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Section Code: C020



In Memoriam Dan Negruț (1973-2015)

Our dear colleague and friend, Dan Negruț, died on October 18, 2015, after a valiant fight with cancer. Dan was born on February 8, 1973, in Oradea, Romania. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1996, an MA degree in 1997, and a PhD in 2011 from the University of Oradea. He joined the staff of the English Language and Literature Department at Faculty of Letters of the University of Oradea in 1996 as graduate assistant. In 2002 he was promoted senior lecturer, a position that he held until his passing.

Dan's research interests included Romantic and Victorian British Literature, Translation Studies, Text Analysis and Techniques of Oral Communication, Trauma Fiction, and Minorities and Their Identities as Reflected in Literature. He was a member of APCE, ESSE and RSEAS and also RSEAS Secretary. He was Executive Editor of *Confluente, Texts and Contexts Reloaded* between 2010-2015 and Publication Coordinator of the *Proceedings of The International Conference "Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English Speaking World"*. He also worked as an interpreter and translator of movies, documentaries and cartoons between 1995-2015, collaborating actively with several companies in Oradea. Between 2012-2015, Dan Negruț was the Head of the English Language and Literature Department of the Faculty of Letters, University of Oradea, Romania.

Dan was a dedicated teacher who provided a clear and enthusiastic introduction to British Romantic and Victorian literature as well as to Translation Studies to scores of English undergraduates. He mentored countless graduation theses and encouraged the research work of his students in general. He was friendly and helpful towards his colleagues, always ready to brighten the atmosphere with one of his jokes. Always ready to assist others, he found it difficult to ask for help for himself. We saw him struggling with the fatal disease but we never heard him complain.

We are all better for having known him; we are less with his passing. He is sorely missed.

The Editorial Board

ABSENCE versus PRESENCE
Literary-isms

ABWESENHEIT *versus*
ANWESENHEIT
Literaturwissenschaftliche
Studien

ABSENCE *versus*
PRÉSENCE
Études littéraires

Disease as Alienated Narrative Discourse in Lisa Genova's *Still Alice*: narrator as grand absentee or the precariousness of memory as we know it

Anemona Alb¹

Abstract: Rationale. *Narrative and the narrator per se have been the concern of theorists and literary critics for the past few centuries, be it in literary criticism or in self-reflexive literary texts. What I am looking at in this paper is the very instantiation or absence of the overt narrator. Indeed – in the text under scrutiny here, the bestseller Still Alice by Lisa Genova, published in 2007 and now an Oscar-winning movie – the first person narrator, Alice is an absentee with a difference, as hers is not a covert absence, but an absence spawned by a medical condition, namely Alzheimer's. A perusal of the text yields lapse of memory on the one hand and immediate gauche attitudes on the other hand. All this triggered by the terrible disease. As such, illness is not necessarily a new trigger in literature – see the science-informed literary texts of the nineteenth century, when indeed science soared and large audiences would be mesmerized by the newest advancement in science in popularization of science public conferences and this did not go unnoticed to the Victorian – generic – writer.*

Keywords: *c/overt narrator; memory; absence; mechanisms of thought and writing.*

Identifying absence

In *Still Alice*, medicalese crops up here and there to express the ambiguous, yet paradoxically precise nature of Alice's thought processes. The narrator-as-the grand- absentee is not itself a new literary device – see the anonymous texts of Old Literature and more recent instantiations thereof (the novel *Primary Colors* by Anonymous is a case in point.). Hence the concept of the absentee

¹ University of Oradea

narrator has come full circle.

More specifically, the research questions that have informed this study are as follows:

- (i) What is the play of conscious/unconscious narrator here and what are the boundaries thereof?
- (ii) Palimpsestically speaking, how many layers of identity, indeed of *personae*/masks are there discernable in the text under scrutiny?(As Alice is at times her own spectre, double, but not in the sense of *doppelganger* , but of confused self, of less-than-alert-self).
- (iii) To what extent is the protagonist absent from her own narrative in states of confusion? Are there different ways whereby one can be absent?
- (iv) Ineed, to what extent can narrative exist as extraneous to any perceptible presence of the narrator?

As overarching questions go, what is the generative mechanism of thought and writing? To demonstrate that thwarted thinking begets interesting, valuable experiment as regards writing is moot. Alice, our protagonist faces hard times as regards her recent memory whilst musing on the very mechanisms of her neurological failure. The episode below is illustrative of that:

Alice stood at the podium with her typed speech in her hand and looked out at the people seated in the hotel's grand ballroom. She used to be able to eyeball an audience and guess with an almost psychic accuracy the number of people in attendance. It was a skill she no longer possessed. There were a lot of people. The organizer, whatever her name was, had told her that over seven hundred people were registered for the conference. Alice had given many talks to audiences that size and larger. The people in her audiences past had included distinguished Ivy League faculty, Nobel prize winners, and the world's thought leaders in psychology and language. ”
(Genova 2007: 279)

In a prescriptively ritualised environment such as a conference, nothing should go wrong. However, Alice's perception of facts and events is irretrievably thwarted by her disease. She does acknowledge the lecture hall, the audience, but fails to evaluate the number of attendees, as she used to be able to. Her 'psychic

accuracy' of yore is now gone, eroded forever. Palimpsestically, she cannot even remember the name of the organizer of the conference (the organizer is typically above all other more or less salient details, but Alice fails to acknowledge this particular over-layer as well). Quite relevantly, though, she does perceive the colour of the shirt John, her husband is wearing for the occasion – which goes to show that her intuitive abilities are still there.

Having said that, it is also noteworthy that her world – the Academe, a world whose underpinnings are rigour, precision is now turned into a world riddled by randomness; randomness of thought, thought processes contaminated by triggers that are extraneous to the topic at hand, triggers that engender randomness of speech, indeed of discourse:

Speaking of the Alzheimer' Association, Alice, I just received their program for the annual demetia Care Conference, and I see you are giving the opening plenary presentation," said Dr. Davis. The Dementia Care Conference was a national meeting for professionals involved in the care of people with dementia and their families. (...) "Yes," said Alice."I meant to ask, will you be there?" "I will, I will be sure to be in the front row. You know, they've never asked me to give a plenary presentation," said Dr. Davis."You, re a brave and remarkable woman, Alice. His compliment, genuine and not patronizing, was just the boost her ego needed after having been so ruthlessly pummeled by so many tests today. John spun his ring. He looked at her with tears in his eyes and a clenched smile that confused her. (Genova 2007:277-8)

In a twist of epistemological fate, Alice is an expert-turned-guinea pig in the world of empirical study, experiments in psychology. Her own Degree is – ironically – in Psychology.

"Ali, what are you doing?" asked John. Startled, she looked up at his bewildered hair and squinting eyes. "I'm looking for ...". She looked down at the items jumbled before her on the table. Batteries, a sewing kit, glue, a tape measurer, several chargers, a screwdriver. "I'm looking for something." "Ali, it is after three. You are making a racket down here. Can you look for it in the morning?" His voice sounded impatient. He did not like having his sleep disrupted. "Okay." She lay in bed and tried to remember what she had been looking for. (Genova 2007: 215-16)

Subsequently, she goes,

After a few minutes, Alice noticed that every seat at the table was occupied except for the one next to her, and people had begun taking up standing positions at the back of the room. Seats at the table were highly coveted, not only because the location made it easier to see the presentation but because sitting eliminated the awkward juggling of plate, utensils, drink pen, and notebook. Apparently, that juggling was less awkward than sitting next to her. She looked at everyone not looking at her. About fifty people crowded into the room, people she had known for many years, people she had thought of as family. (Genova 2007: 208)

Also relevantly,

Alice looked around the room. Everyone's eyes were glued to the screen. They listened intently as Eric elaborated on Alice's comment. Many continued nodding. She felt victorious and a little smug. The fact that she had Alzheimer's did not mean that she was no longer capable of thinking analytically. The fact that she had Alzheimer's did not mean that she did not deserve to sit in that room among them. The fact that she had Alzheimer's did not mean that she no longer deserved to be heard. (Genova 2007: 209)

The minutiae of everyday domestic rituals are also riddled by forgetfulness:

Beep, beep. She saw John hear the noise, too, and she followed him into the kitchen. He popped open the microwave oven door and pulled out a mug. "This is freezing cold. Do you want me to reheat it?" She must have made tea that morning, and she had forgotten to drink it. Then she must have put it in the microwave to reheat it and left it there. (Genova 2007: 244)

Her insertion into a like-minded (no pun intended) group seems to provide solace in the act of taxonomic identification:

They could have been professors visiting from out of town, members of a book club, or old friends.

"Would anyone like something to think?" asked Alice.

They stared at her and at one another, disinclined to answer.

Were they all too shy or polite to be the first to speak up?

"Alice, did you mean 'drink'?" asked Cathy.

"Yes, what did I say?"

"You said 'think'."

Alice's face flushed. Word substitution was not the first impression she had wanted to make.

"I would actually like a cup of thinks. Mine has been close to empty for days, I could use a refill," said Dan.

They laughed, and it connected them instantly. " (Genova 2007: 247)

Humour seems to be a temporary way-out of the terror and dread of ever worsening disease.

Alice's self-evaluative stances yield a sense of displacement, the *techne* thereof notwithstanding. She is precise as regards her medical condition, theoretically, but on the other hand fails to be able to handle the world, empirically. Her meanderings are both spatial and temporal; she gets lost in the newly-instantiated maze of the city and cannot at times retrieve her yesterdays. Indeed peripatetic configurations are quite the norm with people having this condition.

In Alice's words,

"I no longer work at Harvard. I no longer read and write research articles or books. My reality is completely different from what it was not long ago. And it is distorted. The neural pathways I use to try to understand what you are saying, what I am thinking, and what is happening around me are gummed up with amyloid. I struggle to find the words I want to say and often hear myself saying the wrong ones. I can't confidently judge spatial distances, which means I drop things and fall down a lot and can get lost two blocks from my home. And my short-term memory is hanging on by a couple of frayed threads." (Genova 2007: 281)

Improvisation usurps the turf of rationality with Alice. She gets good at being a guesser, as she calls her stance. She has wild guesses about the recent past, thereby perpetually recreating personal history, which is *per se* meta-narrative in the sense that Lisa Genova implicitly poses the question of What constitutes a narrative? Is it about the exclusive process of fabrication based on actual events? Or is it fabrication engendered by, to start with, non-events, events that are absent from the inventory of palpable history? Hence a

two-fold detachment from reality. Indeed play upon Proustian madeleines is insatiated in the following:

I'm losing my yesterdays. If you ask me what I did yesterday, what happened, what I saw and felt and heard, I'd be hard-pressed to give you details. I might guess a few things correctly. I'm an excellent guesser. But I don't really know. I don't really know. I don't remember yesterday or the yesterday before that. And I have no control over which yesterdays I keep and which ones get deleted. (Genova 2007: 281-2)

Thus selection is out of the question, i.e. what gets told/narrated is at the mercy of neurological randomness.

Branding is part and parcel of taxonomic differentiation. Alice is painfully aware of the label people have attached to her since her disease; she is, *proportions gardees*, similar to Hester (*The Scarlet Letter*²) in terms of being ostracized, excluded from a community of sanity (as Hester had been, from a community of propriety). Overtones of Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* are discernable here. In his *Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault discusses the very nature of branding, of dubbing the diseased as Others through language, as though they were indeed ideologically contaminated, beyond the physical:

Being isomorphous to ideology, the clinical experience offers one an immediate domain. This is not to say that, in Condillac's proposed field, medicine would have regained empirical respect for the perceived; but, within the Clinic, as indeed within Analysis, the skeleton of the real is shaped according to the model of language. The gaze of the clinician and the reflection of the philosopher share analogous powers, as both entail an identical objectivity structure: wherein the totality of being gets spent in manifestations that constitute the *signifiant* to the *signifié*; wherein the visible and the manifest/the apparent meet in a sort of identity that is at least a virtual one; wherein the perceived and the perceptible can be totally rendered in a discourse whose rigorous form enunciates its origin. (Foucault 1963: 65)

Equally importantly, as mentioned above, the *techne* of recollection

² *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose protagonist is branded an adulteress and consequently has to wear the stigma of her shame, the letter A pinned to her dress.

is laid out here:

I often fear tomorrow. What if I wake up and don't know who my husband is? What if I don't know where I am or recognize myself in the mirror? When will I no longer be me? Is the part of my brain that's responsible for my unique 'ness' vulnerable to this disease? Or is my identity something that transcends neurons, proteins, and defective molecules of DNA? Is my soul and spirit immune to the ravages of Alzheimer's? I believe it is. (Genova 2007: 282)

Hence identity suddenly becomes composite, perpetually re-configured in a puzzle-like structure.

Alice's vision is an anti-eschatological one. Says she,

"I am a wife, mother, and friend, and soon to be grand-mother. I still feel, understand, and am worthy of the love and joy in those relationships. I am still an active participant in society. My brain no longer works well, but I use my ears for unconditional listening, my shoulders for crying on, and my arms for hugging others with dementia. Through an early-stage support group, through the dementia Advocacy and Support Network International, by talking to you today, I am helping others with dementia live better with dementia. I am not someone dying. I am someone living with Alzheimer's." (Genova 2007: 282-3)

The very mechanisms of thought and speech are impeded (for further discussion of how language is engendered, see Aitkinson, *The Articulate Mammal*). Says Alice,

Cued by the hanging rise in her inflection and the silence that followed, Alice knew it was her turn to speak but was still catching up to all that Lydia had just said. Without the aid of the visual cues of the person she talked to, conversations on the phone often baffled her. Words sometimes ran together, abrupt changes in topic were difficult for her to anticipate and follow, and her comprehension suffered. Although writing presented its own set of problems, she could keep them hidden from discovery because she wasn't restricted to real-time responding." (Genova 2007: 106).

Also saliently, writing-as-deferred-*persona* is instantiated here; the *persona* that is delayed hereby is the one that should be in charge, lucid and all-controlling. But unfortunately a totally different mask is attached to Alice's face now.

Genova uses the lingo of postmodern identities (see Fukuyama , *Our Post-human Condition*) with a difference: the electronic extensions of the human body are inertia-ridden when the discerning mind goes amiss: "She closed her unwritten reply to Anna and opened a new email to send to Lydia. She stared at the blinking cursor, her fingers frozen on the keyboard. The battery in her brain was running low today." (Genova 2007: 107)

What's more, the overlap of the *soma* and the brain fails her:

Running was becoming less and less effective at clearing her thoughts. In fact, these days, she felt more like she was physically chasing down the answers to an interminable stream of runaway questions. And no matter how hard she kicked, she could never catch them. (Genova 2007: 107)

Indeed, motricity and thought are no longer co-terminous with Alice. Her disease renders her physical exercise a quest – a chase in her own words – for elusive answers; hence even physical activity, which should be mindless(ly) mechanical is now about recapturing irretrievable thought processes. Furthermore, Alice has the impression of experiencing instances of *deja-vu*, which at this point she no longer can tell apart from figments of her imagination. Indeed, a subtle play on surfaces and (non)-realities by the novelist.

Conclusion

All in all, *Still Alice* is an experiment in narrative and the meaty absences thereof make it a good read, replete with theoretical considerations. This research has identified subtle interplay of conscious and hardly conscious narrator, without the artifice of elliptical syntax, albeit boundaries between articulate discourse and inconsistencies are ever so frail; multiple layers of identity of the protagonist, indeed *persona* is palimpsestically there; also that there is absence of the protagonist from her own narrative, the multiplicity of masks notwithstanding; and finally, that narrative can at times exist as being extraneous to any perceptible presence of the narrator, as (postmodern) narrative is by its own nature perpetually dismantled and subsequently reassembled in novel

ways. Nor do we need to ponder the narrator's province thereof, as their narrative is a moveable feast.

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Violence Imagined, Violence Aestheticized: Psychology of Violence in Jean Genet's *The Maids*

Papatya Alkan Genca¹

Abstract: *Jean Genet's The Maids is loosely based on the infamous case of the Papin sisters, which caused a media scandal in France in the '30s. Police reports said that the bodies of Madame Lancelin and her daughter were found brutally mutilated and murdered; and the maids, who were the only other people in the house, were found in bed, cuddling each other. French media and intellectuals were highly interested in the case; including Jean Genet, who in The Maids, presents a more psychological and suggestive version of violence instead of staging the actual murder. Throughout the play, Claire and Solange, the two maids/sisters and protagonists of the play, fantasize about killing their employer – Madame. Thus, The Maids becomes a rehearsal of violence whereby the sisters find themselves in an elaborate make-believe which turns into an act of violence in itself. This violence is more imagined than realized, more psychological than physical. As such, this paper argues that by its aesthetic rendering and re-presentation of the original murder case in its fictional construct, Jean Genet's The Maids magnifies the reception of violence through the portrayals of Claire and Solange.*

Key words: *Jean Genet, The Maids, class, psychology, violence, self.*

Introduction

The Papin sisters caused a media scandal in France in 1933. Police reports said that Madame Lancelin and her daughter were found brutally battered and mutilated, and their maids – Christine and Lea Papin – the only other people present at the scene of murder, were found in bed, cuddling each other. It was obvious that they were the perpetrators. Not only the media but also the intellectuals in France showed great interest in their violent act. Instead of

¹ Celal Bayar University, Manisa

focusing on how the sisters killed their employers, the intellectuals focused on the why. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, read the whole act as an outcome of the system in which the sisters are both “the instruments and martyrs of a somber form of justice” (“La Force du L’age”). Thus, she makes a critique of society through a reading of this murder case concentrating on the interaction between the maids and their employer. Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, wrote “Les Motifs du Crime Paranoïaque: Le Crime des Soeurs Papin,” which provides a detailed psychological and psychiatric explanation of the murder, which would then become rather crucial to his conceptualization of the mirror stage in which the self misrecognizes itself in the reflected image. Karen Boyle notes that the “fascination with the Papin case” is evident because “incest as well as gender, sexuality and violence is at issue” (105). Boyle reads the case as a multifaceted violent act which transgresses more than one code: “As murderers and desiring subjects, the sisters violate gender norms, literally destroying the bourgeois family members with their violence, while their incestuous and lesbian relationship violates the sexually repressed bourgeois family ideal” (106). Thus, this double homicide has been interpreted in such various terms, as class struggle, lesbian love, incest, and disturbed psychology.

Jean Genet’s *The Maids* (1943) is also based on the Papin case, although it is not Genet’s only source of inspiration. The play is the first fictionalization of this horrific event. Despite the brutal nature of the actual crime, in Genet’s version, violence takes a more psychological and suggestive tone. As such, this paper suggests that the aestheticized version in the play focuses more on the psychology of violence rather than the mere representation of the actual violence of the original murder case itself, and argues that such a change in the form of violence magnifies its reception in its implied, fantasized, and ritualized rendition.

I. Class, Violence and *The Maids*

The play opens in a bourgeois bedroom where a woman in lingerie continuously abuses a maid with verbal insults. This woman makes references to the physical appearance of the maid, calling her “filth, dirty, scum,” and getting angry at her for touching her gloves with her “filthy hands.” At this point, there is more verbal and psychological violence than an actual physical manifestation. Unable to take this abuse any longer, the maid takes the lead, and attempts to strangle the woman she calls Madame. However,

strangulation cannot be realized because an alarm goes off. This is the moment the audience realizes that they have been witness to an elaborate make-believe where the two maids (Claire and Solange) conspicuously enact their fantasy of killing their employer, Madame. Their anger, loathing, and hatred seem to be directed at Madame. It is why the play can be read as a meditation on class struggle. The Madame is everything that the maids are not: she is secure in her bourgeois life, she is loved and in love, and she has two people at her disposal to order around. Contrarily, the maids are stuck in their position as servants, in the literal sense of the word; they cannot break from their social position, which becomes the underlying reason in their violent make-believe.

Such violence finds its basis in the original murder of Madam Lancelin and her daughter in 1930s. Nicole Ward-Jouve quotes Peret and Eluard who argue that the real motif behind the murder in the Papin case was a reaction to the oppression of bourgeois society:

Their mother placed them in a bourgeois home. For six years, they bore observations, demands, insults with the most perfect submissiveness. Fear, weariness, humiliations were slowly begetting hatred inside them: hatred, the very sweet alcohol that secretly consoles, for it promises to add physical strength to violence one day. When the day came, Lea and Christine Papin repaid evil in its own coin. They literally massacred their mistresses, plucking out their eyes, crushing their heads. (12-3).

Whether the Papin sisters actually committed those murders as an act of class rebellion still remains to be seen as one of them died and the other was institutionalized, thus unable to provide an explanation for the crime. Such a reading is possible yet not really verifiable. If it were the case, though, their aim is achieved since the mistresses are indeed dead. However, Genet seems to suggest that getting rid of bourgeoisie, which is symbolized by Madame, is not possible, at least not for Claire and Solange: “No Madame (either real or false) is ever actually murdered” (Henning 82). The only thing they can do is to “kill” Madame in a make-believe, which turns into the real murder of one of the maids. As such, “when Solange kills Claire who plays the role of Madame, the ritualistic murder of Madame and the real murder of Claire abolish both terms of the binary master-slave system” (Sohlich 643). The only way to save themselves from the master-slave binary, then, turns out to destroy both.

For Claire and Solange to have fought against this binary,

one should presume that they already acknowledge their hierarchical demarcation; one should also assume that they always already internalize the superiority of Madame's position and the inferiority of theirs. The level of Claire and Solange's interpellation of their status as maids is evident in their verbal assaults. Since they cannot explicitly direct their anger towards Madame, they take the second best alternative: they create a ceremony in which the maids assume a dialectic duality representing the master and the slave. The slave (i.e. Claire and Solange) cannot overcome the dominance of the master (i.e. Madame): this inability to break away from the class struggle is manifest in the interrupted ceremony. Their interpellation is such that they do not even believe they are lovable, either by their employer or by themselves.

SOLANGE: Nobody loves me! Nobody loves us!

Claire: *She* does, *she* loves *us*. She's kind. Madame is kind! Madame adores us.

SOLANGE: She loves us the way she loves her armchair. Not even *that* much! [...] And we, we can't love one another. Filth [...] doesn't love filth. (16)

Madame's lack of love and their lack of love for Madame may be understandable once it is accepted that they are irrevocably separated by their reciprocal social positions as maids and master. However, a closer inspection reveals that these negative sentiments are in fact more directed at their own selves and at each other than at Madame. As such, the play offers a reading that goes beyond mere class rebellion, a reading that interrogates how the self and the other clash and collide into one another in the characters of Solange and Claire.

II. The Self, The Other, and *The Maids*

As Mark Pizatto suggests,

Genet [...] depicts not a triumphant, Lukacsian struggle of proletarian heroes, but rather a doomed *ressentiment* which turns inwards: between and within the Maids. They are trapped in their own work/position/roles [...] They play out their Imaginary and Symbolic murder of Madame in each other: of the other in the other and the Other within. That is their only triumph (120).

Thus, the conventional master/slave dialectics is taken further in

the play as Solange and Claire turn their submission and hatred onto one another and not really onto Madame. In their role-playing, Solange becomes Claire when she acts as the maid. This may seem odd since Solange herself is already a maid, and she does not really need to impersonate one. However, this serves a double purpose: on the one hand, it highlights the surreal mood of their make-believe, and on the other hand, it underscores how willing both Claire and Solange are to get out of their skin and become “the other.” They do not seem to have separate identities, or better yet, they seem incapable of differentiating their selves from one another:

SOLANGE. ... I can't stand being so alike.

[...]

CLAIRE. And me, I'm sick of seeing my image thrown back at me by a mirror, like a bad smell. You're my bad smell.

[...]

SOLANGE. Baby sister, my angel. (23)

They simultaneously love and loath one another; likewise, such conflicting emotions hold true for their self perception as they seem unable to differentiate their selves as individual and separate entities. Thus, they mirror each other as well as themselves to each other, becoming halves of the same “I,” representing a split identity/ego. The idea of mirroring one another is also reinforced by the plethora of references to the maids' gazing into the mirror and to the presence of mirrors suggested in the stage directions. This is a theme repeatedly highlighted throughout the play. Mirrors function as a reminder of their need to face their “selves” “and also the impossibility of escaping their similarity, whether physical or otherwise. Indeed, as Cynthia Running-Johnson contends, “the fact that the ‘other’ resembles the self is reassuring; but at the same time, as the other is *not* the self, a sense of loss and separation also obtains” (961). Seen this way, it can be claimed that when the maids attempt to kill Madame in their ceremony, the target is no necessarily Madame herself. In fact, speaking of Madame, Claire mentions that Solange has tried to kill her, yet adds that Solange's attempted murder was more at Claire than at Madame: “CLAIRE. Don't deny it. I saw you (*A long silence*). And I was frightened. Frightened, Solange. Through her, it was me you were aiming at. I'm the one who's in danger. When we finish the ceremony, I'll protect my neck.” (18)

The “ceremony” they keep referring to is in fact their role-

playing in which they imitate Madame in her bedchamber giving orders and asking to be served. Stephen Barber contends that Genet portrays “the hatred and desire of two subjugated sisters, pinioned within the gestural rituals of their domestic service, towards their oblivious mistress” (91). This elaborate act presumably highlights Madame’s physical, social, and/or moral superiority, which lies at the basis of their hatred. Barber maintains that “gradually the sisters evolve an oppositional but covert set of gestures of their own to formulate an act of murder, which they plan to inflict on their mistress but ultimately turn on themselves” (91). Hence, this hatred may be of their own images rather than the Madame herself or her social status. It can be claimed that Madame stands for everything they lack or they think they do. In this respect, killing (or trying to kill) Madame is an act that is aimed at themselves, since by eliminating her, they would be getting rid of their Ideal I, which Madame stands for. The love and hate relationship they seem to have with/towards Madame underlines how Claire and Solange both have a certain admiration/adoration for Madame and despise her simultaneously. If she is indeed the maids’ Ideal I, the object of such adoration and despise is not Madame but Claire and Solange themselves.

This confusion of identities can be best understood when the very title of the play is taken into consideration. While it is lost in translation in the English version, the French title of the play – *Les Bonnes* – carries a double meaning. “*Bonne*” denotes a domestic servant, and it is also the feminine form of “*bon*” which means good. Throughout the play, Madame is referred to as “*bonne*,” “*trop bonne*” meaning both she is really kind and she is a servant – their equal. The Madame, then, becomes the Ideal I, serving as a mirror image the maids loath and love. It is within this context that their violence, whether psychological (i.e. against themselves) or imagined (i.e. against Madame), plays out throughout *The Maids*. The maids’ traumatic self-realization or its lack thereof, elicits a gaze that is turned both inwards and outwards. In the Papin case, Christine and Lea tore out their victims’ eyes, an act that signifies the elimination of “the gaze.” In this sense, since the play clearly draws from this actual murder case, Claire and Solange’s fantasy-murder can be taken as an attempt to eliminate the agent of the gaze, which they take to be Madame. However, in their case, this agent, or the gaze is rather problematic because it is both internal and external; in other words, they are both the object and the subject of the gaze as there is no clear distinction between any of

these three characters. In this respect, they are as much gazed at as they perform the act of gazing. The direction and the source of the gaze become the direction and the source of violence as well. In reply to Claire's accusations of trying to kill her, Solange replies as follows: "SOLANGE. Yes, I did try. I wanted to free you. I couldn't bear it any longer. It made me suffocate to see you suffocate, to see you turning red and green, rotting away in that woman's bitter sweetness." (18)

In order to get rid of Madame and her "bitter sweet" treatment, Claire and Solange fantasize about various ways through which they can off her. Strangulation does not work because Solange cannot carry it out when she sees Madame's sleeping face (which is another marker that they are trying to extinguish the gaze yet unable to do so when they are immediately in front of it): "SOLANGE: I didn't kill anyone. I was a coward, you realize. I did the best I could, but she turned over in her sleep (18)." Just like the actual failed attempt, Solange cannot strangle Madame (who is in fact Claire posing as Madame) in their fantasy role-playing because this time the alarm goes off, indicating that they have run out of time. They keep on fantasizing, and Solange suggests they cut Madame off to pieces:

SOLANGE. Let's sing. We'll carry her off to the woods, and under the fir trees we'll cut her to bits by the light of the moon. And we'll sing. We'll bury her beneath the flowers, in our flower beds, and at night – we'll water her *toes* with a little *hose!* (24)

At this point, it is clear that their imagination runs wild, and it turns into a highly elaborate and aestheticized form; Solange starts speaking in rhymes (which can be taken as a marker for schizophrenic delusions). Nevertheless, this murder is obviously not realized, either. However, upon her sudden arrival to the house, Madame jokingly remarks that "[Claire and Solange] are quietly killing [her] with flowers and kindness. One day [she says] [she] will be found dead beneath the roses" (30). Thus, it just adds up to the maids' stress level and agitation as they feel that their tricks and attempts were somehow clear to Madame. Finally, they decide to poison her by putting drugs in her tea. Solange, at this point, gets highly hysterical, seeing that this might be their last chance. Yet, Madame never drinks it. Sylvie Debevec Henning argues that "Dressed as Madame, Claire will drink the poisoned tea thereby

destroying the image of her mistress” (82). As such, since they cannot actually kill their mistress, they resort to the second best alternative, that is, destroying her image. The double entendre here, of course, is that by so doing, they end up killing themselves (at least Claire dies), which can be interpreted as how intertwined the images of Madame and the maids are. Henning further maintains that “the maids dare not, however, defile their mistress openly. Their assaults can only be surreptitiously attempted, and will consequently fail. Madame refuses her secretly poisoned tea” (80). In this respect, the violence towards Madame can only be an implied and highly ritualized one; it is not an actualized or realized violence. The only violence that is committed by the maids, then, is in fact self-inflicted. Cynthia Running-Johnson contends that “The sisters resemble each other in personality and function, neither one is more important than the other nor basically different from her counterpart” (960). It is evident that the notion of self becomes rather problematic as there is not a clear distinction between Claire and Solange, both because they assume different identities throughout the play and because they are deliberately left undifferentiated as individuals but portrayed simply as maids.

The play is like a Chinese box, repeating the same pattern with slight variations. Genet employs *mise-en-abyme* to realize this: Claire impersonates Madame, Solange impersonates Claire and vice versa. Even when they stand on stage as themselves, there is constant implication that either one of them would and could slip into the role of the other. Thus, their sense of self is violently disrupted by their incessant acting in the form of ritualized murder. Only by killing Claire, who assumes the role of Madame can Solange become Mademoiselle Solange Lemercier as she rants hysterically in her monologue at the end of the play. Only then can she become an individual instead of being merely a maid or a mirror image of Claire: “SOLANGE: I am the strangler, Mademoiselle Solange, the one who strangled her sister. [...] Just tell yourselves that this time Solange has gone through with it.” (93)

Conclusion

The Maids rests upon dualities and double meanings; one part of the binary immediately embodying its opposite: the maid becomes the master, the self becomes the other, and the absent becomes the present and vice versa. Claire and Solange as names denote “light” and “sun,” respectively. Yet, their characterization draws a completely opposite picture as these characters are both dark and

gloomy both in their self-perception and in their perception of one another. As such, they melt into one another without any clear markers of individuality. This makes their role-playing ever more clear since one maid, be it Claire or Solange, can immediately assume whatever role she is aspiring to fill in. This lack of differentiation also strengthens the class undertone as Claire and Solange are cast not as individuals but as representatives of the working class. Their loathing, anger, and hatred are less personal and more “universal” against one common enemy: Madame, who is conveniently not given a proper name but known simply by her social standing.

One review of *The Maids* suggests that

Genet’s play, inspired by the true story of the Papin sisters, who mutilated then murdered their employers, is less a crime thriller than a meditation on the psychological violence of mistress-maid power dynamics, sibling rivalry and female competition (“The Maids”).

By choosing to portray not the crime but the mentality that creates such a crime, Genet achieves an end-product which is open to various layers of interpretation. The revolt Claire and Solange feel towards Madame can be read as a reflection of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and their servants (or working class). The servants’ social status and suffering in the hands of their masters are personified in the dynamic between the sisters and Madame. However, their hatred and contempt is not only directed at their mistress, but, perhaps more importantly, at themselves and at each other. Violence implied and aestheticized in the play focuses on this very hatred. It is not necessarily an explicitly explored and presented sort of violence but a more verbal and psychological one, which is felt both by the audience (as Genet would prefer) and by the characters themselves. The brutal scenes of the actual murder case is absent in this fictionalized version. However, the absence of such brutality does not make *The Maids* less violent. On the contrary, it is this very absence that makes the play more effective and efficient.

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Beauty Ingrained in Absence and Contemplation in Kawabata's "Dandelions" and "The Moon on the Water"

Dana Sala¹

Abstract: The present article aims at analyzing two of Kawabata Yasunari's writings, namely the short story *The Moon on the Water* and the posthumous novel, *Dandelions*, stories within a *zen* balance between plot advancement and plot non-advancement. In both writings, beauty lies in loving in absence. Beauty means loving an absence. The lovers in the two stories undergo a strange metamorphosis, on the verge of unreal, by becoming one sight after having become one flesh. The mirror effect in both writings is to capture an absence and to prolong it, as if it were a presence. The theme of almost hallucinatory shared sight, of the sameness of vision is encapsulated, in both narratives, in the theme of death and loss. Vision is also about mirror reflection and about how fragment can shift into wholeness. Beauty is meaningless without incorporating absence – seems to be one of the teachings of Kawabata Yasunari's universe, as inferred from his writings focused particularly on the leitmotif of reflection.

Key words: Kawabata's posthumous novel, *Dandelions*; 20th century Japanese fiction; beauty and aesthetics; absence and beauty; contemplation; mirror reflection; loss and madness; zen; Kawabata's *The Moon on the Water*; ambiguity; love and shared vision.

“It occurred to Kyoko one day to let her husband, in bed upstairs, see her vegetable garden by reflecting it in her hand mirror. To one who had been so long confined, this opened a[...]new life. (...)

Kyoko wanted to call it the eye of their love. The trees in the mirror were a fresher green than real trees, and the lilies a purer white. «This is the print of your thumb, Kyoko, your right thumb». He pointed to the edge of the mirror.[...]«You

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may not have noticed it. Thanks to this mirror, I've memorized the prints of your thumbs and index fingers»²

Dandelions are abundant along the banks of Ikuta River. They reflect a unique feature of the town of Ikuta. The blooming dandelions give this town a springtime air. Among the population of approximately thirty-five thousand, there are three hundred and ninety-four citizens over eighty years of age. (...)

They hear it as a bell of time. Since it is a daily ritual to strike the bell, the townspeople have probably forgotten that a madman does it. They probably don't even hear the feelings of the patient contained in the tone of the bell.(...)

When Inako became unable to see human figures, the first person who became invisible to her was none other than Kuno. That is why her mother feels so hesitant. (...)

It was probably an old bell. It was not a harsh sound but contained an echo of desolation at the end of its dry sound. Even after the echo had completely vanished, the sensation remained in her mother's and Kuno's hearts. The town appeared to be silent. The tiny river and the ocean also were silent. «It's so peaceful – as if time were standing still»

Kuno continued, «When Inako is striking the bell, could it be that the passage of time has stopped?»³

The present study focuses on two of Kawabata Yasunari's writings, the short story *The Moon on the Water*, irrespectively his last novel, *Dandelions*. What does strike the reader with an immediateness of reaction is the extraordinariness of Kawabata's narration. I would say that both stories seem to have developed as clusters around some nuclei.

The two main present characters of *Dandelions* move along a path. Their progress, on the banks of Ikuta river, after having left the hospital of Ikuta, and in there, their most beloved being on the face of the earth, means distancing, a spatial distancing

² Kawabata Yasunari. *The Moon on the Water*. Transl. George Saitō, in *Modern Japanese Stories, An Anthology*: 245. (The surname comes first in Japanese names, see for that Boardman Peterson:11)

³ *Dandelions: translation of Kawabata Yasunari's last novel into English with Introduction and notes by Lorraine Ryūko Fukuwa-1977*, p. 20 and passim. Retrieved July 8, 2015 from <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll3/id/264123>

from the hospital encased in an old temple. But the discussions, shared memories, shared worries, the fear of unknown, minor conflicts between the two talkers make the substance of this plotless writing. The main characters are Kizaki Inako's mother and Kizaki Inako's lover, the future son-in-law. They do not have autonomy as characters. They exist as reflectors of somebody else's life, somebody who has united them in conflict and friendship. Yet the person who has united them is the one who cannot be reached, psychologically. Mother and son-in-law almost make an alliance to be able to reach the soul of the being they love most. Their efforts are neither useless, nor constructive or efficient. Absence is a key element of the short story *The Moon on the Water*, irrespectively of Kawabata's last novel, *Dandelions*. Coming to terms with absence means a transformation or a deformation of all other important aspects of somebody's life. Mirror intervenes to capture this deformation brought up by pain.

Mirror has the role of advancing a new reality, but at the same time of withdrawing it, of making it disappear secretly in the ashes. This is evident in *The Moon on the Water*. Mirror accompanies Kyoko's husband in his passage into death.

Beauty lies not only in the eyes of beholder, it also lies in the beholder's capacity to love an absence, to guide's one's life in harmony with that absence.

The mirror effect in both writings is to capture an absence and to prolong it, as if it were a real presence. The plot of *Dandelions* means at the same time advancement and non-advancement. This kind of inner balance, impossible to imitate, reminds us of a *zen* anchor of Kawabata's universe. Both the mother and the young fellow are concerned only with talking about the girl who is absent, yet dominates all the utterances. A second absent figure also emerges, that of Inako's father.

Daughter and father are absent as characters from the very first page to the last one, and yet they dictate every loop, every turnout, every stop, every thought and every action. Father, an officer, has been dead for many years, dying in an accident witnessed by his daughter that happened after Japan's capitulation. The war, the change and the disease all happen in one phrase in *The Moon on the Water*. The social and political conditions are entirely absent, with the exception of a phrase or two. Yet they play a key role, they determine harsh realities in spite of their explicit absence.

If we consider the unfolding of the plot along a horizontal line, that of mother and son-in-law's progress to take the

way back from Ikuta, we realize that this corresponds to a chronologic unfolding of the plot. On the other hand, the horizontal line is not the only dimension of the story. Just like in a Japanese painting or gravure, there is a vertical axis inherent to the whole structure, sustaining a vertical 'reading' of the whole image. We shall call this a "vertical reading". In *Dandelions*, the pattern of chronological reading is given depth and unpredictability through the possibility of vertical reading: a reading that drills through superimposed layers of symbols and memories, simultaneously. Flash-back and recollections are not the same in Kawabata's writing, where they are deeply ingrained in a *zen* structure of this piece of fiction.

In *Dandelions*, the pattern of chronologic reading is given depth and unpredictability through the possibility of vertical reading: a reading that pierces memory.

In Kawabata's writings, vertical reading happens simultaneously with horizontal reading. It is not an element of advancement, on the contrary, it is an element already there, in the structure, hidden in the non-rhythm of the whole development of the plot. A kind of *zen* attribute gives this vertical reading the quality of non-advancement and the emphasis on other elements of configuration, equally.

A vertical writing within a Japanese picture with calligraphy as part of the picture is something quite customary. Kawabata's unique style had synthesized the most important European literary innovations, of Proust, of Joyce, of Kafka and yet it developed a different configuration of all elements of the plot and a more static rhythm of narration. This association is definitely linked with vertical writing within a Japanese picture. As René Huyghe pointed out, European letter, in its evolving from handwriting to printing, allowed thinking to develop, minimizing the spontaneous sensorial charge that used to accompany every act of writing⁴.

Beauty is meaningless without incorporating absence – seems to be one of the teachings of Kawabata Yasunari's universe. Contemplation induces a different pattern into these two writings. They are both focused on the leitmotif of reflection. Complex

4 René Huyghe: 43 Dialog cu vizibilul. Cunoașterea picturii. Translated by Sanda Rapeanu, preface by Valeriu Rapeanu, Bucuresti, Editura Meridiane, 1981 (in Romanian), p.43. Original title: Dialogue avec le visible. Connaissance de la peinture.

feelings are contained in the text. Actions are less important for the development of plot than those moments when the contemplation of life and death occurs directly.

The mirror opens up the domain of the invisible. Contemplation is given a chance to occur directly in the short story *The Moon on the Water*. This happens when Kyoko, the main female character, discovers incidentally a trick. It is a way to empower her bedridden husband.

This is the contemplation of life. Later, the same mirror will bring along an unmitigated contemplation of death. Maybe in a different environment or on a different continent this gesture of offering her small mirror to her husband would not mean so much, it would be just a funny game rather than a door opened to a new world. But since the attitude of contemplating nature is ingrained in typical Japanese education and in everyday practices, we can understand why an ailing man, Kyoko's husband, can get rid of his feeling of uselessness. He does not get cured, but he feels surrounded by nature, he gazes at the infinite worlds he can catch in the reflection maneuvered through a simple voyage case mirror, a humble tool. Through this tool, Kyoko's husband feels that he was granted a new life. The mirror helps him grasp the continuity of life in nature, the tiny creatures under the vegetable leaves brought to life by spring. He can see even the caterpillars picked from the vegetables. "It occurred to Kyoko one day to let her husband, in bed upstairs, see her vegetable garden by reflecting it in her hand mirror. To one who had been so long confined, this opened a[...]new life."

Mirror is from now on the secret realm where two lovers illicitly meet, although they are married in real life and their marriage knows no obstacles or hardships other than war, disease and their country's capitulation and recession. The man secretly follows and catches rays over her with the mirror while she is absent in the vegetable garden; she discovers a sky of a different color and hears the skylark. "She did not doubt the beauty she saw in the mirror: Quite the reverse: she could not doubt the reality of that other world⁵."

Kawabata's delicacy in following Kyoko's heart leads to a subtle shift in reality. By having the impression that the mirror stand, the wooden support of the first mirror is widowed, Kyoko releases the mirror from its object features and its functionality.

⁵ Kawabata Yasunari, *The Moon on the Water*, transl. George Saitō, ed. cit.

Now the mirror is the repository of her memories. Now the mirror has a life of its own, apart from bestowing a new life on people. Without any other magic than awareness and receptiveness, the tiny object has become a mirror of her soul, not of her face. “Since the former mirror had burned with her first husband, the mirror stand might well be compared to a widow .⁶”

This means that her feeling of loss is terrible. Yet it is understated, it is a silent hint rather than a desperate cry.

In Kawabata’s last novel, *Dandelions*, Inako, the main character, is locked into a world similar to the realm behind the mirror. She is being deferred to the world of isolation by the people who love her most, her mother and her lover. Mother especially is afraid of her daughter’s unknown disease, is afraid that she could harm herself, that is why she decides that the girl should be treated in the insane asylum. Her lover disagrees on this treatment and insists on taking her home. Actually, mother resorts to specialized treatment so as to limit her own maternal fears of dealing with a possible suicide of her daughter. The girl intertwines absence with presence in a mysterious way. She has a sudden temporary and selective blindness of the people she sees. Actually, her form of so called insanity is far from madness. It does not mean lack of reason or negativity. But she can also see what the others cannot; she sees her lover's body hidden in a rainbow arch.

Suspended into another realm, that of Ikuta's mental asylum, the only gesture of communication between Inako and the people closest to her, namely her mother, Mrs. Kizaki and her lover, Kuno (Hisano) is the gesture of striking the bell of the temple where the asylum is located.

These patients are isolated from the rest of the world. The sound they make is carried to the outside world and can be heard in the town of Ikuta. Whether or not the patients are conscious of that or not, they are communicating with the outside world through the way they strike the bell. Shall I say that each patient is actually letting the others know that he exists? (Kawabata, *The Dandelions*: 23-24).

Kawabata brought into world literature a new way of conceiving fiction. This way has certainly renewed the possibilities

6 Kawabata Yasunari, *The Moon on the Water*, ed. cit.

of fiction, generally speaking. Delicacy, nuance, sadness, absence, ambivalent realities, still time, stillness of people and objects, nature, seasons, shadows, counter-time, time suspension, death-facing old age and death-facing virginity, concealed honor, guilt, hallucinations, eroticism, isolating darkness and isolating snow, man's encounters with impossibility, all these create a focus on implicitness. The implicit has been part of literature, but never its exclusive substance. Fiction always relied on some concepts to build its construction of words. Kawabata makes the whole substance of literature out of something imponderable and implicit.

Kawabata could understand the force of absorption played by absence. He was a man who could not be fooled by history and who could not be fooled by the true decisions of his fellow beings. He explored the vulnerability of human beings when facing loss. He was an orphan from a very early age, his childhood was marked by the loss of all his family members. "Even by the extreme standards of literary biography, his childhood was an unusually painful one"⁷

The Japanese writer used minimalism and simplicity to explore complexity, not to merely sketch it. He could see every human being together with his or her invisible chains and channels. There are invisible chains between one person and his or her family ties, for instance. At the same time, each person has his or her channels opened to the revelation of the important questions in life, opened to nature, to complex forms of expression.

In *Dandelions* the absence becomes a kind of invisible character, disruptive for those moments when people feel the need to rest in a predictable existence. The absence is given an unusual shape in this novel: a bizarre illness, stemming out of neurotic causes (rather than ocular ones), namely the sudden loss of the ability to see objects and people. This condition is the enactor of the crisis. As a result of this partial blindness, the fact that she cannot see her lover's body, which suddenly becomes invisible to her, a young woman is confined.

In his Nobel Prize lecture, entitled *Japan, The Beautiful and Myself*, Kawabata recurrently highlighted Japanese tradition as a way to codify absence and incorporate it not only into the art *per se* but also into the art of living. The heart of the ink painting is in space, abbreviation, what is left *undrawn*. In the words of the Chinese painter Chin Nung: «You paint the branch well, and you

⁷ Roy Starrs, *The Fictive Art of Kawabata Yasunari*. Routledge, 1998, p. 9.

hear the sound of the wind.»⁸

In his novels and short stories, Kawabata revealed that beauty is contemplation. In *Dandelion* the disease is an unreachable one. The girl is the only patient with this disease. Neither the doctors nor mother and lover can reach her fully. She is like a weeping tree. Yet each one of her gestures is a calling, a cry for help. She needs to be reached out.

Mirror will not link Kyoko to her second husband. Through mirror, through the invitation to contemplate her beauty, launched by her second husband, Kyoko's inner being will emerge as a rediscovery of her own self, but separated from the man he remarried after being a widow. She longs for her beauty in the way it was revealed by the eyes of her first husband. Mirror is also her first repository of the love of her husband as he would use mirror to make her see her own nape. Within Japanese dress code, exposed nape is the carrier of utmost beauty. It is the beauty of a part of the body offering itself for contemplation. Utamaro was a master of revealing the beauty of female nape and of its stemming erotic effect (see Bell:294). It is as if the loving presence of her first husband is still imprinted in the mirror.

Kyoko's second husband, although tactful in other regards, tries to capture explicit beauty. He brings the words that would associate with it. But his wife cannot be forced to reach beauty to its full depth this way and his words either push her further away or act like a knife.

Beauty's essence is not tempted by dominating nothingness. This would create an antagonistic foundation. Beauty is the exercise of completeness which does not overcome nothingness. On the contrary, beauty can embrace nothingness. At the same time, beauty seems to elude he who is focused on the illusion of beauty. Beauty residing only in words, as well as that beauty which fears absence are both charged with utopian attributes. Replaced by utopia, beauty cannot be replenished, but driven away.

Beauty is one of the main keepers of ambiguity. You are always on the verge of not understanding it. To the European eye,

⁸ Kawabata Yasunari, Nobel Lecture (December 12, 1968), *Japan, The Beautiful and Myself*, Retrived July 11, 2015 from http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1968/kawabata-lecture.html (emphasis mine).

beauty and emptiness are not intrinsically related. Beauty is a solution in front of nothingness, in spite of nothingness. To the Oriental eye, self and nothingness are intrinsically related.

The Zen disciple sits for long hours silent and motionless, with his eyes closed. Presently he enters a state of impassivity, free from all ideas and all thoughts. He departs from the self and enters the realm of nothingness. This is not the nothingness or the emptiness of the West. It is rather the reverse, a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless. (...)The disciple must, however, always be lord of his own thoughts, and must attain enlightenment through his own efforts. And the emphasis is less upon reason and argument than upon intuition, immediate feeling. Enlightenment comes not from teaching but through the eye awakened inwardly. Truth is in «the discarding of words», it lies «outside words». (...)⁹.

The short story *The Moon on the Water* by Kawabata is set against a war minimized as verbal presence and maximized as effects (death, widowhood, nervous breakdown). The same is valid for Kawabata's unfinished novel, *Dandelions*, appeared posthumously after the writer's alleged suicide on 16 of April 1972 (at the age of nearly 73). Here the war is responsible, indirectly, for Inako's father fatal accident and for her strange disease with psychiatric treatment necessities¹⁰.

Dandelions is the peak of Kawabata's art of mystery and ambiguity. The title is a “unifying image” reminding us not only of the ephemeral, but, as the translator Lorraine Ryūko Fukuwa points out, of “the reincarnation of all living things”¹¹.

9 *Ibidem*

¹⁰ The names of the characters vary from one translation to another. Thus, in the 1977 Lorraine Ryūko Fukuwa's translation into English the names are: Inako (the heroine of the novel), irrespectively Kuno (her lover). In the Romanian translation from Japanese (*Păpădiile*), the girl is Ineko, and the boy is Hisano. The same names and orthography (Ineko, Hisano) appear in the French version of the novel: *Les pissenlits*. Ryūko Fukuwa's translation, originally an M. A. thesis not yet published as a book, was done after Volume XV from Kawabata Yasunari Zenshū (Complete Collection of Kawabata Yasunari).

¹¹ Introduction to Kawabata's *Dandelions*, *Dandelions: translation of Kawabata Yasunari's last novel into English with introduction and notes by Lorraine Ryūko Fukuwa*-1977, p. 1 Retrieved July 8, 2015 from 34

On one hand it is his last novel, therefore it embodies the best of his previous writing experience and the deepest of his meditations on human life, on the other hand it is an unfinished work. We can never know for sure what the final shape of this novel would have been. The novel had been published in installments (1964-1968) even before the novelist won the Nobel Prize for literature. This was also before Mishima Yukio's suicide, in 1970, which deeply affected Kawabata. There is a strange connection thus formed between Kawabata's own mysterious death and his last novel. The writer left this world taking with him a double secret: that of his own death and that of a definite frozen form of his masterpiece. In a way he gave his last novel the destiny to pass into eternity as the incarnation of a dandelion flower, as a meditation on the metamorphoses of life and death.

It is through fragility that a man can be opened to love. In this respect, a dandelion suggests both the fragility and the evanescent light of the soul.

The shared themes of the two writings analyzed in this article (*The Moon on the Water* and *Dandelions*) are: loss and death, beauty and absence, nature and universality, reflection and metamorphosis, human condition and love of beauty.

Both stories are focused on the illness and temporary or eternal loss of one of the partners in a couple. In both writings there are also displays of mild neurotic outbursts. Reflection appears both as a metaphor and as a literary technique. In one story the reflection is brought by the hand mirror, in another story the reflection is brought by dandelion metamorphosis. The soul is as luminous as a dandelion and it is as frail as this flower susceptible to metamorphoses. After metamorphoses, the seeds of the flower can reach the sky instead of the ground by being blown away or carried by wind.

In the short story *The Moon on the Water* the lovers are married. She is the healthy one in the couple. Her first husband, the one who truly understands her, is ill and dies of tuberculosis. The woman, Kyoko, will enter a second marriage, arranged by her brother-in-law, but the second husband, fifteen years her senior, will prove too arrogant to understand her. His attempts to connect to her heart act like a razor-blade. However, one cannot blame the second husband for not trying enough, and here lies the ambiguity

of this beautiful piece of literature. Both husbands are not present with their names. This suggests absence. The first husband is absent as flesh-and-blood, turned into ashes after his death, the second husband is absent from Kyoko's inner world. The polite dialogues typical for Japanese houses, with repressed outbreaks of temper, keep the appearance of good communication in the family. The second husband is very content with this appearance as he is afraid to stir deeper into the heart of his wife. Kyoko takes repression of feelings as a duty towards her new household. At some point, after the breakdown, after being suggested psychiatric care, Kyoko knows she must find the solution within herself. The solution comes after visiting her parents' house, however her parents do not have a role in the whole story, they have an insignificant part as compared to the huge role played by Kyoko's own memories.

Kyoko longs to see herself through the eyes of her first husband and she resorts to her hand mirror, a new one since the old mirror was burned together with her husband's incinerated corpse. But in the mirror she also discovers that he might have had a better awareness of his approaching death. Therefore, in a way, she is responsible for having brought him closer to death.

Mirror meant another chance to live. The woman becomes aware that it is through the same mirror, which brought the joy of life within her first husband, that he might have been contemplating death as well. Mirror is an ambivalent threshold.

The grieving woman has some mental breakdown symptoms. A strange idea occurs to her at the end of the story, when she has a revelation about beauty. Her unborn child, although the offspring of her second marriage, could inherit only the truth of her feelings, therefore could resemble her first husband, although there is no logical evidence. Her thought, empowering for her life from now on, is that this wish-fulfillment urge could replace the reality and the story ends here.

The vertical reading of this short story, with a focus on synchrony rather than a diachronic passage from one action to another, reveals the overlapped layers of significance. Kyoko's life with her second husband is not necessarily bad or dull or joyless. Here is the mastery of Kawabata's *écriture*, by making his fiction be sustained by perfectly ambiguous characters. These characters escape any confinement into a category or another. One cannot put the finger on significant differences between Kyoko's first and second husband. What matters and what the reader does know is her attitude towards her own pain. The second husband is part of

her present and does his best. But he cannot fully reach her heart enveloped in sorrow. Her pain is her link with the former layers of her own self and she does not want to step into a new stage of her life, although pregnancy within her second marriage will prompt her to accept different choices. Just like Inako, in *Dandelions*, Kyoko does not surrender to becoming a person reachable beyond pain. Inako can only send her call through the sound of the bell she is striking, as the rule of the asylum allowed the patients to use this outlet.

Kyoko enwraps her unborn child in the thought that it was the offspring of the times before grief, and this one thought gives her the power to go on, to return to her present.

In the posthumous novel *Dandelions*, Inako Kizaki¹², the main character, is absent from her own story. Just like her father, who died years before in a horse-riding accident. As Tony McKibbin puts it, “It is as if Kawabata is looking to disintegrate the line between the living and the dead, the still and the animated”.¹³ This situation of illness, from the novel *Dandelions*, resembles very much that of Kawabata’s moving story, *The House of Sleeping Beauties*. Not entirely fantastic, not entirely impossible but however very unlikely to have any chance to realness. In this other novel, old men visit a red-light district house to contemplate their death while having in their arms the unreachable beauty. It is a beauty they might harm any minute, while beauty continues its sleep, unaware of itself. It is an extreme experience in which the old visitors grasp the proximity of death and the most intense nostalgia of beauty.

Beauty is not something that should be grasped. It can be grasped when it occurs within a moment, as a time essence.

In his 1968 Nobel Prize Lecture, when Kawabata referred to the art of dry landscaping, he referred also to the absence of the mountains, of the rocks, of everything that is caught in this new form of landscaping. Therefore absence is there, in an inseparable unity with beauty. Why contemplate beauty, why be opened to it? Beauty draws you to other human beings, to your fellows, to your ancestors. Even if they are not present, the overwhelming sense of beauty makes you want to share with them the essence of beauty as the essence of time.

¹² Ineko in French and Romanian translations.

¹³ Tony McKibbin, Yasunari Kawabata—Revenants. Retrieved July, 11, from <http://tonymckibbin.com/non-fiction/yasunarikawabata?output=pdf>.

When we see the beauty of the snow, when we see the beauty of the full moon, when we see the beauty of the cherries in bloom, when in short we brush against and are awakened by the beauty of the four seasons, it is then that we think most of those close to us, and want them to share the pleasure. The excitement of beauty calls forth strong fellow feelings, yearnings for companionship, and the word «comrade» can be taken to mean «human being». The snow, the moon, the blossoms, words expressive of the seasons as they move one into another, include in the Japanese tradition the beauty of mountains and rivers and grasses and trees, of all the myriad manifestations of nature, of human feelings as well.

As Gwenn Boardman Peterson says it in her book *The Moon in the Water. Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima*,

the term *mono-no-aware* refers to sensitivity, qualities of transcendence, and delicate perceptions of inherent sorrow. At one level, *aware* includes the association of a falling cherry blossom petal with the inevitable death of a samurai (the cherry blossom being a symbol of samurai virtues in all tenacity as well as in the suddenness of its eventual fall)¹⁴.

The short story *The Moon on the Water* uses landscape imagery to melt together absence and presence in a singular reality of the heart. Mirror reveals the emotions of the main character, the married woman Kyoko, and her stages of self-knowledge and coming to terms with her own self, after loss and continuous grief.

Both stories mentioned here (a short story, irrespectively a short novel) are focused on the act of seeing and on the openness to inner wisdom given by the experience of love. The lovers in the stories, more than becoming one flesh, have become one sight. Their separate visions reach a point of sameness impossible outside their relationship. However, this theme of shared gaze is encapsulated, in both writings, in the theme of death and loss. Vision is also about mirror reflection and about how fragment can shift into wholeness.

The absence incorporated in beauty is beyond victory. As Roy Starrs said it,

¹⁴ Gwenn Boardman Peterson, *The Moon in the Water. Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima*, The University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1979, p.26.

There is a quiet, meditative quality to Kawabata's language which speaks more eloquently of a victory of the spirit over suffering and of serene joy in life than any explicit statement could do. In this respect, certainly, it shares something with the language of haiku and of zen¹⁵.

In both writings, *The Moon on the Water* and *Dandelions*, beauty resides in loving in absence. Beauty means loving an absence. The lovers in the two stories undergo a strange metamorphosis, on the verge of unreal, by becoming one sight after having become one flesh. The mirror effect in both writings is to capture an absence and to prolong it, as if it were a presence.

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15 Roy Starrs, op. cit., p. 7.

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The Portrayal of the *Femme Fatale* in Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*

Bernadett Veres¹

Abstract: *The purpose of my study is to examine the representation of the femme fatale in Max Beerbohm's Zuleika Dobson. The turn of the century was a period when the traditional role of women underwent rapid changes and the appearance of the New Woman provoked controversial reactions. In literature the profound anxiety caused by the New Woman found expression in the reemerging archetype of the femme fatale. Zuleika Dobson is an exaggerated version of the femme fatale type and at the same time a reflection of the period's New Woman.*

Key Words: *femme fatale, New Woman, turn of the century, reflection, representation*

If we have a look at the literary scene of the second part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century we will certainly meet an archetypal character, the so called *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale* has been an ever present archetype in art and literature since the beginnings of our history. The image of the “fatal woman” or “deadly woman” goes back to mythological times, ancient history or to the Bible itself. The stereotype of “the evil woman”, one of the always popular themes of artists and writers of different centuries, enjoyed wide popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century and was characteristic to the *fin de siècle*. Frequently rediscovered and reinterpreted the femme fatale has undergone many changes throughout history although the name itself was only an invention of the twentieth century.

The Penguin Concise Dictionary of Art History offers the following definition:

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This well known phrase, literally translated as "deadly woman," stands for a theme that became popular, if not obsessive, during the 19th century. The *femme fatale* was beautiful, seductive, and dangerous. She infiltrated opera (Wagner, Massenet, Strauss), theater (Strindberg, Wilde, Goethe), poetry (Baudelaire, Mallarme, Keats), philosophy (Schopenhauer), and art. She was painted in the guise of Salome, Eve, Lilith (Adam's first wife), even the Madonna and a sphinx. But she need not be portrayed as a specific character; she was as much a general type as a particular individual (Frazier 237).

Patrick Bade in his famous work *Femme Fatale. Images of evil and fascinating women* observes that the second half of the nineteenth century was characterized by an 'extraordinary proliferation of *femme fatales*' in European art and literature (Bade 6). He observes that the 'malefactors of the female sex' could be found virtually anywhere, in any form of art, from literature and painting to advertisements, necklaces, ash-trays and soup bowls. Therefore Bade argues that this preoccupation with 'evil and destructive women' can be seen as one of the most outstanding features of late-nineteenth century culture. The 'all-pervasive' theme entered the popular consciousness and inspired artists belonging to 'opposing artistic creeds' (Bade 6).

The popularity the *femme fatale* enjoyed at the turn of the century is not accidental. Her reappearance is strongly linked to the emergence of another real life and literary figure: the New Woman. The New Woman provoked ambiguous reactions both in life and in literature. In spite of the fact that the two characters are not one and the same and they mustn't be confused with each other they are still inseparable in the case of turn-of-the-century literary representations. If we take into consideration their strong relationship we can treat the regained popularity of the *femme fatale* as a sort of reaction to the appearance of the New Woman.

According to Rebecca Stott's work *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale. The Kiss of Death* when we are studying the second half of the nineteenth century and the turn of the century we have to make an important difference between the two characteristic female figures of the period: the *femme fatale* and the New Woman. Stott explains that though the *femme fatale* is distinct from the other turn-of-the-century type of woman, called New Woman, the two are related to each other (Stott viii). Stott

explains:

The New Woman, in contrast, comes to refer to a new type of woman emerging from the changing social and economic conditions of the late nineteenth century: she is a woman who challenges dominant sexual morality, and who begins to enter new areas of employment and education. While she is often threatening, and sometimes sexually threatening, in her challenging of sexual norms, she does not carry the sexual fatalism of the *femme fatale* type (Stott viii-ix).

Zuleika Dobson or, An Oxford Love Story is Max Beerbohm's satirical novel about the eponymous heroine's adventures at the Oxford of the Edwardian era. There is considerable debate among critics whether Zuleika Dobson should be characterized as a *femme fatale* or not. In this essay I propose to analyze how Beerbohm constructed the image of his title character and to look at the features which may liken her to the two distinct but inseparable archetypes of the period: the *femme fatale* and the New Woman.

The barely credible story starts out with Zuleika Dobson's arrival to Oxford station with the intention of spending some time with her grandfather, the Warden of Judas College. Upon arriving to Oxford, the celebrated conjurer enchants all the Oxford undergraduates who immediately fall in love with her, including the proud and self-absorbed Duke of Dorset. The Duke wants to commit suicide in order to prove his passion and to make her understand what terrible power she has over men. Zuleika however has a romanticized notion of men dying for her and considers it the prettiest compliment a woman can get. Soon all Oxford undergraduates plan to join him and commit suicide for Miss Dobson. When he realizes what he has done the Duke tries to persuade the undergraduates not to commit suicide even if the only way to save them is to abandon his own plan of dying for Zuleika.

However because of an ill omen he believes that his fate has been decided and his death is inevitable. The Duke confronts Zuleika telling her that he will still die but not for her. She is not troubled by this detail as long as he pretends to die for her shouting her name as he jumps into the water. When a thunderstorm hits the May Week boat races, the Duke drowns himself in the River Isis and the bewitched undergraduates follow him to death. Zuleika briefly contemplates going into a convent but quickly changes her mind

and orders a special train for the next morning which is bound for Cambridge.

Max Beerbohm establishes her heroine as a *femme fatale* from the start. The choice of her name is not coincidental either because it belongs to a complex and controversial figure, a heroine or anti-heroine of biblical times: Potiphar's wife. As Shalom Goldman argues in his book entitled *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish and Islamic Folklore* neither the Bible nor the Quran gives Potiphar's wife a name. He also refers to the fact that feminists critics note that many women are unnamed in bible narratives. In the case of Potiphar's wife this is seen as a serious omission and the authors of the legends suggested various exotic names. In the Jewish work *Sefer Hayashar* and in later Persian Islamic Folklore, Potiphar's wife is consistently named "Zuleikha" (Goldman 85).

Goldman also observes that in the Islamic tradition legends tell that Joseph married Potiphar's wife after she had repented her sins. 'In some Islamic pietistic texts, and especially the great poetic epics of Rumi and Jami, Zuleikha's life becomes a paradigm for the power of repentance' (Goldman 86). Goldman also notes that in the great Persian poet Jami's epic work *Yusuf and Zuleikha*, Yusuf represents divine beauty while Zuleikha stands for the yearning human soul (Goldman 139). However Goldman also points out that according to another interpretation 'Potiphar's wife symbolizes "evil inclination," that lack of restraint that brings punishment down upon the world.' Zuleikha is demonized, her attempt of seduction symbolizes and foreshadows a 'cosmic drama,' where Satan tries to gain dominion over mankind (Goldman 138).

The same ideas appears in an article written by the bestselling Turkish female writer Elif Shafak, who refers to the complexity of the biblical character and mentions the above mentioned duality in her article entitled "Women Writers, Islam and the Ghost of Zulaikha". She claims that in the history of Islam perhaps no woman has been more widely interpreted or rather misinterpreted than Potiphar's beautiful but 'perfidious' wife in the biblical story of Joseph (Shafak 1). Shafak argues:

In the history of Islam, perhaps no woman has been as widely (mis)interpreted as Zulaikha-the beautiful and perfidious wife of Potiphar in the story of Joseph. It was she who tried to seduce Joseph into the whirl of adultery and unbridled hedonism. It was she who upon being rejected by Joseph

accused him of raping her, thus causing him to be incarcerated for years in the terrible dungeons of Potiphar's regime. And it was she who has over and over been blamed, condemned, and vilified by conservative religious authorities in the Islamic world. Throughout the centuries, in the eyes of the conservative-minded, Zulaikha has stood out as a despicable symbol of lust, hedonism, and, ultimately, feminine evil (Shafak 1).

Shafak points out that as opposed to the picture drawn by the conservative Muslims the Sufi² mystic saw the figure of Zulaikha in an entirely different light.

As wicked as Zulaikha might be in the eyes of the conservative Muslims, she was considered in a completely different way by the Sufis. For the Sufi mystic, Zulaikha simply represented someone purely and madly in love. Nothing more and nothing less. This ages-old discrepancy between the exoteric (*zahiri*) and esoteric (*batini*) interpretations of Qur'an is little known in the Western world today. Likewise, this hermeneutical tradition is not well known by the contemporary reformist, modernist cultural elite of Muslim countries either. (Shafak 2).

In addition to this Shafak adds that the ongoing process of Westernization and modernization in Turkey also brings about a detachment from the past and the complete erasure of the Sufi legacy (Shafak 2). From Shafak's article we can deduce that although the figure of Zulaikha is highly complex and controversial, the first interpretation is more emphatic than the latter owing to the fact that the Sufi interpretation is mostly forgotten or rarely taken into consideration.

Dr. Firuza Abdullaeva's in her work entitled "From Zulaykha to Zuleika Dobson: the femme fatale and her ordeals in Persian literature and beyond" observes that interestingly Beerbohm's novel never raised the question of the name of its main heroine. She refers to the Persian poem, *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, attributed to Ferdowsi, which preceded Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*

² **Sufism**, mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world (Encyclopedia Britannica).

with 800 years. In Abdullaeva's view it is likely that 'the peerless femme fatale Zuleika Dobson was conceived in the fertile waters of yet another wave of literary Orientalism [...]'(Abdullaeva 236). However Abdullaeva also adds that it is possible that Beerbohm could have read at least one of the two English translations of the Zulaykha story that had been published by that time (Abdullaeva 236).

Taking all of the above into consideration we can say that Beerbohm made a good choice when he named her heroine Zuleika. The oriental name gives her an air of exoticism and the controversial story behind the name enhances the complexity of the character. Readers may wonder from the beginning of the book, which Zuleika they are going to get: the perfidious villainess or the devoted lover.

Beerbohm establishes his heroine as a *femme fatale* from her very appearance at Oxford station referring to the fact that she is far more dangerous than the train which brings her: 'It became a furious, enormous monster, and, with an instinct for safety, all men receded from the platform's margin. (Yet came there with it, unknown to them, a danger far more terrible than itself)' (Beerbohm 8).

Her appearance is more of an apparition; Beerbohm uses the word "cynosure" to emphasize the fact that this woman demands not only the attention but the admiration of all the people who are present. Details of her dress and hat suggest elegance and refinement. The author describes her as fairy like, a "lithe" and "radiant" creature, a "nymph" rather than a human being:

[...] the door of one carriage flew open, and from it, in a white travelling dress, in a toque a-twinkle with fine diamonds, a lithe and radiant creature slipped nimbly down to the platform. A cynosure indeed! A hundred eyes were fixed on her, and half as many hearts lost to her. The Warden of Judas himself had mounted on his nose a pair of black-rimmed glasses. Him espying, the nymph darted in his direction. The throng made way for her. She was at his side. "Grandpapa!" she cried, and kissed the old man on either cheek. (Not a youth there but would have bartered fifty years of his future for that salute) (Beerbohm 8).

Another addition to her character is a touch of the supernatural, besides her nymph- or fairy-like appearance, her charm or natural talent to enchant young men is emphasized from the very beginning of the story. Beerbohm even uses the word "enchantress" to make

clear for us that his heroine is a *femme fatale*. The young men are mesmerized by her beauty and follow her as if they were in a hypnotic trance:

All the youths, under her spell, were now quite oblivious of the relatives they had come to meet. Parents, sisters, cousins, ran unclaimed about the platform. Undutiful, all the youths were forming a serried suite to their enchantress. In silence they followed her. They saw her leap into the Warden's landau, they saw the Warden seat himself upon her left. Nor was it until the landau was lost to sight that they turned – how slowly and with how bad a grace! – to look for their relatives (Beerbohm 9).

Despite her irresistible charm Zuleika isn't a real beauty in the true sense of the word. Beerbohm describes her appearance in the following way:

Zuleika was not strictly beautiful. Her eyes were a trifle large, and their lashes longer than they need have been. An anarchy of small curls was her chevelure, a dark upland of misrule, every hair asserting its rights over a not discreditable brow. For the rest, her features were not at all original. They seemed to have been derived rather from a gallimaufry of familiar models. [...] Her hands and feet were of very mean proportions. She had no waist to speak of. Yet, though a Greek would have railed at her asymmetry, and an Elizabethan have called her "gypsy," Miss Dobson now, in the midst of the Edwardian Era, was the toast of two hemispheres (Beerbohm 15-16).

Surprisingly after such a hypnotic introduction her outlook is described as rather unoriginal and ordinary. Thus it is difficult to explain her charm and power over men. Her asymmetry and her gypsy-like features make her interesting. The expression "the toast of two hemispheres" hints to a sort of exoticism, implying that her features are a mixture of different nations. This description enhances the special atmosphere around her because it suggests that she has a certain unexplainable quality which makes her irresistible.

However we shouldn't forget that *Zuleika Dobson* is first and foremost a satire. Heather Braun in her book entitled *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* argues that 'Beerbohm takes the previous century's Decadent

femme fatale's excess to comic extremes' (Braun 140). Braun points out that Beerbohm's parody of 'the fatal woman's unconscious yet violent charms' is a powerful example of 'the growing Victorian disenchantment with the obvious and overdone features of the fatal woman' (Braun 140-141).

Michael Murphy in his essay entitled "Medieval Max and *Zuleika Dobson*" compares Beerbohm's work to medieval romances. Murphy argues that Zuleika is a "siren", but only part of her name is exotic and her 'seducing song', which is her beauty, is quite commonplace as well. The fact that the Oxford undergraduates fall 'en masse' for this 'tawdry old song' and 'this queerly named siren' demonstrate how much they know about love, women, passion and beauty (Murphy 6). Murphy points out that it is somewhat more ironic that Zuleika has affinities to the heroines of the other major branch of medieval romance, that of the saint's life (Murphy 4). Murphy observes that 'if the fiery passions of the men of two continents have not seared her, monastic, celibate Oxford will not harm or even warm her.' Indeed not a single man in Oxford seems to have 'one lustful thought about Zuleika'. For them, she might be 'a Madonna of a perverse kind, to be worshipped from afar and without a possibility of becoming an alma mater' (Murphy 5).

Although Murphy's essay never mentions the term *femme fatale*, he doesn't contest her belonging to the category of fatal woman. Sirens have always been seen as *femme fatales* and Murphy admits that Zuleika succeeds in enchanting all of Oxford. Even if her "song" is false, her commonplace beauty and her exotic name are enough for her to steal all those hearts. Murphy's perverse Madonna image also strengthens the idea that she is a *femme fatale*. She is indeed worshipped by all those students "from afar" without any lustful thoughts from their parts like "a Madonna of a perverse kind" and because she wishes to preserve her spinster status there is no possibility for her to become "an alma mater", a mother goddess or a nourishing mother.

It is also undoubtedly true that it is difficult to determine the object of satire in the case of *Zuleika Dobson*. It is more likely that the intention of the author might have been to ridicule several types of people and several social phenomena characteristic to the age. According to Jane Smiley in the case of *Zuleika Dobson* it is a fair question to ask if the book is a satire, what is it satirizing? In Smiley's view it is not as much satirizing as it is 'making fun out of irresistible women, manly men, and undergraduate callowness'

(Smiley 427). Smiley argues:

For our purposes, *Zuleika Dobson* also pushes to its ridiculous extreme the old question of what women are for. Zuleika, who is by profession a magician but by avocation a siren, is clearly for nothing. She has no money and no life goals other than to captivate the hearts of undergraduate men (Smiley 427).

From Jane Smiley's comment we can deduce that Zuleika is seen as a *femme fatale*. Although Smiley does not use the expression *femme fatale* as such, she uses a suitable synonym: *irresistible women*, making clear what she really means. Characterizing the heroine of the story she grasps some of her essential features. The statement that she has neither a role in life nor life goals to accomplish except for captivating the hearts of undergraduate men underlines her belonging to the category of the *femme fatale*. The affirmation that Zuleika Dobson is a magician by profession but a siren by avocation reveals that the issue is slightly more complex.

From this point of view we can consider Zuleika both a New Woman and a *femme fatale*. The emergence of the New Woman contested the previously existing ideals of Victorian womanhood. As Buzwell observed: 'Free-spirited and independent, educated and uninterested in marriage and children, the figure of the New Woman threatened conventional ideas about ideal Victorian womanhood' (Buzwell 1).

Zuleika can be seen as a New Woman because she is completely independent and individualistic, lives her life as she pleases; moreover she decides not to marry because the spinster lifestyle is suitable for her profession and she doesn't want to marry without love just for custom or commodity. She answers the Duke's marriage proposal the following way:

I would not marry you, because I did not love you. I daresay there would be great advantages in being your Duchess. But the fact is, I have no worldly wisdom. To me, marriage is a sacrament. I could no more marry a man about whom I could not make a fool of myself than I could marry one who made a fool of himself about me. Else had I long ceased to be a spinster (Beerbohm 80).

Sally Mitchell argues that the idea that marriage was women's 'natural destiny' was not universally accepted. Mitchell points out that there were more women in their twenties and thirties than men

to merry them and not all single women became ‘unhappy old maids’. There were working class women of the well-paid trades who could afford to remain single and support themselves. Moreover it was possible for women from the middle and upper classes to earn decent incomes and live ‘contented independent lives’ (Mitchell 269). Mitchell describes the image of the New Woman as follows:

The idealized New Woman was single, well educated and worked at a white-collar or professional job. She lived alone or shared a flat with friends; enjoyed robust good health; travelled by bicycle or public transport; and went wherever she pleased without a chaperone. She was as firmly based in class-bound perceptions as the midcentury Angel in the House—but fewer than 40 years separate one from the other (Mitchell 270).

Zuleika has a profession and working as a magician she earns her own living. She goes where she wants and travels by train from one European capital to another, from performance to performance, than she crosses the Atlantic and conquers America as well. She manages to support herself and leads an independent life. Although Melisande, her French maid, can be seen as a chaperone, she is a paid servant not a defender of Zuleika’s honour.

Linda Dowling points out that although ‘the apocalypse of Victorian civilization they [critics and observers] feared was delayed considerably beyond the end of the century, it was to arrive’. Still late Victorians had correctly identified the New Woman as one of the harbingers of this apocalypse (Dowling 437). The character of Zuleika Dobson also signals the end of an era, she is the first “modern” woman who sets foot in Oxford and she is the one who brings about its destruction. In this point of view she is also a harbinger of an apocalypse. Dowling points out that critics and reviewers perceived in the ambitions of the New Woman ‘a profound threat to established culture’ (Dowling 435). Zuleika is also seen as a profound threat right from the beginning of the novel and she proves to be one as her irresistible charm drives all the Oxford undergraduates to commit suicide for her. Her appearance disturbs the peaceful academic life of Oxford which will never be the same again. On the other hand she is a siren by avocation, because she lives to be admired and adored, enjoying her ability to seduce the young men she encounters. The word ‘siren’ points to the category of the *femme fatale* and distances Zuleika’s figure from the previously mentioned New Woman type.

Zuleika falls in love with the Duke assuming that he is indifferent towards her and immune to her charm but she loses all interest in him and refuses his advances as soon as he declares his love for her. She knows the power of her own charm and despises any man who makes a fool of himself for her sake. Zuleika admires and adores the Duke because of his coolness and pretended indifference. She respects him so much because he seems to be so different from the rest. She longs to be in love but quite ridiculously her desire is not to be loved but to find somebody who is able to break her heart and cast her aside. This very fact makes her less credible in the role of the *femme fatale*.

Although Zuleika is conscious of her charm, her power to enchant young men but she is not fully aware of its dangers. In one of her conversations with the Duke she declares that: ‘Certainly a young man doesn’t waste away for love of some particular young woman. He very soon makes love to some other one’ (Beerbohm 106). She observes that all of her most ardent adorers have married.

“Have any of your lovers ceased to love you?” “Ah, no; not in retrospect. I remain their ideal, and all that, of course. They cherish the thought of me. They see the world in terms of me. But I am an inspiration, not an obsession; a glow, not a blight.” “You don’t believe in the love that corrodes, the love that ruins?” “No,” laughed Zuleika (Beerbohm 107).

From this passage it seems that Zuleika is not aware of the dangerous nature of her charm. Obviously she doesn’t see herself as a *femme fatale*. Taking in consideration the description she made about her relationship with her past lovers, she most likely considers herself an ideal, an idol, a muse. The words ‘inspiration’ and ‘glow’ have a very positive quality and she also declares that she doesn’t believe in a love that ruins.

Heather Braun in her book entitled *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature 1790-1910* observes that:

Today, the term *femme fatale* refers most often to manipulative, dangerously attractive women; more interesting, however, are the ways in which this term applies to those female characters unconscious of their allure or reluctant to acknowledge its destructive powers. This question of fatal intent preoccupied nineteenth-century British writers as they sought to locate and explain this character’s power and mystique. Their accounts of this figure’s ambiguous motives

reveal new ways of understanding the *femme fatale*'s fluctuating career in popular nineteenth-century forms and genres (Braun 2).

This characterization is undoubtedly valid in the case of Zuleika Dobson and it proves that even if she is reluctant to accept the destructive nature of her allure and she is not fully conscious of its incredible power she is still a *femme fatale*. Her motives are ambiguous and the fact that she takes the sacrifice of the Duke and the undergraduates as a compliment only enhances her mystique. Therefore we can say that she matches this particular definition of the *femme fatale* perfectly.

Zuleika regains her credibility as *femme fatale* when she accepts the Duke's vow to die for her. She is utterly moved, thrilled and delighted by the very idea that the Duke wants to die for her. Once again, for the first time since his confession she becomes interested in him. We learn from the omniscient narrator that:

Men were supposed to have died for love of her. It had never been proved. There had always been something – card-debts, ill-health, what not – to account for the tragedy. No man, to the best of her recollection, had ever hinted that he was going to die for her. Never, assuredly, had she seen the deed done. And then came he, the first man she had loved, going to die here, before her eyes, because she no longer loved him. But she knew now, that he must not die – not yet! (Beerbohm 117).

The Duke hopes that his death will be a public service and considers himself a savior for disinfatuating his fellow alumni with his awful example. Nevertheless he honours Zuleika's wish and postpones his suicide until the next day. She is delighted by the situation and treats the Duke as her own plaything: 'It was as if she stood alone with her lover on some silent pinnacle of the world. It was as if she were a little girl with a brand-new and very expensive doll which had banished all the little other old toys from her mind. She simply could not, in her naïve rapture, take her eyes off her companion' (Beerbohm 119). Zuleika's interest in the Duke grows in direct proportion with the Duke's disinterest, and she confesses her love to him again as soon as he isn't in love with her any more. When she learns that it is inevitable for the Duke to die because he received the ill omen³, but he is not going to die for her she is concerned

³ It is believed that before a Duke of Dorset dies two black owls come and

about only one thing:

“By the way,” she said, [...] “have you told anybody that you aren’t dying just for me?” “No,” he answered, “I have preferred not to.” “Then officially, as it were, and in the eyes of the world, you die for me? Then all’s well that ends well. Shall we say good-bye here? I shall be on the Judas Barge; but I suppose there will be a crush, as yesterday” (Beerbohm 255).

She treats the boat races as an ordinary social event, even if she is aware of the fact that the Duke is going to die. She is only concerned about people’s opinion and considers the idea of somebody dying for her a flattering compliment. She has no objections against the fact that the Duke is not going to die for her after all as long as the people don’t know that. This cool detachment and her lack of genuine feelings prove that she can be included in the category of the *femme fatale*.

Another element of her character is a sort of cunning or shrewdness that we might even consider hypocrisy. She is well aware of the Duke’s suicide plans; still she wants to remain innocent in the eyes of the people and obviously wants to be free of any blame. She relishes the idea that a brilliant young man dies with her name on his lips but doesn’t want the people to incriminate her for this. An incredibly talented manipulator, Zuleika plays all the cards a traditional *femme fatale* would, while she is posing as a helpless woman who is alone in the world. She tries to persuade the Duke to perform his own suicide according to her plans and expects him to protect her reputation even in his death. However the Duke is not receptive to her attempts of manipulation any longer. She has the nerves to remind the Duke not to forget to call her name in a loud voice before he jumps into the water.

After the Duke jumps into the River Isis crying Zuleika’s name innumerable undergraduates follow his example and die for love with smiles on his faces. The women escape the rain and the awful sight, only one figure stays unmoving on the roof. Zuleika Dobson, the ultimate *femme fatale*, relishes the horrible parade:

Dispeopled now were the roofs of the barges. [...] Yet on one roof one woman still was. A strange, drenched figure, she stood bright-eyed in the dimness; alone, as it was well she should be in her great hour; draining the lees of such homage

as had come to no woman in history recorded (Beerbohm 300).

The narrator uses the word 'homage' to reveal Zuleika's attitude towards the happenings. Extreme as it may seem, the description of her reaction tells us that she considers the sacrifice of the Duke and the other undergraduates a flattering compliment, a tribute to her beauty and charm. We have to admit that only a real *femme fatale* can display such a reaction after witnessing such a horrible scene of mass suicide.

Zuleika understands the gravity of the situation only later that evening when she witnesses the empty tables at the 'bump-supper,' a festive occasion the undergraduates of Judas College were supposed to attend. At first it seems that Zuleika experiences remorse at the sight of the empty Hall and understands that she is to be blamed for the loss of all those young lives who died for the love of her. But the melancholy and loneliness she feels are in fact a manifestation of self-pity from her part. She doesn't feel sorry for all those young people who threw their lives for her, she feels sorry for herself. She is tortured by the idea that nobody loves her anymore; she misses the admiration and adoration of the undergraduates.

As her grandfather is oblivious of the whole story, Zuleika is the one who tells him about the dead undergraduates at last taking the blame on herself: 'I am an epidemic, grandpapa, a scourge, such as the world has not known. Those young men drowned themselves for love of me' (Beerbohm 343). The Warden confesses that he himself was greatly admired by young ladies when he was young and even though he liked this admiration he never encouraged it, and chose a young lady to become his future wife who had a great dignity and didn't try to win his heart through flirting or gifts. This mirrors Zuleika's attitude towards men, as she could only fall in love with somebody whom she considered indifferent towards her. From this dialogue we can understand that Zuleika inherited her charm from her grandfather who might have been an *homme fatale* in his youth.

Zuleika is touched by this similarity between herself and her grandfather. It is revealed that she understands that her charm is an inheritance from her grandfather and also points to the fact that deep down she is conscious of her special status and acknowledges herself as a *femme fatale*. However the Warden contests Zuleika's ideas about heredity and considers themselves 'in the matter of affections' ordinary enough. In his view what makes

Zuleika different from other young women or made him different of other young men in the past is only 'a special attractiveness' (Beerbohm 348). The idea of the *femme fatale* and *homme fatale* is challenged again by the Warden's words. Another possible interpretation of this negation is that like any other character bearing the qualities of the *femme fatale* or *homme fatale* the Warden lives in a kind of self-denial and tries to calm her granddaughter with the same arguments he used to calm himself when he had similar experiences long ago.

Still Zuleika is not content with her grandfather's explanation. Her reaction shows that clearly: '[...] tell me no more of it – poor me! You see, it isn't a mere special attractiveness that *I* have. *I* am irresistible' (Beerbohm 348). We can see that her vanity is stronger than her remorse because she is not able to tell the Warden the real reasons of the Duke's death. She is greatly intrigued by the fact that her irresistibility may be contested. Obviously she realizes that it is not her true desire to retire to a convent and notices that her grandfather seems to be proud of her. He agrees that it is best for her to leave in the morning but he also insists that she must come back and stay later on, 'not in term-time, though' (Beerbohm 350).

The only logical explanation to the Warden's pride and peculiar attitude towards Zuleika's dangerous power over men and the mass suicide her charm provoked is that the two of them are indeed alike. A former *homme fatale* himself, he cannot incriminate Zuleika for something that cannot be logically explained or consciously controlled.

Zuleika's reactions are also very difficult to explain. Her remorse and guilt mingle with her vanity and pride. Before going to sleep she is distressed by the idea that people may contest the fact that the Duke and the undergraduates have died for her even if they shouted her name before jumping into the water. She tries to convince herself that it doesn't matter what the world thinks if she knows the truth that the undergraduates did what they did only for her. But her happiness is overshadowed by the ghost of the Duke and the ghosts of all the young men who died for her. Finally she makes her decision and orders a special train for the next morning which is bound to Cambridge.

The ending of the story is very ingenious and ironic indeed and the author settles the problem of the *femme fatale* at last. Our heroine has a moral dilemma in the last part of the novel. Zuleika is a very complex and complicated personality, who

experiences radically contradictory feelings. One impulse tells her that she is a monster and she should retire from the world in order not to cause more harm and endanger more lives. Another impulse makes her enjoy her victory and relish the supreme compliment of hundreds of young men sacrificing their lives to prove their love. She has a difficult decision to make and has to face the consequences of her charm. One possibility would be to accept her guilt and take the veil in order to atone for the lives which were lost because of her. But she chooses the other way and instead of retiring to a convent she decides to embrace her *femme fatale* nature and continue her life just like before enjoying the admiration of men and she ventures to order a special train bound to Cambridge. This decision tells us that she wants to continue her life as a *femme fatale* because this is what gives reason to her existence.

The ending of the story makes Zuleika Dobson entirely credible in her role as a *femme fatale*. However it is also undoubtedly true that the author included several New Woman characteristics when he was outlining the figure of Zuleika Dobson. Analyzing the period when the work was written and taking in consideration the changing role of women and the contradictory image of the New Woman which characterized the turn of the century we have to say that Zuleika is a reflection of the New Woman. *Zuleika Dobson* is the product of an age where: the role of women underwent rapid changes; women started to go to college and work outside the home; the image of the *femme fatale* regained its popularity and gained new connotations. Even though the *femme fatale* and New Women qualities of Zuleika Dobson are exaggerated and sometimes extreme they do betray suspicion and fear towards the changing role of women and towards those female characters who exhibit these unorthodox qualities.

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De l'expérience du manque à une autobiographie à part

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Résumé : *Georges Perec recourt dans “W ou le souvenir d'enfance” à l'idée de “fiction autobiographique” pour marquer une opération mentale, mais qui l'engage quand même psychologiquement: parler de soi, de l'absence de ses parents, sans se découvrir, sans souffrir, sans en dire trop, en annulant sa mémoire, en comblant les absences et les vides, en dépassant la frayeur par l'écriture; l'autobiographie se construit ici par des voies obliques, en inventant de nouvelles stratégies, d'une amnésie à une obsession.*

Mots clés: *autobiographie, souvenir, enfance, fiction, espace, écriture.*

“J'écris pour me parcourir“ est la citation placée par Perec, en exergue au chapitre Ier, (La page), du recueil *Espèces d'espaces*, la citation appartenant à Henri Michaux. Le chapitre commence par les mots : “j'écris...j'écris : j'écris...“. Le texte se forme en plaçant des lettres sur une ligne horizontale (mais le mot est disposé verticalement et de biais). Dès qu'on écrit, on vectorise l'espace, avec un haut et un bas, un commencement, une fin. Ecrire, c'est donner un sens à l'espace.

Le premier détail autobiographique de ce recueil est le portulan, vieille carte marine, qui est un des objets favoris de Perec. Il en a placé un dans l'appartement rêvé par Jérôme et Sylvie au début des *Choses* (chap. I), il en a reproduit un morceau dans *La Vie mode d'emploi*. En fait, il en a longtemps accroché un au-dessus de sa propre table de travail.

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Si le chapitre s'ouvre sur les mots "J'écris", notons que le livre se renfermera 100 pages plus loin sur la reprise du même thème " écrire...laisser une trace". Et déjà, le projet autobiographique est là, dans le recueil *Espèces d'espaces*, pour qu'il se transforme, par l'écriture de *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*(1975), en un événement autobiographique –après le "ils" des *Choses*(1965), le "tu" d' *Un homme qui dort*"(1967), le "nous" de *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour ?*(1966), et le "je" lipogrammatiquement mutilé dans la *Disparition*(1969). D' ailleurs, le projet autobiographique a toujours été central pour Perec, qui affirmait dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* : "Le projet d'écrire mon histoire s'est formé presque en même temps que mon projet d'écrire".

On constate que, dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, l'auteur émet une double énonciation du "je" : celui de Gaspard Winckler, le narrateur du texte imaginaire, et celui du récit des souvenirs d'enfance, revendiqué par l'auteur comme le "je" autobiographique. « C'est le seul des textes autobiographiques de Perec qui noue ainsi les choses, les ferme, resserre l'étau sur l'indicible. Presque tous les autres projets sont fondés sur un déplacement à perte de vue, que rien n'arrête ».²

En partant de *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, en 1984, Anne Roche présentait au Collège de Cérisy-la-Salle consacré à Georges Perec, une analyse intitulée "auto(bio)graphie". L'élément "bio", volontairement mis en évidence par l'effet typographique des parenthèses, enrichit la notion d'autobiographie d'un surplus de sens. "Auto" désignerait un moi réflexif, "bio" mettrait l'accent sur l'aspect transmutable de l'élément vie, tandis que "graphie", enfin, traduirait l'aspect esthétique, formel et construit de l'écriture. Dans son analyse, Anne Roche approfondit le caractère évolutif et transmutable de l'élément "bio" pour montrer son dévoilement dans la construction écrite ou scripturale qu'elle reconnaît comme "l'autographie". Le sens qu'Anne Roche donne au terme «autographie» est surtout psychanalytique :

« On peut tirer *l'Homme qui dort* du côté des troubles du langage, le caser dans quelques sous-catégories de l'aphasie. Mais l'écriture est un trouble du langage. Un *Homme qui dort* est assurément une autographie, où l'élément « bio » reste en suspens, confié – cela ne nous regarde pas – aux proches, à ceux qui étaient

² Lejeune, Philippe, 1991, *La Mémoire et l'oblique. Georges Perec autobiographe*, Paris, POL, p.44.

là».³

Dans l'écriture d'une oeuvre, déterminer l' "autographie" selon Anne Roche reviendrait à considérer l'auto-analyse du moi que l'auteur entreprend par le seul acte d'écrire. L'élément "bio" est condamné à l'absence, mais sa trace s'avère indélébile. Aborder l'oeuvre de Georges Perec sous cet angle semble d'autant plus légitime que l'auteur affirme à plusieurs reprises le côté révélateur des diverses contraintes qu'il s'impose tant sur le plan créatif que sur le plan autoanalytique.

En appliquant le terme "autographie" à une auto-analyse effectuée à travers l'écriture, même en tant que métaphore, Anne Roche crée un néologisme important qui passe, toutefois, à côté d'un autre sens que l'on pourrait attribuer à ce terme, si l'on tient compte du sens propre de celui-ci et qu'on lui associe, dans un rapport de parenté homonymique, le sens du terme "autographe". L'«autographie» est un procédé de reproduction, tandis que l'"autographe" est un paragraphe écrit de la main même de son auteur. Dans un sens plus contemporain, l'autographe est aussi la photo d'un célèbre artiste, paraphée de sa propre main.

Le terme "autographie" sera pour nous une transposition/ reproduction fictionnelle du moi, un autoportrait esthétisé sur lequel l'auteur applique sa griffe, c'est-à-dire son autographe. En investissant le terme "autographie" de cette notion particulière, notre point de départ sera d'analyser comment le problème de l'identité impossible chez Perec trouve une formulation esthétique dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, pour aboutir à une autographie sérielle dans *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) où l'on trouve une multiplication d'autoportraits.

Véritable conte philosophique, la fable de W joue sur des schémas narratifs. Elle commence comme un roman policier : un membre de l'ancienne organisation Véritas, qui se charge de récupérer les rescapés des naufrages en mer, retrouve un certain Gaspard Winckler. Ce dernier, en des circonstances difficiles, bénéficia des papiers d'identité d'un homonyme, sourd-muet, fils d'une cantatrice célèbre et récemment disparu après une catastrophe maritime. L'intrigue policière s'interrompt et la narration enchaîne sur un roman d'aventures à la manière de Jules Verne : l'action se situe, désormais, sur un îlot de la Terre de Feu, W. Mais, très vite, la fiction bascule dans la description kafkaïenne d'une vie consacrée au sport. Le récit évoque les camps de

3 Roche, Anne, «L'auto(bio)graphie», Cahiers Georges Perec I, Paris, Pol, 1985.

concentration nazis, mais dénonce aussi, et surtout, le principe général d'une sélection axée sur l'obsession de la compétition qui enferme les hommes dans une prison psychologique.

Les chapitres autobiographiques retracent l'enfance de Perec, d'abord à Paris et ensuite dans le Vercors, où se déroulent, pendant la guerre, d'atroces massacres. Toute la difficulté, pour l'auteur, consiste à reconstituer le puzzle d'un passé fracturé par la perte de ses parents, des Polonais émigrés en France. Le père meurt le jour même de l'armistice et la mère disparaît sans laisser des traces, sans doute à Auschwitz. En bon détective, Perec, l'auteur, procède à une lente investigation du souvenir de Perec l'enfant ; il traque les traces objectives, les photographies, les constructions de son esprit-on apprend ainsi que l'histoire de W fut inventée par le petit garçon et développe son imaginaire de sa propre histoire. Il reste, au lecteur, à ne pas tomber dans le piège de W. Les deux récits sont deux versions assez avoisinantes d'une même histoire, chacune d'elles exprimée en une forme différente, mais à la première personne « et le second texte glose en permanence le premier. Le lecteur n'a qu'à se laisser guider dans ces explications de textes qui mettent en lumière les procédés et les fonctions de la « mise en fiction ».

La crise d'identité subie par l'écrivain marqué des disparitions de son enfance s'affiche dès les premières lignes de la confession autobiographique *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, qui commence par la déclaration suivante : « *Je n'ai pas de souvenir d'enfance* ». ⁴ Par sa dédicace "Pour E", *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* devient doublement significatif. L'escamotage du Juif dans *La Disparition*, le rare usage de "juif" dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* sont l'expression d'une aphasie qui touche à la déclaration de l'identité. Fiction et autobiographie confondues, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* « montre la difficulté de dire, d'épeler à son niveau abécédaire cette identité damnée, avant même que celle-ci soit enfouie dans un inconscient d'indifférence ». ⁵

Tout d'abord, nous pouvons constater une certaine incongruité dans cette déclaration par rapport au titre de l'ouvrage. Perec y affirme en quelque sorte, qu'en dépit du titre, il n'y aura pas de souvenirs d'enfance. Les quatre ou cinq photos racolées au passage et décrites avec soin recto-verso, ou encore les quelques

⁴ Perec, Georges, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Paris, Denoël, 1975, p.17.

⁵ Béhar, Stella, *Georges Perec: écrire pour ne pas dire*, 1995, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, p.139.

noms de lieux : les villages, la pension et le home d'enfants où il a passé les années de guerre, ne sont pas de souvenirs. Par sa déclaration, il nous invite à les regarder comme des repères qui vont lui permettre de tisser un réseau de sens pour reconstruire les réalités probables de cette enfance. Pour lui, le seul souvenir d'enfance c'est W : une histoire inventée, racontée et dessinée entre douze et treize ans, oubliée qui puis, tout à coup, ressurgit. W tel que l'avait imaginé Perec à l'âge de douze ou treize ans n'est pas le texte de 1969. « *Je réinventai W* » et « *W ne ressemble pas plus à mon phantasme olympique que ce phantasme ne ressemblait à mon enfance* »⁶. Si Perec privilégie cette histoire comme le seul souvenir d'enfance c'est qu'en fait elle représente à la fois le souvenir d'un phantasme « dont les valeurs et les enjeux rendent compte du progressif mais inéluctable anéantissement des êtres humains happés dans l'engrenage du système imaginé sur W »⁷, mais aussi et surtout, le souvenir d'une nécessité vitale: celle d'avoir à écrire parce que « *l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie* »⁸.

Du récit de la confession (le souvenir) on apprendra que Perec est envoyé sous les hospices de la Croix-Rouge en Vercors, mis en pension où ses tantes viendront lui rendre visite. Il y aura les saisons « avec ou sans tantes ». Puis plus rien. Ou pourrait croire à première lecture que le récit de la confession est authentiquement documenté. Perec est allé sur les lieux : rue Vilin, Villard-de-Lans, Lans-en-Vercors. Perec a questionné sa tante, ses cousins, un ancien camarade de classe. Rien dans ces souvenirs n'est réalité tangible, tout est reconstruction, souvenirs potentiels à partir d'éléments vérifiables ou non. Les seuls souvenirs dont Perec est sûr et pour lesquels le ton qu'il adopte est totalement différent quand il les présente, ce sont ses lectures et les films vus avant son retour à Paris.

Si Perec ne s'attarde pas à vérifier réellement ses souvenirs c'est qu'en fait, au cours de l'enquête, il conçoit qu'ils n'ont pas besoin d'être authentifiés. Ses vrais souvenirs se sont construits dans la lecture et son identité dans l'écriture. Même si l'on peut objecter à cette affirmation que cette décision de considérer comme vrais souvenirs les lectures et les films est une décision de l'auteur, il n'en demeure pas moins que c'est ainsi que

⁶ Perec, Georges, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, op.cit., p.14.

⁷ Béhar, Stella, *Georges Perec: Ecrire pour ne pas dire*, op.cit, p.136.

⁸ Perec, Georges, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, op.cit., p.59.

Perec définit son identité; c'est ainsi également qu'il a créé sa marque et sa signature d'auteur, par l'allusion, la citation, la parodie, le plagiat, le remake.

Dans la mesure où la thématique de *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* pose d'une façon aiguë le problème de la mémoire, l'ouvrage l'aborde aussi comme source d'inspiration esthétique. Confronté à l'absence de souvenirs, Perec doit définir une autre voie que Proust ou les surréalistes : et cela non pas parce qu'il cherche à tout prix du nouveau qu'il invente au passage, mais « parce qu'il lui est impossible de faire autrement. Il n'écrit pas contre l'autobiographie traditionnelle mais en marge, ailleurs ... »⁹.

Dans le dernier chapitre de la partie confession de *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec fait une sorte de tentative pour faire surgir ces souvenirs qui n'existent pas. La recherche s'organise autour de points de repère précis tel que des photos, des lieux, des dates, que Perec va suivre chronologiquement et qui n'ont rien à voir avec la mémoire ou le souvenir: «Ce qui est peut-être le plus étonnant dans le projet de Perec, remarque Lejeune, c'est que l'innovation n'était nullement prévue au départ. C'est une solution qui a été imposée par le désespoir. »¹⁰

Pour présenter ses parents, il utilise des photos, donnant une description neutre et précise : la pose, la coiffure, le vêtement, les boucles d'oreille, le sourire... Tout ce qui n'est point tangible se présente comme des conjectures construites à partir d'hypothèses plausibles. Celles-ci sont soit empruntées au domaine du savoir général (le trajet en métro) soit surgies d'un phantasme littéraire comme cette idée que la rue Vilin devait être pavée en bois parce que *l'Ile rose* de Charles Vildrac parle de ces merveilleux petits forts faits de bois derrière lesquels certains enfants de Paris ont eu la joie de se prendre pour des corsaires.

Dans ce dédale, quelques images mnémoniques apparaissent liées à l'évocation de l'école – lieu clé dans la constitution de l'identité individuelle : la première est une image “floue” d'une bousculade dans la cave où les enfants essayent des masques à gaz; la deuxième, l'image de l'auteur “ivre de joie” dévalant la rue en agitant sa première oeuvre de peinture; et la troisième, après avoir obtenu une médaille chèrement gagnée à

⁹ Lejeune, Philippe, *La Mémoire et l'oblique. Georges Perec autobiographe*, op.cit., p.39.

¹⁰ Lejeune, Philippe, *La Mémoire et l'oblique. Georges Perec autobiographe*, op.cit., p.87.

coup de “bons points”, l’enfant Perec se trouve dégradé et dépouillé de sa médaille, à la suite d’une bousculade. Ce qui trouble ce n’est pas le fait en lui - même mais la façon dont Perec analyse l’image : « *Je me demande si ce souvenir ne marque pas en fait son exact contraire : non pas le souvenir d’une médaille arrachée, mais celui d’une étoile épinglée.* »¹¹

Les souvenirs ressemblent de plus en plus à une construction qui introduit le savoir historique. Par cette construction, Perec présente un témoignage implacable sur les séquelles intangibles laissées par une histoire qui a été oblitérée par la mémoire et doit être recomposée, réécrite. En la réécrivant, Perec choisit de montrer les vides ou une sorte de non-mémoire derrière les reconstitutions et les reconstructions. Elle rend également compte du vide qui suit la rupture qui s’est produite avec son passé.

Dans la deuxième partie de la confession de *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, Perec introduit progressivement cette forme de “mémoire lettrée” (selon l’expression de Philippe Lejeune) qu’il reconnaît comme le fondement même de son identité :

[Les livres] m’ont presque servi d’histoire : source d’une mémoire inépuisable, d’un ressassement d’une certitude : les mots étaient à leur place, les livres racontaient des histoires; on pouvait suivre; on pouvait relire, et, relisant, retrouver, magnifié par la certitude qu’on avait de les retrouver.¹²

Perec explique sa relation avec les mots, les noms, les signes et les textes écrits ou cinématographiques et l’importance du syncrétisme entre mots/objets/images. Les noms des villas de Villard-de-Lans où se réfugient ses tantes et ses cousins deviennent les premiers objets d’investigation culturelle. La correspondance entre l’objet et la forme du caractère qui représente la lettre, fait déraiser le souvenir sur un jeu de transformations de caractères, de symboles graphiques. Chaque chapitre présente une étape de l’apprentissage culturel et littéraire de Perec. Les marques de cet apprentissage prennent des formes diverses : jeux de mots, calembours, lectures, films ... Elles sont également d’une manière ou d’une autre liées de façon oblique à la réalité historique et à l’actualité politique de l’époque. Le goût de l’éclectisme, du fétichisme aide Perec à camoufler le passé dans une masse de souvenirs inessentiels. La

11 Perec, Georges, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, op.cit., p.76.

12 Perec, Georges, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, op.cit., p.193.

discontinuité, la fragmentation, la dispersion qui caractérisent le texte participent à « une entreprise de désangoissement : nulle place pour la lamentation, ou la confession développée; le pathos n'est pas de mise, [...] mais une même neutralité dans la présentation et la rédaction des divers souvenirs.»¹³

Quand dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, à la fin de l'ouvrage, les deux récits finissent par converger, l'un donnant une description des objets (dents en or, cheveux, lunettes ...) trouvés sur "W", l'autre décrivant la visite d'une exposition sur les camps de concentration que Perec fait avec sa tante, les ambiguïtés de l'expérience vécue, de l'absence de souvenirs et de la mémoire tronquée se dissolvent complètement. Par contre, l'origine, le goût pour l'écriture et la formalisation esthétique de l'expérience conçue de façon à transmettre la nudité mécanique et adoucie de la violence est expliquée progressivement sans fausse charge émotive. Entre la réécriture fantasmatique de l'univers concentrationnaire et la réécriture des souvenirs – littéralement apprentissage à partir de l'écriture narrative ou fictionnelle – Perec résout cette quête sur les souvenirs, la mémoire, ce qui enfin participe ordinairement à la définition d'une identité, en offrant dans cet ouvrage son portrait autographé.

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¹³ Bertharion, Jacques-Denis, *Poétique de Georges Perec*, op.cit., p.259.

Réel et imaginaire dans *Le Grand Meaulnes* d'Alain-Fournier

Rodica Tomescu¹

Abstract: *Disappointed with the immediate reality, with a world in which they feel misunderstood and that they fail to understand, and with the thirst for adventure typical of their age, the teenagers in the novel Grand Meaulnes by Alain-Fournier try to take refuge in dreams and imaginary worlds where they can accomplish their hopes and expectations. Throughout the novel, the real elements intertwine with the imaginary aspects that are being provided by the heroes' sensibility and quest for evasion.*

Key-words: *adventure, reality, dream, imaginary, evasion, expectation, quest.*

Introduction

Alain-Fournier était cet insatisfait qui voyait bien que le réel des grandes personnes était une illusion et qui ne savait pas être heureux. « Le bonheur est une chose terrible à supporter », avoua-t-il un jour à Jacques Rivière. Son livre le prouve, car, dans *Le Grand Meaulnes*, la réalité est décevante et c'est l'imaginaire des héros qui l'embellit. Les héros adolescents ont soif d'aventures et attendent beaucoup de la vie, leurs rêves étant sans cesse enrichis par l'imagination. Ils ont atteint l'âge de la fragilité, le moment où, pas encore adultes, ils ne sont pas non plus des enfants et on sait bien que cette période de la vie est riche en émotions et en espoirs. Tout est désiré avec beaucoup d'enthousiasme et de ferveur afin de vivre au mieux, ce qui arrive à Augustin, François et Frantz, nos héros qui saisissent toutes les occasions pour profiter de la vie. Tous leurs sens sont constamment sollicités ; l'attente met les

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personnages dans un état d'excitation souvent incontrôlable, ils ne savent pas patienter, ressassent leurs rêves afin que leur univers magique fasse partie de leur quotidien. Leur extrême sensibilité fertilise leur imagination et cette imagination les entraîne vers un Ailleurs, un monde idéal et inconnu.

Une extrême sensibilité

Alain-Fournier était un homme nourri d'illusions. Dès l'enfance il est visité par le merveilleux, par des rêves du paradis perdu qu'il voulait ressusciter. Il le fera dans son chef-d'œuvre, *Le Grand Meaulnes* dont les héros adolescents, sensibles à tout ce qui les entourent, expriment son désir impatient du bonheur absolu et son besoin inlassable de mystique et d'irréalité. Construit comme un roman d'aventures, il recrée poétiquement l'itinéraire de ces adolescents nostalgiques de leur enfance. C'est le genre de roman poétique, cherchant moins à bâtir une intrigue et des personnages qu'un état d'âme. Le personnage adolescent est un être extrêmement sensible, il vit intensément ses émotions et il voit tout ce qui l'entoure par son Moi fragile, il est assoiffé d'expériences nouvelles. Il est à un moment de sa vie où il construit son identité, un temps de recherche et d'introspection d'où surgira cette identité. Derrière le travail de la mémoire et de la méditation on trouve des descriptions de circonstances riches en détails qui laissent deviner d'abord l'extrême sensibilité des héros adolescents, mais aussi l'acuité étonnante de celui qui regarde et qui cherche quelque chose.

Dès les premières pages du livre, on notera la sensibilité de François et ses capacités de transformer son milieu selon ses sentiments. Quand Meaulnes apparaît dans sa vie, au début de l'histoire, il lui prête des pouvoirs extraordinaires et l'entoure d'une aura. Son arrivée est le signe d'une nouvelle existence mais aussi la rupture avec le passé et la tranquillité. Meaulnes est un « envoyé de la Providence » d'après Léon Cellier, mais il n'apporte « ni la lumière ni la paix, mais la tempête » (Léon Cellier, 1963 : 4) ; on pourrait donner à l'arrivée de Meaulnes une valeur symbolique car François le voit comme un être exceptionnel pour vivre l'Aventure. Augustin Meaulnes veut tout : le bonheur, l'amour, bref le paradis sur terre et tout de suite. Ne serait-il pas amoureux de l'impossible et quelque peu rêveur ? Paul Genuist souligne qu'il vit dans une atmosphère très personnelle, car « sa vision du monde n'est pas celle des autres » (Genuist, 1965 : 34) et il refuse « un compromis entre son idéal et la vie réelle » (Genuist, 1965 : 65). C'est pourquoi ses rêves sont toujours proches mais jamais atteints.

L'extrême sensibilité et la capacité de rêver des personnages se lit également dans leur façon de voir leur village et leur département. L'auteur utilise la formule romantique *paysage-état d'âme* et introduit dans les tableaux de la province natale la femme aimée, ses rêves, ses sentiments et ses aspirations. Mais il va plus loin, car la soif d'évasion et d'aventure, la quête du bonheur, le font dépasser les frontières de cet univers concret de l'enfance. Les références aux paysages immenses nous indiquent que les personnages pensent partir à la découverte du monde dès qu'ils dépassent les limites de leur environnement habituel. Leur émotivité les pousse à tout transformer du regard, à considérer tout ce qu'ils regardent selon leur état d'esprit. Jean-Yves Tadié pense que l'on pourrait esquisser à partir de ce texte « une typologie du héros 1900 [...] Toute époque illustre le mythe de Narcisse, l'individu à la recherche de son image » (Tadié, 1978 : 15). Les adolescents agissent comme s'ils portaient en eux un monde merveilleux, ils ont des attitudes mystérieuses, l'air de cacher de beaux projets. On assiste à une perpétuelle quête de soi et tous leurs gestes et actions relèvent leur extrême sensibilité. Il serait intéressant de voir maintenant comment cette sensibilité nourrit l'imagination.

Une imagination fertile

Souvent le récit entraîne le lecteur dans le monde du rêve et du fantasme qui enrichissent le quotidien et le rendent plus supportable. Alain-Fournier, dans une lettre à Jacques Rivière datée du 13 août 1905, explique : « J'entends par rêve une vision du passé, des espoirs, une rêverie d'autrefois revenue, qui rencontre une vision qui s'en va... » Le rêve naît fréquemment de la privation de l'existence, d'une déception et il embellit la réalité. En pensée, les souhaits les plus forts se réalisent. En effet, Meaulnes rêve souvent, lorsqu'il est au calme, qu'il part à la recherche du Domaine perdu pour retrouver Yvonne. À force de penser à elle, il en oublie son aspect physique et son prénom et elle finit par n'être qu'une image. « Souvent, plus tard, lorsqu'il s'endormait après avoir désespérément essayé de se rappeler le beau visage effacé, il voyait en rêve passer d'autres jeunes filles, chacune ayant une des caractéristiques de Mademoiselle de Galais » (LGM : 222). Le monde onirique finit par remplacer le monde concret, par conséquent Augustin ne trouvera jamais le bonheur. L'amour de Meaulnes et d'Yvonne est à la fois beau et tragique et se caractérise par la pureté et la tendresse des sentiments. Mais cet amour pur et

innocent est perturbé par le remord et il finit par un aspect tragique. Par la liaison impure avec Valentine, Meaulnes commet une erreur contre la beauté d'un amour auquel il a tout le temps rêvé et il n'est plus capable de retrouver la pureté de jadis. Le retour au passé et à l'innocence s'avère impossible car en détruisant la perfection, il brise son rêve. Lorsque François retrouve Yvonne dans le village de son oncle Florentin, il invite Meaulnes à une fête afin qu'il revoie la femme qu'il aime. Malheureusement, rien ne se passe comme prévu car Augustin est trop ancré dans le passé ; il s'imaginait tant la revoir dans le château d'autrefois, dans les mêmes conditions, qu'il semble déçu et triste alors que l'on attendait à le voir exprimer sa joie. François raconte ainsi ses impressions suite à cette rencontre : « Nous marchions côte à côte...Vainement j'essayais de faire diversion à la tristesse qui nous gagnait tous les trois » (LGM : 324).

Meaulnes ne pouvait pas profiter du moment présent, il ne pouvait pas exprimer sa joie de revoir Yvonne car il avait épuisé toute son énergie en rêve. Sa mémoire déforme et embellit ce qu'il avait vécu. On pourrait, en quelque sorte, établir des analogies entre le roman d'Alain-Fournier et la littérature de la chevalerie car l'amour de Meaulnes et d'Yvonne est un exemple parfait d'amour courtois. Meaulnes part à la quête de la pureté comme les chevaliers de la Table Ronde partaient à la quête du Graal, symbole de l'aspiration à la perfection chrétienne qui mène à Dieu. René Vincent fut parmi les premiers à saisir cette analogie : « Le mystère du Grand Meaulnes, de cette aventure étrange qui est la recherche du domaine inconnu et de l'irréelle Yvonne de Galais, c'est aux aventures de notre littérature chevaleresque qu'il nous faut irrésistiblement songer ; aux exploits mystiques des chevaliers de la Table Ronde en quête du Graal, qui n'existait peut-être pas, mais qui avait le réel et extraordinaire pouvoir de muer les hommes en héros, de les délivrer de toute cette part de la nature humaine qui est basse ou bestiale et de faire d'eux ces êtres surnaturels que conçoivent les poètes ou l'imagination des peuples. » (Vincent : 1939)

L'imagination reste pour les adolescents le meilleur moyen pour s'échapper du réel décevant. Walter Jöhr disait que « la magie du *Grand Meaulnes* naît en grande partie de l'état d'attente ou d'aventure où se trouvent les protagonistes du roman » (1945 : 160) et cet état est nourri par leur imagination.

Rêve, imagination, imaginaire, évasion, restent les coordonnées récurrentes du roman. Si Meaulnes vit plutôt dans le passé et se nourrit de ses rêves, François, avec ses facultés

d'émerveillement et d'enthousiasme, vit intensément en imagination les aventures de son ami. Il ne se conçoit que dans la dualité puissante qu'il forme avec Meaulnes, il est son double authentique. Quant à Frantz, ce personnage orgueilleux, séducteur et agité, il représente le double antagoniste de Meaulnes, celui qui s'oppose aux actions de l'autre, le double qui détruit le merveilleux qui se passe dans la vie de son ami. Frantz reste l'éternel adolescent qui vit dans un monde à lui, éloigné de la société et du monde réel. Personnage chimérique et fantastique, il apparaît tout le long du roman comme un enfant qui refuse de grandir préférant s'enfermer dans un univers personnel fait de jeux, de plaisirs, d'espoirs et de vagabondage. Mais, pour tous ces adolescents, chaque lendemain est une promesse car ils ont une confiance illimitée en ce que l'avenir pourrait leur offrir. L'imagination nourrit cet optimisme puisque dans les rêves tout se réalise, tout est possible.

La quête d'un Ailleurs

Empreint de merveilleux et de mystérieux, *Le Grand Meaulnes* est un roman subtil, d'une richesse inépuisable. Il nous offre le spectacle de trois adolescents qui cherchent à échapper au monde réel qui ne leur convient pas pour s'enfuir dans les rêves et trouver, peut-être, un jour, un Ailleurs idéal.

Au sujet d'Alain-Fournier, Paul Genuist écrivait : « Nous avons vu comment, être sensible, très idéaliste, il avait eu la vision d'un monde sans tare. Toujours insatisfait dans son désir, il poursuit la quête d'une plénitude qu'il aurait voulu connaître car, tel Lazare qui a vu Dieu et ne peut après sa résurrection détacher son regard du divin, Alain-Fournier ne peut abandonner son rêve de bonheur, de joie profonde, de pureté, de perfection surhumaine qu'une enfance heureuse lui a fait entrevoir » (Paul Genuist, 1965 : 173). Ainsi Augustin, François et Frantz, les trois facettes de l'auteur, ne parviennent non plus s'adapter à ce monde. Par conséquent, étant des « anges déchus », selon l'expression de Pascal, ils ne peuvent s'empêcher de faire le rêve fou de regagner le Domaine perdu du Paradis. Cet Ailleurs, les protagonistes cherchent à l'atteindre par différents moyens. Par exemple, ils s'isolent dans le noir qu'ils considèrent le lieu de tous les possibles. On assiste à un « hymne de la nuit » (Gilbert Durand, 1969 : 248). Dès le premier chapitre, la nuit est un instant magique. Meaulnes arrive de nuit chez Seurel et il entraîne François dehors pour allumer un feu d'artifices. Le jeune écolier, tranquille et sage jusqu'alors, se tient « dressé dans la lueur magique, tenant par la

main le grand gars nouveau venu et ne bronchant pas» (LG M : 164). Ou bien encore, la nuit permettant la solitude, donc la réflexion, c'est une porte ouverte sur le possible. En effet, c'est seul dans le noir que Meaulnes repense à son aventure et tente de retrouver le parcours effectué le soir de son escapade. « Ce ne fut pas la seule nuit où, réveillé par le bruit de ses pas, je le trouvai ainsi, vers une heure du matin, déambulant à travers la chambre et les greniers» (LGM : 190). Cette présence nocturne apporte une tonalité tragique au roman et favorise la révélation d'un nouvel univers.

Remarquons alors l'importance du grenier dans le roman ou bien des étages supérieurs des habitations, des endroits mystérieux qui se veulent exploiter. Meaulnes apparaît au début au bas d'un escalier, il semble descendre d'un monde de rêve et de solitude à la fois. « Nous étions debout tous les trois, le cœur battant, lorsque la porte des greniers qui donnait sur l'escalier de la cuisine s'ouvrit [...] C'était un grand gars de dix-sept ans environ [...] Je pus distinguer aussi qu'il souriait... » (LMG : 163). Augustin semble heureux, soit parce qu'il a réussi à inquiéter des adultes, soit parce qu'il descend d'un endroit enchanteur. Ou bien, lorsqu'il est au Domaine, il dort dans la chambre de Wellington qui se situe à l'étage puisqu'il précise qu'il va « descendre au dîner » (LGM : 211). C'est dans cette chambre qu'a lieu une sorte de cérémonie initiatique du héros car, avant de changer ses vêtements, il se lave, chose qui pourrait suggérer que, pour accéder au Domaine mystérieux, au « Paradis », l'initié doit avoir le corps et l'âme propres. À de nombreuses reprises, il éprouve cette envie de découvrir un autre monde, de franchir un seuil, d'exploiter l'univers des grands.

Dans le roman, on notera également une profondeur symptomatique de la campagne. L'action se passe dans un village mais tout semble immense. Heureusement, dans cette immensité, la maison apparaît comme un espace sécurisant prêt à recueillir une âme en détresse. Selon Bachelard « elle constitue, entre le microcosme du corps humain et le cosmos, un microcosme secondaire » (Bachelard : 1981) et Gilbert Durand la définit en deux termes contradictoires lorsqu'il dit que c'est « un labyrinthe rassurant » (Gilbert Durand, 1969 : 278). La maison est à la fois un refuge et un moyen de s'évader puisque portes, fenêtres, cour ou barrières, peuvent symboliser des ouvertures sur un autre monde.

Quant à la cour, elle est le point de jonction entre l'insécurité d'un ailleurs inconnu et la sécurité du domaine familial

rassurant. Cette cour devient souvent un lieu de décision. Elle est parfois, aussi, le théâtre des dernières nouvelles, comme l'annonce de la naissance de l'enfant d'Yvonne : « Une femme entra dans la cour [...] Elle venait m'annoncer qu'une petite fille était née aux Sablonnières » (LGM : 353). Ou bien l'annonce de la mort de Mademoiselle de Galais : « À sept heures, il y avait déjà deux ou trois gamins dans la cour [...] je vis le plus grand des écoliers se détacher du groupe [...] il venait me dire que la jeune dame de Sablonnière était morte hier à la tombée de la nuit » (LGM : 357). À travers la pluralité de cours, on suit les aggravations et les rémissions du mal et du tragique dans le roman. De même, les barrières qui clôturent la cour représentent les frontières qui séparent deux mondes. Il y a, par exemple, l'intérieur de la cour d'école, avec les jeux, les joies, les disputes et l'extérieur, ce qui est dehors, c'est-à-dire l'Aventure et l'Inconnu.

La quête de l'Ailleurs se fait également par les fenêtres ou les seuils, qui sont des limites à franchir ou pas, selon le cas. Même si Meaulnes se blesse en les franchissant, il parvient à s'évader. À la fête étrange, au fur et à mesure qu'il passe une porte, il découvre un autre monde, celui où les enfants sont rois. « Une lourde porte de bois [...] était à demi ouverte. L'élégant s'y engouffra. Meaulnes le suivit et, dès ses premiers pas dans le corridor, il se trouva, sans voir personne, entouré de rires, de chants, d'appels et de poursuites » (LGM : 213). Il a pénétré cet univers magique et enchanteur facilement parce qu'il est à un âge où l'on passe aisément d'un monde réel à un monde rêvé. Il voit son aventure comme un saut au Paradis et tout le reste de sa vie ne lui suffira pour retrouver cet univers paradisiaque où il a connu le bonheur. Il a réussi, pour un instant, à soulever le voile qui sépare le présent du passé mais il se rend compte qu'un tel retour dans le passé sera impossible.

Meaulnes aussi bien que François et Frantz se situent à un moment charnière de leur existence : sans être des adultes, ils ne sont plus des enfants, et pour cette raison ils oscillent entre les deux pôles, le rêve et la réalité, le présent et le passé. Les critiques du roman d'Alain-Fournier parlent d'un « rêve éveillé » qui crée cette impression de nostalgie. Meaulnes regarde tout le temps vers le passé même lorsqu'il retrouve Yvonne, comme s'il voulait anéantir une fin heureuse et tellement attendue. Ce passé dont il ne peut pas ou peut-être ne veut pas se séparer devient pour lui une obsession qui ne laissera pas évoluer et devenir adulte. Pour Françoise Payat, par exemple, « *Le Grand Meaulnes* est un roman écrit au passé, restituant au lecteur un passé perdu, et marqué du signe de

l'irréremédiable. Le sentiment du passé se confond bien, pour les héros, avec celui d'une dépossession qui les condamnent à la nostalgie » (Payat, 1969 : 83).

Conclusion

Alain-Fournier écrivait lui-même à propos du *Grand Meaulnes* : « Mon livre futur sera peut-être un perpétuel va-et-vient du rêve à la réalité. » Le rêve est pour lui la vie heureuse de l'enfant. Les trois personnages principaux, bien qu'ayant à peu près dix-sept ou dix-huit ans, sont plus souvent vus comme des enfants que comme de jeunes adultes. Tout au long du roman, on assiste à leur refus de grandir. En effet, ils souhaitent tous rester dans le monde magique de l'enfance, par conséquent le merveilleux de cette histoire réside dans le discret mouvement de balancier où les protagonistes passent, sans s'en rendre compte, d'un monde à l'autre, c'est-à-dire de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, ou bien encore du rêve à la réalité. Leur souffrance provient du fait qu'ils éprouvent des sentiments très forts, comme des adultes, alors qu'ils agissent comme des enfants.

Le Grand Meaulnes, même s'il est un roman sur l'imaginaire, est également un roman qui traite de la vie réelle et quotidienne de jeunes gens qui ont soif de vie. D'une part, l'auteur cherche à montrer au lecteur combien la force des rêves peut être grande chez certains adolescents, mais d'autre part, il tente également de transmettre le message selon lequel il peut être dangereux de ne vivre que dans l'imaginaire et dans un monde onirique que l'on se crée.

Ce roman d'amour et d'aventures est frémissant d'émotion car, à sa lecture, des souvenirs identiques à ceux des héros surgissent du fond de la mémoire. Chaque lecteur a en lui une part du *Grand Meaulnes*, de François Seurel ou de Frantz de Galais. Pour Christian Dédéyant, il a été écrit pour revivre l'enfance, pour soulever « le voile qui sépare l'amer présent des magiques années » (Dédéyant, 1967 : 46).

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ABSENCE versus PRESENCE
Cultural-isms

ABWESENHEIT *versus*
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Kulturwissenschaftliche
Studien

ABSENCE *versus*
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Études culturels

Memories of the Colonial Past: Re-Visiting the Colonial Discourse

Magda Danciu¹

Abstract. *The present paper is meant to foreground those discursive elements that eventually constructed the concept of Otherness in a stereotypical, judgmental manner within the context of Imperial Britain and Euro-centredness, as they are identified in famous texts authored by Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster*

Key words: *otherness, colonialism, Orient vs. Occident, discursive identity*

The globalization processes going on today imply intercultural and transcultural geographic and communicative flows through which individuals become aware of how identities are crafted through histories and pasts of differences and otherness. More than ever before, memory has become crucial as it is life, “Memory is subject to remembering and forgetting”(Zeynep Celik,2002: 62), it is vulnerable to appropriation and manipulation and can lie dormant for long periods, only to be reawakened all of a sudden when individuals and families/groups/nations construct their identities by “storying the various random incidents and contingent turning points or their lives into a single, coherent narrative”(Hall, Stuart ,2002 :74) and produce a national story called tradition. Tradition should persist in spite of the shifts and transformations a community is subdued to, it cannot be dissolved, it relies on the difference which cannot be erased or traded. Cultural difference and plurality are provocative challenges to the fantasy about a stable and continuous subject, in a world of transiency, immigration, deterritorialization and requires a revision of the concept of

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Otherness.

Disclosing the colonial discourse

When tackling literary texts written during colonial times or even in the aftermath of the loss of the British Empire, one senses the presence of the colonized *Other* as symbolizing specific differences and standing for testimony of the way in which they are ready to reflect elements of Eurocentrism that their authors subliminally favoured. The centredness and the interconnectedness of themes and discourses, most often fictionally represent the colonised lands in travel accounts, documents, diaries, narratives, written under imperial licence. Western writings constructed the image of the Orient and of the Oriental by stereotypes and prejudices. They eventually shape and somehow distort the image of the Other in the process of representation that was imagined to finally become a tool of power that turns on the recognition and denial of racial, cultural and historical differences. In his seminal study, Edward W. Said explains that “*the Orient is a creation having a history and a traditional knowledge of its own, an imaginary and linguistic dimension which renders its reality and specificity as reported to the Western World*” (Edward W. Said, 1995: 16). The Orient-Occident relationship represents a formula of power, domination, complex hegemony generating a texture of myths, or lies, to endorse the necessary discursive image about Orient, revealing theories and practices of many generations in their attempt to offer an overall system of comprehending the Oriental world from the position of the European identity, regarded as superior to any non-European cultures and peoples.

Said mentions that the perception of the Orient in the eyes of a European can be epitomized in some facts, namely, it is a romantic, exotic place inhabited by uncommon beings, haunted by memories and obsessive, recurrent landscapes, fertilized by remarkable experiences; it is adjacent to Europe, yet far enough; it represents the richest and oldest colonies, the root of civilizations and languages, a rivalling culture and a persistent image of the Other. The Oriental substantializes the image of (Western)European as being the opposite of his own image, ideas, personality, experiences; this image was historically constructed when the Western world (mostly the British) designated the East (Asia, Egypt) geographically, morally, culturally as being different/opposed in terms of personality, atmosphere, mode of production, traditions, everyday life. This canonical assessment

showed a knowledge that expressed domination and authority, as well as the determination to deny autonomy to Oriental countries by governing their people belonging to a different creed, race, discipline, conditions of life, turning them into subjects of a dominant Western power, guided by logical thinking in understanding the limitations of the Oriental, in finding a worthier, stronger bond of union between the rulers and the ruled.

Gradually a canon of Oriental wisdom has developed, due to the aforementioned collective contribution, according to which the following national profile has been created:

accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind; want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is the main characteristic of the Oriental mind. The mind of the Oriental is wanting in symmetry, his reasoning is one of the most slipshod descriptions, he is deficient in the logical faculty, unable to draw the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which he may admit the truth. His explanations are lengthy and wanting in lucidity, he contradicts himself many times before finishing his story, he breaks down under the mildest process of cross-examination. (Edward W. Said, 1995: 38).

The Orientals are described as being gullible, devoid of energy and initiative, practising flattery, intrigue, cunning, lacking kindness to animals, they prove to be liars, lethargic, suspicious, they ignore roads or pavements, they are seen as irrational, depraved, briefly putting, “different” from the general assessment of the European, posited in complete opposition (rational, virtuous, mature, “normal”). The Oriental, Said asserts, had to live in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, with its own “national, cultural, epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence”, with its intelligibility and identity emerging from “a complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West.”(39). Knowledge of the Orient works with terms like the Orient, the Oriental, the Oriental world, within Orientalism, representing “a way of thinking lying in the ontological and epistemological difference between Orient and Western World” (14), a “manual” for classification, scrutiny, judgment, discipline governing purposes. Orientalism, originating in the British and French enterprises and projects covering the Far East colonies, lies in a set of ideas and concepts which supply the Orientals with “a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere” and allows Europeans to

deal with Orientals as “a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics”(42). The Orient was re/configured through a dominant, authoritative view based on experiences and practices in India, the Levant, in terms of trade with spices, colonial army and administration; official reports or personal documents (letters, diaries, logbooks) referred to Oriental issues such as Oriental despotism, Biblical lands, splendour and sensuality mixing with cruelty, particular philosophy and wisdom, later stimulating a scholarly interest for Oriental culture, materialized in text translations, in setting up societies and associations for Oriental studies, in publishing periodicals to circulate the knowledge thus accumulated. Yet,

Orientalism imposed limits upon thought about the Orient as it was ultimately a political vision of a reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’). (43).

For the representatives of the British Empire, the Oriental represented a subject race and an example of an Oriental, that is, ‘different’ mentality, a profitable way to enhance metropolitan authority at home, as it revealed its strength in a binary opposition to the weakness of the Orient, perceived from the dominant, governing position. The general picture foregrounded a precise Western rationality, peacefulness, liberalism, logic, capability of holding real values, lack of natural suspicion as opposed to the Arab-Orientals who “were none of these things due to their value systems and their natural world of anxiety generated by generalized suspicion and distrust, by need of vengeance not to fee the ‘ego-destroying’ shame.” (44).

Discovering the Other

As one can easily acknowledge, the interest for the Orient was both historical and geographical, as recorded in history books, travel books, memoirs, official documents as it became part of a Western project “to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it” (94). Said demonstrates how Orientalism disseminated the knowledge about the Orient via a large number of scholars, translators, critics, language teachers, professors of Sanskrit grammar, Phoenician numismatic or Arabic poetry, who promoted a specific discourse meant to both maintain the difference and to enable a transition between the two worlds by “scientific

discoveries, philological reconstructions, psychological analyses, sociological description”.(24). Orientalism is to be seen as a dimension of the political and intellectual modern culture, foregrounding the question of the way in which “political imperialism governs a field of study, imagination, and academic institutions”(24) and showing how philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economical theories, fiction and poetry got “to serve the imperialist concept about the Orient”(26). The critics and the literati think of Orientalism as an example of interconnection between society, history, intertextuality, as a way of linking “ideology to politics and the logic of power” (35), as an intellectual, academic and cultural resource to work with in a transnational discourse.

Colonial discourse, Homi Bhabha synopsis, is referred to as having created a space for subject people through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited while seeking authorisation for its strategies, by the production of the canonical image of the coloniser and the colonized, stereotypically and antithetically evaluated. The aim of the colonial discourse was to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order on the one hand, to justify conquest, and on the other hand, to establish systems of administration and instruction.

In his *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Joseph Conrad opted to demonstrate the dynamics of the stereotypical construction of Otherness picturing the Congolese African as a single unit, first,

Glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones received a full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young – almost a boy – but you know with them it’s hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuits I had in my pocket. (Conrad, 1995:17)

Then the image of Otherness is grafted on the group of local people underlying the same construction of power vs. submission relationship:

Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads (...) Black rags were round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I [Marlowe] could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking.(...) these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law (...) had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me (...) with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. (p.15)

The focus is generally laid on the way in which the difference is rendered in the contrast to the white dominant representatives favouring the empowered party:

When near the building [of the station] I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand (...) he was the company's chief accountant (...) His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. (p.17).

The same paradigm of domination/subordination, sensible even within the context of everydayness of relationships, within personal experiences lived during British colonialism is demonstrated by E(dward).M(orga)n.Forster in *A Passage to India* (1924) as Hamidullah observes as being a phenomenon that operates at both an individual and group level:

It is impossible here (to be friends with an Englishman). It is possible only in England. (Forster, E.M., ,1979:.5), being an essential issue to consider, as put by dr. Aziz: "Why be either friends with the fellows or not friends? Let us shut them out and be jolly. Queen Victoria and Mrs Bannister were the only exceptions, and they're dead!" (7).

There is a specific way of representing the natives: it requires certain strategies, as mentioned in Kurtz's report for the

International society for the Suppression of Savage Customs:

We whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might of a deity (...) By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded, etc, etc.(Conrad, 1995:p.50)

It is also the way British domination constructs the formula of power and hegemony within the consciousness of its representatives:

For Miss Quested, the true India slid by unnoticed. Colour would remain – the pageant of birds in the early morning, brown bodies, white turbans, idols, whose flesh was scarlet or blue- (...) She would see India always as a frieze, never as a spirit.(Forster, E.M., 1979: 38)

Foster renders colonial mentality and atmosphere within a dialogical process, the characters being carriers of traditional, almost stereotypical beliefs of both Orient/Occident regarding the representation of alterity:

“Mrs Moore: I don’t think I understand people very well. In only know whether I like or dislike them.
Aziz: Then you are an Oriental” (17),
or the justification of the characters’ belief in the supremacy of the white race against the different others:
“We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster” (Conrad, 1995: 35).

Concluding on colonial identities

There was an initial option to select several examples found in texts belonging to different periods of colonial dominations and from different British colonies in order to demonstrate and validate the stereotypical construction of Otherness based on the theoretical framework which became so well-known due to the contribution of Said and Bhabba. The presence of the white people in these ex-centric and mysterious parts of the world (Congo, respectively, India) is explained by their desire to explore romantic, exotic places inhabited by uncommon beings, as stated in the corpus of

knowledge about the Orient, that is, to explore the dark parts of the unknown world,

“[The colonist] has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is so detestable(Conrad, 1995: 6), when The blank spaces of Africa became spaces of darkness” (7);

The English colonists and visitors are also urged to see how epitomes of an already accepted image of the coloniser and the colonized get materialized as a result of a serious endeavour to stereotypically and antithetically evaluate this difference in most documents recording the perception of the west. Thus for them India becomes the embodiment of the Oriental space with its real and imaginary features, tattooed in the collective memory of the newcomers to the country, mostly geographically speaking, “Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasance, washed by a noble river.” (Forster, E.M., 1979:3).

By questioning their own identity and outlook, creatively stimulated by the discovery of alien cultures, both Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster, among other post-war writers, explored the findings and experiences of their forerunners in terms of difference and otherness. They work with the concept of cultural identity as the interface of cultural performances that should lead to the acknowledgement of cultural difference in a process of permanent negotiation between the margin and the centre, the colonizer and the colonized – a contrast that slightly disappeared within the recent times of postmodernism and globalization.

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Self-exile as the Failure of a Utopian Quest

Sonia Vass ¹

Abstract: *The following paper discusses Daniela Zeca's last novel, "Omar the blind", witnessing the Iranian culture and religion collapsing in front of the laws of the Islamic fundamentalism. Inside the borders of his homeland, Omar is a victim of the theocratic interdictions. Outside his country he becomes his own enemy. The novel tells a story about unfaithful love, about Heaven and Hell, about light and darkness, and the futile quest of orphaned souls.*

Key words: *Zeca, exile, Zoroastrianism, Islam, adultery*

Following her first novels, "The Fictionalized History of a Safari/„Istoria romanțată a unui Safari" and "The Demons of the Wind"/„Demonii vântului", "Omar the Blind"/„Omar cel orb" represents the last piece of the so-called "Oriental Trilogy" that Daniela Zeca has been planning to write for a period of over ten years.²

Engaging in thorough research, as seen in the preface of the novel, the author permeated the interstices of the Iranian culture and religion, attempting to reconstitute the transitory period of the Muslim community from the oppressive regime of Mohammad Reza to the *pasdars* of the Islamic Revolution.

During one of her interviews, while talking about her published travel journal, "Ten Days Under the Veil", the author stated that she had wanted to meet and interview the controversial president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Her stubborn and perseverant attempt resulted in the president's indulgence of

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2 The English translation of the titles of the novels appears on the program of the "New Literature From Europe Festival". Daniela Zeca herself attended the event that took place in New-York, in November 2013: <http://www.acfny.org/event/cab-chats/>, accessed at 18.05.2015, 20:35

allowing her to visit the temple of Zarathustra, the former imperial capital and even use Facebook in Iran (which is prohibited by law). The author faced herself with the need to choose between the journalistic urge to expose the violent consequences of the Islamic fundamentalism, and the opportunity to explore the mystical depths of Iran with its assemblage of mosques, palaces and temples, inaccessible to the eyes of most Europeans.

Omar, the protagonist of the novel, is a character whose family endured the atrocious persecutions of the Islamic Revolution. As a witness to the clash of two gods, the Prophet and Ahura Mazda, Omar pursued the utopia of self-exile, choosing to live in a European country that didn't understand and didn't accept him.

Born in Yazd, in the very crucible of the Zoroastrian cult, Omar witnessed his father and grandfather collapsing in front of the laws of the Islamic fundamentalism. When they decided to flee their hometown and take up the life of merchants in Tabriz, Omar's mother refused to leave and died in anguish, under the pressure of the unexpected change. Her mother's funeral, buried against her will, in the moist grounds of Teheran, represented the outset for Omar's resentful plea against a tired and unjust God.

When his grandfather died, his last wish was to be buried in Yazd, respecting the old rite of Zarathustra, a forbidden practice after the Islamic Revolution. According to tradition, the Zoroastrian funeral had to take place in the Towers of Silence or "dakhmas", "a wide tower with a platform open to the sky on top of a hill where Zoroastrians brought corpses for vultures to devour. (...) After being cleaned, the corpse is set in front of the sun and the birds eventually come in. The bones of the dead were put in a well-like depth in center of the tower, which was called a *stoudan*."³

Caught by the Shiite guards while carrying grandfather's body to the towers, Omar's father was incarcerated and deprived of his beloved carpet factory in Tabriz.

Gradually Omar's birth country was perceived as a land of terror, a world of the whispered silence, censored by the theocratic interdictions of the Islam. After the institution of the *ayatollah*, the children of the remaining *Zartosht* were banned to drink from the same fountain as the Muslim ones. The bakery of a Turk was replaced over night with a yarn storehouse, since his

³ "Tower of Silence", <https://theblueart.wordpress.com/category/tower-of-silence/>, accessed at 18.05.2015, 22:15

innocent “bread faces”, decorated with pistachio eyes - delicacies of the local children, were against the teachings of the Koran.

Omar’s father was allowed to ransom his freedom after his son married Ghazal, the daughter of a Shiite *pasdar* (“officer of Islam”). Frustrated over a few years of unsuccessful marriage, he exiles himself to an East-European country, being practically “adopted” by Godun, a local owner, who eventually becomes his business partner.

Omar represents the typology of the unadaptable, contradictory, character. Named by his mother after Omar Khayyam, the great Persian poet whose legacy outlived the turmoil of time, he was destined for greater achievements. Yet he was awarded several insulting nicknames throughout the novel, like Homer, The Terrorist, The Circumcised, Bin Laden or Omar Kalif. Being a refrigerator engineer by profession, he despises the harsh winters in Europe and yearns for the dry fire of the desert. Stuck in this new country that resembles Neverland, he’s unable to return to his family or to move on. He’s constantly trying to find a matching correlative to heal his consuming home sickness, but the world he’s longing for only exists in his memories. In the shallow European land, the haste of modernity reduces everything to ephemeral bits of plastic and thread.

The occasional dissolution of real into fictional is interceded by Eleonor, the charcoal cat, with sparkling honey and saffron eyes. She represents the mediator who ensures the safe passage between parallel worlds. Trapped in the attic like a pharaoh in his tomb, Omar imagines ways of altering the path of time. With Eleonor as a guide, he repeatedly jumps in and out of the frames that enclose Godun’s replicas of famous paintings. The author chooses to symbolically dismantle one of Paolo Veronese’s canvases: “The Family of Darius before Alexander”. The painting tells the story of Alexander the Great, who conquers the Persian Empire, ruled by Darius. The mother, wife and children of Darius kneel in front of Alexander, pleading for mercy. Omar’s and Eleonor’s intrusion turn the grave scene into the burlesque setting of a commercial, shot with background actors. Everything is fake, the setting is a painted poster, and the clothes are too tight to fit Omar for the role of Alexander.

The Veterinarian, the Amazon horsewoman, represents the European correspondent of Ghazal. Independent and strong-headed, both of them embody a type of ethereal woman that you can neither catch, nor lose. As the owner of an equestrian club, the

image of her, riding an obsidian stallion, symbolizes the erotic frenzy that Omar experiences along her side.

His decision to take riding lessons reveals his weak character and emphasizes his inability to control his lover's life or the life of another being. Steering a horse outside the paddock, in the open field, proves his unrestrained desire to escape, but confronted with a sudden feeling of liberty and disregarding its rider, the tamed horse always chooses to run back to its protective, safe shelter.

Omar is stuck in the midst of an identity conflict. His self-image is unclearly represented: he is both an exiled man and a lost wanderer, he is not Arab, but Persian and he is a *Zartosht*, and not a Muslim:

maybe the only goal of his wanderings here, on a new land, was realizing that the world wasn't supposed to be copied unendingly, just like in Godun's pastiches; it had to be rewritten, reinvented and, sometimes, re-created.(Zeca 190) ⁴

Thus, Omar's fascination with the Persian oasis drives him to build an ivy labyrinth that looks like a welcoming, green gulf. This artificial paradise reenacts the exhilarant beauty of the ancient, mystical Persian garden: "The image of a lush garden is one that is deeply rooted in both the religious and cultural heritage of the Persian design. In a region of the world where water is a precious commodity, it is perhaps not surprising that the garden, with an abundance of flora and fauna, is the Muslim symbol of paradise."(Amadi 62) Omar's sanctuary draws the long, sinuous and enigmatic path of his life in the shape of a maze, but centered around a spiraling ladder. Without ever knowing whether escaping the interconnected passages represents an achievable purpose, he can climb up that ladder, pausing for a breath while watching everything from above, and return to complete the essential task of his existence: the crossing of the finish line.

In spite of the fact that the novel bears the name of the main character, the captivating Ghazal is the true heroine of the book. Left to raise their son alone, she sacrificed eleven years of her life waiting for her husband to return. As a lawyer, she advocated for the human rights, defending abused children and women,

4 All the excerpts from the novel, cited in the article, are translated by the article's author

eventually rediscovering love by the side of a French-Iranian journalist. The ending of the novel inverts the two love stories: Ghazal is lapidated for adultery and Omar, having lost his eyesight, is doomed to perish alone and forgotten amongst strangers.

The symbol of the flying carpet

It is widely known that each Persian rug is considered an individual, unique work of art. Every carpet encloses an untold story, deeply embedded in its stylized motifs. Among the floral models that embellish their surface, one of the distinctive patterns created by the weavers of Tabriz is that of the tree of life. As the oldest, pre-Christian, both mythological and religious symbol, it constantly reminds the rug's owner about the resplendent realm of afterlife:

The trees grow from the base of the rug, starting just within its borders and continuing to fill the entire field. The leafy branches are spread and dotted with flowers and birds. Often there will be a stream or pool at the foot of the tree and, perhaps, a few small animals. (...) References to a *tree of life* as the connecting link between the human and heavenly worlds are found in diverse cultures throughout Europe and Asia. In Islam it symbolizes the bridge between paradise, the world of men and the world above. (Amadi 63)

After becoming a *bazari* (i.e. merchant) in Tabriz, Omar's father told his son that "heaven is a carpet: souls float gently over it, light as ash, soft as the lint of wool." (Zeca 109) Young Omar knew the carpets better than anyone, named them and classified them according to their purpose: for night, for eating, for prayer, for loneliness or fellowship. He thought of them as windows to other worlds. When his father sold one of his dearest carpets disregarding Omar's entreaties, his grandfather bestowed upon him a silver-thread rug, depicting a nocturne filigree of an enigmatic celestial body, trapped in the cobweb of a starry sky. He called it "The Sun of the Night".

The novel's author mentions the importance of sun in the ancient Zoroastrian cult, known as the religion of the "beautiful light": at the beginning of the Christian Era, Zoroastrianism claimed the worship of the Vedic solar deity, Mithra, celebrating the triumph of light over darkness (Zeca 10-11). Thus the fabric's pattern envelops the essential and powerful alliance between light (depicted by the sun) and Ahura Mazda, the supreme divinity of the

Zoroastrians, symbolized by the sky.

Permanently displayed on the floorings of his homes, the carpet becomes an indispensable asset in Omar's life, much like water or sleep. The magical rug seems to reenact a story from the "Tales of 1,001 Nights", as its owner dreams of riding it into the crimson sky of tomorrow's dawn. The carpet provides greatness and the power of wisdom to Omar, who resembles King Solomon of Israel, from the Jewish folktale "Solomon and the Ant": "When God appointed Solomon king over every created thing, He gave him a large carpet sixty miles long and sixty miles wide, made of green silk interwoven with pure gold, and ornamented with figured decorations. Surrounded by his four princes, Asaph Berechiah, prince of men, Ramirat, prince of the demons, a lion, prince of beasts, and an eagle, prince of birds, when Solomon sat upon the carpet he was caught up by the wind, and sailed through the air so quickly that he breakfasted at Damascus and supped in Media."⁵

The carpet is endowed with a premonitory function throughout the novel. After having fled to the East European country, Omar left his magical carpet sink into oblivion, storing it rolled up in a corner of his attic, concealed from the eyes of others. The color of the sun painted on the fabric is purple, thus signaling the fading of the light and foreshadowing Omar's inevitable blindness. He unwrapped it one last time to use it as a *zaronim*⁶, not long before permanently losing his eyesight, only to find out that he had forgotten the essence of his faith: the language of prayers.

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Un mythe antique rajeuni : « l'Orphée » de Jean COCTEAU

Constanța Niță¹

Abstract : Dans son «Orphée », Jean COCTEAU (1889 – 1963) s'est emparé du mythe orphique en faisant de l'orphisme, en tant que pouvoir magique du langage, l'un de ses thèmes préférés. car le mythe du légendaire Orphée, ce héros tragique de l'amour plus fort que la mort, s'inscrit en majuscules au cœur même de l'univers dramatique de Cocteau comme un thème préférentiel qui mène au drame du poète, du créateur. L'auteur en voulut même faire « le mythe du dramaturge - poète écorché vif ». Cependant, l'intégration des structures archétypales que sont les mythes dans la mentalité moderne relève d'une volonté de les rajeunir, sans se soucier d'anachronismes, en les traitant sans solennité et en les désacralisant à bon escient.

Key-words : mythe orphique, théâtralité, jeu de sur-illusion, didascalies, lecture productive, voyage initiatique, orphisme, hybris, désacralisation, anachronismes.

Du mythe antique au mythe moderne

Jean Cocteau semble être, à côté d'André Gide, l'initiateur d'une mode, sinon d'une tendance dans le théâtre français du XX-e siècle, mode ou tendance que Jean Giraudoux et Jean Anouilh, de même que les « existentialistes » Jean- Paul Sartre et Albert Camus ont particulièrement illustrée : le retour aux mythes antiques et aux légendes médiévales en tant que sources inépuisables de thèmes et de situations dramatiques et, non en dernier lieu, de poésie. À prendre Mircea Eliade pour guide dans les vastes territoires du mythe, on apprend que celui-ci est une réalité culturelle extrêmement complexe, qui remonte à une Antiquité préhistorique lointaine, « *in illo tempore* », selon l'expression consacrée par ce savant d'origine roumaine. « Il raconte une histoire sacrée,

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exemplaire, qui relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des commencements(...). En somme, les mythes décrivent les divers et parfois dramatiques irruptions du sacré/du surnaturel/dans le Monde »(M.Eliade,1975 :14– 15). Le recours de bon nombre d'écrivains modernes aux mythes et aux légendes antiques représente une quête du « temps paradisiaque perdu» (dans l'acception freudienne) que l'on voudrait revivre et qui se confond avec l'éternité.

À partir des mythes de la révolte et de la liberté (tel le Prométhée gidien), jusqu'aux mythes de la connaissance orphique et narcissique, et en passant par la légende biblique et chrétienne pour aboutir aux mythes contemporains, tels l'enfer sartrien des *Huis clos*, le mystérieux *Godot* de Samuel Becket ou les *Rhinocéros* de Ionesco, le mythe, en tant que«modèle exemplaire de toutes les activités humaines significatives»(M. Eliade,1975 : 16) a fourni une matière thématique inépuisable à la scène française. Chez les auteurs de l'entre-deux-guerres, **mythe** et **poésie** se confondent, car la poésie s'apparente étroitement à la philosophie, aussi bien qu'à la religion, du fait même que « leurs racines puisent dans la même source et que la même sève les unit» (T. Vianu, 1971 :17/ n. trad.). Cependant l'intégration de ces structures archétypales dans la mentalité moderne relève d'une volonté de moderniser et de rajeunir les mythes, sans se soucier d'anachronismes, en les traitant sans solennité et en les désacralisant à bon escient.

En tant que poète, Jean Cocteau a eu l'intuition que son art n'aboutit à un enrichissement que s'il se nourrit des sources inépuisables que sont les mythes qui viennent du fond des âges. S'identifiant tantôt au malheureux chanteur de Thrace, Orphée (dans la pièce homonyme), tantôt à l'infortuné Œdipe (*La machine infernale*) ou au très pur Galaad (*Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde*), Jean Cocteau s'est emparé du mythe orphique en faisant de *l'orphisme*, en tant que pouvoir magique du langage, l'un de ses thèmes préférés. Car le mythe du légendaire Orphée, ce poète civilisateur dont le chant mouvait les pierres et domptait les animaux, cet initiateur des mystères et fondateur de religion, ce héros tragique de l'amour plus fort que la mort, ce mage révélateur des secrets divins visitant l'au-delà pour lui arracher son Eurydice, s'inscrit en majuscules au cœur même de l'univers dramatique de Cocteau comme un thème préférentiel, tissant un réseau des fils qui mènent au drame du poète, du créateur. De surcroît, ce « déniaiseur des mythes » que fut Cocteau voulut faire de son *Orphée* « le mythe du poète-dramaturge écorché vif », comme il l'avoue dans une lettre

adressée à Pitoëff (comédien et directeur de théâtre), lettre datant de 1926, quand la pièce passa la rampe. Cette lettre est devenue, par la suite, la *Dédicace* mise en vedette, une sorte d'avertissement accompagnant le texte dramatique publié en 1927.

Vers une esthétique théâtrale

Mais avec son *Orphée* Cocteau voulut aussi « se trouver de plein-pied avec le mystère » (J. Cocteau, 1965 :10), d'où la provocation de la mise en scène : un *cheval* qui dicte en frappant du sabot – comme en pleine séance de spiritisme – des phrases que l'on comprend mal mais que le poète Orphée recueille avec religiosité, en les mettant dans ses poèmes ; un vitrier (l'ange Heurtebise) qui est suspendu en l'air, sans rien qui le soutienne, comme s'il fut entré en lévitation, tout en incitant l'effroi de la prosaïque femme du poète, Eurydice ; des *personnages étranges*, tels la *Mort* – sous les apparences d'une femme du monde habillée dans le vent de la mode, doublée d'une chirurgienne – et ses *aides* pénétrant à l'intérieur des miroirs qui deviennent les portes d'accès de la Mort ; une *tête humaine* (celle du poète décapité par les Baccantes) qui vole à travers le plateau et se met à chercher son corps ; et finalement, *l'enlèvement* de la maison d'Orphée au ciel, pendant qu'il prononce son action de grâces à Dieu.

À ce côté illusionniste et jongleur vient s'ajouter la poésie des didascalies concernant le décor qui est censé être « utile », ou « le moindre détail joue son rôle comme les appareils d'un numéro d'acrobates ». Ce décor doit « épouser les personnages et les événements d'une manière aussi naïve et aussi dure que modèle et toile peinte se mélangent sur le camaïeu des cartes-portraits » (J. Cocteau, 1965 :17) Selon les mêmes didascalies, dans le salon d'Orphée, « même les objets familiers ont un air suspect », cerné qu'il est par des forces mystérieuses, ou le metteur en scène craint de « déchirer un rideau de mystère par un geste... » (J. Cocteau, 1965 :61). Ce sont autant d'éléments qui nous placent d'emblée « de plein-pied avec le mystère » dont l'organisateur s'avère être le dramaturge-magicien. « Puisque ces mystères nous dépassent, feignons d'en être l'organisateur » – disait la phrase figurant en frontispice à l'une de ses premières fantaisies dramatiques de 1921, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. Son génie protéiforme eut l'intuition que le poète se trouve en une sorte d'entente et de complicité avec Dieu. Et c'est en vertu de cette « imitatio Dei » que notre auteur a pris tous les risques afin de renouveler et d'enrichir ses textes

dramatiques en leur enchâssant toutes sortes de conventions techniques, d'artifices expressifs, depuis la magie verbale des didascalies, jusqu'à l'immixtion du ballet, de la pantomime, de la musique ou de la farce. Ainsi, des créations comme *Parade*, *Le Bœuf sur le toit* ou *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* illustrent-ils cette formule scénique inédite qui combine la féerie, la danse, la pantomime, l'acrobatie et l'orchestre dans le même spectacle. Ce sont autant d'expériences qui tiennent de la « poésie plastique » et qui s'inscrivent sous le signe d'un « théâtre total » dans la tradition d'un Alfred Jarry ou d'un Apollinaire, tout en anticipant la voie d'un Artaud ou d'un Ionesco. Ces recherches sont explicables en partie grâce au moment d'effervescence surréaliste qui les a vues naître, mais font pressentir une constante de son œuvre visible surtout dans les pièces inspirées des mythes antiques.

Parmi les stratégies dramatiques, « la théâtralité », dérivée de la formule spéculaire « théâtre dans le théâtre » nous retient particulièrement l'attention dans *l'Orphée* de Cocteau. Dans son *Prologue*, un acteur charge du rôle d'*Orphée* avertit d'emblée le spectateur sur « l'illusion scénique » qui va se produire devant nos yeux. Il nous dit *ex abrupto* que « ce prologue n'est pas de l'auteur qui sera surpris de l'entendre ». En sortant pour le moment de la peau du personnage, cet acteur prend des libertés par rapport au *texte* et à *son auteur*, en vertu de la grande liberté que lui permet l'illusion scénique. Il invite même le public « d'attendre la fin pour exprimer ses sentiments », de participer au spectacle par son silence, en ménageant de la sorte les acteurs qui « jouent leurs rôles sans filet de secours », comme s'ils étaient des acrobates ou des trapézistes. Ainsi, de par la théâtralité, l'acteur s'implique-t-il de cette manière ostentatoire dans le spectacle, en le démasquant, en la démystifiant en tant qu'*illusion*, au nom de la vie, de sa vie et de celle de ses camarades, car « le moindre bruit intempestif risque de nous faire tuer, mes camarades et moi » (Cocteau, 1965 :19). Mais Anne Ubersfeld (1981 :179) nous avertit qu'il s'agit là d'une « ostentation ambiguë », car ce qui est montré/exhibé est-ce « le moi » héroïque et dépouillé de l'artiste, ou bien l'hystérie des « monstres sacrés » (de la Comédie Française ou d'ailleurs) ?

Procédé très fréquent sur la scène moderne, la « théâtralité », cette « sortie de la peau du personnage » afin de jouer « cartes sur table » (apud John Gassner) délivre et émancipe l'acteur de sous la tutelle du personnage, donc de sous celle de l'auteur, en produisant un court-circuit sur l'orbite qui les unit depuis toujours, « tout en permettant au personnage, redevenu

acteur, de se situer délibérément en dehors de l'univers scénique qu'il démasque et dénonce comme fictif »(Maria Vodă- Căpușan, 1980 :35/n. trad.) En le mettant à profit dans son *Orphée*, Cocteau, cet « enfant terrible » du théâtre français, a eu l'intuition de ce que peut signifier pour la scène – en tant que lieu privilégié de la fiction – « ce procédé apparemment marginal et trop longtemps occulté, grâce à ses virtualités symboliques, voire même philosophiques » (P. Pavis, 1987 :396). Car la théâtralité, (dans un sens différent de celui que Roland Barthes lui accorde) ouvre la représentation vers le public par une construction « en bordure » (c'est-à-dire le champ de l'œuvre y est encadré dans « un châssis » qui correspond à l'interpellation ouverte du destinataire) en rendant plus manifeste le processus de la réception, en vue de l'influencer plus directement »(apud Maria Vodă- Căpușan,1980 :34/ n. trad.)

Ajoutons à tout ceci que ce procédé permet à l'auteur de « miner » la fiction scénique par une pointe d'ironie ou d'auto-ironie qu'il glisse dans ce même prologue : «La tragédie dont il nous a confié les rôles est d'une marche très délicate (car elle risque de tuer les acteurs durant chaque représentation) ; cependant, ils ont assumé le risque de « jouer très haut et sans filet de secours »(J. Cocteau,1965 :19). Mais en minant la fiction a bon escient, l'auteur s'impose à lui-même une certaine distance vis-à-vis de son texte, et cette distance voulue témoigne de l'intention de Cocteau d'accorder au spectateur une certaine liberté, c'est-à-dire la conscience que celui-ci est à même de recréer l'univers dramatique par le truchement de sa « lecture créatrice » qu'il effectue durant le spectacle. Il s'agit là de l'abolition du « mythe de l'auteur-démiurge » qui présente aux lecteurs des personnages « déjà faits », antérieurs au texte. Or Cocteau voulut présenter, par contre, des personnages libres, qui se créent eux-mêmes à l'intérieur du spectacle. Cependant, il faut remarquer aussi que prend l'acteur par rapport au personnage et celui-ci par rapport à l'auteur n'est qu'apparente. Ainsi, à la fin de la pièce, le lien qui tient sur la même orbite la triade *acteur – personnage – auteur* est-il rétabli jusqu'à leur identification. Car c'est toujours en vertu de la théâtralité que l'auteur « mine » et abolit de nouveau, de par sa présence insolite à l'intérieur de la pièce, la règle de « l'objectivité classique : interrogée par le commissaire qui enquête le meurtre d'Orphée, la tête de celui-ci (détachée de son corps) déclare s'appeler »Cocteau », prénom :Jean, être ne a « Maison Laffite et habiter »10, rue d'Anjou »(Cocteau, 1965 :113–114).

Il est à remarquer encore une certaine ambiguïté

qu'impose Cocteau dans ses rapports avec le public. Tout en ouvrant la fiction vers le public, il tient quand même son public «à distance» tout au long de la représentation, en réduisant implicitement le rôle du spectateur, car il lui interdit d'emblée toute participation active pendant le spectacle : « Je vous demanderai donc d'attendre la fin pour vous exprimer si notre travail vous mécontente ». Une telle tentative est inauthentique de nos jours, car l'effort essentiel des hommes de théâtre vise notamment la recherche des formes les plus variées en vue de réaliser le contact direct entre la scène et le public. Cependant, à l'époque de Cocteau, toute tentative de réduire la distance entre les acteurs et les spectateurs (par exemple : faire passer les personnages dans la salle) semblait encore contredire la nature même de la représentation théâtrale. Voilà pourquoi l'immixtion du public dans le spectacle, en vertu de la même théâtralité, pourrait passer pour insolite à l'époque. Mais Cocteau, en illusionniste, a eu le courage d'en user en pleine illusion et justement dans la VI-e scène, celle qui actualise la présence dans l'espace scénique de la Mort personnifiée. En cette occurrence, l'un de ses « aides » s'adresse au public en dynamitant de l'intérieur le mystère même qu'il instaure sur la scène :

Azraël : « Mesdames, Messieurs, la Mort me charge de demander à l'assistance si *un spectateur* serait assez aimable pour lui prêter une montre? Merci, Monsieur.(Cocteau, 1965 :62). On y assiste à un véritable « jeu de sur-illusion » dû à la même théâtralité, jeu qui s'appuie tout court sur l'idée« qu'il est impossible de scinder la vie et l'art»(P. Pavis, 1987 : 401), au XX -e siècle surtout.

La pratique symbolique

Ce serait un mode d'approche unilatéral que d'analyser *L'Orphée* de Cocteau d'un point de vue exclusivement esthétique, comme *spectacle*, et de négliger son côté symbolique, à savoir *l'univers de signes* que cette pièce actualise. Bien qu'il leur refuse le statut de *symboles*, on ne saurait occulter la charge symbolique de certains objets et personnages qui deviennent hautement significatifs dans le texte, par leur poéticité, comme métaphores textuelles. C'est une raison de plus que d'analyser ce texte dramatique en tant que *texte poétique*, en vue de saisir sa productivité poétique par le biais d'une « lecture productive » dont parle Roland Barthes (« *S / Z* », 1978 :10 –11) et qui exige une véritable participation à l'acte poétique.

C'est que le poète-dramaturge oblige ses lecteurs-

spectateurs à prendre leurs responsabilités et à s'engager avec toute leur intelligence dans l'acte de cette lecture, car à en croire Georges Poulet (*La Distance intérieure*), un texte n'a de signification et même d'existence que si le lecteur projette en lui sa propre pensée. Vu que n'importe quel texte moderne ou classique exige une telle lecture, la critique moderne cautionne que la matière signifiante du texte littéraire doit être soumise à un travail transformateur autant par le *poète* que par le *lecteur*. « S'il est difficile d'accès, c'est qu'il n'admet pas de mauvaise lecture. Il faut le prendre tel quel ou le rejeter. Ce sera d'ailleurs l'un des traits constants de la littérature véritablement moderne »(Livius Ciocârliie, 1979 :162 / n. trad.) Ainsi, les **vitres** de Heurtebise, de par leur transparence, renvoient-elles à **l'azur** mallarméen qui signifiait, pour le poète de *L'Hérodiade*, l'existence réelle d'**un ailleurs**. Elles suggèrent que le monde de l'au-delà existe, qu'il peut s'entrevoir poétiquement à travers la transparence des vitres, mais qu'il se refuse ironiquement au contact humain. Orphée est invité par l'ange-vitrier de constater la mort de son épouse en regardant à travers « ses vitres » :

Heurtebise : « Regardez à travers mes vitres ! »

Orphée : « Elle est assise. Elle dort. »

Heurtebise : « Elle est morte... »

Orphée : « C'est impossible ! » (Il frappe aux vitres : « Eurydice ! Ma chérie ! Réponds-moi ! (En revenant de sa chambre) : « Où est-elle ? Je viens de la voir, assise, près du lit. La chambre est vide. Eurydice !! »

Heurtebise : « Vous avez cru la voir. Eurydice habite chez la Mort. » (J. Cocteau, 1965 : 67 – 68).

Dans la poésie mallarméenne, la vitre perd par la suite sa transparence, c'est-à-dire sa fonction médiatrice, et devient **miroir**. À travers le miroir, l'azur du monde de l'au-delà ne se voit plus, car la vitre, devenu miroir, se charge d'un fond noir qui le rend opaque. « Le *fond noir* du miroir suggère peut-être la partie inconsciente du psychisme, devenue l'écran entre le moi et le transcendant »(L. Ciocârliie, 1979 : 164) En tant que surface réfléchissante, « le miroir est le support d'un symbolisme extrêmement riche dans l'ordre de la connaissance. On dit du miroir qu'il était le symbole même du symbolisme, étant un thème privilégié de la philosophie et de la mystique inspirés du néoplatonisme » (Chevalier, J. & Gheerbrant, A., 1989 :638). Mais chez Cocteau, cet objet autrement dur, opaque, devient perméable,

favorisant l'accès, le voyage initiatique d'Orphée dans le monde des ténèbres. C'est que, de par leur réflexivité, les miroirs deviennent les portes d'accès à la connaissance poétique. En tant qu'objet de réflexion, le miroir acquiert une fonction essentiellement orphique, cognitive, mais dans l'espace dramatique de Cocteau, elle actualise aussi une fonction métonymique. De même que la vitre a besoin d'un fond noir pour refléter pleinement la lumière, le poète Orphée, lui, a besoin de cette descente dans la nuit de la Mort pour lui arracher son rayon de lumière, son épouse sacrée, la Parole poétique. Tout comme pour Gérard de Nerval, cette descente aux enfers s'avère être une épreuve fatale, mais inhérente à la condition même du poète. Elle converge vers la découverte du pouvoir métaphysique de la parole poétique, de cette parole sacrée qui ne se dévoile qu'aux initiés :

Orphée : « Ce cheval entre dans *ma nuit* et il en sort comme un plongeur. Il en apporte des phrases(...) où je m'écoute comme on écoute la mer dans un coquillage ». De même :

Orphée : « Colle ton oreille contre cette phrase, écoute le mystère : « Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers... » Ce n'est pas une phrase. C'est un poème, un poème de rêve, une fleur du fond de la mort ».(Cocteau, 1965 : 27 – 28)

Cette métaphore renvoie au poète des *Fleurs du Mal*. Mais si l'aventure orphique baudelairienne s'arrêtait plutôt au seuil de son Enfer intérieur, de par un « complexe narcissique » décelable, à titre d'exemple, dans *L'Homme et la mer* : (« Tu te plais à plonger au sein de ton image »), Orphée de Cocteau se plie plutôt à l'exemple de Mallarmé qui traduisait son orphisme par une « quête consciente » des aventures lucides. Et Clément Borgal a tort de qualifier « toute la pièce comme une méditation sur la mort » (Cocteau : *Dieu, la mort, la poésie*, 1968 :83). Nous croyons, par contre, que la pièce de Cocteau se veut une méditation sur l'orphisme, sur cette quête tragique mais nécessaire de la vérité poétique au-delà des contingences du monde. C'est le poète lui-même qui nous conduit vers cette assertion quand il nous avertit, dans la *Dédicace*, qu'il en voulut faire « le mythe du poète écorché vif ». Et son Orphée le confirme, lorsqu'il lui répond en écho, en avouant tragiquement : « Je découvre un monde. Je tourne ma peau. Je traque l'inconnu » (p.27) Que cette quête doit passer obligatoirement par le royaume de la Mort », comme par un Purgatoire nécessaire, c'est une évidence, car le poète doit

obligatoirement « être mort » pour ce monde, afin de renaître dans le royaume des Idées.

Mais cette mort symbolique que lui offre le *miroir*, en tant que « porte par laquelle la Mort va et vient » peut acquérir aussi une autre connotation. De même que le rêve auquel elle s'apparente, cette quête entraîne une évasion, un plongement dans son moi intérieur, dans sa propre peur-de-mort qu'il exorcise. Le voyage d'Orphée à travers le miroir équivaut à une traversée des « zones » du subconscient, de ce « no man's land » intérieur. Mais Cocteau s'est servi du symbole du miroir grâce à sa grande force lyrique. De même que *l'eau* à laquelle il s'apparente, *le miroir* est une présence inquiétante qui donne l'impression de cacher l'inconnu. Gérard Genette (1966 :23 – 24) dit qu'il engendre « le thème de la fuite métaphysique / qui est précisément/ une fuite verticale, la fuite en profondeur ». C'est que « la *surface aquatique* la plus innocente recouvre un abîme : *transparente*, elle le laisse voir, *opaque*, elle le suggère, d'autant plus dangereux qu'elle le cache ». La séduction et la hantise de cet inconnu est si forte que l'on est prêt à franchir ce seuil miraculeux, à forcer les portes de l'au-delà, afin de passer dans cet autre monde qui est soumis à d'autres règles, tellement étranges qu'elles se confondent avec celles de la mort. Ce n'est qu'une mort apparente, mais une mort nécessaire que le Poète doit affronter.

Le sondage intérieur du subconscient équivaut à un accomplissement total du destin poétique. Le voyage initiatique d'Orphée, à la suite duquel il sort en vainqueur de sa propre « peur-de-mort », équivaut à une connaissance de soi-même et, par-delà cette « co-naissance » (comme la nommait Paul Claudel), à une victoire sur la mort et sur le monde de l'au-delà dont il révèle l'essence : sa création. L'œuvre poétique n'en est que le résultat, l'accomplissement total de cette quête dans laquelle le poète a engagé son destin. D'ailleurs, le motif de la *quête tragique* d'une essence a traversé toute la création de Cocteau, depuis la pièce de 1927, jusqu'à la « quête du Graal » (des *Chevaliers de la Table Ronde*), qui n'est qu'un autre synonyme de l'orphisme. Ce mythe familial, Cocteau l'a envisagé aussi dans des hypostases cinématographiques, telles *L'Orphée* de 1951 (Paris) et *Le Testament d'Orphée*, (1960, Monaco).

Pour accéder dans le monde de la connaissance, dans la nuit de la conscience (**Orphée** : « Il me reste *la nuit*. Et pas *la nuit* des autres. *Ma nuit* »), dans cette mort apparente que le poète doit nécessairement affronter et que son œuvre poétique doit accomplir, le poète met des gants protecteurs.

Heurtebise : « Avec ses gants / de la Mort / vous traversez les miroirs comme de l'eau... » (p.71) C'est qu'il prend des précautions pour s'évader dans un voyage à travers le temps et l'espace éternels dont les dimensions sont modifiées par rapport à celles terrestres, car « une heure » dans l'au-delà équivaut à « une minute » terrestre. Hypérion, le héros tragique d'Eminesco, refait à sa manière cette aventure orphique lorsqu'il s'envole vers le Démiurge, bien que son voyage eût un but inverse car, éternel, il voulut accéder à la condition terrestre. Lors du voyage initiatique de son héros, le poète roumain constate lui-aussi de pareilles modifications spatio- temporelles : « Hypérion partit. Au ciel, / Ses ailes grandissaient / Et des distances éternelles / Au même instant passaient... » (n. trad.)

Avant de connaître la nuit des enfers et d'en sortir illuminé, Orphée était un être angoissé de par sa condition terrestre, un aveugle las de son enfer terrestre.

Orphée : « Ma vie commençait à se faisander, à être a point, à puer la réussite et la mort. Je mettais le soleil et la lune dans le même sac » (p.26). C'est que le plomb de la condition terrestre est lourd à supporter et que « la terre, après tout, n'est pas sa patrie » - pour reprendre les paroles de Cégeste, dans la dernière séquence du film *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960).

«Instrument de l'illumination » (J.Chevalier & A.Gheerbrant, 1989 :635) symbole de la sagesse et de la connaissance, le miroir devient chez Cocteau une métaphore textuelle prolifique dont l'auteur se sert à son gré, et qui se prête même à des trucs, à titre d'exemple, celui de déchiffrer des messages secrets :

Orphée : « Je ne peux la lire, la lettre est écrite à l'envers ! »

Heurtebise : « C'est un moyen de déguiser l'écriture. Lisez dans la glace ! (p.92). Par la suite, la glace s'endurcit et ne permet plus l'accès du poète dans les territoires de sa nuit

Orphée : « La glace est dure. Elle m'a lu la lettre ! » C'est qu'elle refuse de « collaborer » une seconde fois avec le poète, car la connaissance orphique est une épreuve personnelle unique qui occulte tout acte de création, qui ne concerne que les élus et ne permet pas de trahison (de la loi des ténèbres). De l'iconographie antique et médiévale qui conçoit *la mort* «personnifiée par Thanatos, le fils de la nuit et le frère du sommeil, / étant / armé d'une faux et accompagné d'un génie ailé, / un ange / de deux jeunes garçons (l'un noir, l'autre blanc), d'un serpent ou de tout animal

psychopompe (*cheval, chien*) (cf. J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant : 651), J. Cocteau a retenu plus d'un de ses auxiliaires, à savoir : « le génie ailé »-qui devient *L'Ange Heurtebise*, le *cheval* (en tant que « médium spiritiste ») et les deux « aides (ayant des noms à résonance ésotérique : Azraël et Raphaël).

L'exégèse critique est d'avis qu'autour de l'Ange s'articule tout le mécanisme symbolique de l'œuvre de Cocteau. Cette assertion ne paraît pas choquante si l'on se rappelle que le motif poétique de *l'ange* traverse d'une manière obsédante toute sa création, depuis le poème *L'Ange Heurtebise* jusqu'au *Potomak* (recueil de dessins et de proses soumis à la dérive onirique), et depuis *Le Cap de la Bonne Espérance* jusqu'au *Discours du grand sommeil*. La mythologie chrétienne a consacré les anges en tant que « symboles d'ordre spirituel et signes avertisseurs du Sacré qui entretiennent les relations du Dieu avec les créatures ». Protecteurs des élus, de même que les génies, « ils révèlent aux hommes les règles divines de l'activité humaine » (J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant : 44) Cette mythologie insiste sur le rôle d'illumination qu'exercent les anges à l'égard des humains. Dans la pièce de Cocteau, l'ange Heurtebise s'avère être une sorte de « conseiller secret » d'Orphée qui guide les pas du poète vers l'au-delà : **Heurtebise** : « Je vous livre le secret des secrets... » (p.71). Il lui ouvre par la suite les portes d'accès vers le royaume inconnu de la Mort, en lui permettant de voir plus loin et d'une façon irréductible aux arguments :

Heurtebise : « Regardez toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme les abeilles dans une ruche de verre... » (p.71). De par sa nature transcendante, l'ange autorise au poète à violer les règles de la raison et lui enseigne « le vertige » que suppose son voyage initiatique dans les territoires de la Mort : c'est que, par le biais de l'ange, le mystère apparaît au poète plus accessible, bien qu'étrange : **Heurtebise** : « La, comment vous expliquer ? Il n'y a plus de sens...on tourne ; c'est un peu pénible, au premier abord...» (p.72). L'ange prépare le poète en vue d'un véritable sacerdoce, mais ses conseils d'intercesseur en sa faveur s'arrêtent à un seuil magique, au-delà duquel : « Personne au monde ne peut vous renseigner. La mort commence ». Or, c'est justement par cette illumination, par cette « science hallucinatoire » que le poète accède « à la condition nécessaire de l'acte poétique » (Julia Kristeva, 2006 :157). Leçon difficile, d'autant plus que dans les territoires du moi profond, du « moi orphique », le poète lui-même est son propre guide et « personne au

monde » ne peut ni lui enseigner, ni lui éclairer » sa descente aux *enfers intérieurs* qu'est, dans une version psychocritique, le mythe d'Orphée (Gérard Genette, 1966 :136).

L'Orphée de Cocteau n'est que l'écho symbolique d'une situation mythique archétypale que son auteur, en « enfant terrible », se prête à démonter les rouages jusqu'aux plus intimes. L'Orphée de la légende avait déjà commis une violation de la loi dans le royaume des ombres, en se retournant pour s'assurer de la présence de son épouse suivant ses pas vers la lumière. C'était son *hybris* légendaire que ce « regard interdit », que cette « provocation des dieux malgré leurs avertissements, ce qui aboutit à leur vengeance et à sa perte » (P. Pavis, 1987 :194). Or, à la différence de son archétype mythique, qui tourne la tête « par amour », l'Orphée de Cocteau regarde *expressément* Eurydice pour « la perdre » et « se perdre » à bon escient, en vertu de sa liberté démiurgique :

Orphée : « J'ai tourne la tête exprès, et **je** défends qu'on me contredise ! »

Heurtebise : « Vous venez de la perdre une seconde fois, de la perdre lâchement et de la perdre tragiquement, de vous perdre, de tuer une morte ... Car elle est morte, morte, ré-morte ! » (p.90-91). Après cette *hybris* consciemment commise qui entraîne la nouvelle perte d'Eurydice, l'Orphée de Cocteau se sent à l'aise, libéré, soulagé :

Orphée : « **Je** serai ce qu'il me convient d'être...Ouf ! On se sent mieux. On respire. » (p.89). C'est que l'on assiste à une métamorphose de l'ancien « ténébreux, du veuf, et de l'inconsolé » qu'était l'Orphée de Cocteau dans la lignée de Nerval (*El Desdichado*) mais qui se sauve de cet état de « déshérité » et d'« infortuné » par **l'écriture** /qui est/ « l'étrange moyen de dominer cette infortune, en y installant un « **je** » qui maîtrise (...) les ténèbres de l'inconsolé » (Julia Kristeva, 2006 : 157), tout en instaurant sa liberté créatrice.

La dernière scène de la pièce où l'on proclame que la poésie se confond avec Dieu tend à conférer une résonance religieuse à cette œuvre. Elle s'explique par la conversion catholique de Cocteau qui coïncide avec la période *d'Orphée*. C'est elle qui illumine le final, les remerciements qu'il adresse à Dieu, pendant que, par un recours inlassable au merveilleux, « le décor montre au ciel ». C'est que l'auteur se plaît à pratiquer la magie dans le quotidien, à l'exemple des surréalistes ou de leurs précurseurs : Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé ou Apollinaire. Mais à force de

mêler dans sa pièce des éléments empruntés aux croyances les plus diverse : orphisme, spiritisme, christianisme, il en a fait, somme toute, un drame poétique d'inspiration païenne contaminé de christianisme. C'est l'attitude de ce qu'il était au fond : un « Prince frivole » (Ch. Doumet, 2000 :209) de la Poésie, mais un humaniste avéré.

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Mythique et poétique à la fois, le théâtre de Cocteau défend également les droits de la poésie et de la fable mythique qui arrivent d'ailleurs à se confondre, car c'est au *mythe* que la poésie du théâtre doit son poids indéniable d'universalité, de même que ce théâtre peut constituer à lui seul, par le biais du mythe, « un véhicule de *poésie* », pour employer une expression chère à Cocteau. Pour lui, ainsi que pour d'autres dramaturges de l'entre-deux-guerres, le retour aux mythes et la reprise des grands thèmes poétiques qui ont bercé l'humanité équivaut à une résurrection de l'enfance du monde et constitue une hantise où *mythe* et *poésie* se répondent en écho.

Ce théâtre n'ignore la créativité ni dans le langage, ni dans la vision du monde, et l'on ne saurait ne pas déceler chez ces auteurs une volonté de moderniser et de rajeunir les mythes, de les traiter sans solennité et sans soucis d'anachronisme, en les désacralisant à bon escient. Les remaniements appliqués aux mythes arrivent même à les situer sur des coordonnées paradoxales, de sorte qu'un mythe païen comme celui d'Orphée arrive à se faire pénétrer de christianisme chez Cocteau, justement en vue d'insuffler au héros antique une humanité plus proche du XX- e siècle.

Mais le théâtre poétique est avant tout un théâtre littéraire, où le texte vaut par lui-même. Cocteau a beau donner l'impression d'avoir pris ses distances par rapport au style dramatique traditionnel, en mettant à profit les stratégies modernes telles : « le théâtre dans le théâtre », « la mise en abyme » ou « le jeu de sur-illusion », en tant que formules spéculaires qui valorisent le procédé pirandellien de la rupture d'entre *l'acteur* et le *personnage*, son théâtre demeure cependant très traditionnel quant à son *écriture*. Même lorsque l'absurde sera inauguré par ce théâtre, il le sera avec la clarté rigoureuse d'une argumentation philosophique, si bien que le spectateur pourrait reconnaître une sorte de secrète connivence avec la fiction scénique.

Mais en pliant la fable mythique aux exigences de la liberté poétique, ce théâtre ne la prive pas d'une apparence de gratuité et de jeu qui lui interdisent l'accès au vrai tragique. Car ce côté *ludens* est voué à exorciser le tragique et à délivrer l'homme du *fatum* de la fable ancienne. De surcroît, à travers ce théâtre on commence même à s'interroger sur les possibilités de surmonter une certaine « crise du langage » qui se fait ressentir et qui sera revêtue d'accents tragiques dans le théâtre de l'absurde. À ce propos, dans son *Orphée*, Cocteau parlait déjà de « la haine profonde, de la haine religieuse que cache le mot », tout en se demandant, à juste titre, depuis que Mallarmé avait prêché « l'égalité des mots » dans le discours poétique moderne : « Sait-on ce qui est *poétique* et *pas poétique* ? » (p. 94)

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DIVERSITY-ISMS

Beatific or Beaten? Encounters with Nature from Transcendentalists to The Beats and Hippies

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Abstract: *Initially, the earliest ideas concerning the relationship between man and nature within the context of American culture are briefly recalled (Columbus, Smith). Then, the transcendentalist view upon this relationship, put forward by Emerson and exemplified by Thoreau, is restated – to be shown as fundamentally questioned from the perspective of existential alienation or cognitive skepticism, first by Poe and later, by Dickinson and Crane. Consequently, the Beat literature is presented both as an attempt at the restoring of the transcendentalist concept of divine harmony between man and nature and as an example of the writers being alienated in the “disenchanted world” of the mid-20th century America – the attempt ultimately unsuccessful, as was proved e. g. by Kerouac’s Big Sur. A similar idea of America as never-to-be-regained “paradise” of natural beauty and harmony is featured in the artistic legacy of the Hippie Generation, from Easy Rider film, to Steppenwolf’s song Monster or Brautigan’s novels such as Trout Fishing in America. Finally, a parallel is drawn between Kerouac and his Polish follower, Edward Stachura, chronologically belonging to the Hippie era and showing in his fiction hypersensitive individuals, tragically alienated both from nature and humanity – which, despite any notes of existential pessimism, was not the case with the Beats.*

Keywords: *transcendentalism harmony paradise naturalism beat bohemianism alienation skepticism existentialism*

I. PRELUDE

It may be reasonably argued that the biblical imperative for man to make any new land his own finds classic exemplification in the economic, social, and, last but not least, literary history of North America. The new continent, with its unknown, frequently

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dangerous natural environment, provided the most immediate context for any effort to build a new civilization or society there. The environment in question was consequently reflected in the written history of this civilization/society as either fit for God-granted exploitation and genuinely beautiful (if not just divine), or inexorably indifferent (if not plainly hostile).

In this paper, we shall attempt to present a necessarily selective, chronological recollection of American literary encounters with nature, paying special attention to transcendentalists, their Romantic dissenters (Hawthorne), or plain opponents (Poe). First of all, however, we shall concentrate on the Beats and their Hippie followers, generally seen as spokesmen for the “alternative” lifestyle, initiated by Thoreau's Walden experiment and the communes that other transcendentalists started establishing in the USA in the first half of the 19th century. Moreover, we shall try to find whether for Jack Kerouac or Jim Morrison the choice of living „outside the society” (as Patti Smith, their legitimate successor, was to put it later) meant returning to the realm of nature in Thoreau's footsteps. We shall also approach this problem from a wider sociocultural perspective, stressing little known, though relevant nonetheless, Polish reflections of the Beat/Hippie phenomenon.

II. FROM THE VIRGINITY OF NATURE - TO ITS DIVINITY - TO COLD INDIFFERENCE

The first two features of nature recalled in the opening section, i. e. its beauty and fitness for exploitation, are mentioned already in the earliest document of the European consciousness of America, Christopher Columbus's *Journal*, published only in 1892-1894 in the original version and translated into English in the following century by William Carlos Williams, an eminent American modernist poet. In this text, which, due to relevant sociocultural observations and the quality of the translation, may be added to the canon of English-language records of the settlers' encounters with the New World, the author stresses both the virgin, or even paradise charm of its vegetation (18), and the inferior status of the original inhabitants, easily satisfied with “things of little value” (18) and thus prospectively considered as cheap labour force.

In the 17th century, the idea of people exploiting nature for their concrete needs was developed by John Smith in *A Description of New England* (1616), where he described the North American continent as a land of greater material promise than his native England (20). Almost simultaneously, in *History of*

Plymouth Plantation (written in 1630-1650, published only in 1856), William Bradford highlighted the initial hostility of the New World's natural environment to Puritan settlers (24-25), in the 20th century restated e. g. by Charles Reich (40). Still, as the colonization of the continent progressed, this gloomy perspective remarkably changed in favour of the idyllic vision of pastoral America, to be found in Washington Irving's short stories, such as "Rip van Winkle" (1820), or "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820).

This blissful vision may be considered, arguably, as one of the sources of the more universal system of American Romantic transcendentalism, informed by the native tradition of unitarianism, German transcendental idealism and, last but not least, perennial philosophy, based upon the ancient Indian principle of the individual self (Atman) and the Universal Mind (Brahman) being virtually identical. This principle was restated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the founding father of the movement, in his famous essay *Nature* (1836): "I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (161). Simultaneously, however, the serene pantheistic "gospel" of unity of God, nature, and man, preached by this prominent member of the Transcendental Club in Concord, was not totally accepted by Nathaniel Hawthorne, for some time belonging to the most famous transcendentalist commune, Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education. Sharply aware of evil as intrinsic to human nature, probably owing to his Puritan ancestry, he deconstructed, to some extent, the aforementioned idyll in a short descriptive passage of 1844, showing the pastoral silence of "Sleepy Hollow" in Concord, Massachusetts (Irving's one being located in the present state of New York), significantly disturbed by "the whistle of the locomotive" (Marx 13), i. e. technology.

If Columbus's original vision of American paradise – the realm of unspoiled beauty of nature, peopled by naked, uncivilized natives – was historically "disenchanted", to use Max Weber's sociocultural terminology, by the onset of colonial exploitation, then the transcendental "gospel" may be claimed to have undergone a "disenchantment" in philosophical terms, more methodical than Hawthorne's virtually accidental deconstruction, owing to Edgar Allan Poe. In his non-fiction work *Eureka* (1848), subtitled by the author as "A Prose Poem" – another, arguably more relevant subtitle being "An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe" – he demonstrated that Emerson's bold statements concerning the divine union of the Over-soul, nature, and man were in fact

arbitrary, given the obvious, unavoidable limits of human cognition.²

Quite significantly, as well as surprisingly, similar doubts resonate in the words of a prominent English representative of Romantic transcendental idealism, William Wordsworth, expressing his skepticism about the Spirit really rolling through the Eternal Thing, i. e. nature (Graff 62). However, Poe went remarkably farther, proposing a relativist, if not “deconstructionist” view upon nature and the whole universe (Valery 106-107) and finally stating: “My whole nature revolts at the idea that there is any being in the universe superior to myself” (Matthiessen 8).

F. O. Matthiessen, one of greatest authorities on American Romanticism, quotes these words, paradoxically, as an example of extreme solipsistic consequences of transcendental philosophical approach – if we recall Emerson's declaration “The individual is the world” (Kadir 20) - failing to notice “a certain rhetorical ambiguity and epistemological complexity in Poe's reasoning and ironic diction” (Kadir 20). Indeed, Poe's provocative statement invites the interpretation rather along the lines of decadent Romantic dandyism, tinged with self-mockery and naturally inclined towards narcotics or alcohol as remedies for the numbness of the soul and senses. Towards reaching the highest spiritual elevation via a biochemical “short cut,” rather than through time- and effort-consuming mystical meditation – which was only natural under the conditions of burgeoning modern urban civilization, with its imperative of consumption to possibly quick effect. Towards “artificial paradise” - to use the classic phrase coined by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, one of Poe's most avid admirers and most talented followers.

As shall be stressed later, the replacement of genuine mystical initiation into the divine essence of nature with the “artificial” one was of seminal importance also for American Beats and Hippies, who appeared around one hundred years later. Meanwhile, however, let us briefly recall the subsequent stages of American transcendental pantheism becoming consistently undermined and increasingly “disenchanted.”

At first, we shall have to elucidate the implications of the aforementioned replacement that virtually meant the substitution of moving higher and higher on the pantheistic ladder of cognition

² Which goes some way towards explaining the mutual reluctance between Emerson's “camp” and this *enfant terrible* of American Romanticism.

towards true illumination with the logic resembling the one of a vicious circle. Born out of *ennui*, underpinned by the subconscious conviction of *unio mystica* being beyond the human reach - hinted at by Poe and precisely articulated by Baudelaire - the search for “artificial paradise” inevitably lead back to *ennui*, i. e. to “dirty pool” of everyday existence (to refer to Rimabud's famous metaphor from the poem “Le Bateau ivre,” 1871). The repeated experience of this uninspiring return automatically bred the feeling of overwhelming dejection or the impression of cul-de-sac that, in philosophical terms of existentialism, was later described as being plunged into existence: intrinsically absurd and inclined towards nothingness (Poe's accidental death caused by opium and alcohol overdose could be quoted as an adequate, real-life example here).

Simultaneously, in the works of American writers who were relatively closer to transcendentalism, one may hear a more and more audible note of cognitive skepticism, born out of the increasingly sharper consciousness of the limitations of human understanding - the limitations that, let it be stressed once again, Poe was also conscious of. Consequently, the pantheistic unity of man and nature started eroding, which, as we shall see later, also found its conclusion in existential pessimism.

The skepticism in question may be identified already in the poetry of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman (1821-1873). Though sometimes compared to Keats and frequently inspired by the Hudson River landscapes, he goes, in fact, against the tradition of his Romantic predecessors, stressing that the voice of nature is virtually incomprehensible to human ear: see, first of all, “The Cricket,” arguably his most appreciated poem, published only in the 20th century. The same discrepancy assumes far more dramatic proportions in *Moby-Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville, a writer of well-known transcendentalist connections. He proposes here something of a dialectical opposition of Emersonian “gospel,” presenting an archetypal Romantic rebel in ultimately unsuccessful pursuit of the alien force of the Absolute, disguised as an ambiguous phenomenon of nature. In the story “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1856), the writer goes even further, creating a mysterious Romantic anti-hero: “more a man of preferences than assumptions” (432), challenging not the Absolute, but the commonplace logic of everyday behaviour, fundamentally disturbed by his being passive. Thus, alienated in a big city that has already replaced the natural environment, he finds himself drifting towards existential nothingness and, finally, suicide – to some extent because of the

lack of characterological essence (to refer to existentialist terminology once again).

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) follows quite closely stating “I dwell in Possibility-” (262), which, basically referring to her poetic profession, may also invite associations with being plunged into existence of any kind – whereas the implication of her hands being too “narrow... to gather Paradise” (262) in the same poem approximates the aforementioned note of cognitive skepticism that culminates in “Nature' is what we see.”³

In “Apparently with no Surprise,” the poet extends this perspective; probably inspired by the theories of naturalism, increasingly popular at the time, she metaphorically shows human being as redundant in the face of indifferent nature.

The latter idea becomes more thoroughly articulated in Stephen Crane's “The Open Boat,” which stands in direct opposition to the transcendentalist concept of pantheistic harmony of the universe. This autobiographical story of four survivors floating upon the icy Atlantic waters near the Florida coast in a rescue boat that may swamp any time exemplifies not only nature's cold indifference towards man – with God, by then, largely absent from the picture – but also man being plunged into being as a potential victim of blind chance, if not the absurd of existence (one of the characters, most likely to survive, dies near the shore: see p. 200). It also remotely suggests the affinities between two aforementioned trends of “deconstruction” of Emerson's “gospel” - the growing cognitive skepticism of its tentative followers and its replacement with the morbid mirage of “artificial paradise” - as “God is cold” (C276), the refrain of “A Man Adrift on a Slim Spar,” Crane poetic footnote to “The Open Boat,” might be inscribed as the motto of e. g. Poe's “The Raven.”⁴

Moreover, having been published in 1900, “The Open Boat” symbolically foreshadowed the mood of existential uncertainty, if not sheer pessimism, that came to define a significant number of literary and philosophical milestones of the 20th century - including such American ones as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), probably a definitive Lost Generation novel. It was also in the century that, in the USA, the Beats and the Hippies marked their

³ “Nature is what we know-/Yet have no art to say” (263) – to quote the poem further.

⁴ Not to mention Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, with their prevailing mood of “empty spirituality” (Friedrich 72-75).

artistic and intellectual presence.

III. THE BEATS AND THE HIPPIES – NATURAL PARADISE UNREGAINED

1. The Beats could be paradoxically identified as the mid-20th century incarnation of both the Lost Generation and transcendentalists. With the former, they shared the feeling of being alienated, or even oppressed, considering their anarchic lifestyle and political sympathies in the 1950s' conservative America – the feeling of existentialist connotations, emphatically expressed in the famous opening line of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956): “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked ... (205). With the latter, including closely related Walt Whitman, they were more profoundly linked – if we recall their stress upon Zen Buddhist meditation practices that vaguely resembled contemplating nature in the manner of Thoreau, or global poetic perspective, in *Howl* extending from the Rockland madhouse to “the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night (205), and free-verse form. Both these traits, obviously inherited from the author of *Song of Myself*, find model exemplification in “Footnote to *Howl*,” where Whitmanian enumerations and obsessive, quasi-chamanic repetition of the word “holy” harmoniously combine to convey the mystical, Blake-inspired vision of universal holiness, quite in line with Emersonian “gospel.”

There is, however, an important difference: in the Beat literature transcendental spiritual adventures are usually mentioned in the psychedelic or narcotic context: see at least the second part of *Howl*, inspired by a peyote phantasmagoria, in which the author “saw the facade of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel as the grinning face of Moloch” (Ellmann & O'Clair 1120). Or the line from its first part, with the mention of those “who... hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking... contemplating jazz” (205) – where the words “high” and “smoking” obviously referred to marijuana or hashish consumption.

The stress upon contemplation being regularly (necessarily?) assisted by drugs is only natural, considering that the Beat movement was seen as a belated American reflection of European *fin-de-siecle* bohemia: vide at least the second chapter of *Down and In*, Ronald Sukenick's story of New York artistic underground after WW II, entitled “Bohemia Is a Country in Europe” (55-108). This book plainly demonstrates that the

movement in question was born under the conditions of American modern urban culture – if we additionally recall that those who contemplated jazz in *Howl* were “floating across the tops of cities” (205), or that California, probably the longest-lasting remnant of the American paradise of natural harmony and beauty, was metaphorised as “supermarket” in another classic poem by Ginsberg. The rural America of Thoreau's Walden Pond contemplation practices, or of the aforementioned Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, established in 1841, was far behind – remembering that it was already Walt Whitman, an immediate follower of Emerson and Thoreau, who saw himself as “one of the citizens” (249) of the New World conceived as “the city” (249). Consequently, it was only logical that the Beats should follow their 19th century bohemian predecessors, such as Baudelaire or Rimbaud, into the elusive realms of “artificial paradise,” away from the pantheistic union of God, man and nature. However, it would be unfair to claim that the latter was reduced in their works merely to the background of searching “a unique narcotic” (*Lunch* 253) called yage in Burroughs and Ginsberg's *The Yage Letters* (1963), or to accidental landscape changing quickly behind the windows of fast moving cars in which the characters of Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) chase the thrill of narcotic or sexual adventures.

Among the works of the latter writer, there are, in fact, at least three novels where nature is assigned a more prominent place. Still, the scenarios of the characters' encounters with it are remarkably different from Emerson's or Thoreau's spells of solitary contemplation.

Thus, in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), Ray Smith, i. e. Kerouac himself, and Japhy Ryder, i. e. Gary Snyder, a poet considered by the Beats an authority in Zen Buddhism, follow the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama renouncing the “supermarket” of contemporary American consumerism and preaching the art of facing “only the essential facts of life,” as Thoreau would have put it (173). Still, as “bums,” i. e. dissolute tramps seeing themselves as the seekers for spiritual illumination, they fell free to take advantage of consumer goods, drinking huge amounts of wine and devouring salami, cheddar cheese, or Hershey chocolate. Thus, they approximate to some extent the characters from Hemingway *The Sun Also Rises*, even though the latter are driven to empty hedonism by the sense of existential aimlessness and emotional wasteland. In this context, even Ryder's peyote-inspired vision (34), barely transcends the level of consumption, while Smith's solitary spell of

meditation on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Mountains in the state of Washington ultimately proves rather ambiguous from the perspective of transcendental wisdom in the Buddhist version.

This ambiguity is even more clearly visible in *Desolation Angels* (written also in the late 1950s, though published only in 1965), sharing with the former novel both the subject matter and the setting. Kerouac, this time as Jack Dulouze, in the initial section describes the time he spent as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak – becoming, however, increasingly less angelic in the Buddhist sense, as well as tempted by narcotic pleasures (after a large dose of opium, his mind becomes profoundly confused). Ultimately, having chosen to live in the world of nature, he finds himself alienated from it – in obvious contradiction to Emersonian “gospel.”

Quite significantly, Dulouze goes through this unwelcome experience once again in *Big Sur* (1962), which may be tentatively considered the Beat equivalent of *Walden*. He escapes from the intensity of bohemian life in San Francisco to his friend's cabin in the Big Sur woods, on the rocky Pacific coast of California, to live in complete solitude. He indulges in long walks around this wild though enchanting area, contemplating birds, flowers, or trees. The analogy to Thoreau's *Walden* experience is reinforced by mystical insights into the divine harmony of nature, where “the leaf is paradise... the man is paradise... the sea is paradise” (29),⁵ as well as by references to Emerson and Whitman (24).

Still, the American Paradise of harmony both between man and nature and within man himself may be regained only for a while: differently from Thoreau, who spent more than two years on the Walden Pond, Kerouac/Dulouze already on his fourth day at Big Sur “began to get bored” (24). Thus, he opted to follow his “DESIRE” (33), i. e. to return to the common bohemian pleasures of alcoholic/psychedelic/narcotic consumption. The latter's effects are presented here as mind-boggling rather than mind-expanding: excessive drinking results in delirium “horrors,” whenever “the bottle is gone” (89), while marijuana puts the narrator/main hero into a paranoid mental condition (103). Consequently, his final illumination of being “perfectly normal again” (177), and, in

⁵ Another obvious analogy, within the Beat literary circle, is to “Footnote to *Howl*,” further parallels with Ginsberg's free verse at its most visionary may be found in “Sea: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur,” the poetic appendix of the novel, featuring loose, “far out” associations, reminiscent also of French surrealism (A. Breton, referred to in Chapter 7).

accordance with the Buddhist principle of *tathata*, reconciled to everyday reality as well as his friends (including the woman he hardly found emotional fulfillment with), becomes even more doubtful than Smith's meditation on Desolation Peak. In other words, in the world consumed by existential anxiety, along with increasingly unrestrained hedonism, the noble transcendentalist idea of harmony of God, nature, and man appears to be little more than a passing fancy.

2. Even though Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a renowned Beat poet, contemptuously considered the Hippies as a product of “a nonliterate age” (Wright 36), there were, nonetheless, important links between these two movements, both of which originated in California, traditionally known for liberal sociocultural atmosphere. First of all, however, they rejected the same middle-class America (in the countercultural jargon of the 1960s defined as “square”) in favour of alternative (bohemian) values and lifestyle – even though, with the Hippies, it was rather a case of “bohemianism for the masses,” according to Czesław Miłosz's ironic remark (Jarzyńska 136).

Still, as far as the attitude towards nature was concerned, the Hippies seemed to be definitely closer to the tradition of American transcendentalism. Additionally inspired by Fourier's version of utopian socialism⁶ and, first of all, by the works of the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955) questioned the conflict between Freudian pleasure and reality principles, they widely practised living in communes, in harmony both with natural environment and their own instincts. Simultaneously, while opposing the conscription for the Vietnam war, they directly referred to Thoreau's philosophy of civil disobedience. To what extent, however, did their anti-establishment communal experiment prove efficient?

The answers provided by the movement's literary legacy are rather ambiguous, to say the least. Even Richard Brautigan, described either as “one of the youngest members of the Beat Generation and one of the oldest members of the Hippie Thing” (Welch 24), or, most significantly, as “all the novelist the hippies needed” (Wright 36), in the majority of his writings remained rather skeptical about the possibility of the alternative utopia being actually implemented. The best example here is, arguably,

⁶ Fourier's falansters being notorious for free-love practices.

presented in his first published novel, *A Confederate General from Big Sur* (1964), whose main hero decides to challenge the contemporary American establishment by settling down in a cabin, in the place mentioned in the title, and establishing a commune there. The reference to Kerouac's *Big Sur* is evident, not only in terms of the setting. Strictly speaking, the effort to rediscover the American Dream in the pantheistic sense of transcendentalists, this time by "some hippies and their girls and a rich madman" (Waugh 287), fails once again, becoming pathetically reduced to fruitless marijuana-smoking and alcohol-drinking sessions, as well as to collecting cigarette butts along the highways of California.

In his most revered novel, *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), Brautigan largely discarded this relatively subdued irony in favour of a depressing vision of "the Cleveland Wrecking Yard" (164), i.e. industrial "waste land" where one can buy e. g. a bathroom, or encounter a trout stream that has already been used. Painting this picture of American Paradise being technologically "disenchanted," to some extent in line with Eliot's or Fitzgerald's pertinent imagery, he simultaneously provided the answer to Jim Morrison's dramatic question: "What have they done to the Earth?/What have they done to our fairest sister?" in The Doors' epic song "When the Music's Over" (1967). The question was actually more audible than the answer, as it was songs of this kind that, rather than any piece of poetry or fiction, represented the mainstream of the Hippie culture articulating itself primarily through music and film.

As could be reasonably expected, the answer provided by Morrison himself in the aforementioned song was remarkably similar. Elsewhere, he occasionally referred to the original American Paradise of harmony between people and nature, showing it as dramatically violated by modern technological civilization: see his childhood memories of Indian workers lying along the motorway and bleeding to death after a car accident, as marginally referred to in the song "Peace Frog" (1970) and thoroughly recalled on the posthumous poetry/music album *An American Prayer* (1978). At the same time, however, as a keen observer of the contemporary American reality, Morrison hardly saw any viable solution in the youthful revolt against "the Moloch" (to refer to the famous metaphor from *Howl*), describing the members of a Hippie commune in the realm of Nature as "stoned immaculate" in the song "The WASP (Texas Radio and the Big Beat)" (1971). And, despite straightforward praising the unspoiled "country" as infinitely

superior to the hectic, polluted “city,” e. g. in Canned Heat's “Going Up the Country” (1969), the irreversible decay of American Paradise was almost just as often observed by other leading Hippie rock artists from this country. One of the most pertinent examples is, undoubtedly, Steppenwolf's epic “Monster” (1969), impressively reconstructing the process of idyllic pre-Columbian America turning into an inhuman oppressive technocratic “monster” - as the new rebellious generation chose to rename Ginsberg's “Moloch.”

To conclude this section of the present essay, let us recall one of the most relevant sequences of the film *Easy Rider* (1969), whose two main heroes, one of them significantly nicknamed “Captain America,” embark on a motorcycle odyssey, smuggling cocaine from Mexico to Los Angeles and attempting to rediscover the original American Paradise – the tanks of their Harley-Davidsons being proudly painted in the Stars and Stripes. In the sequence in question, they are having a marijuana-smoking session with a counterculturally-oriented lawyer who, having joined them on their journey, reflects upon the continent's pristine, pre-Columbian past, concluding that once this land was beautiful and friendly. The lawyer being killed soon afterwards by blood-thirsty “squares,” as well as subsequent deaths of both main characters, suggest that this is “no country for open-minded men,” to paraphrase the title of Cormac McCarthy's later novel. Men who at least try to live in harmony with themselves and the world around them – even though they ultimately fail to revive the traditional American idealism of nature.

IV. POLISH FOOTNOTE TO THE BEAT/HIPPIE NATURAL PARADISE UNREGAINED

1. With reference to the literary movement led by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the notion of “beat” has a number of contradictory references mirroring the complexity of the Beats' perspective upon themselves. On the one hand, they preferred to be seen as “beaten,” e. g. by the “Moloch” of corporate post-WWII American state – on the other hand, though, they rose to the level of “beatitude,” owing to their exercises in (psychedelically stimulated) meditation. Thus, with respect to our topic, one may wonder whether the outcome of their encounters with nature ultimately comes down to being admirably “beatific” or pathetically “beaten.”

Taking into account the Hippie sequel of these encounters, as exemplified by *Easy Rider*, the second option would be more plausible, since “Captain America” and his partner, apart

from being literally “beaten” to death by the “Monster's” slaves, conclude earlier that they “blew it:” finding their ambition to rediscover the American Paradise reduced to drug-smuggling or visits to brothels. As for the classic Beat writers, such as Kerouac, the issue in question appears to be more ambiguous: considering at least Dulouz's final illumination in *Big Sur*. This novel would also suggest that, for anyone identifying with the Beat *credo* and its practical consequences, nature was rather an asylum from the excesses of alternative/”artistic” lifestyle than a source of divine consolation or existential harmony. Thus, in contrast to the eternal pantheistic presence in Emerson's sense, enveloping every human being, here it was assigned almost the function of a hotel one could always leave: feeling the need to return to bohemian pleasures (as in *Big Sur*), or finding oneself alienated (as in *Desolation Angels*), and ultimately proving the Beats to be “disaffiliated,”⁷ not only from the “square”⁸ middle class, but, paradoxically, even from their own transcendentalist heritage.

Still, if we approach the latter issue from the perspective of existentialism, which remarkably affected the philosophical profile of the first half of the 20th century (to mention, once again, Crane or Hemingway), then solving the problem of alienation by moving somewhere else, in accordance with the “on the road” pattern, may justifiably appear to be shallow and naive. Being alienated in the existential sense may not be appeased by any fleeting pleasures; instead, it seems to be inwardly directed towards its own absolute, i. e. nothingness. The latter perspective, largely absent from the classic works of Beat literature, quite unexpectedly, however, marked its presence in a Polish novel, obviously inspired by Kerouac.

With respect to the thematic perspective of this essay where, apart from the Beats and Hippies, we devoted special attention to transcendentalists, it may be worthwhile recalling, at this point, the philosophical and spiritual affinity between R. W. Emerson's circle and the leading poets/thinkers of Polish Romanticism: to mention only Adam Mickiewicz's correspondence

⁷ The term originally used by Kenneth Rexroth - a poet and jazz essayist, strongly “affiliated” with the Ginsberg-Kerouac circle, though remarkably older - in Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), a highly relevant publication on the Beat phenomenon.

⁸ In the countercultural jargon meaning “conventional” and “materialistic.”

with Margaret Fuller, or Juliusz Słowacki's concept of spiritual/divine genesis of nature and man, conceived along the lines of transcendental idealism. In the 20th century, Ernest Hemingway's stylistic approach, manner of literary characterization, and, last but not least, "macho" philosophy of life visibly influenced Marek Hłasko, one of the most promising Polish fiction-writers of the 1950s and 1960s, while earlier Zbigniew Uniłowski's *Wspólny pokój* ("Common Room," 1932) accidentally came quite close to the formula of *roman a clef*, regularly exploited by the Beat novelists (radical differences in style and mode of narration notwithstanding). Nevertheless, the first genuinely conscious and undoubtedly impressive example of receptiveness towards this American literary trend in Polish literature was, arguably, the aforementioned Kerouac-inspired work: Edward Stachura's *Siekierzada* ("Axerezade," 1971).⁹

This affinity may seem quite surprising: considering that, at the time, Kerouac's works were unavailable in Polish translation, and Stachura hardly knew English (as this author was reliably informed by Krzysztof Karasek, a renowned Polish poet and the writer's close friend, in August 2014). Born in France and familiar with this country's literature, as a later student of Romance languages at the University of Warsaw, he must have read *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, or *Desolation Angels* in French – since it is particularly the latter novel that is reflected in *Siekierzada*, along with such features of Kerouac's writings as autobiographical approach and "freely improvised" syntax.

Its main character, Janek Pradera, a sensitive, poetically inclined loner and, obviously, the author's porte-parole, arrives in some wild area of Polish mountains to work as a woodchopper. The analogy to Dulouz's occupation and place of residence in *Desolation Angels* is instantly evident – even though Pradera, as a citizen of the communist Poland, can hardly afford opium, satisfying himself with vodka at the local inn. Another difference, despite his being constantly "on the road," is that the Polish equivalent of Dulouz can hardly be considered a "dharma bum," as he abstains both from Buddhist meditation practices and bohemian orgies. In line with Melville's *Bartleby*, representing a classic, already existential case of

⁹ This literal English equivalent of the Polish neologism, produced by the fusion of "siekiera" ("axe") and "Szecherezada" ("Sheherazade"), could be possibly replaced by more descriptive – and, arguably, more informative – "One Thousand and One Tree-Cutting Nights."

alienation, he is basically different from everybody: both primitive, albeit friendly fellow woodchoppers, and his only friend, whom he ultimately leaves. The reason is that the friend, despite hardships and depressions he has experienced, ultimately finds himself on the side of life and its unpredictable beauty – whereas Pradera, again in line with *Bartleby*, is instinctively driven towards nothingness, experienced via suicide.

The latter means, of course, the conclusion of the alienation in the realm of nature from the perspective of existentialism in its nihilistic variety. The perspective that was quite natural for Stachura - well-versed in Heidegger and especially Sartre, as well as displaying suicidal tendencies that led to his premature death in 1979 – and fundamentally alien to the Beats. Being to some extent heirs to transcendentalists and their “gospel,” in the minimalist variant summarized by Thoreau as “However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names” (175), they naturally were, despite any self-destructive bohemian excesses, too strongly devoted to life and its diverse charms to allow themselves to be seriously tempted by nothingness. Thus, they appear to be quite close to Pradera/Stachura's friend from *Siekierezada*, or, first of all, to their Hippie successors, such as Janis Joplin or Tim Buckley, famous acid-rock¹⁰ artists.¹¹

Let us recall here that both Joplin and Buckley died of accidental heroin overdoses, following the lifestyle of their generation that largely consisted in having as much “fun” as possible, i. e. in hedonism that apparently outdistanced even the one of the Beats. After all, both heroes of *Easy Rider* also die by accident, i. e. definitely against their will.

V. POSTLUDE

Recollecting the history of American literary encounters with nature, one may notice that its Emersonian pantheistic concept was gradually “deconstructed:” either by the bohemian quest for “artificial paradise,” or, more systematically, by naturalism, stressing man's redundancy in the eyes of indifferent nature, and

¹⁰ The term synonymous with “psychedelic rock” (“acid” being a slang name for LSD), and thus defining the music of the Hippie Generation.

¹¹ Considering real-life examples alongside the ones from the realm of literary or film fiction is justified by the Beat/Hippie artistic productions being heavily reliant on the lives of pertinent writers and musicians; for example, Stachura used to define his approach to writing as “zyciopisanie” (“real-life writing”), to which Kerouac or even Burroughs could readily subscribe.

existentialism, highlighting the absurd of his being as undetermined by any metaphysical factors. The American Beat movement that came later was frequently considered as transcendentalism reborn in the mid-20th century – though, as has been observed, its representatives were generally more inclined to discard the genuine pantheistic mysticism in favour of the decadent searching for “artificial paradise” and, consequently, treating nature rather as a temporary asylum from the intensities of bohemian lifestyle. On the other hand, the Beats, as well as their Hippie successors, were rather reluctant to follow the path of alienation from nature to its suicidal end – as was the case under the extreme philosophical conditions of existentialism in its nihilistic version (Melville's *Bartleby*). Incidentally, this alternative route was chosen by the writers from other countries, such as the Polish poet and novelist Edward Stachura, influenced both by Kerouac and by French and German existential thinkers.

The question why this pessimistic scenario remained only potential for the contemporary American followers of transcendentalism is obviously open for a discussion. Trying to provide an answer on the basis of the above discourse, we would have to pay special attention to this philosophical/sociopolitical movement's attractive power that, despite Emersonian “gospel“ having been effectively questioned by naturalist/existentialist “deconstruction”, survived until the second half of the 20th century (as, at least, Thoreau-inspired civil rights protest actions were to show).

Arguably, the apparent timelessness of the transcendentalists' heritage is due to its being, ultimately, an affirmation of life – no matter how cliched, controversial, and arbitrary, under (post)modern philosophical conditions, the latter concept might actually appear to be. As we have seen, it was this particular affirmation that, in the century increasingly marked by skepticism, ironic deconstruction, and transience of literary/philosophical fashions, American Beats and Hippies remained faithful to: despite their seemingly suicidal hedonistic excesses. And, possibly, this is what fundamentally defines the aforementioned dialectics of being “beatific” and “beaten.”

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Transracial Identities in William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*

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Abstract: *Racial divisions are still an important issue in William Faulkner's later works of the 1940's but his outlook in this saga of the Old South seems to propose a more integrative view regarding the identity of the land. My reading of the novel considers the two dominant voices in the narrative: that of the last white descendent of an old, patriarchal order, musing on what was and on the sins of the fathers; and that of Lucas Beauchamp whose keeping alive the 'fire' of his marriage with Molly on their 'hearth' is symbolic of a long tradition of black endurance. In conclusion, what underlies the novel is, on one hand, a pervasive sense of fatality and of nostalgia for a lost part of integrity and, on the other, a parodic projection of an indeterminate future in which identities are blurred and fluid.*

Keywords: *race , the South, gender, class, identity, difference, otherness*

Preliminaries

Thematically, *Go Down, Moses* (1942) can be read as a chronicle of five generations of McCaslins while the loose structure of the novel (seven stories) allows the narrator to adopt different perspectives and registers in a multi-layered discourse that includes race, gender and class issues. The structure of the work signals the exhaustion of high modernist poetics, of what John Barth called, in *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967), the 'used-upness' of different narrative forms, and allows the loosely connected short stories to range freely from the comic to the tragic, from past to present, from black to white, in a kaleidoscopic vision of transracial identities. Their interplay becomes manifest in some cases of fragmented consciousnesses, black and white, that do not feel at home in Faulkner's South and that prove to be incapable of coming to terms with Self, the Other or Transcendence.

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Relegated to inferior positions in terms of class and race, blacks assert their difference and resist domination by reshaping the major, white discourse, by 'signifying' upon its cultural codes and thus developing a 'minor' discourse. 'Signifying', a critical concept coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as a rhetorical trope to describe the African-American vernacular, is instrumental in the description of the cultural confrontation between two discursive universes: the black and the white. Rather than articulating their fears, anxieties and desires in the masters' dominant discourse, the blacks learned to improvise and 'signify upon' that discourse and its cultural or ideological codes.² 'Signifying' actually translates as: 'talking with great innuendo...talking around the subject, never quite to the point'³. While signifying, the signifier makes up for a lack of social power with an exercise of intellectual or critical power. In what concerns me here, 'signifying' is the Other's discourse, inscribed in the major discourse; it is difference inscribed in identity.

Conflicting discourses and interracial opacity

Conflicting discourses across the color line is what makes self-expression impossible in *Pantaloon in Black* for example, my first case under consideration⁴.

The story/chapter is one of the few instances in which Faulkner gives centrality to a black character and it is written in a key of mourning: when Rider's young wife, Mannie dies, his incapacity to articulate his loss in any of the dominant discourses drives him to a kind of hysterical, inarticulate rage. His state of mind elicits, in return, the incomprehension and vindictive rage of the white structure of power and he is lynched for having killed in self defense, Birdsong, a white night watchman whom Rider has caught cheating on him at dice.

The piece can be read as an example of interracial

2 Notably so in the genre of black spirituals from which Faulkner took the title *Go Down, Moses*. The source is used for E. Genovese's study of black religion in the South- *Roll Jordan, Roll, 1974*.

3 Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986. p. 54. Gates argues that we should bracket the word 'race' consistently in quotation marks to reflect the cultural difference that the unbracketed word would leave unmarked.

4 The title itself signifies upon the black tradition where the 'pantaloon' is the buffoon, the fool.

cultural opacity and, indeed, Faulkner contrast Rider's attempt to express his loss with two instances of white cultural incomprehension. In the first section of the story, Mannie's grave is described by the omniscient narrator in terms that are meant to 'defamiliarize' common perception. The grave 'save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old bricks and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read'. (*Go Down Moses*, Vintage Books, NY, 1973, p.118, hereafter quoted as GDM followed by page number)

The writer's intention may transcend the textual significance and point to matters regarding Faulkner's life-long struggle with the portrayal of black culture. Often accused that, as a southern white, he was not quite able to surpass his own cultural conditioning Faulkner takes issue here with the racist assumptions regarding blacks that were dominant among his contemporaries, i.e., that blacks were genetically inferior to whites, or that their way of life was worthless and primitive and consequently irrelevant for the white culture. Although Faulkner may not have consciously intended to change the black image in the white mind, he certainly felt, as his entire work testifies, that white racist assumption were wrong and needed to be challenged. Therefore, J. D. Singal is right when he asserts that what Faulkner may have also attempted here was 'rendering black life *visible* to whites for the first time and combating the noxious yet pervasive belief that people of African ancestry were somehow subhuman'.(Singal, 264) Maybe so, because, on the other hand, Faulkner remained convinced, as J. Blotner shows, that white southerners of his generation could never successfully have access to the real, inner world of their black contemporaries. Not only because they wore a mask and adopted the practice of 'signifying' in interracial encounters, but also because 'their modes of thought and feeling were often different and therefore difficult for a white person to understand'(Blotner, 1038-9).

The second half of the narrative is a comment on Rider's story by the sheriff's deputy in the form of a long monologue to his wife. Faulkner's uses here, again, one of his favourite devices, i.e., an alternate narrator who retells the events from what appears to be the prejudiced viewpoint of the white community in town. His version of events embodies the limits of his white discourse grounded in stereotypes that a long tradition had endorsed:

I swear to godfry, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why?. Because they ain't human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to normal human feelings, they might just as well be a herd of wild buffaloes.(GDM, 133)

The deputy sheriff cannot understand or explain Rider's behaviour because he possesses a set of virtues different from the ones Faulkner elsewhere associated with black characters: endurance, passivity, obedience. Rider is defined in and by action, asserting himself through the sanctioned means of manual labour. Used to have more social dignity and power than most blacks around him, he rejects one by one conventional expectations as inadequate to his grief and growing rage. He rejects his grandmother's religious urging because that would mean acceptance of a power incomprehensibly unjust and incapable of helping him ('Efn He God...Leff Him come down hyar and do me some good', GDM, 130). Turning away from religion he does not find meaning in the work ethic either, as he soon realizes that the money his job at the saw-mill brought him could now only buy whisky or be spent at gambling.

His third attempt to drown himself into drinking and gambling, 'Rider's hysterical carnivalesque'(Moreland, 173) proves equally ineffectual because here they function only as a pre-set escape valve within the same socially repressive mechanism. Alcohol as solution to mitigate his rebellious spirit leads to sickness which, with Rider, is both actual and metaphoric. Gambling, too, is equally deceptive; the outcome of the dice game he enters is pre-established allowing only insignificant, false winnings to the blacks who always lose to the white man in the end. But, perhaps, there is more to it. If we accept that Faulkner's intention in writing the story may have been to force white readers to go beyond the stereotype of the black man, maybe he is also challenging here the stereotype of the white man, of all southern white men, as inherently racist and prejudiced in what concerns black matters. For what is curious in the narrative is that the deputy continues to tell the story of Rider's lynching even though his wife is obviously uninterested and impatient to go to the movies. The possible explanation is that the man is actually addressing himself rather than her, in an effort to

understand something that his previous experience hadn't taught him: that human suffering and doom is not confined to the white 'race'.

The striving to accept this truth is highlighted by the contrast with another white voice in the novel that had equally been faced with black suffering: that of Gavin Stevens of the last, title story of the novel, *Go Down, Moses* that I will consider later.

Let me just say here that, unlike the redneck deputy, the highly educated and sophisticated lawyer will be completely alien to Molly's real humanity. Both of them confront grief and human passion where they least expect it. Both have the chance to test the cultural stereotype about race against their actual experiences but their reactions are different: the deputy tries to understand it, Gavin Stevens is sure that he understands the 'negro' completely. Both fail but at least the deputy seems sensitive to the revelation, while Stevens runs away from Molly's grief in order to avoid emotional involvement.

Et pluribus unum

From the radicalism of *Pantaloons in Black*, Faulkner gradually moves toward a more balanced view of the South pointing to what might be taken as the general theme of the novel; i.e., the idea that blacks and whites lead equally problematic lives in a confused society; that they are, ultimately, one family kept together by their very divisions- an idea that may originate in the old southern cliché that the plantation was a harmonious and interdependent family'.

Here, as elsewhere, Faulkner's statement on race is ambiguous and the voice that expresses it is that of Isaac McCaslin. We meet him first in the piece entitled *Old People*, as young Ike who loses his innocence when killing his first buck under the guidance of his half-black, half-Indian mentor, Sam Fathers. Ike is embodying here what has been designated as the American myth of 'regeneration through violence', the myth of the hunter who is initiated into manhood through his appropriation of the mysterious power of the beast and the knowledge of the Indian hunter.

He is given a more consistent role in *The Bear* as he gradually moves from issues of self articulation to larger issues concerning the relation with the past, the acknowledgement of guilt and the possibility of redemption and deliverance. Ike progresses from the natural to the social order in an effort to understand and find a viable relation to the past. His epistemological quest is carried over from reading the woods to reading history; that of his own

family as recorded in the ledgers of the plantation and, at the same time, the generic history of slavery. The past is soiled, he soon finds out, with sin, injustice, suffering and incest committed by his own grandfather, Carothers Mc Caslin. The white patriarch had had a child by a slave, Tomasina, who was probably his own daughter as well. The episode is registered in the plantation ledger as an ironical rhetorical question, a comment on the fact that Tomasina's mother, Eunice, committed suicide: 'Who in hell ever heard of a niger (sic) drowning him self?'(GDM, 225). The comment only shows again how, in matters of race, the human dimension and the social definition are always at odds in Faulkner's South. For R. W. B. Lewis, 'that combination of incest and miscegenation represents for Ike the evil condition of the South, and its betrayal of moral possibility' (qtd.in Warren, 210). For, in this case, the sin against the 'negro' is even more unpardonable as it is committed in the family: not only incest, but also a hasty dismissal of its consequence, i.e. of the half-black son Carothers had by his slave Tomasina (Tomey). The son, Terrel, had been marked down in old Carothers will for a legacy of one thousand dollars, a fact which now entails Isaac judgmental comment: it must have been cheaper this way, he thinks, than to say 'my son to a nigger'.(GDM, 227)

Incest and miscegenation are deeply rooted in the southern past; they are, partially, the result of the white planter's freedom with his women slaves and they have produced, for Old Carothers, the 'black' and 'white' members of his family subsequently enmeshed in tragic conflicts and contradictions. On one hand, the South, with its emphasis upon family honor and values, advocated strong familial bonds and obligations; on the other, it wouldn't grant family status and love to a white man's offspring of mixed blood. As a result, the black man's life was tragically marked while the white man's conscience was burdened by the awareness of guilt.

Such a realization explains Isaac's decision to withdraw from the social realm into the natural one, rejecting his tainted past for the haven of the sacramental woods. The decision he takes is ambiguous, however, as it can be understood on one hand, as the result of moral indignation, but also, as the act of a defeated consciousness coming from the realization that the past is a fatalistic curse upon the present that no southerner could escape. In a speech made at the University of Virginia, William Faulkner has the following to say:

Well, there are some people in any time or age that cannot face or cope with the problems. There seem to be three stages: The first says , ‘This is rotten, I’ll have no part in it, I’ll take death first’ . The second says ‘This is rotten, I don’t like it, I can’t do anything about it, but at least I won’t participate in it myself, I will go off into a cave or climb a pillar to sit on’. The third says ‘This stinks and I’m going to do something about it’. Ike McCaslin is the second. He says ‘This is bad and I’ll withdraw from it’. What we need are people who will say ‘This is bad and I’m going to do something about it, I’m going to change it’.(qtd. in Moreland, 183)

and his statement is an indirect condemnation of Ike’s choice and of his disassociation with the world. John Duvall is of the same opinion when he states that:

Ike McCaslin fails to provide the key to a nonpatriarchal society because his renunciation - his refusal to profit from a system of male power that perpetuates racial injustice - is just that, simple negation and refusal, a withdrawal from life. He generates no alternative vision of how to live in the world, and the transmission of patriarchal authority is in no way disrupted by Ike's refusal to be its embodiment.(Duvall, 110)

The idea of Ike as a Christ-figure, sustained by Jazz White⁵, for example, would lead to the same conclusion although the comparison almost forces itself on the reader. Like the Nazarene, Ike abandons all worldly ambitions, discards whatever would point to a life of social involvement: the gun, the compass and the watch and, equipped only with his carpenter’s tools, retreats into wilderness. In *A Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee conceives of the wilderness as a place of escape but makes the distinction between simple detachment and isolation and the transfiguration of the self made possible through what he calls ‘withdrawal and return’. Toynbee writes that ‘a transfiguration in solitude can have no purpose, and perhaps even no meaning, except as a prelude to the return of the transfigured person’ adding that ‘the social human animal cannot permanently estrange himself without repudiating his humanity and becoming, in Aristotle’s phrase “either a beast or a god” ‘(qtd. in White, 107) . Ike’s desire to remain in the wilderness

⁵ See Jazz White, op. cit., especially the Chapter 4: ‘The Failed Messiahs of Go Down, Moses’.

betrays him as a defeated consciousness. If Christ withdraws into wilderness he also returns after forty days of wandering and temptations 'in the power of the spirit'. On the other hand, Ike, 'widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one'(GDM, 8) has nothing that he loves enough to live for or return to. He withdraws into wilderness but never emerges.

In a study entitled '*The Winter of Isaac Mc Caslin: Revisions and Irony in Faulkner's "Delta Autumn"*' , Carol Harter points to the character's inadequacy when saying: 'In the final analysis, Isaac Mc Caslin represents the end of a long line of deluding and self-deluded men enmeshed in a culture and a heritage marred by corruption and failure'(White, 111) . Ike himself acknowledges his predicament when, guilt-ridden, cries to his cousin Cass Edmonds: 'Don't you see? This whole land, the whole South is cursed and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse?'(GDM, 234). When the reader meets him again in, *Delta Autumn*, he is an old and defeated Ike Mc Caslin, moving undeniably toward death, in an empty tent, listening to the 'grieving rain'.

The final, title story of *Go Down, Moses*, offers another example of the clash between two modes of cultural discourse. In this case the issue at stake is whether Samuel Beauchamp's story and the grief of his grandmother, Mollie, can be understood across boundaries of class, race and gender by Gavin Stevens, the white lawyer. Raised by his grandmother until he was nineteen, Samuel goes north and under an assumed name, becomes involved with the Chicago underworld, and ends up on the electric chair for having killed a policeman. When the news of his death reaches Stevens, his first impulse is to avoid mental and emotional involvement with the case and the story of Beauchamp's marginal position. Stevens, guided by his moral and legal principles embedded in his dominant white discourse, tries to justify the necessity of his death as that of a 'murderer', 'a bad son of a bad father', whose death is 'better this way'. However, when confronted with Mollie's grief and Mrs. Worsham's emotional solidarity, he agrees to bring the body home to be properly buried, not 'just in a box' provided by the prison and with flowers.

When Stevens visits the Worshams he witnesses silently their chanting and mourning but his reaction is one of denial regarding the implication of Edmonds and of the white world in Beauchamp's death. His instinctive reaction is to flee. 'He went down the hall fast, almost running', Faulkner writes. 'Soon I will be

outside, he thought. Then there will be air, space, breath'(GDM, 317). Gavin Stevens cannot face the reality of their suffering and his sense of suffocation and nausea suggests the depth of his unacknowledged involvement in his death and their grief.

Mollie's demand that the story be published in the local newspaper and also her insistence for a proper funeral comes from the desire to find the culturally proper means of articulating her loss and the grief of the black community. If Stevens makes feeble attempts to resist her request, he does so out of concern for the pain it would cause the white community and Stevens himself. In other words, Stevens's attitude is a means of denying emotional involvement with the other and, at the same time, of insulating himself and the white community from the guilt and the larger responsibility they are not ready and willing to accept. Faulkner's implicit critique here is that Samuel Beauchamp's story cannot be written as it cannot be comprehended neither across the color line, nor as part of the story of the Yoknapwepha saga and, implicitly, of the American South.

Instances of non-involvement are counterbalanced, in the same story, by glimpses of human solidarity across the border line; not only does Mrs. Worsham, the local aristocrat, get involved with Mollie's grief, but so does Gavin Stevens, although reluctantly, and, eventually, the whole white community by contributing to the buying of an expensive coffin for Samuel. His contribution to the funeral expenses can be seen as the white liberal response to the tragedy of slavery. The gesture is not singular or unprecedented in the novel: the same guilt money had been given by Old Carothers in his will to Tomey' Turl, his black son (*The Bear*); or left by Roth Edmonds with Ike, for his black mistress, in *Delta Autumn*.

Faulkner's 'sense of the heart', i.e. his emotional attitude is repeatedly in conflict with his intellect. Alongside the fraternity and 'homogeneity' that might be inferred from the 'town's involvement in the burial, the narrator also implies that Samuel's death is the price he paid for having gone North and having thus denied his 'southernness':

The negroid hair had been treated. [...] He wore one of those sports costumes called ensembles in the men's sop advertisements...smoking cigarettes and answering in a voice which was anything under the sun but a southern voice or even a negro voice.(GDM, 308)

Faulkner makes a similar point in *The Bear* by showing Fonsiba, Lucas's sister, in a state of utter destitution, now living in a half-ruined shack in Arkansas after having run off with an idealistic northerner. The author is judgmental again by having her rescued, financially, by Ike McCaslin, a white southerner and remote descendent of a slave master. Blacks cannot manage on their own, he seems to say.

Delta Autumn: racism, tolerance, the future

'Truth of the heart' and 'truth of the mind' are again contrasted in *Delta Autumn* in the encounter between old Ike Mc Caslin and the black woman who had come to look for Carothers Edmonds, the father of her child. On discovering that she is a 'nigger', he is appalled at the idea that they might marry and strongly advises her to go North and marry 'a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for you'. The possibility of an interracial marriage is projected onto an indefinite future, 'for a while yet, maybe a long while yet'. Black critics have eagerly jumped at Ike's words in order to accuse Faulkner of 'racism'. However, in the context, the narrator does not endorse Ike's speech, for it is the woman who has the last word: 'Old man', she said, 'have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?' (GDM, 303). Her appeal to 'the truth of the heart' checks Ike's racism and projects a larger tolerance that is the author's, ultimately.

Such an attitude underlies the portrait of Lucas Beauchamp of *The Fire and the Hearth* who will be given centrality in the next novel, *Intruder in the Dust*. In *Go Down, Moses* the character of Lucas is ambiguous in terms of identity. Faulkner would have us believe that he is a composite of the two races which he accepts equally, unlike Joe Christmas, for example, who belongs to neither. Lucas is seen as the result of genuine integration, a son of the land: 'He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology that sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind...of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own' (GDM, 104). As he appears here, he stands for the single 'race' of southerners.

Lucas Beauchamp is not just another black character in Faulkner's fiction. A mullato, like Joe Christams of *Light in August*, or Charles Bon of *Absalom, Absalom!*, he is, nevertheless, a singular type. Not tragically torn between the races, he actually takes pride in his (partially) white ancestry and his 'inferiority' is

only in terms of class. For, in *The Fire and the Hearth*, the ‘uppity’ black tenant and the white planter descend from the same family, the McCaslins, initiated by Old Carothers. He, the old patriarch, had three lines of descent, each traceable in *Go Down, Moses*: one through his son ‘Buck’(who, with his twin brother ‘Buddy’, appear in *Was*, the burlesque, opening story of the volume), which would end with the childless Isaac McCaslin; a second through his daughter Mary, who would marry an Edmonds and eventually become the great-great grandmother of Roth, Lucas’s cousin and landlord; and a third through his black slave Eunice, that, three generations later, would produce Lucas Beauchamp.

The issue of descent, lineage or ancestry as validating present identity is foregrounded in an episode which Lucas recalls and which dramatizes interracial communication and renders Lucas’s identity as problematic and precarious. The scene features Lucas enter the front door of the big house (cf. Sutpen’s being turned away from the door by the liveried black servant), an open razor in his hand, intended on killing Zack Edmonds whom he suspected of having ‘taken’ his wife Molly. Lucas’s rage is the more justified as Zack was the man ‘he had known from infancy, with whom he had lived until they were both grown almost as brothers lived’.(GDM, 52)

But Lucas’s rage has additional motivations, too; he wouldn’t like Zack to think that ‘because I am a nigger I wouldn’t even mind’(GDM, 50). What follows is a physical contest, tellingly over the *bed* in Zack’s room. In using violence, Lucas deflates the stereotype of the submissive black but, as R. Moreland points out, he also runs the risk of confirming another stereotype that was quite common-spread during the Reconstruction: that of the ‘violent Negro’, especially as he contemplates the idea of cutting Zack’s throat while he is asleep. Eventually Lucas discards the idea, throws the razor away and engages Zack in a one-to-one wrestling over the gun that lies between them on the bed. What the confrontation comes down to is, ultimately, one that would prove natural superiority, the fact that Lucas is a ‘better’ man if only because of his ‘masculine’ kinship with Old Carothers, unlike Zack, the descendent of Carothers’ daughter.

Faulkner wouldn’t let either of them win by having the gun, which Lucas did eventually use, misfire. Even though he takes Molly back, his ‘victory’ is debatable; he comes to realize that, for a man of his condition and race, social dignity and love cannot coexist.. The dilemma that Lucas has to confront is that between ‘a

precarious social dignity at the cost of life and love, or a precarious love at the cost of social dignity. And even trading social dignity for private love remains an unsure settlement' (Moreland, 168).

As Richard King points out, a character such as that of Lucas Beauchamp was extremely unusual in the early 1940s, 'artistically and morally daring for a white writer, Southern or not'(King, 234).. The reason is that Lucas is depicted as a successful mulatto, 'as a black man endowed with a Cavalier persona'(Singal, 267), proud, self-assertive and independent, features traditionally ascribed to the old planter class: 'He's more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put together, including old Carothers'(GDM, 104), Roth reflects.

Taking into account Faulkner's position on the racial issue in the South, Lucas's persona can be seen as a possible model for a transitional identity for blacks in a racially mixed, 'homogeneous' society that Faulkner envisaged, as the following makes clear: 'To live anywhere in the world today and be against equality because of race and color, is like living in Alaska and being against snow'⁶.

Yet, his racial liberalism is still marked by a tinge of paternalism apparent in his advice to blacks to conduct themselves in such a way as to be 'better than white people', 'more responsible, more honest, more moral, more industrious and educated' (Singal, 101). And when it comes to the fictional form of such an identity model, expectations are baffled and the idea is not sustained, or, at least, seriously diminished: Lucas's other face is that of a silly 'darky' engaged in such business-like enterprises as distilling illegal whiskey or digging for buried gold at night with the help of a divination machine sold to him by a northerner- a highly unusual position for a black character in his fiction.

Written after Faulkner's monumental achievement which was *Absalom, Absalom!*, this unusual novel incorporates some echoes from the former, it 'signifies' upon it, as if it were a post-modern revision of his masterwork. Not only that both texts have biblical titles, but both focus on the connection between race and identity, both are obsessed with blood and genealogy, with inheritance and dispossession. Finally, in both novels the white

⁶ W. Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, p. 94. Faulkner's address 'On Fear: Deep South in Labour: Mississippi' was written in 1956, in the wake of the Supreme Court's Brown decision, to support the integration of public schools and equality in general. Apud, J. D. Singal, op. cit., p. 268

protagonists perform acts of rejection and seek an intimate relation to the land, albeit for different reasons; these protagonists have their black counterparts that are somehow related to them and that cannot avail themselves of their rights because of their inferior racial status.

Thomas Sutpen's act of denial can be seen as *exclusive* and *future-oriented*. He sheds his 'poor white trash origin', intent on erasing a past in which he has been victimized by cultural difference, and starts working to the accomplishment of his 'design': the foundation of a white, racist empire that, he believes, will last as long as the successive generations will preserve the purity of their blood. And then there is Charles Bon, the alleged 'mulatto' who becomes 'both the sacrificial victim of Sutpen's design and the catalyst of his empire's slow destruction'(Weinstein, 35)

The case of Isaac McCaslin of *Go Down, Moses* is, on the contrary, *inclusive* and *past-oriented*. He, too, wants to wipe out a past that he discovers to be tainted with guilt and incest and, by withdrawing into the big woods, attempts to construct a self-contained, imagined world. This timeless space takes the form of the 'delta', a sign that Faulkner actually uses in the text; it is a space of stoical acceptance and mourning, as the title of one of the stories, 'Delta Autumn', suggests. His black shadow is Lucas Beauchamp, both victim and survivor and who, by virtue of kinship, is equally entitled to the possession of the land.

The revisionary dimension of *Go Down, Moses* is most obvious in the way (southern) identity is conceived of and constructed in the two novels as the result of the relation with the other; while in Sutpen's case that relation is racist, excluding the cultural other, McCaslin's vision seems to include blacks, too, in what is his design of what he calls 'disinherited inheritance'. The indefinite future that Ike projects is one in which 'Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares'(GDM, 304). Ambiguity seems to be endemic whenever we come across such theoretical considerations about the future of racial co-existence.

In a hasty appraisal, one is tempted to say that this is 'Faulkner' speaking through Ike, the same Ike, we should remember, that had retreated from the real world into an ahistoric space where he hopes to reestablish the long last connection with the land, or, the Ike who has just advised Edmonds' mistress, discovering that she has black blood, to go North and marry someone in her 'race'.

Ike's previous attitudes enable us to say that the passage is rather a critique, on the part of Faulkner on Ike's racism and passivism. All the more so as the larger historical context puts things into a new perspective: the novel was published in 1942, when America had already entered the war against Nazi Germany and its allies. Actually, Hitler's name is mentioned in a conversation between Roth Edmonds and his hunting companion Will Legate, one of the rare instances when echoes from the real world penetrate the walls of the Yoknapatawpha. It is not far-fetched then to say that the mentioning of the 'Austrian paper-hanger' (GDM, 283) can be linked to Ike's fear of racial assimilation and to his sense of a lost, 'homogeneous' homeland.

What Faulkner indirectly criticizes here is that the construction of a genuine identity, as Ike sees it, 'is a matter of closing out and separating oneself from the 'other', that the transformation of the authentic self can only take place outside history, within a bounded, segregated space' (Weinstein, 42). Such a space, symbolically 'bounded' by the delta sign, connotes the feminine as it is connected to the stereotype of the woman as a virginal womb. The idea is apparent in the scene of the encounter with the unnamed woman- the granddaughter of Tennie's Jim-, who had come to the hunting camp to look for Roth Edmonds. He is the father of her child, the last offspring of the assimilated Mc Caslin-Beauchamp line, crossed and recrossed by blacks and whites alike, in the long history of the family that Ike has discovered in the plantation ledgers. By the way she is described- wearing 'a man's hat and a man's slicker and rubber boots, carrying the blanket-swaddled bundle on one arm and holding the edge of the unbuttoned raincoat over it with the other hand' (GDM, 298) -, she appears as a figure of transgression and racial crossing: dressed in man's clothes, she is both male and female, black and white, disinherited and inheritor, all in one. Walking out of the closed space of the tent into the future that Ike dreads, the woman is a figure of alternative identity as compared to Ike's separatist views of a white male.

Conclusion

In subverting Ike's identity outlook in the novel, William Faulkner suggests the possibility of another, postmodern version of identity, that is composite, aggregate and transracial. In tune with such a possibility, the fragmentary form of the novel sustains the postmodern idea of a decentered text and subverts the humanist

notion of individuality as a coherent essence of self which exists outside ideology and cultural history. For Faulkner, identity, and especially black identity is always relational and contextualized.

Starting with the 50's, 'Faulkner's fictional treatment of identity issues, both black and white, both personal or regional will become increasingly contaminated by Faulkner's involvement into public debates and controversies regarding pressing political issues at the time. After *Intruder in the Dust* was published in 1948, Faulkner the citizen will dedicate more and more time to speak publicly on political and especially racial issues, at the cost of losing the support of many fellow Southerners because of his attacks on racism and disappointing many liberals because of his gradual approach to desegregation.

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The Postmodernist Prose of the European East. A Case

Marius Miheț¹

Abstract: *The present paper intends to offer an x-ray of Alexandru Vlad's prose, thus proving its postmodernist features; a brilliant translator of modernist American and British writers, Alexandru Vlad proves to be a rather tough enterprise whenever a critical attempt of including his fiction within a rigid, canonical literary paradigm has been performed, since his writing is continuously changing its interior rhythm, permanently searching for its inner voice.*

Key-words: *postmodernist prose, Subject, de-centering, identity, abyss.*

In the postmodernist prose of the European East manifold obsessions of the subjectivity of the I, instantiated primarily through the American strand have been retrieved. Alexandru Vlad (1950-2015) is a case in point in terms of such de-centering. A translator of several Modernist American writers, the Romanian prose writer systematized his prose up until his untimely death. Whereupon a conglomerate of contradiction as regards the disintegration of the Subject in fiction has resulted. Irrespective of their subject-matter, Alexandru Vlad's stories problematize the way whereby reality does not make sense in the absence of minimal dramatization. Although the texts of the Romanian author seemingly debate issues extraneous to a Subject purged of reality, it is often the case that we witness what Foucault coined as the synthetic activity of the Subject. A perpetual becoming, in fact, of the same universal subjective I. That is why the feeling of discontinuity in his prose is so vital, so electrifying. Vlad's technique denies coherence in surface discourse, whilst secretly betting on the

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unification of radical subjectivity. The fragmentariness of his discourse urges, all things said and done, the remaking of a recomposed truth, whilst preserving a visible anti-humanistic stratum. That the latter is mimed or not, it doesn't ultimately really matter. What does matter is that his prose thematizes subsidiary modernist structures, which is redolent of the fact that Vlad denies the multiple possibilities entailed by postmodernity. Without exception, Alexandru Vlad's texts can be read as an archaeology of subjectivity on a quest for harmonious identity.

The volume *My Life as a Civil Servant* (2004) is part of Alexandru Vlad's eclectic literature. Diverse, preeminently composite texts, ranging from reportage to memoirs, skits, at times even excerpts from novels, all this composes, as mentioned above, such a literature, as volumes published after 1989 amply prove. The noteworthy exception is the novel *Bitter Rainfall* (2012). The same technique is discernible in the *Lamp Glass* of 2002 and in *In Summer, More Careless than in Winter* (2005), but also even later, in *Olives Almost for Free* (2010). In other terms, the short-stories in these volumes can arguably be read as *fiction in the abyss* (using McHale's term), replete with self-referencing material and individual maps that are re-grouped with a view to novel *relations*: from epistemological particulars to ontological verdict.

There was nothing that fascinated this author to a greater extent than short prose, short stories, regardless of the fact that they would COALESCE or not in a coherent, synthetic material. He would rather include ingredients as in a sort of *culinary text* (not an entertainment-ridden text however, but one yielding conceptual openings), unified notwithstanding, by a mesmerizing, enthralling style. None of these texts lack reflexiveness, a concept and indeed *praxis* that the author stayed faithful to up until his last writings.

A thoroughbred analyst, a surgeon of the geometrization of destiny, Alexandru Vlad writes as indeed he lived: in the vein of fragmentariness. Even the novel *Bitter Rainfall*, skilfully laid out, yields the flawless convergence of its constitutive parts. Especially through these cumulative details, minutiae, the novel ultimately discloses a master's potential in terms of mastery of prose.

If a unifying vision is the issue here, one can speak of one thereof only in *Bitter Rainfall*, where the experience of withdrawal – into the inner self and away from urban exteriority filters the very meanings of a World, not merely its layers, as he had previously done. One can identify in Alexandru Vlad's writing – having as goal the ultimate experience of the total novel – several levels of *event-*

informed particularization, preeminently icons of a destiny apparently researched without the odd ultimatum-riddled curiosity. It is my belief that it is when he relinquishes the curiosity informed by the fugitive detail, by the fragmentariness of the world, and closes up in the cumulative overarch of a definitive Self, that Alexandru Vlad is truly prepared for writing up the total novel. What indeed happens in the case of *Bitter Rainfall*.

My Life as a Civil Servant stands apart through the very novella that gives the title to the whole volume. All the other texts are somewhat *niche*. It is common knowledge that the older, generic text, had been rejected by communist censorship several times and the writer subsequently kept altering it. What is certain is that, as soon as he seems to be satisfied with its final form, he does publish it alongside other texts, as I mentioned earlier, on the – officialized – eclectic note. In *Instant Autobiography* the author swaps the protagonist's data with that of the author on the blurb, similarly to the subsequent *Double Rainbow*. Confession here justifies, in fact, the very all-emcompassing melancholy that accompanies the texts of the Cluj author: the dysfunction of biography (raised by his grandmother and in a conflictual relationship with his mother) does, however set some psychological landmarks: first, his closeness up to almost identification with the rural world, which will subsequently turn into identity-driven shock and a sequence of implosions once he becomes a city-dweller; second, the love-life shock he underwent, with his girlfriend's untimely death. The solutions thereof are well-known: " detachment and humour have often functioned as safety valves. As a result of her death an inexorable guilt-ridden feeling would stick with me". "Emotional catalepsy" would be doubled during his Cluj student years by *systematic estrangement*: from every job and every place – a predominant feature of the writer, ever louder this, until his demise. *Instant Autobiography* equally contains the very idea of the volume: "I was in turn an antiquary, custodian to a small art gallery, I cleaned spiked boots for a soccer team and lots of other odd jobs until I got to be a typist with a big transportation company, where I was to work for over ten years. This was what I now call my life as a civil servant. During this time I edited my books (three up to that point), always in Bucharest so that I should extract myself out of local politics, I got the first awards and indeed recognition".

In *The Clear and Precise Memory of September, 27th 1970*, the fictionalization of biography continues, this time around by an episode on the brink of surrealism. The narrator-character

helps out a grandfather's clock thief carry the huge clock in order to have it fixed. There are two concepts that are intertwined here, caught up in a theatrical duet: time and lies. Both, in fact, engendering illusion. Ultimately the thief, the one who wishes to fix the shattered time brings along a sort of consciousness that the narrator originally contests by counterpoint, by incremental lying so that, in the end, it should stay with us as the argument of diluted conscience.

The bizarre crook who wishes to unleash arrested time is to be later developed into a significantly more complex character: Kat the male nurse in *Bitter Rainfall*. A parable of illusion, *The Clear and Precise Memory of September, 27th 1970* is a nice, endearing Borges-ean game.

Endlessly more ethereal, *Exit* resembles the indecisive notes in an unfinished story. What stays with us is that the feeling of alien atmosphere through setting and the impossibility of unclearness – two ideas that Vlad would later resume in his novels – both have to do with social masks.

A Place for You to Understand is an allegory of friendship, whilst an occasion for the author to resume recurring musings. When one of his friends lets him know that he is getting married, he takes the former 50 km away into the mountains in order to confide in him. The aphorism-informed conclusions, that run throughout Alexandru Vlad's work, crop up here in terms reminiscent of Livius Ciocarlie's verdicts: "friendship is an underutilized generosity, forever available" or "I used to think that friendship is the most democratic feeling of all, but even friendship begets obligation". Ultimately, a cautionary tale about maturity and separation within the bounds of friendship. The skit *V* captures in an almost photographic stance the reunion of two ex-lovers. Veronica, now a married woman, seems to the narrator to be the embodiment of his own failure, the latter only to later succumb to evasionistic pondering: "The detachment at slow pace of the massive vehicle gave me, for a second there gave me the feeling that in fact it was I who moves away from all the fixedness around me."

It is *depersonalization*, not merely as pharmaceutical retreat from failure, but equally as social project that the novella that gives the title to the whole novel is about. Alexandru Vlad has remained faithful to an idea picked up from Joseph Conrad, an idea we shall come across also in later volumes. The idea goes: "the inner adventure of the character is more genuine than the external one. Characters are more or less losers, but what losers!"

Indeed, the assertion above constitutes a staple in the poetics of Alexandru Vlad's novel writing. Both the atmosphere thereof, and the relationships within the novella are built upon the theme of failure. The narrator is Emil, a young man who gets prepared to sit for the admissions exams for college, and who, after a series of failures thereof is hired as a traffic warden. In this sense, things are redolent of the re-education of the hero in *The Most Beloved of All Humans*: it is arguably the same, the intellectual banished by semi-illiterate colleagues, the impossibility of dialogue, vulgarization etc.

It is only the plot that is similar, of course. What preoccupies Vlad are relationships, the insidious way failure comes to pervade the others or the means whereby the former is further propagated.

In fact, intent readers of Alexandru Vlad's prose will somehow read the same story over and over again, it being interchangeable in terms of manifold scenarios: namely, the melancholy individual, who, having landed in the midst of an at times violence-riddled world, finds that the latter remains alien to him in the event. Too afflicted by solitude is he, or too fed up with it. Discontinuity sets *ontological superiority* in Alexandru Vlad's text.

My Life as a Civil Servant is a collection of photographs of the use of estrangement. Alexandru Vlad does not conceal, here or elsewhere, the appeal failure has, failure as lack of constitutive will. The artistic effect thereof settles it against a background of contemplation of a depressive nature and of a phantomatic, ever more contourless society.

Out of all this, however, what overrides all is what Vlad continuously ensures: a sense of spleen that is not infrequently poetic, as well as the bounds of bookish depression having an epistemological end.

Quite a natural passage shall be performed in *Double Rainbow*. As in the title itself, and as indeed in *Bitter Rainfall*, the emphasis is laid on a-rhythmical nature – a constitutive preoccupation with Alexandru Vlad.

Alexandru Vlad locates the leaks of a reality wherefrom nothing has remained to be capitalized. This is, in fact, the story in *Double Rainbow*.

The narrator, a kind of Emil retired after a lifetime spent as a civil servant cushions the wait for the end with the game of reintegration: into the world of the village once deserted for life in

the city. Incapacitated by "my oneiric recklessness" , by "the caricatured images" from the extended experience of the Centre, the return to the village resembles a return to the rhythm of sedate death.

The pace of waiting is disrupted by a myriad excursive stances ranging from insertions of memoirs, to all kinds of bookish references, to ideas etc. All the connections against coherence in its traditional stance. A photogram aficionado, Alexandru Vlad writes *Double Rainbow* with the gusto of a collector who, in the absence of new acquisitions, re-arranges and permutes the available pieces. In other words, the novel is a plural text, technically speaking, and its non-linearity, its innate fragmentariness, all this justifies indeed one of the conditions of postmodernity. Vlad's method is obvious, it is one that utilizes one of the broadest concepts: indeterminacy. The notion substantiates the journalese-informed titles or the memoirs-driven ones and indeed the excerpts that seem to perpetually, incessantly dismantle the text.

BOOK REVIEWS

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REVUE DU LIVRE

On Interpretation (Ioan Pânzaru, *The Regime of Interpretation. Literature and the Sense of Plot*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași 2012/*Regimul interpretării. Literatura și sensul acțiunii*, Editura Polirom, Iași 2012)

Anemona Alb¹

It is with profound critical acumen and impressive ideological range that Ioan Pânzaru - who specializes in French literature and is a Professor at the University of Bucharest (his main research concern being medieval studies) - tackles the issue of interpretation in literature. His book *The Regime of Interpretation. Literature and the Sense of Plot / Regimul interpretării. Literatura și sensul acțiunii* (Polirom Publishing House 2012/Editura Polirom 2012) lays out and painstakingly analyzes the intricacies of the process whereby exegesis is performed.

Interpretation is not merely seen here as the revelation of meaning, the yielding of multiple, palimpsestic meaning but equally as problem, (transgression of) norm, entitlement, legitimation. Indeed the ethics thereof emerges as one of the main issues undertaken by the author. To quote the latter, „As in the study of ethics, the transcendent nature of moral values seems to some to be insurmountable, likewise in literature the irreducible nature of the aesthetic to other values seems to be a founding fact.” (Pânzaru 2012: 60). Indeterminacy, one of the staples of postmodernity is also approached by the author in a bid to unveil the very mechanisms of meaning production. He quotes, *inter alia*, Paul Ricoeur, who identifies what he labels literary value as superimposed to communicated content that is addressed to an indeterminate recipient. It is this very indeterminacy of the recipient, Pânzaru argues, that allows space for the honesty, the candour and for the very intimacy of literary enunciation. Artists, he claims, are the ultimate sincere humans, not because they have higher moral standards than others, but because the medium whereby they express their views guarantees their freedom of speech as if beyond the grave. The very same indeterminacy, Pânzaru states, allows for the monumental character of the work-of-art (according to Paul Zumthor) and its availability for occupying a position of authority in society.

In other sections of the book, Pânzaru saliently uses the

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concepts of *prescriptive rules* and *the conative force of writing* to make a case for the manifold nature of interpretation. He also discusses *agency* and *the forking of paths in narrative* (in the Eco-ean vein). Not only are the concepts thereof minutely and subtly dissected and analyzed, but the referential range (from Aristoteles, to exegeses of the Bible to postmodernism) equally beckons the reader to immerse themselves in this text. It is indeed a text that is valuable both for the adept and for the layman who wishes to discern the entanglement of interpretation in literature.

Rigor (mortis) in Warfare Literature (Antonio G. Iturbe, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, Planet Editorial Publishing House 2012/Antonio G. Iturbe, *Biblioteca de la Auschwitz*, Editura RAO, 2013, transl. by Graal Soft SRL, București)

Anemona Alb¹

It has been one of the recurring *modus operandi* of late to revisit old, sedimented themes such as terror, mass extermination, ideological clout, be it in Nazi-sm or in communism. Indeed some of the most hailed books in this vein over the last few years tackle revisionistic issues such as, What if we were to allow literature to yield *the other side of the story*, beyond the prescriptively triumphalist vein of the victor (The Allies) and thus to portray the horrors of World War Two through the eyes of the defeated, for the sake of balance? Books such as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink do indeed yield such alternative narrative. In the absence of mainstream rendering and representation, what else is there in terms of means of expression? Antonio G. Iturbe in fact departs from this newly-intantiated practice of whitewashing the historical perpetrator, as his is a vision of the resilience of the victim, but it is the very theme he addresses that circumscribes his novel into the revisionistic practice mentioned above; beyond the content-driven considerations, in terms of form he dismisses the generally-accepted practice of, say, accruing tension vertically, as it were, and instead has the latter build-up laterally, by mapping out, indeed extrapolating meaning from one domain onto another (i.e. from lethal practices to – lo and behold! – the theatre, amateur theatre performed by inmates). Indeed it is the everyday minutiae of life at Auschwitz, the equally banal and tragic combustion of living in a concentration camp that Iturbe masterfully lays out in his novel, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, published in 2012 (2013 for the Romanian translation). It is perhaps the smallest collection of books in history that this makeshift underground library accommodates (only eight books in all). But this tiny treasure is a symbol for survival, for (lost) normalcy. Books carry values that no ideology, no punitive practice can obliterate (it is not a coincidence that Hitler had tons of books burnt in public squares in a bid to insidiously set terror and to pre-empt any potential resistance, rebellion). If in *The Reader*, it is a female guard that

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has a controversial, tragic relation with books, in *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, like in *The Book Thief* as well, it is a nubile girl, a prisoner that harbours books at Auschwitz, thus putting her life at risk in the process, the guard in the first novel mentioned above being herself a tad infantile, notwithstanding.

What I find most enthralling in this book is the way the myriad meanings of order, of rigor are played out; it takes – indexical – rigor to organize a library, as indeed it takes cynical rigor to organize mass murder. The scenes in the novel whereby the aftermath of gas chamber efficiency is instantiated play upon the ambivalence of mobility. It is the desperate mobility of the moribund, trying to escape the gas chamber in the process of being gassed, gasping for air, clambering on other agonizing, half-dead bodies. It is rigor mortis in an uncanny entanglement of dead bodies, uncanny because still projecting movement, impossible egress from a space of doom, but equally the rigor of Nazi extermination, the *techne* thereof. As one of the characters reports, "God forgive me, you have no idea what's in there. As you enter you come across a mound of cadavers, all topsy-turvy, one on top of the other. Definitely some die from asphyxia and being trampled on. When that poison reaches them, probably the body reacts in a horrible way, suffocation, convulsions and all. The dead bodies are covered in excrement. Their eyeballs are protruding, their bodies bleeding, as if their organism had undergone inner combustion. And the limbs, the cringy arms, like claws, tangled into the bodies of others, in an attitude of despair, the necks so elongated upwards, gasping for air, so elongated as if they were ready to snap." (Iturbe 2013: 69). The elongated necks in this Bosch-ean, nightmarish scene are redolent of yet another painter's style, that of Modigliani. An unwanted palimpsest, as these images are not mere surface, but woeful content, Death *per se*, not the mere iconography of death. It is, beyond the imagery, *rigor mortis* with a difference, as here we have the immobility of death paradoxically superimposed to the mobility of panic, of despair; the mechanics of horror that supersedes the very motionlessness of death.

Yet another powerful interplay of images is that of the makeshift theatre productions the prisoners are made to perform and of life itself. Art and life, cynically intertwined. It is, *inter alia*, the ambivalence of spaces that is instantiated here: the space of the concentration camp, where things are all too real, where death is real, *versus* the space of the theatre, where make-believe is the norm. In fact, two types of illusion are invoked here: on the one hand, that by inflicting death upon a number of Jews, the whole Semite race will disappear, hence the illusion of eugenics and on the other hand, beyond the conventional artificiality of the theatre, that by staging a play, the worries and fear will be dissipated. Stage-fright is subtly made to yield twofold causality here: that of the natural nervousness of actors before entering the stage and that of having as spectators the very butchers of their destiny, the Nazi officers

in attendance. It is not an arbitrary choice that the prisoners, all children, are made to perform *Snow White*, which entitles the author to suggest a readily discernible parallelism: that of the officers (Doctor Mengele among them) and that of "wolves in uniforms". Indeed it is a modern bestiary that is alluded to – and operationalized – here. In the indiscriminate massification of identities, indeed of taxonomies, it is only laughter (as triggered by the inadequacies of the actors on stage) and crying as triggered by *catharsis* that differentiates among people: "It was only laughter and crying that reminded them that they were still human" (Iturbe 2013: 33)

Hence two relations of ambiguity are thus established in the text: one between the gas chamber and the showers (all prisoners were told, and indeed thought that they were going to have a shower when in fact they were guided towards death induced by poisonous gas) and the one between the concentration camp as the space of impossible illusion (the illusion that one may escape) and the theatre as the ultimate space of illusion, of make-believe.

A plethora of other forceful images in this novel: surveillance as extension of body (Dita, the protagonist has the sticky feeling, a feeling of stickiness – like sweat exuding from her body - that she is being surveilled, monitored by guards even when she is not); play upon the conventions of literature (Dita used to be a librarian back in the day, in the ghetto as well, only to forecast her role as an underground librarian at Auschwitz, a premonition, this, not dissimilar to that in Russian drama, where a weapon on the wall panoply in Act One most surely indicates a murder that is to come in Act Three etc.)

Iturbe's story is based on real history, on facts at Block 31 at Auschwitz that the author documented and the protagonist, Dita is inspired by the real protagonist of these uncanny forms of resistance and resilience, Dita Kraus, a survivor of Auschwitz (where she was imprisoned as a 14 year-old) that Iturbe interviewed and to whom the book is dedicated.

The World as a Theater. Then & Now. Andrei Zlatescu, *Shakespeare's The Tempest and The Elizabethan World* (Publica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014)

Ioana Cistelean¹

Andrei Zlatescu is currently the Director of European Inter-University Center for Human Rights and Democratization – European Master's of Human Rights and Democratization Programme for Romania; he is also teaching Community Theory and Human Rights for the Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, enjoying a vast Western recognition for both his academic activity and his studies in the fields of cultural anthropology, history of ideas, community research and minorities' rights.

As summarized in the book's presentation, Andrei Zlatescu's *Shakespeare's The Tempest and The Elizabethan World* essentially represents “a dramatic riddle vacillating between older and newer symbols of Elizabethan and Jacobean Court cultures (...). Prospero's provisional tyranny disposes the absolute answers of representative knowledge, his enlightening work of wizardry reduces knowledge itself to an act of efficient representation, nonetheless an empty epiphany. Thus, Shakespeare's last major folio is both ritual and play, an unprecedented work of “magic theater” that institutes new stage conventions - in which both the meaningful “fabulation” of the sacred drama and its prescriptive performance in history are shown: a dramatic structure that can produce events in history within its narrative agency, truth that finds its new measure in representation.”

Nevertheless, a modern reader might very well be intrigued by the study for much more than this: it is a story within a research, it is a literary text within a complex cultural paradigm, it is also a historical and political context within a Shakespearean play or vice-versa. From the beginning, the author reveals and thus sort of validates his need for constructing such a study: “An incompletely mapped maze for the history of hermeneutics, Shakespeare's last major play is topped off with rhetorical paradoxes. This requires a new critical understanding of “ambiguity” as a carrier of meaning throughout different interpretational eras: the metaphor of a dramatic vortex both mercurial and corrosive (...) goes well with the image of this play. Indeed, *The Tempest* looks like an

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inexhaustible source of inspiration for each epoch of understanding.” This particular inexhaustibility would act throughout the entire study as the inner energy, the engine and never-ending vitality of the volume's intercession. The process of structuring the researcher's arguments in its intentional introductory stasis would eventually prove to fulfill its tasks, to reach its goals – a multiple-colorful fresco emerges with each chapter of the book: “In my demonstration, I will discuss a social “history” of imaginary acts centered on the metaphors of kingship that are found conducive to the paradoxical quality of symbols present in Shakespeare's last major play.” Indeed, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* turns into a religious, a political, an ideological quarrel – all in all, into an extended multi-cultural x-ray which underlines the play's referential progress and its intrinsic dilemmas. Critical perspectives on the topic over the centuries and concepts related to the text's problematic, thematic and substance are carefully followed, registered, revisited and demolished if needed. (“A more elaborate rendering of Marxian esthetics is crystallized in Louis Althusser's theoretical undertaking; he takes the phenomenon of ideological contamination as typical of all forms of social interaction, including forms of art.”; “To free the Englishmen from the influence of papacy, Morison proposes, the state had to do more than to impose the laws of the new Parliament to gain public support through proselytizing.”; “Political strategizing, as the moderns have learned from the lessons of history, is often a hazardous process, whose dependence transcends the powers of individual leadership, and depends upon objective resources as much as upon demographic and social factors.”; “Shakespeare, Kermode writes, rejects Montaigne's “naturalism”, ascribing his perceptions to those narratives of the New World unfavorable to the natives, widely popularized during the epoch.”)

Andrei Zlatescu's *Shakespeare's The Tempest and The Elizabethan World* is a surprisingly generous, fully-documented and quite a spectacular research; the reader would discover not only the world of Shakespeare as theater, but above all his proximal contemporary world as a continuously performing arena/ stage, a text within few other texts, a story within and moreover beyond the classic or the canonized story, a rewarding universe attentively analyzed in its apparently minor details, contexts and pretexts in their dynamics, a cultural background worth re-visiting over and over again.

James Oliver: *Affluenza*. Vermilion, London, 2007

Magda Danciu¹

This is one of the books that help you better grasp the underlying social context fiction writers evolve in so that they can end up writing about certain things/characters in a certain way in an age characterized by the contagious disease of consumerism, highlighted by the title itself: affluence + influenza= affluenza. Readers concerned about the twists in the conceiving and rendering literary issues nowadays would find it useful to discover that most of our current existence and aspirations are marked by the emergence and operation of virus values of the affluenza, that is, our present way of life residing in the need for consumption, and the awareness that our lives are dominated by the conflating site of having and being.

As a social psychologist, the author examines the effects, that is, the depression and anxiety created by the virus of consumption under the condition of “Selfish Capitalism” which induces emptiness and loneliness, and a lack of authentic and intimate relationships, all of which encourage an increase of consumption:

The more anxious and depressed we are, the more we must consume; the more we consume, the more disturbed we are. Consumption holds out the false promise that an internal lack can be fixed by an external means. Compensation for personal misery is why people with the Virus are at greater risks of substance abuse (...) or of the legal ‘aholias’: shopaholia, workaholia, sex, the other compulsions of mass consumption. We medicate our misery through buying things. (p.15)

James Oliver carries out a massive research in notably English-speaking countries (the US, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand) but also Denmark, China and Russia, to demonstrate how people accept the rule of superficial values or, as Erich Fromm observed, how they “experience themselves as commodities whose value and meaning are externally determined” and how “consumerism has found it easy to offer distraction and false individualism, supplied by possessions because most people lack identity. People differentiate one another by what they own, not who they are (...), by Having rather than Being” (p.65).

He attempts to identify and juxtapose the traits of the *Marketing Character* in the various parts of the world, discovering the unifying areas as well as the particular aspects of each country/society/community investigated, foregrounding the roots of their

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depression and frustration, and ways of “healing” the wounds of the virus, in accordance with general and particular principles, such as:

Form as truthful and accurate an assessment as possible of yourself and your society, rather than living in a rose-tinted bubble of positive illusions.(p.153)

Don't be scared of examining your failures as much as your successes when searching for clues about what to do.(p.154)

There is unhappiness and depression generated by the Virus values, goals and motivation as they are driven by the need of “reward, praise, the others' appreciation”, and vector to “money, possessions, good appearance, fame” (p.157) that could be cured by what is seen as the opposite of Virus motivation, namely, the intrinsic motivation: “you do things for the pleasure of the activity itself” and soon realize that “typical intrinsic goals are supporting others, such as beauty or self-expression and that “people with intrinsic motives and goals tend to be emotionally better off than those who have exclusively Virus ones”(p.154).

By offering certain solutions to overcome the negative effects, the destructiveness of our virus-attacked well-being, the author makes use of a positive psychological encouragement to face the affluenza by controlling the balance between needs and wants, by establishing your self-esteem in terms of both victories and defeats of daily life, “if one's worth is so shackled to one's performance”(p.247)

Horea Ioana: *Theorie und Kreation in der modernen Literatur*. Editura Universității din Oradea, 2013

Denisa Igna¹

Vor Kurzem ist im Verlag der Universität Oradea ein Buch *Theorie und Kreation in der modernen Literatur* der Lektorin Ioana Horea erschienen, das auf einer Promotionsforschung basiert. Die Autorin beabsichtigt, die intellektuelle Bivalenz mancher Wissenschaftler und Schriftsteller zu erforschen, um danach mit belletristischen Argumenten die Existenz eines Entwicklungsprozesses in Kunst und Literatur sowie in Wissenschaft zu prüfen. Die Arbeit verbindet eine riesige Bibliografie mit Fallstudien aus der rumänischen und europäischen Literatur. Die Autorin bezieht sich auf die aristotelische Trennung von Wissenschaft und Kunst, bzw. von Geschichte und Dichtung, indem die erste als Gegenstand die Wahrheit und die Partikularität hat, die zweite die Schönheit verbreitet. Verschiedene Autoren behaupten, man könne mit Dichtungstalent geboren werden, aber Wissenschaftler könne man erst durch harte Arbeit werden. Die zwei intellektuellen Beschäftigungen setzen verschiedene geistliche Begabungen voraus, obwohl es viele Wissenschaftler gibt, die sowohl wissenschaftliche als auch künstlerische Talente haben. Als Beweis werden sechs Schriftsteller ausgewählt, drei aus der rumänischen (George Călinescu, Camil Petrescu und Mircea Eliade), zwei aus der französischen Literatur (André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre) und der Italiener Umberto Eco.

Der Beziehung zwischen Wissenschaft und Kunst widmet die Autorin ein ganzes Kapitel, das sie *Theorie und Kreation* in der modernen Literatur benennt. Als modern wird die neueste Literatur verstanden, die Literatur nahe unserer Zeiten, des 20. Jahrhunderts. Die moderne Literatur hat laut den literarischen Kritikern sechs wesentliche Merkmale: die Änderung der Beziehung Literatur-Realität, Erscheinung des Selbstbewusstseins der Literatur, die Strukturkrise, Zergliederung des Charakters, Polysemie der Interpretation und das offene Kunstwerk. Bei den analysierten Schriftstellern und Werken merkt man, wie die Literatur subjektiver wird, man kehrt von der objektiven Realität zur inneren Welt zurück. Es findet eine Reifung des Selbstbewusstseins der Literatur statt. Die Literatur beginnt, über sich selbst nachzudenken und über den eigenen Schöpfungsprozess. Das beste Beispiel in diesem Sinne ist der Roman von André Gide, *die Falschmünzer*, der hierin durch seinen

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Charakter Edouard enthüllt, wie der Roman eines Romans (Metaroman) geschrieben wird. Die Zergliederung des Charakters, die Strukturkrise sind direkte Ergebnisse der Entwicklung des modernen Romans. Die Polysemie der Interpretation macht Platz, nicht nur in der modernen Literatur, sondern in allen Kunstwerken, zahlreicher Interpretationen seitens des Lesers; egal ob er gewöhnlicher Leser oder literarischer Kritiker ist. In Bezug auf das offene Kunstwerk oder das offene Ende zeichnet sich die moderne Literatur durch die überraschendsten Ereignisse und Geschehen aus und lässt den Leser viel darüber nachdenken.

Schlussfolgernd setzt sich das präsentierte Buch mit dem Schwierigkeitsgrad des gewählten Themas, mit dessen Wichtigkeit für die geistlichen Wissenschaften, mit der wissenschaftlichen und ästhetischen Kultur der Autorin und mit der Richtigkeit der ausgedrückten Ideen über Entwicklung in Kunst und Literatur auseinander.

J. M. G. Le Clézio : *Tempête. Deux novellas* Collection Blanche, Gallimard, 2014

Floarea Mateoc¹

Le livre le plus récent de J.M.G. Le Clézio se présente sous une forme littéraire toute neuve pour son écriture. Il s'agit de *novella*, une oeuvre de fiction située comme longueur entre la nouvelle et le roman, peu fréquente en France mais très appréciée par les Anglo-Saxons. Le sous-titre *Deux novellas* précise le particulier des deux petits récits réunis sous le même titre : *Tempête*. C'est le libellé de la première tandis que la deuxième s'appelle *Une femme sans identité*. D'ailleurs, l'écrivain en donne des explications supplémentaires sur la quatrième de couverture : « En anglais, on appelle "novella" une longue nouvelle qui unit les lieux, l'action et le ton. Le modèle parfait serait Joseph Conrad. De ces deux novellas, l'une se déroule sur l'île d'Udo, dans la mer du Japon, que les Coréens nomment la mer de l'Est, la seconde à Paris, et dans quelques autres endroits. Elles sont contemporaines. » Quoique indépendantes, elles se relient par des thèmes communs, chers à Le Clézio comme la quête des origines, l'identité, la mer, la solitude, l'errance, la révolte, le remords, pour n'en nommer que certains.

Ce livre illustre une fois de plus la motivation du jury Nobel qui a couronné Le Clézio en 2008 comme « écrivain de la rupture, de l'aventure poétique et de l'extase sensuelle, l'explorateur d'une humanité au-delà et au-dessous de la civilisation régnante ». Surnommé à juste titre « l'écrivain nomade », Le Clézio est considéré l'un des plus grands voyageurs de sa génération. Pour lui, à l'ancienne pensée de Montaigne « voyager c'est connaître » s'ajoute le désir de découvrir d'autres espaces, d'autres peuples et d'autres cultures que la civilisation occidentales a longtemps ignorés et minimisés. C'est aussi le cas de la première novella dont le cadre lointain se situe dans l'Extrême-Orient.

Mais quelles sont les raisons de son choix ? Le Clézio en donne lui-même quelques éclaircissements dans une interview accordée à Thierry Fiorile, journaliste du service culture de France Inter : « J'ai eu l'occasion, en effet, dans une petite île qui s'appelle Udo, de fréquenter un peu ces femmes, j'ai même nagé avec elles mais je n'ai pas osé plonger car je ne suis pas un très bon nageur. » (www.franceinfo.fr/emission/le-choix-culture/2014). Dans son témoignage, il dévoile avoir été bouleversé par

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leur vie, par leur force et par leur optimisme. C'est une vie ambivalente, partagée entre la souffrance physique de leur corps, pareille à toutes les personnes âgées, lorsqu'elles sont sur la terre, et le plaisir de plonger dans les profondeurs de la mer lorsqu'elles changent, devenant joyeuses. La preuve en sont leurs cris de joie en sortant de l'eau que l'écrivain se plaît à reproduire tels quels. C'est une musique de la mer qui s'avère être une thérapie pour ces femmes qui l'ont bouleversé de les voir en réalité et qui lui ont donné envie d'écrire ce livre.

Il est vrai que la mer devient un élément fondamental de l'imaginaire insulaire de Le Clézio. Quoique le topos de la deuxième novella est la ville, elle apparaît aussi d'une manière symétrique à l'incipit et à la fin. Ses personnages entretiennent une relation particulière avec la mer qui remplit plusieurs rôles : substance de leurs rêves, source de vie et gouffre de la mort, lieu initiatique, espace de la délivrance et de la liberté totale.

Le Clézio a été inspiré aussi par un thème qui le hante, relié à la vie complexe des femmes, surtout des jeunes femmes qui doivent surmonter grand nombre de difficultés pour accéder à la vie adulte. Tout en soulignant que la vie des femmes est plus dure que celle des hommes, il les admire pour leur courage physique et moral, pour le fait qu'elles doivent réussir plusieurs vies en même temps : la vie professionnelle, physique et affective, tout cela en même temps, en se heurtant à toutes sortes de difficultés.

Les personnages féminins des deux novellas sont deux adolescentes en quête de leur passé, de leur origine, un mélange d'innocence et de maturité. Elles sont stigmatisées dès leur naissance par le manque d'un parent. June, de la première novella, vit avec sa mère sur l'île d'Udo dans la Mer du Japon et ne connaît pas son père. Rachel, de la deuxième, est née en Afrique et grandit dans la famille Badou avec son père et sa sœur cadette, Abigaïl (Bibi). Elle apprend plus tard qu'elle est une enfant illégitime, venue au monde à la suite d'un viol et que sa mère l'a abandonnée après sa naissance. La trame narrative de leur identité se tisse d'histoires et de rencontres qui les rapprochent ou les distancient.

Dans la première novella, June est aussi l'un des narrateurs qui raconte sa vie, exprime ses états d'âme, présente ses opinions sur la vie de l'île et ses observations sur les gens. Elle se remarque par la différence : l'aspect physique (elle est métisse), le don de chanter et le penchant vers l'errance et la rêverie. Sa mère veut lui assurer un meilleur avenir en l'envoyant à l'école mais elle reste une enfant de la mer dont elle connaît les légendes et les mystères. Le Clézio exprime encore une fois l'admiration et l'empathie pour les pêcheuses d'ormeaux de l'île qui gagnent leur vie plongeant chaque jour, malgré leur âge et le danger qu'elles courent.

June rencontre d'un pêcheur bizarre et taciturne, Philip Kyo, un journaliste, chroniqueur de guerre et photographe qui débarque sur l'île

après trente ans pour revoir les endroits où il avait déjà vécu. Il est le deuxième narrateur qui raconte sa vie et observe l'évolution de June. On apprend que, pendant la guerre, il a assisté à un viol sans réagir, ce qui lui a coûté une peine de cinq ans de prison. C'est un trauma, une blessure de l'âme, un remords dont il n'a pas guéri même s'il est venu sur l'île pour chercher l'éloignement, « le calme et la distance » comme possible thérapie. « Je suis un mort en sursis. Je suis mort depuis longtemps. J'ai fait quelque chose de terrible et ça ne s'est pas arrangé. Tout ce que je vois me parle de mort... » (p. 89). Ni l'amitié avec Mary Song, une chanteuse de blues rencontrée sur l'île, ni les beaux jours passés avec elle, n'ont apaisé sa douleur. Chacun était venu sur l'île pour chercher un refuge, lui pour fuir le passé, elle pour se remettre après un amour perdu. Philip doit traverser une épreuve plus dure après la disparition mystérieuse de sa copine que la mer a engloutie pendant qu'elle nageait.

Les trente ans passés ont abîmé son identité le transformant dans un écrivain raté, un homme qui n'est rien et qui n'appartient à personne. Accablé par la nostalgie et la solitude, il tombe dans le trou noir de l'existence mais la présence de June devient un salut. Elle est l'ange gardien qui lui redonne le goût de la vie. « Le hasard a mis sur mon chemin un ange, une enfant innocente et drôle. Pour la première fois, depuis longtemps, j'ai rencontré un être humain. » (p. 75). A son tour, la jeune fille cherche auprès de lui la protection et l'affection paternelles qui lui manquent. Il se forge entre eux une communication très forte et sincère.

Rachel, de la deuxième novella vit une partie de son enfance à Tarkwa, en Afrique de l'Ouest. Elle est fascinée aussi par la mer mais elle grandit sans affection dans la famille Badou, dans une atmosphère chargée par les disputes interminables entre les deux époux. Le seul être cher et proche est sa demi-sœur, Bibi. L'annonce que Mme Badou n'est pas sa mère et qu'elle est née à la suite d'un viol, lui provoque un véritable trauma qui divise son existence en deux dimensions temporelles : avant et après. L'avant coïncide à l'enfance avec sa joie et sa beauté tandis que l'après correspond à son devenir adulte lorsqu'elle découvre la méchanceté des gens. En effet, Rachel doit subir la froideur et le rejet de Mme Badou qui dévoile ses ressentiments et la condition de la pauvre fille : « La petite Rachel (...) Sans famille, sans maman, Rachel sans nom, c'est ça qu'il faudrait dire quand on parle d'elle, Rachel No-Name...une enfant trouvée, une enfant de la rue dont personne ne veut...l'enfant de personne...Elle me fait peur. Je n'en peux plus. Elle me hait..., elle nous hait, c'est un démon. » (p. 150-151). Tout est sous le signe de la négativité. Sans appartenances identitaires, Rachel est hantée par la pensée qu'elle n'est personne et n'a personne, ce qui fait d'elle un être étrange qui s'impose de vivre en solitaire. C'est un repli sur elle-même qui s'apparente à l'exil intérieur avec son dramatisme.

Pendant la guerre, la famille Badou quitte l'Afrique et s'installe dans la banlieue parisienne. Rachel se sent dépaysée ayant du mal à

s'habituer à la civilisation de la ville. Elle doit traverser les épreuves d'un double déracinement : d'un côté, elle s'éloigne du lieu natal et d'un autre, elle doit se séparer de la famille qui se brise et qui n'en veut plus d'elle. Traumatisée par ses origines, marquée par le viol subi par sa petite sœur et par leur séparation d'après, elle erre en solitaire se dressant des itinéraires dans le labyrinthe de la ville grise. Rachel vit dans la précarité, ne peut pas se créer de liens même si elle rencontre des gens qui vivent en marge comme elle. Si avant, elle et sa sœur étaient pareilles et très proches, elle se rend compte que leur relation est rompue. Un mur sépare deux mondes, son monde à elle, sans repères et sans attaches et celui de sa sœur qui se réjouit d'une identité primaire, celle d'appartenir à une famille, d'avoir la liberté d'agir : « Maintenant elle vit de l'autre côté, elle ne sait plus rien de ce que je suis. Elle a les clés de la liberté et moi, je suis en prison. » (198).

Rachel rencontre sa mère biologique qui lui raconte les circonstances du viol et de sa venue au monde. Bibi, devenue jeune femme, subit elle aussi un viol dans un bar parisien. Ces femmes connues et inconnues rejoignent la galerie des personnages féminins lecléziens qui ont subi l'agressivité du viol : Michèle dans *Procès-verbal* ou Laïla dans *Poisson d'or* pour n'en rappeler que quelques-uns. C'est un acte détestable qui est repris comme un leitmotiv dans *Tempête*, une nouvelle occasion pour l'écrivain de condamner l'agression contre la femme qui n'a aucun droit et aucune puissance pour y échapper et de montrer sa sympathie pour la condition féminine. Après ses aventures à l'ouest de la France et ses expériences de vie dans un camp en marge d'une ville, parmi les délaissés, Rachel trouve son salut par le retour dans la terre originelle, l'Afrique. Son geste rappelle celui de Lalla, l'héroïne du *Désert* qui rentre aussi de son exil français, de sa vie « chez les esclaves » dans son paradis perdu, le désert marocain. Rachel nourrit un brin d'espoir retrouvant son origine, ne fût-ce que par la rencontre de la sage-femme qui l'a mise au monde au même hôpital de Takoradi où elle encadre, après trente ans, une équipe multinationale, comme volontaire.

Ecrits à la première personne, les deux récits racontent en fait l'ampleur de la vie avec la variété d'expériences et d'épreuves que l'être humain doit traverser. Philip et Rachel sont des nostalgiques : ce sentiment doux-amer se manifeste chez eux dans sa double expression *Heimweh* et *Sehnsucht*, désignant le mal du lieu natal et le souvenir du temps heureux. Eux, de même que June souffrent aussi d'une solitude foncière qui les pousse vers l'errance et dont ils ne peuvent pas guérir. D'ailleurs, tous les personnages sont souffrants : Philip perd sa bien-aimée et connaît l'horreur de la guerre, les pêcheuses d'ormeaux souffrent physiquement lorsqu'elles sont sur la terre, Rachel éprouve la douleur de l'abandon, June vit avec difficulté le passage à la vie adulte. Leurs expériences pourraient s'encadrer dans un *bildungsroman*.

Mais le sentiment dominant dans *Tempête* est l'amertume qui

désigne ici un état particulier, « une douleur qu'il faut bien aimer, parce que lorsqu'elle cesse, tout devient vide, et qu'il ne reste plus qu'à mourir"... » (p. 47). C'est un sentiment ambivalent « un don précieux qui donne du goût à la vie ». (p. 128). Le Clézio précise d'ailleurs dans la même interview que c'est le livre de Cioran, *Syllogismes de l'amertume* qui l'a inspiré aussi pour écrire ce livre. Hanté par la question du philosophe concernant la couleur du remords, l'écrivain en trouve la réponse : « c'est le gris de la tempête lorsque la mer et le ciel se confondent mais c'est aussi le gri des villes surtout la banlieue où l'on sent le remords, « cette essentielle dimension de l'humanité ».

Dans les deux novellas, Le Clézio dépeint la tempête de l'existence, exprime encore une fois son humanisme et envoûte le lecteur par la musique de sa phrase et de ses mots.

Recovering the Literary Intimacy. Simona Sora: *Regăsirea intimității. Corpul în proza românească interbelică și postdecembristă (Recovering the Intimacy. Body Paradigm in the Romanian Post-December and Inter-War Prose)*. Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008

Marius Miheț¹

There can be identified precisely two literary moments in the center of Simona Sora's present study on body and bodily substance as far as the Romanian prose is concerned: 1933 and 1989. For any foreign reader these particular temporal frames bear no relevance whatsoever. But they do for the Romanian culture: the inter-war year represents, on one hand, the absolutely remarkable explosion of creativity, quite impressive on the level of Romanian minor culture, while the year 1989 emphasizes both our separation from communism and our new start in a freedom experience that had to recuperate almost half of a century of darkness in regards of creativity.

No wonder, thus, that under repression and denial circumstances, such as that of totalitarianism, the Romanian literature was forced to reinvent its messages on those forbidden realities, among these one could easily denote intimacy. Things are getting more difficult to comprehend since we are dealing with a bodily substance accepted and constructed as a theory of reading. The problem lies in discovering such an intimacy which is deeply hidden beyond epochs, ideologies, all sorts of interdiction and censorship. But above all these, the biggest problem lies in the process of distinguishing the communication between personal intimacy and literary intimacy. Simona Sora strongly believes that there should be a real balance between the act of writing on intimacy and the act of simultaneously reading and re-reading literary criticism, philosophy, religion and psychology - all these applicable to a double revelation, which is the body itself and the obsolete intimacy belonging to a personal epoch.

Immediately after our freedom was reinstated in 1989, the Romanian culture felt the inner need of a specific something to erode all the accumulated impudence during the totalitarian regime. While during the inter-war period the very process of representing the intimacy always had something erogenous and summer-like in it, in the communism aftermath such gestures could no longer be performed easily. Consequently, the very gesture of dis-inhibition suddenly took a totally

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different approach, acting as a renunciation to all taboos and inhibitions: the process of recovering intimacy manifested itself technically by stamping the whole area of self-referentiality, textuality and authorship. That's why the concrete differences between what is called the inter-war body and the post-revolutionary body are clearly cut and quite consistent. For instance, the author notices that during the inter-war period the body paradigm used to still reflect a cosmic harmony, being nevertheless the proper habitat for losing one's self, for an absolute fall into the world. On the contrary, the post-modern body paradigm, as it is portrayed in the most significant novels published after 1989 revolution, implying its total lack of external censorship, this particular body ends into a rather fragmented, dispersed one; it would actually transform itself into a body-form and also into a body-universe which might be mapped from all perspectives.

Simona Sora proves to be a master of research: she would successfully apply diverse theoretical instruments – a generous range that includes theological and philosophical studies, sociology, psycho-criticism, phenomenology and hermeneutics. The author's theory on intimacy intends to act as a very comprising one, a theory that sums up all major ingredients of Romanian bodily substance prose, focusing on those two historical moments already mentioned. The conclusion is rather clear, a quite simplified one for today's modern reader: the soul and the body become the same entity during the inter-war temporal frame, while the body becomes the soul as far as post-modernism is concerned. This is how the intimacy paradigm is radically changing.

There are plenty of intriguing verdicts offered by the book: for example, the one stating that despite the Romanian writers' wishful thinking, they will never be able to completely synchronize themselves with the Occident aesthetic tendencies since the '80-s literary representatives were actually the last real writing professionals in our literature, given the fact that their most favored devices (self-reflexivity, fragmentarism, para-literature, textual bodily substance and inter-textual game) have already reached an inflexible level.

Beyond all these theoretical x-rays, Simonei Sora's book is definitely a surprising and a continuous challenge: it permanently invites the reader to taste other perspectives for old books. In her analytical arguments she is amply making use of classic references, such as: Aristotle, Kristeva, Nietzsche, Freud, Baudrillard and Foucault, so that the reader no longer feels he belongs to a marginal literature, but he/ she is part of a consistent literature, one capable of really modeling its landmarks.

The present book is a plus for the foreign reader as well, although he/ she is not familiarized with the Romanian writings; he/ she may be the beneficiary of a totally new theoretical perspective on the matter, the subject of many surprising conclusions. But above all, the one essence

that counts the most in the dynamics of the volume is its dialogue not only to the other totalitarian oppressed cultures, but also with those that were never “blessed” with such interdiction.

Matei Vişniec's *Cabaretul cuvintelor. Exerciții de muzicalitate pură pentru actorii debutanți* (*The Cabaret of Words. Exercises of Pure Musicality for Beginner Actors*) as an Ontoepic Dictionary. Cartea Românească Publishing House, București, 2012

Tamás Mihók¹

“How to describe the moment when word and matter explode to generate a different dimension of existence, that is bliss?”², wonders incidentally the narrator of *The Cabaret...*, suspending his declamation on the word *cafea* (*coffee*). In the same chapter, this narrating character (actually an acting stage director) discloses that his daily encounter with the self takes place by virtue of this word “which scents the being”. But before these effusions of inciting his own identity through words, the auctorial intentionality, as the preface reveals, points to the antropomorphisation of words.

The book is divided into two parts representing an example of hybridization between the three established literary genres. In the first section of *The Cabaret...*, words march in materialized form, acquiring not only shape, but occasionally also colour and even smell. The narrator, participating to a linguistic clash, is chatting with words praising them, challenging them and, when needed, expressing reproaches. Both the verbal and nonverbal interaction, enhances the theatrical effect of the discourse; one can identify the omnipresence of the narrator transfused into a cautious tone and the mundane gesticulation, tools the characters, impersonated by words, operate with. Despite the first-person narrative, behind-the-scenes the narrator has an accomplice, a prompter if not the director himself, who tempers his experiences.

The detachment tendency is more pregnant in *Exercises of Pure Musicality for Beginner Actors*, the second part of the book, where the words become wayward in the name of some original pronunciation experiments. The narrator disguises into a skillful alchemist who prepares various phonetic potions using sounds as raw material. Ingredients such as exclamations, onomatopoeias, digressions, idioms or syntactic breaks are summoned to produce that flamboyant magical effect. Hence a feeling

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² All the quotes included here are extracted from the book in question and have been translated by the author of the article.

of *catharsis à rebours* generated by the plethora of alliterations and assonances, and semantically by an overestimation of a certain lexical category.

Nevertheless, Vişniec's *trouvaille* in *The Cabaret...* is the device of metamorphosing words into characters described, paradoxically, with words as well. What he calls "a subjective dictionary" becomes from the reader's perspective an *ontoepic* dictionary. The premise of these transfigurations is primarily the reverberation produced by words. That is to say, the words' DNA is defined improperly by their phonetic form. This is why their embodiment is also a remake the narrator realizes by exploring his memory and imaginarium. For example, the word *rău* (*bad*) seems to be frustrated because of his dull sonority and also envious of the phonetic abundance of the word *redundanță* (*redundancy*). The ontological connotations, meanwhile, approach him to the word *bine* (*good*), whose harmony he seeks, in spite the fact that they are antonyms.

If the phonetic level – that is the words' resonance quality – brings upon the act of personification, the semantic dimension is responsible for the role and the existence of each word evoked. Thus, the lexemes are included for the first time in the ontological dimension peculiar to humans, where they express themselves with empirical facility.

It is worthy of mentioning the dexterity with which the creator of this new civilization ventures to string along with the textualist tendencies. The most appropriate illustration would be the dual narratological attitude regarding the word *dorință* (*desire*). If in chapter *Dorință 1 (Desire 1)* the word *protagonist* (*protagonist*) is described as "delicate, tall, always wearing a mysterious smile", in the next chapter entitled *Dorință 2 (Desire 2)*, the narrator, considering the existing textual constructions, changes his mind: "Wrong. Everything I told you until now about the word *desire* is wrong. And it shouldn't... No... (...) Mister *desire* is the type of vagrant unworthy of compassion."

Choosing the republic as a form of government in the universe of words is also essential and the narrator explains the selection of this particular régime by advancing several hints. Since a republic implies that the sovereignty belongs to the people and the executive power is exercised by the citizens elected for a given period, words are granted a more or less delusive equality. This is how Vişniec perceives the bond between us and the words that inhabit us. As a consequence, all the contexts (whether they are for or against equality) are built on this relation.

The Carabet... does not disrupt the balance of the literary motifs prevailing in the works of the author. On the contrary, it is a crossroads where the motifs he employs in his writings eventually meet. Perhaps the most representative phenomenon used by the writer is a slow time condensation, which happens to occur in the very climax of several stories. The temporal slowdown is meant to lead the collateral meanings towards the deadlock of a paradox that births the absurd. Another game

Vişniec invests with *epos* is dialectics, by associating the words *good* and *evil*, respectively *yes* and *no*.

The aesthetic principle on which such connection is based defies the laws of logic without, however, transcending the limits of normality. Everything takes place on a mimetic level, by imitating the real civilization. The meanings of the words in *The Cabaret...* are not (very much) distorted considering that the anarchy is not only the enemy of the republic, but of any effective system. The language by itself is quite an impressive madness, there's no use disturbing it any further – seems to be Vişniec's motto in this book.

Simona Vasilache- Caragiale, diavolul din detalii, (Caragiale, the devil is in details) București, Casa de pariuri literare, 2015.

Dana Sala¹

Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912), more than any other Romanian author, has been hailed by critics as "our contemporary", since he is the writer who had exposed the most unpleasant shortcomings of the Romanian society of his time. A century plus three years after his death, most of the defective social mechanisms revealed by Caragiale as guilty of wrongdoing seem to go on, probably challenged but almost unchanged. Writers, philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, in their critique of these defective mechanisms, have resorted many a time to examples taken from Caragiale's oeuvre, acknowledged as a genius analyst and as a genius writer.

The critic Simona Vasilache has published recently a booklet on Caragiale. It does not claim to be a book of criticism. It does not claim to be grounded on literary theory, either. It illustrates perfectly the Latin proverb *non multa, sed multum*. Vasilache's book makes the reader aware that there many slip-through point of reading in Caragiale's writings. It shows by resorting to details (hence the title) that the knots that have been allegedly quintessential for Caragiale's fiction and drama and political journalism might not be the very ones that matter. Vasilache's 78-page *Caragiale, diavolul din detalii, (Caragiale, the devil is in details)* Bucharest, Casa de pariuri literare Publishing House, 2015, is not an open polemic to a whole tradition of critical reception. It does not contain the slightest polemic remark. Yet it shows not only a new path to follow while maintaining the inquisitive focus on Caragiale's "contemporary" status. It shows new methods of criticism and new ways to melt interdisciplinary intends into a new pot of more flexible concepts. What strikes the reader is the courage of the critic to go beyond the blockages that have accumulated like clots over the years in the field of metaliterature on the subject Caragiale.

The book consists of 26 tiny chapters which are organized under the form of editor's columns. Thus, the 26 'tablets' are free to preserve involuntary associations and develop as elegantly-rounded essays. As we know, Caragiale was not only a columnist but also a gazette-

¹ University of Oradea

manager and owner.

It is through Simona Vasilache's book that we see how the art of Caragiale was difficult to grasp for the very critics that tried too hard to label it or who started to see it through the lenses of pretentious theories. It is what might have led to a descriptive way of interpreting Caragiale but not to an inquisitive one.

Simona Vasilache uses details to revert everything we seemed to know on Caragiale. A new outlook emerges from this upside-down world. The devil is in the details, as the title suggests. Yet not a crowd of unessential details. Simona Vasilache's new methods are so good because they are based in a thorough knowledge of what was written on Caragiale. If she does not take the beaten path it is not because she might dismiss it. On the contrary, she has assimilated it very well. But the main purpose of the book is to find new openings. It is not a way to dismiss the presumption of Caragiale as our contemporary, but, on the contrary, it is like a way to respond why we cannot be exempted from it as long as some defect underlying issues still play an important role in the public domain. The critic starts some of her tablets with a negation.

Simona Vasilache's unusual digging of details in Caragiale's writings point to Caragiale as the forerunner of Ionesco and at possible parallelisms between Caragiale and Creangă. Her booklet is a pleasant reading which makes us glimpse the process of erosion of "strong thought" (as opposed to Vattimo's "pensiero debole") definitely on course in Caragiale's outlook on the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Simona Vasilache's details that turn upside-down what we have been used to perceive about Caragiale are in fact carefully chosen time-joints of Caragiale's writings, not details at random. It is through these joints of time that we can witness how the openings to other worlds are possible.

**Page-Turner Criticism that Invites Academic Debate:
Atalay Gunduz: *Men in Petticoats: Women Characters in
Bernard Shaw's Late Victorian and Edwardian Plays
(1893-1910)*. Manisa: Celal Bayar University Press, 2013.**

Éva Székely¹

Strong, emancipated women have always been central to George Bernard Shaw's plays, and in his life, Shaw has been considered by many one of the male champions of women's rights movements. Yet, since the 1980s onwards, feminist critics turned against him. He was accused of having undermined women's rights movements; he was even called a misogynist. Professor Atalay Gunduz's² book is a welcome response to whatever seems farfetched in the Shavian feminist criticism of the last two decades of the 20th century and of the first decade of the 21st. His approach is historical and biographical. This approach seems, indeed, to be the best method of highlighting the shortcomings of much contemporary gender criticism that portrays George Bernard Shaw as counter-feminist.

The study *Men in Petticoats: Women Characters in Bernard Shaw's Late Victorian and Edwardian Plays (1893-1910)*, takes its title from the title of a speech, "Woman – Man in Petticoats" – delivered by G. B. Shaw on behalf of the Cecil Fund in the King's Theatre, Hammersmith on May 20th, 1927. In this speech Shaw countered the Victorian representation of woman as 'the angel in the house' with the notion of woman as 'man in petticoats'. By this he did not mean that there were no differences between the two sexes or that women were inferior to men. Rather he drew attention to the fact that women were first and foremost human beings with a right to have their individual desires and needs fulfilled, and not heavenly creatures whose sole goal in life was to sacrifice themselves for their families. Professor Gunduz's study aims to demonstrate that while Shaw refused to idealize even those characters of his dramas whose views he agreed most with, his plays were/are still in perfect consensus with his political speeches and writings in which he

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2 Atalay Gunduz is an assistant professor at the Department of English Language and Literature at Dokuz Eylul University in Izmir, Turkey. Dr. Gunduz is interested in comparative literature, travel writing, modern drama and Irish literature. He is a member of the International Shaw Society. He is a feminist.

supported the cause of women.

The book is divided into four parts. In the first part Atalay Gunduz examines the Shavian critical heritage that focuses on the playwright's portrayal of women in his dramas. He emphasizes the biased nature of such studies as Kerry Powel's article "New Women, New Plays and Shaw in the 1890s", Ellen Gainor's *Shaw's Daughters*, Katherine E. Kelly's "Shaw and Woman Suffrage: A Minor Player on the Petticoat Platform", and Savitri Khana's *The Shaviana*. He convincingly argues that much of the criticism brought against Shaw is erroneous because on the one hand they fail to discuss Shavian drama in the context of the discourses regarding the Woman Question in the playwright's time, and, on the other hand, because they overlook the fact that Shaw as a playwright felt obligated to give voice to various discourses in his plays, and not just write downright feminist propaganda.

In the second part of his study: "Shaw and the Woman Question Contextualized" dr. Gunduz gives an overview of the main aspects of the woman question in the course of the late 18th and the 19th centuries in the discourses of such critics and public figures as Mary Wollstonecraft, Florence Nightingale, John Stuart Mill and Henrik Ibsen. As many of his writings demonstrate, these discourses had a decisive influence on G.B. Shaw's views on the status of women.

Yet, it were not just the powerful and the literati that impacted Shaw's opinion on women. In the third part of the book Atalay Gunduz presents the family members: Shaw's mother, sister and wife, as well as those friends and acquaintances, such as the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, whose life, activities and opinions had a formative influence on the playwright's feminism.

The last unit of the study: "Shaw's Women Characters" analyses the portrayal of women in three Shavian plays: *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Man and Superman*, and *Misalliance*. While it is only *Mrs. Warren's Profession* that can be deemed an openly feminist play that features the mother-daughter dynamics within a truly New-Woman-family, professor Gunduz convincingly demonstrates that Shaw, even when portraying biologically motivated Ann Whitefield or eager-to-be-married Hypatia Tarleton, manages to create exceptionally strong and uninhibited women characters that think and act way above the accepted social conventions of the time.

All in all, the study *Men in Petticoats: Women Characters in Bernard Shaw's Late Victorian and Edwardian Plays (1893-1910)* is a very well structured, informed and informative book that may claim the attention of both the undergraduate student and the Shavian scholar. It may be read with pleasure by fans of the theatre and by fans of Bernard Shaw alike. Moreover, not the work of a pedantic scholar, Atalay Gunduz's

study inspires one to read or re-read Shaw's plays³. The economy and the transparency of his style as well as the straightforwardness with which our critic communicates his opinion(s) (At times, he's not afraid to show himself biased.) encourages academic debate. And it is a short academic debate in which I shall engage myself as a closure to my review.

In the concluding part of his study Atalay Gunduz makes a claim that I strongly disagree with. While listing up evidence that supports the integrity of G.B. Shaw as playwright, our colleague states:

Although he says that more than an artist he is a moral propagandist, Shaw also declares that to follow a crude propagandist strategy would kill all his effectiveness as a playwright. That's why when he was asked to write a play on Ireland by W.B. Yeats, he wrote *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), which was not as flattering or glorifying as the Abbey Theatre would like. Although it was one of Shaw's most brilliant plays, it was turned down by the Abbey Theatre with some weak excuses. (160)

First and foremost, I think that reference to *John Bull's Other Island*, a play that engages in a debate with the various Anglo-Irish cultural nationalist discourses of the day, as evidence of the fact that G.B. Shaw, the playwright, was not a writer of feminist propaganda is somewhat out of place. Secondly, the accusation at the address of the artistic directors of the Abbey Theatre of having rejected Shaw's play on grounds that it wasn't flattering enough for Abbey audiences is incongruous with the unrelenting attitude of W. B. Yeats towards cheap Dublin patriotism. William Butler Yeats was not at all afraid to face the wrath of the public when claiming and defending the artistic value of such plays as J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* or Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. There is no reason to think that he would not have done the same for G.B. Shaw's play. And last but not least, the idea that the Abbey Theatre's excuses of not staging Shaw's play were some weak excuses is unjust, to say the least. When Yeats and J.M. Synge decided against the staging of *John Bull's Other Island*, claiming that it was too long and too difficult to be produced, they said the truth. Shaw's play is made up of four lengthy acts and it requires the setting up of six different stage sets, some of which are quite elaborate. It is a play written for the large Victorian stage, with which Shaw was all too familiar. It was simply unprofitable if not downright impossible the staging of such a complex play in the Abbey Theatre, a small repertory theatre that became famed later on not only as a literary theatre but also as the starting point of the Little Theatre Movement. In conclusion, I'd like to add that the reading of *Men in Petticoats: Women Characters in Bernard Shaw's Late Victorian and Edwardian Plays*

³ Alas, there are all too many literary studies that are so exhaustive in detail that one feels reading the actual literary work would be superfluous.

(1893-1910) was a pleasure for me. It is a fresh and inspiring writing without overbearing details or the pretentiousness of much postmodernist critical discourse. I warmly recommend it to anyone interested in George Bernard Shaw as playwright and feminist or in the heated 'New Woman' debate that garnered so much interest at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th.

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Next Issue's Topic:
Migration, Memory, Trauma
Applied on Literary and Cultural
Items

Thematik der nächsten
Ausgabe:
Migration, Gedächtnis,
Trauma
Studien im Bereich der Literatur-
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Thématique du prochain
numéro:
Migration, Memoire,
Trauma
Application sur des sujets littéraires
et culturels

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