthaus 298). Hence,

she criticises her friend Skip's contemptuous opinion regarding women: "He doesn't want to go out with anybody who might see through him, so he picks up girls like me. Girls he thinks will believe everything he says and fuck him the first night and not be real surprised when he never calls again" (*Story of My Life* 5). By simply remarking how she utterly detests Skip's condescending behaviour and misogynistic attitude, Alison shows she is quite self-confident in these matters at first. She disdainfully turns down separate proposals from a couple of strangers who call her for a date under Skip's recommendation, proving that she is in full charge of her sexual worth: "I'm like, I don't believe this. What am I? – the York Avenue Escort Service?" (*Story of My Life* 9). Matters change, nonetheless, when Skip complacently tells her that Dean seems to be secretly dating someone else, making her initial self-assurance suffer a severe blow. Although more than Dean's betrayal itself, what really aggravates her is the shameful degradation she feels in front of Skip, damaging her pride and self-esteem: "I'm so pissed at Dean I could cut his dick off. Not because he went out with this bimbo and probably screwed her. I'm mad because he lied and put me in a position where Skip could humiliate me" (*Story of My Life* 104). Ironically though, her sarcastic comments demonstrate that she basically agrees with a materialistic sexuality at this moment, evidencing that she accepts her consideration as a sexual object, rivalling with other females in identical condition:

> A real smart girl, she's only a little less articulate than Sylvester Stallone. I mean, if he's going to fuck other women, fine, I don't mind, really I don't, but they better be at least in the as-wonderful-as-I-am category or how could he even consider it? Obviously the guy has no taste. That's what really gets me. If he thinks she's worth the price of a dinner, how can he truly appreciate me? (*Story of My Life* 106)

However strange it may seem, this pseudo-commercial valuation does not stand for a denial of her dignity, since her role as a kind of sexual merchandise grants her a very solid sense of worth and supplies her with even greater possibilities of choice. Alison continues to uphold the idea that she is the one in charge when it comes to sex, and that she makes the final decisions on every possible occasion, procuring her own pleasure above all:

> Part of my problem is that I'm actually kind of horny. He got to my nipples before I let loose with the stuff about Cassie Hane. Finally

> I reach over and rub his hip, then feel for his cock, which gets hard in about three seconds, so I climb on top of him, slip it inside me. I hate to admit this but it feels good.
> This isn't for you, I go, this is just for me. I'm still mad. I'm just horny.
> He's not complaining. Dean may be a liar but he's not stupid. (*Story of My Life* 110)

When Dean finally admits that he cheated her, she feels the need to prove that she can respond to such an outrage. The subsequent act of sexual intercourse between them allows her to recover both emotional and physical control, and therefore regain her autonomy. Such determination is most significant in the way she practically commands Dean to have sex with her:

> I pull on his cock like it's attached to a busted cigarette machine and I'm having a nicotine fit, he winces and gasps through his teeth, then I climb on top of him and hump and ride, he doesn't know how lucky he is, the jerk, horsewomen have muscles he never dreamed of, doesn't deserve, and after about ten minutes I come but I keep my mouth shut about it, this isn't one of those beautiful sharing experiences, this is something else entirely.
> Then he comes. Alison, he goes. Alison Alison Alison. (*Story of My Life* 128).

Alison's almost sadistic description of the situation indicates how much she delights in taking the lead concerning sex, well in the line of female domination. Her attitude corresponds to most of what Elise Sutton states about the matter, since she physically controls Dean and submits him to her exclusive desire:

> The truth is that women are the superior gender and once a woman unleashes her dominant power, few men are able to resist her. Men become submissive and like little puppy dogs when they are confronted with a powerful woman. Attitude is the key. The woman who believes she is superior will permeate that attitude and thus she develops an aura of dominance and power ... Deep down, men know that women are not their equals, no matter how politically correct our society tries to be. Women are different and mysterious to men. Women are sexual in a way that men do not understand. Women have a power that men do not understand and cannot resist. This female power is active during the courtship between a man and a woman ... The female uses her sexuality (knowingly or unknowingly) and the man is helpless under her power. (Sutton 65)

The moment he repeats her name at the peak of orgasm, she gleefully considers it an act of recognition towards her authority as well as her sexual self, and now feels she has successfully regained an independent sexual identity, no longer serving as somebody else's disposable object of sexual pleasure. Nonetheless, in spite of this momentary triumph, Alison usually encounters great difficulties to be in full control of her sexual life, as she is still amidst a male-dominated society in which women can only partially ensure their autonomy, according to Weibels-Balthaus (301). Alison herself acknowledges the deficiencies of her sexual relationships: "I try. I want this to be enough, just this. Just contact, just friction. But it's not" (*Story of My Life* 128). She acridly admits she does not obtain sufficient personal satisfaction during her intimate encounters with men, no matter how much she seems to control the situation. To make things worse, there is also a competitive distrust between the sexes in modern times, coinciding with Christopher Lasch's opinion that "both men and women have come to approach personal relations with a heightened appreciation of their emotional risks" (194). Owing to the environment she lives in, where personal relations are governed by the same consumerist and individualist patterns of other human interactions, Alison inevitably tends to grow extremely cautious about the competitive nature of her relationships, including sexual ones. In this clashing of individual interests, she fights back as an individual herself, attempting to ensure her autonomy and emotional stability. Notwithstanding, the most common result is none other than a feeling of extreme loneliness and a progressive sense of alienation, simultaneously narrowing her view of the world. The same sensations, although magnified to a huge extent, take place in *American Psycho*, as human feelings bear no meaning within a hollow existence:

> Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in … this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged. (*American Psycho* 373)

Ellis' other famous novel, *Less Than Zero*, similarly emphasises on how a group of Los Angeles youngsters, already beyond their teenage years, undergo the same feelings of emptiness and identity loss in their surrounding environment. According to Sara Martin,

> These people epitomize what would later be known as 'Generation X' in Douglas Coupland's popular phrase. The lives of the main character, Clay, and those of his well-to-do friends revolve around sex and drugs, in which they try to find the essence of a world that eludes them" (Martin).

In resemblance to this, McInerney's other works tend to deal with the disorientation and fragmentation of modern urban life by means of characters immersed in failed relationships, drug and alcohol addictions, or other self-detaching situations. *Bright Lights, Big City*, for example, presents the main character as a successful young writer in his early twenties, who works for an elite literary magazine, as he goes through a phase of self-delusion in order to numb the painful losses of his wife and mother. Cast into a frenetic cycle of work, late-night parties, and casual sex sustained by copious amounts of cocaine, he eventually emerges from the haze to finally confront his problems of alienation and lost self-identity (Hunter).

In *Story of My Life*, Alison herself regards this kind of alienation to be at the core of many disturbances in people. She observes that most of them often ignore their true needs and desires, or simply do not dare to admit them (Weibels-Balthaus 301). She interprets this lack of self-understanding and acceptance as an important factor determining individual social problems and refers to childhood upbringing as the major source for such troubles. It is undoubtedly true that traumatic social experiences at an early stage may alter a child's later capacity for social interaction, and J. P. Shonkoff reflects upon this by saying: "Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy human development" (Shonkoff and Phillips 86). This could very well explain how Alison's own sense of self-detachment was originated by the death of her horse 'Dangerous Dan'. Horseback riding was not only relevant, but also primordial in her childhood years, as an initial standpoint for her self-esteem and her view of social relationships -especially in connection with her father, towards whom she bears mixed feelings. The great significance she grants to those memories is obvious throughout her account, straight from the beginning:

> When I was a kid I spent most of my time on horseback. I went around the country, showing my horses and jumping, until Dangerous Dan dropped dead. I loved Dan more than just about

> any living thing since and that was it for me and horses. That's what happens, basically, when you love something (*Story of My Life* 7).

She even mentions such moments in the end, just before suffering the breakdown at her birthday party: "Toward the end of the endless party that landed me here I was telling the prep the story about Dangerous Dan… My father bought him for me and he cost a fortune. Back then my father bought anything for me. I was his sweet thing" (*Story of My Life* 187).

With the death of her horse, Alison does not only endure the loss of something truly beloved, but also part of her identity. Riding was essential to develop her personality and forge her own self. The situation proved even more traumatic through her father's responsibility in the animal's demise. Alison partly blames him for bringing her childhood to a violent end, pulverizing her sense of wholeness and even her innocence. Her delusions begin precisely when she decides to try to free her alienated self and recover that long-lost feeling of completeness. Her deep desire is to be at one with the world around her and restore a kind of balance or harmony that has been broken ever since. This is also the purpose behind the acting lessons she decides to take up, allowing her to experience moments of profound self-realization:

> I'm doing something true, I know I'm not just faking it this time and even though it's acting something I'm not really experiencing it's absolutely honest, my reaction, the sensations I'm feeling and I'm completely in my own reality, it's like dreaming, you know, or like riding when you feel almost like you and your horse are the same animal, taking your best jumper over a hard course and hitting everything perfectly….
>
> Something good that I did for someone…sharp taste. I was combining these two incredible sensations. And I knew it was the best I had ever done. (*Story of My Life* 46)

Riding on horseback, she found herself in the most favourable condition a child could possibly experience, which is to be emotionally at ease with the world surrounding. This is what her drama class also provides her with. In fact, Alison claims that acting is just as authentic as riding, and insists that practising such an activity makes her feel unleashed from the restrictions of her environment, creating a world of her own. She considers this as the basis of a state of wholeness or completeness. In this way, acting becomes more than simply an escape

from a pointlessly hedonistic life, saturated with sex, cocaine, and consumerism, it also allows her to overcome alienation and recover what she considers the real, basic self of her childhood, from which she was separated by the death of Dangerous Dan. Alison thus views acting as a therapy to stimulate self-realization, and harmonise her notions of self and society:

> Acting is the first thing I've ever really wanted to do. Except for riding… So anyway, after horses I got into drugs. But acting, I don't know, I just love it, getting up there and turning myself inside out. Being somebody else for a change. It's like being a child again, playing something, making believe, laughing and crying all over the place, ever since I can remember people have been trying to get me to stifle my emotions but forget it -I'm an emotional kind of girl. My drama teacher has this great thing he always says -get in touch with your child, which is supposed to be the raw, uncensored part of yourself. Acting is about being true to your feelings, which is great since real life seems to be about being a liar and a hypocrite. (*Story of My Life* 7-8)

For Alison, the rules that restrain social life in reality don't exist in the world of theatre. She is convinced that such restricting rules are incompatible with seeking complete gratification of one's desires, and invariably cause people to become alienated from their true selves. She regards the stage, not as a place that forces her to suppress her emotions, but quite the contrary, as a kind of refuge where she can show them freely. As a consequence, Alison develops the idea that she has discovered an 'oasis' of authenticity in acting, in contrast to the emotional 'desert' of true life. She acquires the deluding notion that children's natural desire to express their emotions and impulses is continuously altered and suppressed by conventions as the they grow up to become social beings. Under the effect of such social rules, adults would supposedly forget those originally 'true' emotions and urges, or simply learn to deny them and pretend they don't exist. In her view, socialisation is basically a negative process that neutralizes true personality, rendering the socialised self nothing but a mutilated version of the original one. This leads us to believe that acting is not merely, as Faye says, "the means by which she can release the pent-up emotions and feelings of betrayal she experiences" (128). Rather, it is her way of defying what she believes to be the alienating effects of social convention, because the stage offers a means enabling her to probe her inner self, or the child within,

giving her the opportunity to liberate and restore the genuine emotions of that pre-socialised 'somebody else' which she literally refers to. In Lasch's opinion, she would be trying to regain a long-lost "experience of narcissistic self-sufficiency and union with the world", caused by her overwhelming sense of alienation (167). This is also comparable to Ellis' view of the lack of authenticity in human existence, since the characters in his works serve the purpose of a kind of "'funhouse mirror' in which we recognize ourselves as distorted; seeking the true reflection as relief and confirmation of the truthfulness of ourselves" (Grimshaw).

Feeling that she lives in a world full of false or inauthentic people, Alison believes that a return to what she considers 'true self' is also essential for communicating with others. She has the impression that the world is becoming dehumanised, and her narrative resembles the kind of literary atmosphere David Foster Wallace terms "Catatonic Realism", a world "in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul" (Wallace 37). As it turns out, beneath the intense activity of social life and its apparent closeness, people are mostly incapable of communicating, or not willing to do so. This paradoxical condition is what makes closely intimate relationships virtually impossible for Alison, and causes her to suffer from extreme spiritual isolation. Unfaithfulness towards the truth is precisely what she frequently holds against her boyfriend, Dean:

> Look, he says, I'm just saying there's a reason for manners. The unvarnished truth isn't always what we need to hear. Diplomacy is what separates us from the animals.
>
> I totally disagree, I say. I've grown up around liars and cheaters and I don't think there's any excuse for not telling the truth. I want to be able to trust you, but if I don't think you respect the truth, you know, then I'll just hit the road. You've got a nice vocabulary but I'm like, I insist on honesty. You should be able to tell me whatever you're feeling. (*Story of My Life* 74)

According to Weibels-Balthaus, lack of communication is precisely what determines her relations with the two most important men in her life, her father and her boyfriend, since both seem always distant to her (304). Believing her father steers his personal matters under false, stereotyped emotions, she leaves a message requesting him "to get in touch with his child" (*Story of My Life* 132), figuratively using

her drama teacher's phrase beyond the literal sense of the expression, suggesting that her father should get to know himself better. As for Dean, she also perceives his not being emotionally authentic, and sadly admits he has lost his 'spontaneity' and is turning 'conventional', which in her eyes is equal to being alienated from one's true self. As a reaction against this, she confirms her trust in acting as a suitable remedy for her own alienated soul, whilst she alludes to socialization's crippling effect as well:

> In my experience this is one big problem with older guys, they start to lose their spontaneity in their thirties, start saying what they're supposed to say instead of what they feel… Like, we're all pretty much raving maniacs as kids, but then some of us get all conventional. Not me, that's why I know I'm going to be a great actress some day, I'm totally in touch with my child. (*Story of My Life* 73)

While seeking her father's support, Alison's communicative failures only serve to intensify her pitiable situation. Her evident lack of confidence is furthermore enhanced by his constant unavailability. Her attempts to talk to him are mostly in vain, since he is very difficult to get in touch with, and her disappointed reactions show that her father's absence is nothing but an example of neglect, as well as an insult to her familial approach: "I go, where's Dad? And she says he's in Cancun with a new bimbo. Which is great. Whenever I need my old man he's on some beach with a nineteen-year-old sex kitten. Story of his life" (*Story of My Life* 178). The final recognition that the gap between them is definitely unbridgeable turns up at the very end, when she rings him up after her breakdown, only to see that he is just as evasive and undemonstrative as before: "He goes, I don't know what you're talking about" (*Story of My Life* 188).

Alison's sense of social distance and her desire for intimate connection are very evident in her sexual affairs as well. Sexuality is a fundamental way of communicating in her life; however, it also leaves her dissatisfied most of the time, especially when it comes to sporadic encounters:

> I hate being alone, but when I wake up in some guy's bed with dry come on the sheets and he's snoring like a garbage truck, I go – let me out of here. I slip out and crawl around the floor groping for my clothes, trying to untangle his blue jeans from mine, my bra from his Jockeys – Skip wears boxers, of course – without making any

> noise, out the door and home to where Jeannie has been warming the bed all night. Jumping in between the sheets and she wakes up and goes, I want details, Alison – length and width.
> I love Jeannie. She cracks me up. (*Story of My Life* 5)

Her desire for more meaningful contact also explains why she doesn't want her sex partners to use condoms – a practice that eventually causes her to contract a venereal infection or "social disease" as she prefers to call it (*Story of My Life* 27): "You can't beat flesh on flesh. I want contact, right? Just give me direct contact and you can keep true love" (*Story of My Life* 9). Strangely enough though, such contact has nothing to do with the idea of loving anybody, as she doesn't believe in love and even rejects the concept itself: "Did I say love? Wash my mouth out with soap" (*Story of My Life* 33). In fact, her views would be downright nihilistic if it weren't for the fact that Alison's confessions likewise denote that there is a great need for human warmth and closeness beneath her voracious sexual appetite. The problem is that she does not realise how casual sex with partners she hardly knows, who are almost complete strangers, will not satiate her desire for proximity and communication. She generally prefers the anonymous, impersonal condition of such risky sexual practices instead of steady relationships, as indicated by her sex fantasy of "a harem of men to come and go as I command, guys as beautiful and faceless as the men who lay you down in your dreams" (*Story of My Life* 15). Consequently, she experiences an even greater sense of distance and emptiness, revealing the sordid truth that there has not been any communication, apart from what may be simple physical contact. Such a feature can likewise be found in other literary works of the time, which cover the matter in a similar tone. Hence, Ellis also deals with sex as a poor substitute of human love, or rather, what is left of it, as merely a mechanical source of immediate pleasure. Once love has been discarded by the inhuman conditions of modern life, the resulting atmosphere adds to a holistic sense of alienation, which in turn generates a twofold effect, both on a collective as well as an individual scale:

> For Ellis, being able to love is a secondary issue and in a 'hardbody' world love is a sign of weakness anyway. Lust, the taking and giving of a body and a self to be consumed for pleasure, the commodification of sexuality into an exchange of gratification and debasement is all we can seem to hope for. Alienated from each other we are now alienated from ourselves as well. For love can

> only occur when people are aware of what it is to be human. So in Ellis' world, Coupland's cry is that of someone who, in a sense, already has it all. Perhaps it is also evidence of a naivety that fails to truly understand the apocalyptic nature of contemporary existence. (Grimshaw)

As Weibels-Balthaus observes, another component of Alison's individual detachment is her obsessive reliance on the telephone (306). The importance of this device becomes very significant when service to her apartment is restricted to calls coming from the outside: "Suddenly I'm cut off from all my friends and delivery service from the deli" (*Story of My Life* 114). Her nearly pathological dependency on phones, along with the implicit lack of self-confidence underlying her complaints, openly reveals her fear of becoming alienated. Such an experience becomes even more oppressive as she eventually depends on answering machines to get her messages through, taking her to a point of exasperation; once again she metaphorically criticises the lack of human touch in her world, as she places people and devices on the same level: "story of my life, talking to machines" (*Story of My Life* 124). In similar terms, a special concern towards how technological development may alter human existence is of substantial importance in the works of other contemporary writers, such as Ellis. Thus, the element of technology as a dehumanising agent can be found in *American Psycho*, contributing to the composition of a false reality: "a world where reality can be digitally, cinematically, ontologically altered at whim, a world where 'better' and 'worse' are claimed not to matter anymore because no one cares about those meanings. Rather, we adapt to change in a world without truth" (Grimshaw). Ironically, not only do the telephone and answering machine turn out to be indispensable means of communication for Alison, but they also stand out as symbols of her feelings of distance and isolation from her environment. Speaking directly to others in person, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply success in communicating either; what is more, this type of conversation is often inconsistent and erratic, and only emphasizes her alienated condition. To make things worse, coherent communication is especially thwarted when drugs are involved, which is the most occasional case. For example, on returning to her apartment one day in the afternoon, she finds her sister, Rebecca, mechanically arguing with Didi after spending the previous night taking drugs and partying

together. Their non-stop blabbering seems very funny at first, but it also brings Alison to reflect upon her own drug habits:

> I love coke conversations. They're so enlightening. I mean, do I sound like that? It's almost enough to make you swear off drugs forever … That's the good part about dealing with coke monsters. If you don't like the topic of conversation, just wait a minute and you'll get a new one. On the other hand, it never really changes at all. It's like a perpetual motion thing. The topic is always drugs (*Story of My Life* 38-39).

As the girls talk, many subjects are brought up on end, but are also discarded very quickly, always taking the conversation back to the beginning in a vicious cycle, and clearly giving a powerful notion of getting nowhere. Their prosaic, narrow-minded, and egocentric dialogue certainly makes Alison feel superior, yet it also spurs her own self-introspection, as it makes her wonder if she actually sounds "like that" and urges her to think she might equally be incapable of communicating meaningfully in such conditions. As regards Alison's own manners of expression, considering the particular kind of jargon and tone she uses, her speech is very realistic since it corresponds to a careless young person who irrepressibly tends to say the first thing that comes to his/her mind. McInerney himself admits that Alison's girl-about-town antics and her vapid argot were modelled on true people he had met at the time (Rees), and it is beyond doubt that the protagonist's language denotes a highly altered emotional state. Although many of her utterances are simple, short and abrupt phrases, expressed quickly one after another in sequence, Alison also uses continuous non-stop paragraphs to tell us the things that happen to her, all contained within a strongly self-centred discourse, deriving into a communication very much in unison with her touch-and-go lifestyle. Her speech is studded with useless interjections such as "like" and other informal expressions, such as "go" and "goes" – meaning "say" and "says" –, as well as short interrogatives such as "right?" serving as multiple-use question tags. All these words, alongside her obsessively repetitive slogan "story of my life", prove she is directly and spontaneously telling us her experiences in a nervous and emotionally altered tone. This true-to-life narrative formula adds credibility to her situation, involving nightlife partying and drug abuse, a very common problem among young Americans both during the 1980's and 1990's, as Jennifer Robison points out:

> By the mid-80s, the introduction of crack cocaine turned youth drug use into a truly terrifying issue. Crack was cheap, plentiful and hideously addictive. Its effects, including gang warfare and crack babies, were quickly gaining notoriety … Heroin is one of the most deadly of the illegal drugs. Luckily, the most common form of ingestion -injection into a vein- has repulsed most potential users. Until now. A stronger, purer version of heroin that can be smoked or snorted is becoming available in big cities. The use of methamphetamines (often called 'crystal meth' or 'meth') is relatively new among teens. A stimulant, meth creates paranoia, hallucinations and repetitive behavior patterns. Long-term use can lead to toxic psychosis. Recent PDFA studies found that use by high school students more than doubled between 1990 and 1996. (Robison)

The pathetic exchange of gibberish between Didi and Rebecca leads Alison to conclude that people under the influence of drugs become so self-absorbed that they tend to lose touch with their human surroundings, since drug abuse intensifies their egocentric behaviour to a degree that makes them emotionally indifferent towards others. With regards to Didi, the effect is ultimately innocuous; at worst she is a nuisance, and at best a laughable wretch, naïve and self-deluded. However, Rebecca's severe loss of empathy is much worse, even propitiating moments of danger, as it is proved by her cruel and indolent attitude during the dramatic argument that finally leads her boyfriend, Mannie, to attempt suicide: "Mannie screams Rebecca's name and then I don't know, suddenly he disappears, he's just gone… It takes me a minute to realize we're on the sixth floor and Mannie's jumped out of the window" (*Story of My Life* 161). Thus, Alison plainly observes how utterly destructive the isolating effect of drugs can be. The way their influence turns people egocentric and apathetic, rendering them incapable of communicating openly or meaningfully, is another one of those communicational deficiencies that contribute to her isolation from the environment. This alienating drawback is the main reason why she gradually tries to recover the ability to communicate through acting, believing she is re-discovering that supposedly 'real' world she previously lost. Ironically, however, what she actually does is hide in a world of fiction, or fantasy, which only seems real to her because she can express her feelings without restraint and 'be herself', expecting others to do the same. As a consequence, depending on fictional situations turns out to be much like resorting to drugs in order to inhibit social restrictions,

and the results can be equally frustrating. Such a mistaken reliance on fantasy takes place on two specific occasions within the novel, during the subsequent Truth-or-Dare game sessions. These moments are precisely when the contradictory ambivalence of her character reveals itself most clearly. Since things get out of hand, the situation ends up frightening Alison and forces her to choose an absolute reality rather than a fictionalised one. Basically, she does not completely surrender to the fiction of living in a world governed by the rules of a game, but retains the consciousness of a reality outside that world. Even if she willingly enters this fantasy world at first, she struggles to retain her critical viewpoint within it. As the second session unfolds, she discovers that her friends have completely submitted to the fiction of living in a party-game world where nearly everything is allowed. She then becomes horrified as her sister tries to seduce her boyfriend during the game. The incident warns her against the ethics of the real world being inhibited by the rules of a ludicrous pastime activity, leading her to quit the game at the climactic instant of emotional tension: "So I get up and go to the bathroom while Truth-or-Dare is raging around me. This is even worse than the fucking derby" (*Story of My Life* 156-57). She returns from that fantasy world back into reality, in an attempt to recover realistic criteria, essential for a proper understanding of her circumstances. Her experience of the game proves just how risky it can be to completely fulfil one's fantasies, since it may lead to a complete loss of one's sense of reality. The incident during the second session also brought her mind back to a very similar scene that had taken place long before, when she once sat in a hot bathtub together with Alex, Rebecca, and Trent -her sister's lover at that moment:

> Anyway, we're all in that condition where you can't tell where the water stops and you begin, it's like the same warm ooze, the four of us in the hot tub drinking Crystal wrecked on Quaaludes and we're like joking around about having an orgy and the next thing I know I feel a hand fishing around between my legs… We were all doing this underwater foreplay and it was cool, we were all friends and that was the point, and Alex is touching me too but it's just sort of giggly and casual. So like a jerk I decide to get up and take a pee… I don't know, we were pretty fucked up at this point. (*Story of My Life* 155)

It was a similar situation at that time, but involving drugs as well, as they were amidst a world free from the limits of factual reality. In

such a place of refuge the rules of behaviour belonging to real life cease to exist, making her and the rest able to act out their sex fantasies without fearing reprimand. However, just as in the Truth-or-Dare game, we observe again how Alison gives way to fantasy only up to a certain degree, and keeps clinging on to an outer reality whose rules should not be broken. That is why she eventually leaves the tub, in order to restore the balance between the real and the fantasized, as Weibels-Balthaus indicates (312).

After experiencing so many situations of the kind, Alison gradually develops the idea that the ability to tell the difference between truth and imagination is disappearing from her surroundings. Since her acquaintances and associates do not seem aware of the possible outcome their actions might have, she believes they are progressively losing the faculty of distinguishing the two concepts. But it must be pointed out that she herself is also involved in the aforementioned dynamics, because by living on the edge of real life, resorting to so many self-deluding pleasures of a purely superficial or materialistic type, as well as using narcotics to disguise reality, she eventually becomes less capable of telling the fantasized world from the other (*Story of My Life* 131). This makes her growingly insecure and magnifies her detachment, as she desperately grasps an essential referent for what is real, but does so by avoiding her friends and the activities they indulge in. The result is ironically the opposite of her initial objective, which was to be in control of her reality and be an active part of it, interacting positively with others:

> Some impulses you should stifle, right? I never used to think so, I've always done whatever I felt like, I figured anything else and you're a hypocrite like I told Dean, but I don't know, here in the middle of this ugly Truth or Dare session watching my sister grab my boyfriend's dick, thinking about her and Alex back then, thinking about some of the shit I've done recently, I'm beginning to wonder if a little stifling is such a bad thing. (*Story of My Life* 156)

Stephanie Girard sees this as the basic conflict of "betweenness" that takes place in modern life (161). On the other hand, Grimshaw views the matter as a wilful loss or disappearance of identity in the modern technologically-based world, stating that young people may even deliberately give way to such anonymity in order to avoid the potential sufferings the real world can bring about, seeking refuge in a

more artificial or fictitious reality, as found in Ellis' works (Grimshaw). Similarly, in her attempt to be in full control of her circumstances, Alison moves away from the people who could cause her to be trapped in the activities that tend to enslave her, but such a manoeuvre also implies isolating herself and increasing her sense of alienation. Alongside this, we must also bear in mind that Alison tends to interpret her circumstances according to the self-conjured ideas that respond to her own personal logic or convenience, in an attempt to find an explanation for her problems. It must be remembered how she retains her faith in primary human instinct, believing it is a kind of ideal condition, necessary for true understanding and communication. This, of course, refers to that previously mentioned pre-socialised self, suppressed by the standards of civilized society. Consequently, she adopts a simplistic view of an initial state of authenticity, or even innocence, which becomes corrupted by the rules of society as people are brought up to act as adults. Simple-minded perspectives of the like, forging a character's particular view of reality, are common in both McInerney's and Ellis's works, as a number of critics have pointed out (Clary 477). The belief in this honest condition previous to social education is a resort to a minimalist pattern of behaviour, leading Alison to uphold this principal very firmly because it makes sense to her, seeming practical and useful as well. It becomes essential for her to recover that uncorrupted condition, thus justifying her rejection of whatever is socially conventional, alongside her rebellious attitude and her never-ending search for complete satisfaction. Teresa Brennan even sees it as a distortion of her sense of survival:

> From this perspective, more and more, the 'life process' is conducted under the auspices of a fantasy that gradually make living into a series of demands for instant gratification, and competitive evaluations, as well as a means of staying alive ... They are ends in themselves, not only for the sake of the life process, but for the demonstration of how far one has succeeded in the aims of having it all come to you, of beating the competition, of securing one's personal fortress against the real or imaginary hostility of the vanquished. To put this issue in new terms, the life process has ceased to be primarily a matter of the body's survival, and become a matter of the mind's realization of its infantile impulses. (Brennan 223)

Gerhard Hoffmann finds this also true for the viewpoint in *American Psycho*, since he concentrates on the problem as resulting from a sense of chaos and confusion, in relation to what is real and imaginary:

> Both together create a parody of realism but at the same time a confirmation of realism –however, a realism that reveals the limits and the illusion of realism by a serial mode of merely performing empty representation, which does not have a meaningful frame of reference beyond chaos. (Hoffmann 636)

Such a feeling is similar to Alison's bewildered condition, since the result of all her efforts is a growing spiral of confused actions, ranging from struggling to command a given situation to depending on others in order to momentarily cover some need, as she simultaneously considers those people to limit her self-determination. When she tries to do without them, however, she feels the need to communicate honestly, and interprets the world according to rudimentary ideas about childhood innocence that must be regained. Acknowledging her life's degree of chaos, she attempts to stabilize her restless existence and clings firmly to authenticity as if it were a code: "I feel really strong about always being honest no matter what. That's my personal code, basically -do anything you'd be willing to admit, and always tell the truth" (*Story of My Life* 53). Still, she occasionally contradicts that principle by concealing the truth or favouring "a little white lie" (*Story of My Life* 156), and even resorts to plain dishonesty when seeking some kind of revenge, so absolute sincerity is not always her policy. Although being honest and speaking outwardly -as in her drama school lessons- are the tactics she believes will curb her meaningless, superficial lifestyle, her reiterated phrase "story of my life" only indicates an ever-increasing frustration, verifying the futility of her methods. She repeatedly uses this expression up to eleven times throughout the one hundred, eighty-eight pages of the text, either referring to herself or others, as she complains about how things never really change. Such an obsessive remark also indicates the desperate impossibility of escaping her situation, and the continuous sense of going nowhere. Faye agrees that the protagonist "has all the subconscious pieces to assemble a complete picture, but lacks the fundamental self-awareness necessary to understand why she cannot function with any success in society, why she remains an exile" (127). As a consequence of all this pressure, she undergoes a progressive emotional strain characterised by repetitive symptoms of physical weakness, which will lead to her eventual collapse. When this happens at her birthday party, Alison finally gives up her attempts to organise her life and turns to find a solution through a drug rehabilitation program: "I crawl over to the phone and call out, call this number, the

last four digits spell out H-E-L-P on the dial" (*Story of My Life* 186). This program is sponsored on a business card that appears at an early stage in the novel; Alison superciliously offered it to Didi as a conceited suggestion to solve her pitiable condition, shortly after Jeannie jokingly gave it to her at the end of a non-stop night of fun (*Story of My Life* 40). The card ends up making a round-trip back to Alison after Didi gives it to Rebecca, and she in turn hands it to her sister at the critical moment of the second Truth-or-Dare session. Apart from bouncing back at her, the card's boomerang movement enhances Alison's merry-go-round, revolving-door existence, as it makes clear that she is not getting anywhere on her own. Finally seeing them as unfeasible, she resigns to her simplistic principles of complete honesty and satisfaction as a practical life pattern, subsequently using the card to break that vicious cycle of nothingness and head for a Minnesota drug-treatment centre instead, as Weibels-Balthaus clearly states (318-19).

As observed, McInerney's novel concentrates on all the unsuccessful attempts made by the main character in pursuit of a rational balance between her personal desires and the circumstances determining her existence. The entire plot moves around Alison's ups and downs during her proposed self-realization and the ultimate failure of such a process, turning out to be incomplete at the end. The author insists that her struggle for control in the midst of her chaotic lifestyle, relying on her pipe dream of returning to a child-like perspective in order to solve her alienated condition, is not only ineffective, but also contrary to the natural process of maturing. Although her idealization of childhood in terms of innocence and truthfulness may somewhat relate to that natural human goodness once postulated by the European Enlightenment or the American Transcendentalists, it is nonetheless an erroneous perspective, excessively naïve and simplistic for the purpose of individual self-development, especially within the complex and elaborate circumstances of the modern human social sphere. Everything happening to Alison during the two-month period before her birthday party serves as irrefutable proof of how unsuitable her approach is. If we look closely, her material problems essentially converge into three basic financial issues, which happen to be her tuition fee, the rent for her apartment and the unexpected cost of her abortion. The difficulties she faces while trying to solve them are fundamentally related to superficial matters and conventions linked

to consumerism and a materialistic society. In this way, the problems themselves can also be seen as direct or indirect consequences of living up to standards in such an environment, and are either due to her own wishes or someone else's desire for rapid gratification, deriving from a kind of childish impulse in most cases. Furthermore, the desperate steps she takes to soothe her dire economy are instances of a child-like behaviour as well, plainly connecting with the infantile nature of her self-conjured view of life and human relationships. Such attempts only increase her dependency and vulnerability, ultimately leading her to a complete loss of control, since Alison ends up resigning to her would-be positions of power and becomes more dependent on others, as she recklessly counteracts her lack of income by borrowing small amounts of money (*Story of My Life* 36), letting her friends pay the restaurant and telephone expenses (*Story of My Life* 124), or even by stealing from them (*Story of My Life* 132). Apart from limiting her self-reliance and autonomy, her actions also force her to break her supposed code of honesty on several occasions, and a growing sense of guilt makes her intuitively conscious of this. Hence, she feels troubled about lying to her younger sister, Carol (*Story of My Life* 13), becomes dizzy and sick when she sells her grandmother's pearl necklace – a symbol of purity – (*Story of My Life* 173), and turns rather sceptical when she finally covers the cost of her abortion by means of her tuition funds. However, she never gets to comprehend the full extent of such actions, which only serve to intensify the vicious cycle she is already trapped within: "So I make an appointment for the next week and I use the tuition money which is kind of ironic because last month I used my supposed abortion money for tuition and now it's the other way around" (*Story of My Life* 178).

Again, we must remember that Alison moves about during the Reagan years in America. Both McInerney and Ellis have portrayed such a characteristic social period in great detail in their works, above all as an expression of decadence regarding the American Dream and all the conventional paraphernalia surrounding it. Their writings focus on an impulsive self-destructive tendency taking place on an individual level, as Grimshaw observes in Ellis' works: "What Ellis warns us is that decline is resultant upon our decisions. We choose the antithesis. We desire it. We create our own destruction. The inevitability of decline is the inevitability of our choices in a superficial, amoral world" (Grimshaw). Richard Gray in turn views the issue from a more global

perspective, and deals with present American society's tendency towards decline as an outcome of the past twenty years' history, and a product of paranoia:

> That, perhaps, suggests several tensions that this great deal of history of the past two decades has generated. American culture may have become internationally dominant but the US itself has been internationalized; America may be the sole remaining superpower, but it is a superpower that seems haunted by fear – fear, among other things, of its own possible impotence and potential decline. (Gray 128)

In any case, McInerney, just as Ellis, prefers a more individualised setting for the problem in his works. He tends to use the Freudian inner conflict that takes place between our innate yearnings and our desire for pleasure on one hand, pitted against the demands of society and our responsibility towards our fellow citizens on the other. The result is the invariable "assertion that civilization itself leads to our discontents… It also thwarts our deepest, most intimate aspirations for joy and fulfilment" (Rakfeldt 1825). Relating to this idea, Alison's immature view of reality in *Story of My Life* makes no distinction between absolute satisfaction of desire and proper self-realisation in society. She ignores that self-denial and the ability to curb one's impulses are essential ingredients for a truly mature development of personality, as well as basic features of adult behaviour. Alongside this, she never realises that the innocence, authenticity and fulfilment of all wishes that she associates with childhood are impossible to restore and that such an ideal view of infantile truthfulness is incompatible with adulthood. The author makes special emphasis on her failure to understand this in the title of the last chapter, by means of the folk song "Good Night Ladies" in the title, which he uses to show that Alison definitely fails to acknowledge such facts and stubbornly continues her destructive process of carefree fun and entertainment. Both her abortion and her birthday party work together in this culminating chapter as a conjunct exhibit of her immaturity. While the abortion is being performed, Alison intends to relieve the pain by trying to remember a nursery rhyme from her childhood: "So I try to remember that rhyme we used to say in school – Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack all dressed in black black black, but I draw a blank on the rest" (*Story of My Life* 181). The abortion itself, as a rejection of motherhood, also stands for a refusal to accept adult life and its corresponding responsibilities, which

is evidenced by her resorting to a nursery rhyme during the process. By doing so, Alison attempts a return to her childhood the moment she faces an adulthood issue, but fails to remember the words to the rhyme, indicating that the innocence and honesty of her infancy are out of her reach and cannot be recovered. Thus, McInerney insists on the fact that the character's strategy of returning to that ideal condition of innocence is both a proof of her immaturity, as well as an unsuitable and futile method for dealing with matters in adult life. Frank De Caro coincides with this view of the use of nursery rhimes, as he points out that: "her failure to remember suggests a dangerous fragmentation, an inability to connect, to put things together in a meaningful way and mirrors the disconnected and immature world of which she is very much a part" (243). Associating her abortion with a nostalgic longing for childhood innocence constitutes an unconscious denial of mature progression and thereby evidences the limitations of her transition from adolescence to adulthood. The climactic culmination of her crisis exhibits definite proof of this failure; Everett – one of the guests at her birthday party – proudly and ceremoniously declares: "Today… Alison is an adult… she's not a girl now she's a woman" (*Story of My Life* 184), but the celebration concludes in physical and psychological breakdown for the protagonist, forcing her to surrender to the fact that she cannot handle her problem-studded life and is utterly incapable of looking after herself on her own. It may even be said that her progress towards maturity has also been aborted, just as her pregnancy. In the end, her "coming of age" is not only shallow but also a fraud, since it becomes an ironic regression rather than any kind of step forward in her personal development.

One more clue to the persistence of the character's immature or infantile attitude in the novel is provided by an important element the author uses in order to explore the consequences of her childishly primeval ideal. Following Weibels-Balthaus, such a resource is present in the Truth-or-Dare experience Alison undergoes (330). Basically, it is very similar to any kind of playful activity for children, as it is a make-believe pastime whose rules establish a fantasy situation as substitute for reality. However, it is also faithful to truth, just as Alison's ideal rules of conduct demand:

> Everybody has to swear at the beginning to tell the truth, because otherwise there's no point. When it's your turn you say either Truth-or-Dare. If you say truth, you have to answer whatever question

> you're asked. And if you say dare, then you have to do whatever somebody dares you to do" (*Story of My Life* 65).

Although Alison does not become fully aware of it, the Truth-or-Dare game represents a fictitious society that works according to her own personal code, since it encourages the players to enact their own private impulses, whilst it requires them to tell the absolute truth about everything. The game also creates a social environment in which individual interests prevail to an extreme: In real life, the rules of conduct are designed to preserve social order by cautiously limiting each individual's range of action and influence, whereas the rules of the game stimulate de-stabilizing social behaviours by periodically allowing people's wills and desires to predominate over others. As De Caro points out:

> The Truth-or-Dare game sessions ... suggest the immaturity of Alison's world; the children's game has been upgraded to an adult form, yet this merely amplifies its potential for playing with disruptive actions, retaining in essence the childish fascination for daring others and coercing others to say what they would otherwise not. (246-47)

The author makes use of the alternative social model of the game as one that follows the views of an unwary child, in terms of earnestness and instant fulfilment of desire, showing the drawbacks to such a society and its inadequacy for human development. As the players or members of the imaginary society end up harming one another in pursuit of their wishes, an increasingly stressful situation builds up among them, which in turn becomes impossible to overcome due to the limited communication they are subject to, owing to the fact that there is no chance for dialogue or discussion. This is something that also corresponds to Alison's situation, due to her constant communicative difficulties and isolation. Using this social model based on a child's interpretation of reality, McInerney proves that such a proposal must inevitably lead to disaster due to its conflicting nature. Alison's story likewise confirms that the youngster's notion of reality becomes jeopardised by the influence of contemporary consumerism, as it highlights an excessive reliance on fantasy that results from a young person's child-like response to the exigencies of the environment. McInerney thus attempts to portray the inner conflict experienced by immature individuals such as Alison, who are misled by a supposedly fashionable lifestyle, and caught within the vicious

cycle of a deluding fast-lane culture primarily based on materialistic values, as well as an irrepressible need for rapid pursuit of pleasure. Simultaneously, he strives to make clear that such an unstable social model requires a more realistic and mature ethical approach which can effectively meet the demands of social life by setting a balance between fulfilment and negation of desire, as well as between the individual self and the world surrounding. In other words, the influence of modern-day mass media and publicity, by emphasizing on money and material satisfaction, makes it ever more difficult for the young and restless to come to terms with society and their own selves. Furthermore, the imperishable nature of this viewpoint proves true for any oncoming generation, as it not only suits the youth of the 1980's, but also remains valid for the young people of today with identical meaning. Basically, youngsters nowadays experience the same troubles as those of the past five decades, as Western society progressively developed its presently massive consumerist nature. The teenage generations of the late 1950's and early 1960's were the first to gain the attention of their elders through rebellious remarks and attitudes, making clear that they had something to say, although not knowing exactly what it was most of the time. Unruly behaviour was generally the most common feature, and dissolute lifestyles involving sporadic sex and drug consumption became disturbingly usual by the mid 1970's, especially in big cities. The urges related to instant pleasure-seeking and the appeal for material satisfaction followed immediately afterwards, so by the second half of the 1980's a desire to keep up appearances and give the impression of withholding a certain social status did the rest. Many American teenagers today are fully aware that their parents used drugs and had sexual encounters when they were young, finding such activities as natural in the process of growing up and approaching adulthood, but have no references or guidelines as to what it takes to be a consciously mature human being. The consumerist and materialist tendencies some parents likewise cultivate do not make things any better as far as educating their children goes, serving as a poor example to follow, not to mention their prejudiced ideas concerning social status and appearances, which they themselves frequently try to simulate at all costs. Such circumstances give way to the belief that the United States, despite its coming of age as a world power, has nevertheless remained an immature country at bottom. Perhaps this

is one of the reasons why American society is currently facing one of its most intense historical moments of crisis, both economically and socially speaking, to say the least.

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Book reviews

SANTIAGO RODRÍGUEZ GUERRERO-STRACHAN. *EN TORNO A LOS MÁRGENES. ENSAYOS DE LITERATURA POSCOLONIAL*. MADRID: MINOTAURO DIGITAL, 2008. ISBN: 978-84-612-6925-9. 172 PP.

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Not many books on postcolonial theory are normally published in Spain. The most well-known critics belong to the English speaking world, even though their origins in many cases hail from Asia, Africa or the Caribbean. It is therefore something relevant *per se* that a volume of essays on postcolonial thinking is published by a Spanish expert in the field, both in his capacity as a lecturer of postcolonial literature (he teaches at the University of Valladolid) and as a critic (he is a regular contributor to a number of literary journals, such as *Lateral* and *Archipiélago*). In writing *En torno a los márgenes*, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan has, at the very least, enlivened the debate on a series of topics that must be frequently revised and reassessed.

The book consists of an introduction and four essays, some of which were published previously in specialized journals. Santiago Rodríguez handles the different chapters using a serene and even sometimes mordant voice. Rather than exhibiting a systematic body of knowledge, the book gathers together the observations of a well-read theorist on a number of postcolonial authors and the assumptions that accompany their writing. Not being a literature manual, *En torno a los márgenes* does not contain a historical journey through the process of colonialism and its consequences. It would be better described as a volume of prose seeking to explore the intervening spaces that can be found between well-known statements of postcolonial theory. For this purpose the opinions of relevant writers from a number of countries are brought into consideration by the author.

In the introduction Santiago Rodríguez presents his credentials as a humanist intellectual: his view of culture is that of a system of values and ideas that must be restored and protected, art being a form of human projection with a social function. In his opinion it is in literature from the former European colonies where the writing on the cutting edge is being produced nowadays. Santiago Rodríguez warns that the theorization of the Other, with its potential for creation and vindication of rights for the oppressed, can be sterile when it has no other use than the raising of barriers: "Cuando el reconocimiento del Otro no va dirigido a reconocerlo en nosotros, se crea de modo automático una corriente de amenaza fóbica" (22). His, therefore, is a position of integration and respectful coexistence, of enjoyment of cultural diversity: "Nada hay más sospechoso que la monotonía en terminos culturales" (24). Although Santiago Rodríguez does not develop any political theory, it has to be said that a political spirit cuts across the different essays, or rather, his impulse in writing the book is deeply political. A varied, multicultural and antiessentialist society is envisaged throughout the different pieces and it is not surprising to encounter his anger at regional governments for imposing a dogmatic vision of history or for neglecting brilliant minds who fly above petty cultural policies. The introduction is characterized by impressive erudition and a great variety of sources, from Kant to Walter Benjamin, together with the main theorists of the postcolonial world, like Homi Bhabha or Frantz Fanon, and other thinkers of a wider spectrum like Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawn or Ernst Gellner.

In the first of the essays, "Figuras del escritor poscolonial", Santiago Rodríguez addresses the question of the modern intellectual, his/her function in contemporary society and the contradictions that they encounter between acquiescence and rebellion. The theories of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno are mentioned by the author to clarify the limits of transgression that each society allows its intellectual class. France is cited by the author as the country where these clashes with the established power have been more clearly enacted. Despite the obvious risks that going against the current entails for the intellectual, Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan advocates an active presence in the public arena, and exhibits his preference for the literary essay as the perfect medium for the writers' intervention in public affairs. The question that immediately springs to mind is if the postcolonial writer shares

the same concern as European and North-American intellectuals in their tug-of-war with their respective societies. For the author of *En torno a los márgenes*, it is the African writer who best performs the role of social commentator, whose integrity should preside over any writer's set of principles and it is Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o the one who represents the model of reference in his atrium of guiding figures.

Ngugi's view of literature as an instrument of change and social dynamism is well-known (García Ramírez 159); what Santiago Rodríguez stresses about the Gikuyu-speaking novelist is his immersion in his society's cultural practices and his uncompromising defence of a concept of tradition as a vehicle to counteract colonial homogenization. In this sense Santiago Rodríguez seems to share what James Ogude defines as Ngugi's idea of literature "as an agent of history because it provides the space for challenging our notions of national identities, uses of history, and ways in which they are deployed in power contestation in modern Kenya and Africa in general" (2). The rest of the chapter is devoted to the revision of opinions on the role of culture held by other African writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Taban Lo Liyong and Ben Okri. For Rodríguez, Chinua Achebe distorts historical reality with an idealized vision of art, as he considers it previous to any social practice. It is interesting, nevertheless, that he groups both writers together in their role of educators "in reverse" ("educador a la contra", 54), as men of letters who actively fight for a different society.

Santiago Rodríguez's enveloping style allows him to return to topics that had been previously treated, however briefly, incorporating now in the discussion the nuances put forward by the new authors' theories. This happens in the first chapter with this definition of culture as a collective symbolic discourse that he stated in the introduction. Rodríguez includes Ngugi's preoccupations with class struggle and his vision of culture as the material production of a community. The debate over the definition of culture is in the end determined by the political struggle between the forces of the state and those who resist ideological control. For Rodríguez, education, art and literature can be directed towards a political aim while being at the same time grounded in reality: "La tarea del artista es la creación de una obra ejemplar en sus aspectos ideológicos y materiales, pues solo a través de una obra duradera y atractiva logra moldear en cierto sentido y hasta un cierto límite la conciencia de la gente" (74).

The second chapter, "Exiliados y refugiados de la lengua", addresses the topic of exile, so central in the work of many postcolonial writers. Exile is seen here in its double facet of new possibilities for the writer but also as a cause for personal suffering. For Santiago Rodríguez, a creative form to consider exile should be to encapsulate it in a metaphor: a writer like Ngugi can opt to exile himself from the imposed language in order to bridge the gap with his audience. The theme of exile adopts a poignant shade in the case of Caribbean writers. Emigration for them is in many cases a must, a form of survival to escape the cultural wasteland of their hometowns but, as George Lamming reminds us, if African writers have never been "wholly severed from the cradle of a continuous culture and tradition" (12), Caribbean writers depend on the values of the colonizers; their mother culture is always foreign. Rodríguez turns to Derek Walcott to seek some consolation in linguistic creativity, the shelter of literature. The sense of displacement present in much Caribbean writing does remain, but the feeling of expressive freedom is exhilarating.

At the end of this chapter Rodríguez presents the figure of his second intellectual mentor in the book, Juan Goytisolo, whose work on exile will be amply discussed in the following section. It may seem strange at first to see a Spanish novelist at the centre of a volume on post-colonial theory. However, I think this is one of the main assets of *En torno a los márgenes*, as the author's maverick attitude finds an echo in the opinions of one of the most rebellious, independent and lucid writers of contemporary Spanish literature. The presence of an established European author in a discussion on post-colonialism is not entirely new. José Saramago, 1998 Nobel laureate, has been incorporated into anti-colonial discourses for his active opposition to globalisation in his work and in his public statements (Rollason). Goytisolo's rejection of the dominant ideology in modern Spain and his work in favour of unearthing the work of dissident writers of the Jewish and Muslim tradition qualifies him for a place in the debate. Furthermore, the liberationa aspirations of his work have been vindicated by well-documented monographs (Black; Kunz) and it should be remembered that as early as 1969 Carlos Fuentes included Goytisolo in the list of authors of the new Hispanic American novel. For the Mexican novelist Goytisolo represented the cross-bred nature of the new writing: "impureza del lenguaje, impureza de la sangre, impureza del destino" (Fuentes 9). What does Rodríguez

Guerrero-Strachan find in Goytisolo? The answer is found in the third chapter, "Convergencias literarias entre oriente y occidente: Los casos de Juan Goytisolo, Salman Rushdie y Severo Sarduy", a section that aims to compare authors from different cultural backgrounds but with similar views on literature.

Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan does not celebrate Goytisolo's work uncritically. Rather, his reflections on the Spanish writer consist of equal parts of admiration and deep understanding. He values the off-centre position that Goytisolo consciously inhabits in the Spanish literary landscape and his attack to the foundations of the official culture. He also explains at length the inclusive sense of tradition that Goytisolo represents and which connects him with Salman Rushdie's rejection of a "national" literature. Severo Sarduy is brought into the dialectical fray for his emphasis on the subjectivity of perception, which in the case of the Cuban writer is put to use in his interpretation of Baroque art. Rushdie's reflection on Indian writers, who reconstruct reality casting a fragmented glance at their past and nation "through a broken mirror", finds a startling correspondence in the writings of Sarduy.

José Lezama Lima is the presiding figure in the last chapter of the book, "La expresión caribeña". Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan begins by discussing Lezama's perception of nature as a cultural element. If we perceive nature according to preconceived ideas, then this situation is highlighted in the case of the Caribbean landscape because, with its exuberant display of wonders, it has given shape to the desires and dreams of the Western imagination. The author of *En torno a los márgenes*, nevertheless, does not let himself get carried away by ethereal images. In his reading of Lezama Lima he separates the elements in the Cuban writer's idea of culture (conscious construction of the world, lack of innocence in the building of images that form American literature) and, as it has been the trademark in previous essays, he establishes adequate connections between the great Cuban writer and other artists who initiated the verbal awakening in America: José Martí, Martín Fierro, Herman Melville or Walt Whitman:

> Lezama destruye el familiar concepto de causalidad histórica presente hasta los inicios del siglo XX y lo sustituye por una simultaneidad histórica y cultural que le permitirá acercarse a cualquier época con los ojos y la sensibilidad propia del contemporáneo … que interpreta el pasado desde el presente… (153)

In the last pages of the volume Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan looks at the driving forces that beat behind the poetics of essential English-speaking Caribbean writers such as Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris.

En torno a los márgenes is a much-recommended and perceptive book to reflect on issues related to postcolonial literature. It establishes interesting connections between writers of different latitudes and it is imbued with a spirit of inquisitive common sense. Although its prose sometimes does appear to meander round the topics being discussed, this is a risk inherent in any piece of argumentative writing. It is certainly a valuable work for specialists concerned with postcolonial thinking.

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GÓMEZ LÓPEZ, J. ISAÍAS (EDICIÓN Y TRADUCCIÓN). *POESÍA COMPLETA. EDICIÓN BILINGÜE DE ALDOUS HUXLEY*. ALMERÍA: EDITORIAL UNIVERSIDAD DE ALMERÍA. ISBN: 978-84-8240-897-2. 352 PP.

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Dada la popularidad del escritor inglés Aldous Huxley y su merecido reconocimiento como novelista, ha sido una sorpresa encontrarme con la reciente publicación de *La Poesía Completa* de Huxley en edición bilingüe, traducido por J. Isaías Gómez López y publicado por la Editorial Universidad de Almería. La sorpresa radica en mi desconocimiento de Aldous Huxley como poeta. Desafiando las afirmaciones de críticos y representantes del canon literario, como T.S. Eliot – quien intentó desviar la atención de Huxley hacia la prosa – Gómez López revela una faceta literaria de Huxley desconocida y ampliamente infravalorada, con el fin de recuperar "el sabor y la esencia de poemas nacidos en una mente distópica y, por ende, tan inconfundibles como singulares" (31). Por tanto, dicho volumen ha de ser necesariamente acogido con satisfacción, no sólo por tratarse de una poesía que hasta hace muy poco se ha encontrado en los márgenes, sino porque referida traducción ofrece, por primera vez al público en lengua española, la obra poética de Huxley.

Aldous Huxley es principalmente conocido por su prosa, tanto en España como mundialmente. Considerado al final de su vida como un representante fiel del pensamiento moderno por sus novelas *Point Counter Point* y *Brave New World* y por su gran abanico de ensayos, Huxley se interesó asimismo por temas espirituales como la parapsicología y la filosofía mística, destacando con su libro *La filosofía perenne* (de ahí su respaldo a los místicos por las visones que él mismo tenía, Watts 29, 34, 47). Su origen de clase alta fue posiblemente la causa de que Huxley se considerara un escritor erudito, seguro de sí mismo y por encima de los

demás escritores. Sus novelas *Crome Yellow* (1921) y *Antic Hay* (1923) rápidamente establecieron su reputación, sorprendiendo a sus lectores por su satírico rechazo de un tedioso pasado, que sus antepasados admiraban. Tras abandonar el periodismo, Huxley se fue a vivir a países cálidos como Francia, Italia, España y más tarde a los Estados Unidos, donde se asoció con Christopher Isherwood y otros estudiosos de la India. Muy preocupado por los trastornos que experimenta la civilización occidental, escribió en los años treinta interesantes libros sobre la grave amenaza del poder y progreso científico, siendo el más celebrado *Brave New World* (*Un mundo feliz*), en 1932, en el que plantea un sistema social de castas, control y dominio para mantener el orden y conseguir la felicidad. *Brave New World* abriría inquietantes perspectivas en la literatura occidental, muy diferentes a las de los realistas célebres de su tiempo, como Virginia Wolf o de D.H. Lawrence. Huxley asumía sin problemas el papel de sociólogo y filósofo, al mezclar en sus novelas y ensayos problemas sociales, políticos y morales. Para él, el escritor era un personaje absolutamente entregado a los problemas humanos. De ahí su interés en involucrarse en los círculos más variados con autores tan heterogéneos como D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Osbert Sitwell, e incluso con científicos, sociólogos y propagandistas. No obstante, su protagonista Philip Quarles en *Point Counter Point* (1928) y otros muchos de su narrativa, se describen a sí mismos como intelectuales aislados de la sociedad, cosa que le sucedería al propio Huxley en los últimos años de su vida, debido sin duda a sus dos años de ceguera (Archea Huxley 1999).

La temática novelística de Aldous Huxley es fiel reflejo del espíritu inquieto que subyace en los versos del escritor. Tal y como afirma Gómez López, la poesía juega un papel central en la trayectoria literaria de Huxley como vehículo al través del cual "expresar sus eternos conflictos interiores" al mismo tiempo que experimentar con todas aquellas inquietudes que aparecen de forma predominante en sus ensayos y novelas (31). Es en ese sentido que el traductor afirma que dicha obra poética "es principio y fundamento de su posterior carrera literaria" (ibíd.). A pesar de que T.S. Eliot, su amigo personal, le aconsejara – al no poder "mostrar entusiasmo digno por sus versos" (30) – que abandonase la poesía por la prosa y el ensayo, Huxley sin embargo ve en ella un reto y un desafío por el que vale la pena luchar. Como afirma en su poema "Queja de un Poeta Frustrado": "no soy un poeta: ¡mas nunca desespero!/ Viviré locamente los poemas que nunca escribiré" (147).

Sorprende la percepción distorsionada del propio Huxley sobre su poesía, al constatar la extensión de su corpus poético. Esta traducción ofrece el compendio más completo de su obra poética existente hasta la actualidad, ya que incluye, en un recorrido cronológico, desde su primer volumen de poesía, *La rueda ardiente* (1916), hasta su última colección *Las cigarras y otros poemas* (1931). El volumen comienza con un bellísimo prólogo, "La salvación poética del mundo", a cargo de la poeta Rosario Ruiz Castro. A continuación, el traductor nos ofrece un sustancioso y pormenorizado "Estudio Preliminar" de treinta nueve páginas, que sitúa al lector junto al poemario que viene a continuación y ocupa todo el resto del libro.

He dicho situar, y no explicar, porque la poesía de Aldous Huxley no necesita explicación: se explica por sí misma, y basta su lectura y un mínimo de sensibilidad para adentrarse en ella. Aun así, Gómez López ofrece un estudio detallado del contexto histórico-social y autobiográfico de cada uno de los volúmenes traducidos a continuación. En esta introducción, se descifran no sólo las motivaciones estéticas que subyacen en cada uno de los poemarios, si no que a su vez se examinan los tropos recurrentes y recursos estilísticos que predominan en su obra, tales como el uso frecuente de todo tipo de dualidades (idealismo vs. realismo, belleza vs. fealdad, lo material vs. lo divino).

En las páginas siguientes, se agrupan los poemas según los criterios cronológicos más estrictos. El resultado es un completo recorrido por todas las facetas de la poesía de Huxley. *La rueda ardiente*, publicada con 22 años, es su primer intento por darse a conocer en el terreno literario de la poesía. Muchas son "las puertas del espíritu", dice Huxley en su poema "Las Puertas del Templo" y es preciso atravesar los "fríos abismos del pensamiento" y "los fuegos de la ira y del dolor", hasta alcanzar el sueño luminoso, donde cesa la angustia y se consigue la paz (45). Para Huxley, dicha paz no consiste en el desconcierto de la lujuria y la avaricia, sino en la borrachera de las "cosas infinitas". "Todo lo demás no es nada", añade Huxley en el poema que sucede al anterior, "Villiers De L'isle-Adam" (ibíd.). En poemas como éstos, Huxley deja muy claro que él comienza la carrera de poeta con el fin de ser alguien e iniciar una nueva estética en el panorama intelectual del momento. De ahí su incansable búsqueda por salir del anonimato, de siglos de olvido, y abrirse a la luz, como el ciego "Topo" que husmea horizontes, bosques y verdes colinas, dejando atrás las amenazadoras nubes, hacia

un “destino inmemorial”; como el viajero en busca de Itaca; o como el halcón que vuela por las tranquilas colinas en busca de la dorada calma del cielo “hasta que con la noche caiga el olvido” (47-49). Más categóricos sobre la búsqueda incansable y el derecho a conquistar un lugar en el mundo son los poemas breves “El Espejo” y “Dos Estaciones”, en los que el poeta vislumbra “resplandor de fuego” (51) y ve la vida, donde antaño había sepulcros, y concluye que “la vida no es en vano” (51). Dice Rosario Ruiz Castro en el prefacio del volumen que nos ocupa que la poesía de Huxley es una

> constante interpelación al más allá, que alberga dentro de sí cuanto existe y acontece, una poesía que no se recrea en la puesta en escena del mundo si no es para arrancarle algún secreto velado por el que valga la pena la pasión de contemplarlo. Puesto que el poeta no es el puro esteta complacido en su universo simbólico, sino que llama al arte a una pretensión de verdad. (16)

Esa verdad es un regalo de la mente para su autor y se encuentra en poemas como “Libros y Pensamientos” (61), en las praderas de ricos pastos, en el “sueño que nace de los deseos cumplidos” (“Escape” 63), en la naturaleza de su juventud (“El Jardín” 63), y en las fuentes que descansan entre “ciegos muros” hasta que de pronto un cisne se desliza por sus aguas e “inventa nuevas vida[s], una nueva belleza” (“El Canal” 65).

Otra inquietud fundamental que subyace en estos poemas sobre la naturaleza será el descubrimiento del amor – segundo paso en su vida personal como poeta – en la persona de la que sería su primera esposa, Maria Nys. “Y se prendió la llama”, nos dice Huxley en el poema “Amor Extraviado” (67), evocando luego en el recuerdo una serie de conversaciones entre los dos amantes, que al separarse ensombrece sus pensamientos. En tales poemas se pregunta qué sucedería si se tuviera que morir: “¿te partirías el corazón”?, “¿qué quedará … si pierdes/ todo aquello que me diste?” (“Soneto” 67). El poeta entonces sueña con la muerte y con un lugar donde enterrarse, añorando una iglesia blanca, inhiesta sobre una colina cercana al cielo.

En su segundo volumen de poesía, *La derrota de la juventud y otros poemas* (1918), nos encontramos de nuevo con un buen número de poemas dedicados a su amada, a la que también teme perder (“Un Pequeño Recuerdo”, “De Despedida”, “Revelación” o “Una dama, con incertidumbre”). Destaca por su belleza el poema “Italia”, donde

Huxley le dedica unos hermosos versos tras su marcha al extranjero, algo que deja al poeta sumido en una profunda angustia como si su ausencia pusiera en peligro su lugar en el mundo y su liberación (127-29). Esta segunda colección ofrece a su vez un complejo estudio sobre la posesión demoníaca del ser humano. El reto de Darwin a la dignidad del hombre le era ya familiar a Aldous Huxley en su juventud y de ahí su convicción de que el mundo físico ha sido la creación de un largo periodo geológico y no el trabajo de seis días de divino esfuerzo. Será la suerte por tanto la guía que gobierne tanto la emergencia de los mundos animados como los inanimados. La Biblia no será un producto de la autoridad divina, sino una fabricación humana, lo mismo que la *Ilíada* y otras grandes obras del pasado. De ahí que el poeta, sumido en una profunda angustia, conciba a los seres humanos como presas de un mundo cruel y de un universo despiadado. Como dice en el poema de extenso desarrollo que da nombre al volumen, todo signo de vida parece desvanecerse:

> La luz
> bailotea, en la rosa se aprecia un fuego [y]…
> el amor es descontento infinito
> en la pobre vida solitaria de las cosas pasajeras…
> Esperan,
> apenas sabiendo lo que les espera, medio asustados;
> la expectación corre el telón de sus destinos (“La Derrota de la Juventud” 89-93)

Huxley se encuentra solo y, tras unos instantes fugaces de esperanza, inicia el retiro de su escenario pasional y se refugia, como “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” de Ezra Pound, en una cueva, donde rumiar su soledad. En un intento de superar el aislamiento, el poeta intenta recordar los sueños de la niñez, los hayedos, las ciudades junto al mar. De ahí, su regreso a las evocaciones de la naturaleza, hasta que al fin se centra en su amada, en “el radiante oro de su cabello, en el verde vestido de una joven”. Finalmente el deseo se concretiza y define: “¡si pudiera besar su cabello!”, tras lo cual ella “inesperadamente, besó su mejilla” (95). Es aquí donde la constitución del yo en perpetua crisis alcanza su mayor expresión poética, al conseguir el objeto de su deseo, el conocimiento del amor y la belleza sublime (101). Los versos finales del poema relatan el retiro voluntario del poeta de este escenario pasional, poniendo rumbo hacia una soledad que le libere del yugo de sí mismo y del amor que ha sentido y que era la razón del esplendor del mundo soñado:

> aquel amor que le proporcionó el mundo entero, se ha ido.
> Sintiendo odio, y odiado ahora, permanece solo,
> un islote, separado por inconmensurables abismos
> de otras vidas, de la dicha de antaño
> de ser algo más que uno mismo, cuando un corazón a un corazón
> todo lo daba, y aun así rebosaba, sin mermar jamás. (109)

El yo que elabora estas ensoñaciones parece todavía más interesado en la elaboración poética de crearse un mundo, inmerso en la naturaleza, que en la consecución de su amada, como si tuviera miedo de perder su fusión con la naturaleza, sobre la que escribe hermosos poemas líricos (i.e., "La Canción de los Chopos", "El Arrecife", "Por La Ventana").

Leda (1920) constituye el tercer paso en la vida personal del poeta. Tal y como explica el traductor, dicha figura mitológica es probablemente la encarnación de su prometida María, a quien pide en matrimonio, y él, sumido en una profunda angustia por su ausencia, personifica a Zeus. Aunque la crítica convencional considera dicho poemario como la "despedida" de Huxley "como poeta" (30), Huxley seguiría escribiendo y con cierta notoriedad, tal y como se ve reflejado en los poemas que constituyen su último volumen, *Las Cigarras y otros poemas* (1931). Dicha obra sigue considerándose primeriza en muchos aspectos, ya que, como afirma Gómez López, está "exenta de cualquier contagio psicodélico" puesto que el poeta no había sucumbido todavía a la atracción de los alucinógenos ni había caído en la lenta y dolorosa enfermedad ocular (24). En estos poemas, Huxley pone de manifiesto su gran preocupación sociopolítica y continua abordando los distintos temas universales inherentes al quehacer poético, tales como la sexualidad, el amor y la muerte.

Gómez López no sólo se ha limitado a traducir los textos, sino que también ha incluido una serie de notas explicativas (331-46), que explican los términos locales y las referencias legendarias, folklóricas e históricas de los textos traducidos. El volumen finaliza con una útil bibliografía de Huxley por orden cronológico, y una extensa lista de referencias críticas sobre el mismo.

En definitiva, si al lector le gusta la obra de Aldous Huxley, este volumen es una referencia fundamental. La edición también destaca por la minuciosidad con la que el autor aborda el arduo proceso que supone la traducción poética. Traducir a Huxley no es nada fácil y se requiere un gran sentido poético para hacerlo, dada la complejidad de

sus textos. De J. Isaías Gómez López sabemos que es capaz de llevar al inglés a autores españoles tan complejos como Javier Marías (2001). En esta edición bilingüe, se demuestra una vez más estar a la altura de la sensibilidad artística del poeta que traduce.

En suma, debemos felicitar al autor por la labor realizada en esta antología, que cumple sobradamente la función de acercar la poesía de Huxley al público español. Si traducir poesía es de por sí una tarea bastante ardua, enfrentarse a la traducción de una obra tan compleja supone en sí mismo un auténtico desafío. Hay que reconocer, por tanto, el valor demostrado por Isaías Gómez López al aceptar tal reto, y más aún, cuando la antología que hoy reseñamos combina traducción y anotaciones críticas.

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