Le Simplegadi

Partnership Re-creations
in World Literatures and the Arts

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Partnership Re-creations
in World Literatures and the Arts

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POETICHE / POETICS

ARTICOLI / ARTICLES

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Andrew Taylor

Poems

Inhabitants of Darkness (*For Tamara*)
It's after dark, the birds quiet
the dusk procession of bats
complete, day's clear outlines
smudged and erased, that's when
they come out, those nocturnal
inhabitants of our mind.
Some are ominous, or surprise us
like the grating crash of a car
hitting the little bridge at Wooton
by Woodstock, or have the pure
richness of our first waking
to a currawong. Inhabitants
of darkness, most are gentle,
familiar, and in their element
we can know them clearly. They are
our memories, our past, those long
discussions of the world's wrongs
the lit candles of a birthday, someone
who put an arm around us
whose smile warmed a dreary day
or patiently put right
our many mistakes. They are
our life, keeping us company
our friends, though some have died
but always there. With love
and care they will never desert us,
with them we will never be alone.

An Evening in the Day
Soon it'll be time to cook dinner
evening the neighbour's door thumps
between relief and fatigue none of the
birdseed I sprinkled on the balcony
has been chirped away and the wind
that was forecast for this afternoon

but came mid-morning still
hurtles the trees around and proclaims
Indian Summer is over and about time too
but no rain no no rain is coming to loosen
the water restrictions and turn the park
green so that kids punting footballs
get grass stained knees – soon
evening will sprawl into night
in front of tv and later bed where strange
unaccountable situations confront us
with insoluble problems until
an early whistle of currawongs signals
that day is creeping up through the trees
to chase whatever troubled us in the dark
back to its den and more than likely
it won't re-emerge to puzzle us again.

Almost a City
A city is too hard to hold in words –
where we met, where I would run
each morning, where we explored
the market and walked the dog,
where we worked and all the frustrations
that swarmed like peak hour traffic
on the nearby road. Or can a city
be its streets and shops, architecture,
planning, goods and services,
public transport, and all those people
living and dying within it? No, a city
is what happens, like the weather
or the moods of the Southern Ocean
when a storm hovers, or like a tree
becoming itself when a swarm of birds
visits and deserts it. A city is all of this
and none. Can we assemble one
from fragments, glimpses, fractions
of moods, echoes, a teasing shuffle
of flickering memories? If so, is a city
where we live, or does it live in us? Only
when we leave it does it seem to acquire
an illusory completeness, like a dream
unfinished, but done for the day.

Walking Home in the Rain
Walking home in the rain
was something we hadn't planned.
The concert was hot, the music's
crescendo of tempo and temperature
bore us on its waves
of musical summer as far as
the bus stop. That's where the rain
took over. Gentle rain
at first, a beguiling nocturne
as we stepped from the bus
but for you, grown up in a city
it was an ominous prelude
and you were right. For a country boy
like me, rain was what I walked through
rode my bike through, worked in
and generally welcomed. But you
took off like a flight of gulls,
your city instincts alert. It's only rain
I called after you, remembering days
on my uncle's farm, rain coming down
like notes from heaven on the iron roof
and grateful pasture, magpies
dotted like staves on that primitive
clothesline, and his unexpected
library of classical records, a harmony
of water and music. So tonight
my sodden hair and dripping shoulders
sparkled under the streetlights, decades
of city living washed away, until
the surprise resolution - you coming out
with the umbrella we should have taken
to the concert, unneeded now
and how we laughed at it.

Andrew Taylor is the author of nineteen collections of poetry, including *Collected Poems* (Salt UK, 2004), *The Unhaunting* (Salt UK, 2009), *Impossible Preludes* (Margaret River Press, 2016), *Coogee Plus* (Baden Press, 2021 with artwork by his son Travis Taylor) and *Shore Lines* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2023). In 1986 he was the Asia-Pacific winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. He has since won or been shortlisted for numerous national awards, and read his poetry widely in Australia, USA, Canada, Europe and Asia. Other work includes *Reading Australian Poetry* (University of Queensland Press, 1987), the libretti for two operas and translations from German and Italian. His 1997 AM was awarded for services to literature.
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Lance Henson

Poems

So alone
Even their pain abandoned them …
Knowing their pain was the pain of the world …
They waited for its return …

Their light still tremoring

Within them …
(*Entities. From the Stronghold*, 23/12/21)

*

Just before dawn

Where I thought I heard you call my name

Wind forming patterns of beings in the wintered trees

Gray mist rising on the back of a sleeping wolf …

Far from where demons wait

As the temperature drops to its knees

We watch from our hidden balcony

Inside a veil of rain …

Men folding themselves into paper planes that cannot fly …
(*Entities. From the Stronghold*, 22/02/22)

*

And there
Behind our eyes
Nets of light

Folds of consciousness at rest
Upon a floating field of brightened memories …

That dim at the shoreline
Where the ships of the dead are drifting …
(*Entities. The War Poems*, 26/3/22)

*

Here is a place where nothing can die
Darkness that lives beneath the leaves

We bring our nights there without knowing
We bring our fear there before the singing begins
We bring our silent names there hoping we are forgiven

We bring our hands there scented of a river

We bring our prayers that hide and watch us
The landscape where we have held the loose feathers
Of a fallen bird

And awakened in the land of the unseen

Here is a place where nothing can die …
(Bologna 24/05/22)

*

At the well of solitude
Where the dead and the living link hands …

We see when the clouds open and the sun
Shines through

They are smiling …

Whispering of windows shuttered
On an unknown plain …

The ones with ghosted eyes
stand

Within our dreamtime
to watch …

The bones melt on the window pane ...

And the one song that has followed us
All this way ...

Is playing ...
(Poem for not turning away, Bologna 13/01/23)

<div align="center">*</div>

Here is the place where the ones who have vanished awaken us

This is the place where dreams come to die she said
A veil of ashes falling through her voice ...

My grandfather told me removing a screwdriver from the heart of a river
You are surrounded by eternity …

Whispering a prayer away from men my grandmother spoke the word *veho*[1] …

She looked at me lighting
A camel cigarette

The words they use have dead eyes

Memory is the shadow that stays …

Eh maiyun ah huhta[2] …

(A spirit whispered this to me in dream)

Walking badger dog soldier said this …
(To Nob and Bertha Cook, *Entities. From the Stronghold*)

Vo'e[3]
These are the ones who enfold light
Causing it to strike the earth

---

[1] *Veho* in Cheyenne refers to "White Man" and to the black widow spider. The Cheyennes named white people after *veho*, territorial and deadly like the spider.
[2] "A spirit whispered this to me in dream".
[3] Cheyenne for clouds.

The ones who
Caress silence
Their older sister

The ones that hover over
The wintering water

The ones who spin
Their angry eye upon us

The ones who gather above us
As we dream

These are the ones who unfurl
The grown moon …

Entities
Raven watching
Words float by
Words without wings

Dreams on fire at the edge
Of a winter camp
In a soup of blood and ash …

Eh maiyun ah huhta

You will see only one of you
Without eyes …
Singing in a weeping rain …

Dog Soldier Song
When hunger and fear left them
To search for other ones

They turned to one another lying down

Lights shimmering still
Within them

Now the wind arrives scented of rainfall
And evening opens

Its shadowed palm

Who will speak within the language of the other

While the folded birds in the burning forest sing …
(To Olga Hiiva, Russian artist, *Entities. From the Stronghold* 22/02/22)

Five Poems for *Ritsos*
I first read your words in an Oklahoma
Rainstorm in 1968
Now I am here with
Drifting birds in sea wind
Water jars of clay

Cretan knives
Small poems on the handles
And a photograph
Women in black holding
Their diminished dreams
In their aprons

A mauve light upon your weathered face
In the prison where
Your bowl of watered grains
Rotted under the windowed moon

Your resistance an ochre
Color of grace
Rises again
In this troubled time

As a tolling bell
Bursting upon the eternal sea wind
My brother
Nothing can defeat the human heart …
(Island of Crete, 14/06/2009)

Lance Henson is a Cheyenne headman of the dog soldier clan, Sundancer and member of the Native American church of Oklahoma. He has 41 books published and translated into more than 25 languages. He currently lives in Bologna, Italy.
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Giuseppe Ramires

Poesie

I
Altre morti così inattese
udrai narrare a poppa
se il sonno non ti coglie
un pianto di sirene
o il remo che si scioglie.
La vela che gonfi
marinaio non toglie
sdrucciole discese
che una lenta marea dischiude.
Sorda pietra guazzando
giù nella sepolta riviera
cento labbra godrai
ora che non ti preme
che non ami il governare.

II
Il piombo sulle tavole di marmo,
i giorni che scrivevi sui torsoli di limaccio.
...
Come alianti le matrici si cambiano di posto
e a te che volevi rubarne la segreta armonia
(unico virtuoso capace che credevi d'essere)
l'arduo compito di una nuova notizia
non tanto arduo se mai fra le agavi udivi
la cornetta di guerra, il corvo planato.

III
Lindholm Høje[1]
Non più rapine
né freddi mattini
alla pescaia:
nelle navi di pietra

---

[1] Lindholm Høje, la Collina di Lindholm, è la più importante necropoli vichinga (700-1000 d.C.), situata a nord di Aalborg, in Danimarca.

fieri essi giacciono.
Ti provi tu ardita
a drizzare la prua
volta ad occidente
ma è fermo il mare d'erba
è solo il vento che chiama
e la solitudine dei millenni
non può salvarci
se non per un momento.

IV
Il tiepido sonno
gli ultimi fantasmi ti reca,
non cercare il filo
che dipana l'inganno,
è in quel rito
che pur morendo tu vivi
nella nudità vestita
di un macchiato candore
nel volto umano
di un amato vessillo.
È solo nel sogno
che sei al riparo
la vita è altro
calore di lotta e di questua
freddo notturno amaro risveglio.
Tu non credere al canto del gallo
né alle sirene d'imbarco.
Se cedi, mortale,
sarai forse più forte dei flutti?
Non sei livida roccia,
chi ti trarrà a riva?
L'inesplicato sogno
è tutto quello che abbiamo.

V
Più breve sarà l'estasi
e più lungo il tempo dei ricordi
ma presto sfiorisce la rosa
e veloce s'allunga sull'erba la tua ombra.
Il carro celeste corre e ricorre nella volta
e sorgono quiete
dell'ultimo tramonto le stelle.

VI
An die ferne Geliebte
Delle mie perdute notti
consunta eroina
di vereconda passione
amara fanciulla
nel vento che la morta marina inquieta
nel mare che la vela dipinge
come nera farfalla,
nel tuo viso tra le mie mani
respirarti così assente, oh vita
troppo lontana per restare
troppo vicina per tornare.

Giuseppe Ramires è Dottore di ricerca in Filologia greca e latina e in Scienze politiche, storiche e filosofico-simboliche e Fellow presso il Warburg Institute di Londra. Ha svolto una intensa attività di pubblicista su varie testate giornalistiche siciliane, tra cui "L'Ora" di Palermo e la "Gazzetta del Sud" di Messina e collabora a progetti di ricerca con l'Università di Messina, Salerno, Perugia, Roma Tor Vergata. Ha al suo attivo oltre settanta articoli apparsi su riviste nazionali e internazionali e in volumi di atti di convegni. Sta curando una nuova edizione critica del *Commento* di Servio all'*Eneide* Virgilio, di cui finora sono usciti tre volumi: *ad Aen* IX (Pàtron, 1996) *ad Aen* VII (Pàtron, 2003) *ad Aen* VIII (Les Belles Lettres, Pàtron, 2022) e insieme a Fabio Stok, ha recentemente pubblicato il volume *La tradizione manoscritta del commento di Servio alle Bucoliche* (ETS, 2021). Accanto all'attività di ricerca, da anni Ramires coltiva la scrittura poetica e ha pubblicato *Quaderno di conversazione* (Rhegium Julii, 2001).
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Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall": Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity

Abstract I: Quando una studiosa di teoria della letteratura e un medico collaborano per studiare l'opera, molti confini disciplinari devono essere negoziati. Guardando sia l'esperienza personale che la letteratura scientifica, questo articolo indaga il processo di tale collaborazione interdisciplinare ed esplora i suoi vantaggi e i suoi rischi.

Abstract II: When a literary theorist and a physician collaborate to research and write about opera, many disciplinary boundaries have to be negotiated. Looking at both personal experience and the scholarly literature, this article investigates the process of such interdisciplinary collaboration and explores its advantages as well as its dangers.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, collaboration, opera, disciplinary cultures.

Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" (1914) begins with lines that seem appropriate for thinking about the boundaries/walls – or lack thereof – between disciplines in academia:

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
> And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

Those gaps between which "even two [or more of us] can pass abreast" that are caused by that "something […] that doesn't love a wall" is our subject, and our approach is going to be personal, since our research together has spilled boulders and made gaps.

We had best start with full disclosure: we have been together since high school. Growing up in the same Toronto suburb, we therefore had basically the same primary and secondary education and, thus, the same initial intellectual 'formation'. It is true that our family backgrounds were sufficiently different for ours to be considered at that time, in 1970, a 'mixed' marriage: an Italian-Canadian named Bortolotti marrying an Irish/Scottish/English-Canadian named Hutcheon. Nonetheless our educational – and intellectual – backgrounds up to this point were remarkably similar.

That all changed when we went to university. Linda studied languages and literatures; Michael went into medicine. She then went to graduate school in Comparative Literature,

and he did post-grad work in respiratory physiology. What we realised only later was that we were being socialised into different cultures when we entered our different fields. Graduate school instils a disciplinary culture: it instructs us in how we should behave – that is, what professional norms we should conform to, what methods of inquiry and analysis are acceptable, what language to use to carry out that inquiry and analysis, or, more generally, what the disciplinary norms are for interaction, scholarly production, and even success. 'Everything', from the courses we took to the conferences we attended, from our experiences with peer review to the academic reward system, reinforced and reproduced our different disciplinary cultures. Since our fields were both university academic ones, there was some overlap, obviously. But there was also sufficient difference that if you read publications by each of us from this time on, you would immediately see that we 'spoke' and wrote in different vernaculars.

Flash-forward 10 years; each of us had been working in our professions, teaching and researching in the different fields of Respiratory Medicine and Comparative Literature. We decided it would be interesting to try to write something together that would bring our different areas of expertise in what today we would call 'interdisciplinary' work. By this point, we had been married for 15 years and 'thought' we knew each other well; we 'thought' we had accepted that our different professions had turned out different 'professional deformations', as the French call it. Little did we know what we would discover.

We had both been attending the lively monthly meetings of a group called the Toronto Semiotic Circle in the 1970s and early 80s, and so we decided to attempt a semiotic analysis of pharmaceutical advertising that appeared in medical journals. We actually consciously began with the same methodological premises – those set out by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* and so we began determining the ideological implications of the visual and verbal messages conveyed in these advertisements. What makes these advertisements different from regular commercial ones is that they are *not* directed to the eventual consumer of pharmaceuticals (that is, the patient), but rather to the intermediary, the physician who prescribes the medications.

Our disciplinary differences surfaced immediately. Like Roland Barthes, Linda thought we should simply pick out the most 'interesting' and 'complex' advertisements and focus on those. But Michael knew that our intended audience – his medical colleagues – had a very different notion of what constitutes 'evidence', and simply would not find that methodology or its results of any interest – or, more importantly, of any value. So, instead of studying a couple of interesting advertisements, we would need to study a defined sample: 162 advertisements in a specific set of journals over a two-month period (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 1987). Clearly there were disciplinary differences operative here: different assumptions about knowledge and its gathering. And we learned what Julie Thompson Klein calls the "burden of comprehension" (Klein 1990: 110) that is crucial to interdisciplinary studies: one has to know what audience (or audiences) one is trying to reach and then conceive and develop the research project in such a way that one can communicate with that audience – not only in terms of specialised language, but in terms of disciplinary assumptions.

That first pilot project in collaboration and interdisciplinarity taught us a few other

things that were less disciplinary than personal. But the personal is another dimension of collaborative work that cannot be emphasised too much and yet is often ignored. Disciplines can reinforce personality differences. We joke that we have learned that we possess, shared between us, one obsessive-compulsive personality. In what has turned out to be a productive division of labour, he "obsesses" and she "compulses" (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 1995: 14). Working together on the same topic for the first time in the library taught us this – and exposed our 'professional deformations' along the way. For example, Michael was trained to read (and remember) every line. So, when we were in the library, he worked slowly and methodically, with care and attention, recording each point made in the book he was reading, in sequential and logical order. On the other hand, given the broad-based research projects she tends to undertake, Linda was used to reading through large numbers of scholarly works and only then zeroing in on relevant material. Therefore, after a few hours, Michael had reached page 20 in his first book, taking careful detailed notes, and Linda had cleared a library shelf, and had taken weird notes that looked like hieroglyphics to him.

At this point we had to stop and talk together about our massive differences in things like pace of reading, note-taking techniques, and choice of data to record. Part of this is clearly personality, but part is also reinforced by our chosen disciplines. We also learned that we thought as well as worked differently, though. Michael was trained, necessarily, as what he calls a 'concrete thinker'. He not only had an obsessive's urge to understand logic and sequence, but he also had what might be called a 'diagnostic drive', in which the plural meanings of an ambiguous set of physical signs had to be resolved into a single meaning (diagnosis). At the other extreme, as a textual critic operating within a postmodern frame of reference, Linda kept wanting to amplify the single into multiplicity, to jar the fixed into contingency.

What we learned was that we belonged to two different disciplinary 'cultures' – as defined by Stephanie and Jennifer Reich, a sociologist and a psychologist who are also siblings (Reich & Reich 2006). For the two of us, despite knowing each other well, despite knowing that our intellectual formations from graduate school on were different, we still had to face the fact that we worked, read, wrote, and even thought in very different disciplinary cultural contexts that determined everything from methods of analysis and theories to worldviews and language. These cultures determined how we thought and interacted, what we accepted as disciplinary priorities, values and norms, standards of evidence, and even measures of success. There were differences for us in what is viewed as knowledge and even in what sort of knowledge is possible. Given this, how did we manage to do collaborative interdisciplinary work together?

We will here artificially divide what is a unity for us – collaboration and inter-disciplinarity – before bringing them together again in the personal. To consider 'inter' disciplinarity properly, we first have to consider 'disciplinarity' and its cultures. Every discipline obviously has its own intellectual history, its own experimental and analytic approaches, and its own theoretical contexts. Each produces a unique way of thinking about any given problem. This struck Linda forcefully when she first co-taught a graduate course on opera with a musicologist for a disciplinarily mixed group of drama, music and

literature students. The first time the two of them sat down together to look at the critical readings they had assigned for the first seminar, the musicologist asserted: "Well, given that the readings are about how 'music' is what makes opera unique as an art form, why don't we start there?" Linda-the-literary responded with: "No, they are actually about how opera is unique in its bringing together of a 'literary text' and the music written specifically for it". What they had done, they quickly realised, was place their different disciplinary 'grids' (so to speak) over the readings and, therefore, different things had been revealed – and concealed – by that grid. They were fascinated by this process, and decided to use it to teach their diverse student group about disciplinary thinking. When they went into the classroom, the students from the Drama Centre, who had yet another grid to place on the texts, came up with yet another reading of the readings: opera was actually unique because it was 'live performed' music and text. This was a constant learning process for them all.

Art forms like opera – that bring together music, literature, drama, and design – may require more than one discipline to analyse properly. The same is true in the sciences and social sciences: interdisciplinary research is often "driven by the need to address complex problems that cut across traditional disciplines", and aided by "the capacity of new technologies to both transform existing disciplines and generate new ones" (Cohen Miller & Pate 2019: 1211). It is widely recognised today that there are often questions that cannot be answered by one discipline alone – questions like the fundamentals of the aging process or climate change, for example. The National Institutes of Health in the United States defines interdisciplinarity as the integrating of the analytical strengths of two or more disparate scientific disciplines to solve a given biological problem (Aboelela *et al.* 2007: 331)[1]. But this can be expanded outside the biomedical field, obviously: in the behavioural, quantitative, engineering, and computer sciences, especially. But interdisciplinarity exists on a continuum of degrees of synthesis and integration, from 'multi' disciplinarity to 'inter' disciplinarity to 'trans' disciplinarity. The first ('multi') involves teams working in parallel or sequentially from their specific discipline base to address a common problem (as in the case of Linda's course example). 'Inter' disciplinarity involves teams working jointly but still from a discipline-specific base on a given issue[2]. And in 'trans' disciplinary work, teams use a shared conceptual framework, drawing together discipline-specific theories, concepts, and approaches to address that common problem (Aboelela *et al.* 2007: 337-340). In this case, a research question can generate novel conceptual and methodological frameworks that, in fact, create a new discipline formed by the integration and collaboration of other specific disciplines: think of genomics or neuroscience.

Another way to think about interdisciplinarity, though, is that it takes place when two or more disciplines work together to open space between them; those interstices and those interfaces are where innovation often occurs. Crossing disciplinary boundaries has become almost a norm in the sciences and many of the social sciences, but also in some of the humanities – as any scholars who work in Medieval Studies or Women's Studies or

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[1] See also Berth Danermark (2019) for more on the significant and defining element of the 'integration' of knowledge in interdisciplinarity.

[2] For models of how this works, see Repko & Szostak (2017).

Cultural Studies know well. In an attempt to help granting agencies define – and evaluate – what constitutes interdisciplinarity, a study published in *Health Services Research* made an important distinction between the physical and social sciences (which were experimental, hypothesis-driven, and either positivist or post-positivist) and the humanities – whose mode of inquiry they presented as not hypothesis-driven, but rather as seeing reality as experientially based and historically shaped (Aboelela *et al*. 2007: 333).

Another major difference is that the solitary single author is still the norm in the humanities, but not in the sciences and social sciences. Thanks to the continuing ideological power of both Romanticism and capitalism, the autonomous individual is still seen in the humanities as the foundation of knowledge. By contrast, the growth of multi-authored papers in the scientific literature over the last decades has been the result of both the interdisciplinary nature of much research as well as the increased technological complexity of it. The scientific model of collaborative research has been called hierarchical in its clear authority patterns which appear in the authors list of a published article: the head of the lab generates the idea (and the grant money) and is the 'last author' in the list; the 'first author' may be a student or postgraduate fellow and will likely have done the experiment and actually written the paper; the others listed as coauthors will usually have contributed expertise in some specific area of the work (Trimbur & Braun 1992: 25). In other words, there is a stratified division of labour, both intellectual and technical; there is also a power structure, as we shall see.

While collaboration in the sciences is always hierarchical, it is not always interdisciplinary. If, for instance, a group of physicians and surgeons from the same specialty area (e.g. respiratory disease) collaborate, this is the realm of 'mono' disciplinarity; add a statistician to the project list and it becomes 'multi' disciplinarity: a plurality of disciplinary perspectives used in an instrumental way, but not in a synthetic manner. If, to use another example, two doctors and two nurses – using methodologies from, say, transplant research and from psychology and decision analysis – collaborate, we are in the realm of 'inter' disciplinarity. This also involves more than one discipline, but while they all maintain separate disciplinary bases for their contributions, they work together to formulate the problem, as well as the methodologies of evaluation and analysis. This is the model that granting agencies in North America appear to support and to which institutions there frequently pay lip service – for it makes great 'intellectual' sense. The problem is that academia – as a culture – has conflicting values. And disciplines, as institutionalised in 'departments', still rule supreme, and therefore disciplinary 'policing' is not rare: when feeling threatened, disciplines will assert ownership of intellectual turf. Many also argue that interdisciplinary work can risk appropriating or misusing or de-contextualising other disciplines, leading to scholarly dilettantism. Does this opposition create problems for scholars wanting to work across departmental and disciplinary borders? It most certainly does, as we shall show.

Having raised these institutional and disciplinary difficulties and resistances, readers might well ask: did we personally think about any of these when we started working together? Did we weigh the pros and cons seriously, when we – a 'physician' and a 'literary critic' – started working collaboratively on 'opera'? To be perfectly honest: not really. We

simply wanted to work together again. We both love opera and it was, and is, a 'neutral turf' – it belongs to neither of us, in disciplinary terms. But why choose opera – aside from the fact that it has a 400-year-old history, rich in material to explore? To understand this, we offer a story about what we jokingly call our 'Moonstruck' moment (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 2001). Some readers may be old enough to recall the 1987 American movie called *Moonstruck*. The moment in the film that has become iconic for us is the one in which Loretta and Ronny (played by Cher and Nicholas Cage) descend the grand staircase at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and have a conversation about the death of the consumptive heroine, Mimì, in Puccini's opera, *La bohème*. This is Loretta's first trip to the opera, and she turns to Ronny and says: "I *knew* she was sick, but I didn't know she was going to *die*".

Our parallel scene takes place on that same staircase, a decade after this, when, following a production of Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, Michael turned to Linda and said: "Do you think audiences today understand that the character in the opera named Amfortas had syphilis?" She looked at him as if he were demented and said: "Syphilis? Amfortas was wounded by a spear when he was caught in the arms of the seductress named Kundry!" Michael did not deny this, but went on to suggest that this plot device might be Wagner's indirect or even allegorical way of invoking 19th-century obsessive worries about venereal disease. He pointed out that Amfortas's wound (one inflicted, as Linda had remarked, in a moment of amatory indiscretion) was a wound that will not heal, whose pain is worse at night and is eased only slightly by baths and balsams. In the 19th century, he claimed, these symptoms would have been easily associated with syphilis by the contemporary audience.

To say that Linda was sceptical would have been an understatement at this point. Ever the academic, she announced that if Michael were right, someone would have written about this, and we could find out. To which Michael responded: "Not necessarily. People didn't talk openly about this kind of disease; it was secret and shameful, remember. And today, thanks to the discovery of penicillin in the 1940s, we fortunately don't *have* to know about such things anymore". Still sceptical, but now somewhat intrigued, Linda began mulling over the standard interpretations of this complex opera, one that throughout the years has provoked the most varied and conflicted responses from critics, as they have reacted to its overt Christianity as much as to its equally overt anti-Semitism and misogyny. Over the next few days, her Comparative Literature disciplinary culture provided new contexts. Recalling Baudelaire's infamous *fleurs du mal* and J. K. Huysmans's decadent fin-de-siècle linking of flowers with venereal disease in his novel, *À rebours*, she began to see Wagner's dangerous 'Flower Maidens' in the opera in a new light.

What we realised was that there might be a reason why these female characters were considered particularly dangerous to the Grail Knights, whom the maidens sought to lure to destruction. Michael recalled the history of military campaigns from the 16th century onward, in which the least 'syphilised' army usually won. Linda began thinking about the Christianised reading of the disease of syphilis over the last 500 years – as the scourge of God against the sexually sinful. She also realised that this might also have something to do with the racial as well as sexual issues of the opera: the realm of the Grail Knights declines after its leader, Amfortas, is wounded during that alliance with Kundry, a woman dressed

in what the text stresses is 'Arab' style. Michael concurred, because in the 19ᵗʰ century (as well as later), the discourse of social decline linked to personal and racial degeneration was often invoked not only in the European campaigns against prostitutes and venereal disease, but also in much anti-Semitic writing, including Wagner's own.

As more and more of the pieces of the puzzle began to cohere, we felt certain that others must have written about this, but after much time online and in the library, we found nothing. We finally decided that perhaps the silence was not surprising, not only because syphilis is an embarrassing topic still today, but also because this was the kind of issue that would easily escape a single disciplinary examination: the historical, political, literary, musical, dramatic (and now medical) complexities would demand multiple disciplinary perspectives. Fortunately, scholars of opera at this same time were moving away from the historical and especially formalist approaches that had dominated musicology in the 20ᵗʰ century, and had come to accept that the complex and contradictory nature of opera as an art form, that brings together the visual, the verbal, the dramatic, and the musical, demands a flexible and varied arsenal of interpretive tools. What came to be called the New Musicology in these years started taking into account the larger social and cultural contexts of music in general and opera in particular.

We realised that, given our diverse disciplines, we would certainly bring different perspectives to opera than would musicologists but, in order to be 'listened to' by them, that we would at least have to learn the 'discourses', if not the 'discipline', of that field: that is, we'd have to learn how it formulates and articulates issues in its own terms, its rules of evidence and its standards of evaluation. From musicology, then, we would import and borrow – but with respect and care – as we would from other disciplines like sociology and psychology, when investigating aging and creativity for our book *Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen and Britten* (2015) or history, when trying to understand cultural responses to mortality in *Opera: The Art of Dying* (2004). But we tried to avoid what could be dubbed disciplinary 'tourism' by learning as much as we could about other disciplines' discourses.

We later discovered a term for what we were learning in doing this work together: it has been called a process of gaining 'cultural competence' (Reich & Reich 2006). When disciplinary cultures interact, different kinds of knowledge, attitudes, and skills or practices have to be learned about in order to ensure that the encounters are fruitful ones. Miscommunication is likely, though not inevitable, given that disciplines have their own vernaculars or 'sociolects', not to mention their own worldviews and values, as we mentioned at the start. This communication issue was something we had to face from the start in our collaboration with our first book, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (1996): our different disciplines and our different personalities meant that our writing styles and our modes of argumentation were utterly different. And this meant there was no way we could simply divide up the writing, each tackling certain sections. No one would want that schizoid experience as a reader.

Therefore, we had to create a new, third 'voice' that was the voice of neither of us as individuals, but a kind of "collective singular" (Yancey & Spooner 1998: 51). The only way we found to do this – after much trial and error – was to talk everything through orally, then

put it on paper, and then re-read aloud and revise again: only much talk (and time) would guarantee the merging and unity needed. Does it work? We can only leave it to readers to decide. But there is another issue involved: the communication between the two of us. We discuss and even argue a lot in the process, but a lot is at stake when you are married, so you find a way to keep things at an intellectual rather than personal level when debating. And then there are the idiosyncrasies: for example, as a literary person, Linda was initially loathe to 'give up' her words, to surrender control over the writing style of our work. But she came to see that our 'third voice' required a real melding of our different styles. Letting go, being more flexible and adaptable, being willing to shift roles constantly: these were all things we had to learn were necessary when working collaboratively – as was the single most important quality: a willingness to 'listen' as much as talk!

What else did we learn by working together that we can generalise about? Well, it is both enjoyable and time-consuming, but most strikingly, we do end up in intellectual places where neither of us would venture on our own. In addition, we both became increasingly self-conscious of our own disciplinary formations: to learn disciplinary 'cultural competence', one has to be aware of one's own disciplinary culture's premises, strengths and limitations, or one will not be able to appreciate the opinions, efforts, or even information sources of other disciplines. Our recent investigation of the critical literature on both collaboration and interdisciplinarity has taught us other things that resonate with our personal experience. The Environment Protection Agency in the United States put the prerequisites of this kind of research in an interesting way, telling investigators they should "park their egos at the door", and their insecurities should be "parked in the space next to the egos" (quoted in Reich & Reich 2006: 55). In other words, one must be bold, be brave – but also be respectful. Julie Klein argues that a high degree of ego strength would be useful, but it would be best if it were combined with reliability and resilience, along with sensitivity to others (Klein 1990: 182-183). Reich and Reich offer a list of things that members of different disciplines working together should aim for: besides developing a capacity for self-awareness and self-assessment, and working toward understanding our own disciplinary culture, each must value diversity and be sensitive to the dynamics inherent in the interaction of different disciplinary cultures, especially since there will likely be differences in power relations or access to resources (Reich & Reich 2006: 54).

We return now to these notions of hierarchy and power, because it is not just in scientific collaboration that both exist. Because academic collaborators in any discipline may be of different rank or even role (student/supervisor), the power differential is going to be real and has to be addressed from the start. Another danger of interdisciplinary work, especially in large teams, is tokenism: the presence of someone representing a discipline on a research team who is not either valued or allowed real input. The silencing that happens with this kind of devaluation of those lower in the power or status hierarchy happens too easily, but can be avoided – with awareness and increased 'cultural competence'.

Are there other dangers and downsides? Of course. Some are personal: we have both had experiences collaborating with others that were much less happy ones, perhaps because less was at stake: we were not married to 'them'! And learning how to negotiate

differences might be easier for people who spend a lot of face-to-face time together, though others have complained of the 'hot-house' environment when a couple works together[3]. There are personal risks involved in collaborative work – risks to the stability and health of a personal partnership, friendship or collegial relationship. That said, there is also a real sense of bonding that comes from successful collaboration.

But there are other dangers besides these kinds of personal ones involving human relations, and these involve institutional and professional pressures, especially before tenure in North American universities. Our warning here comes from two scholars, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, both of whom were denied tenure in English linguistics because they had done primarily collaborative research (together). They went on to write a book about this experience called *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* (1990). They took the lead early in making academics aware of the institutional risks and dangers (as well as benefits) involved in collaborative work, especially in the Humanities. Their discipline bears witness to the continuing power of the so-called 'common-sense' assumption that writing is inherently and necessarily a solitary, individual act – and not the constructed and socialised process that post-structuralist and feminist theory has been arguing for years (Ede & Lunsford 1990: 5). In the sciences the concept of single authorship is decidedly suspect, and with good reason, but in the Humanities it continues to determine things like tenure and promotion, because the solo individual is still the model for the creative and critical act (Forman 1992: 2). There is an obvious reason why we both waited until we were firmly established in our own disciplines before we started working collaboratively together (Creamer & Associates 2001).

That said, interdisciplinary work (done solo or collaboratively) also faces professional problems[4], and one of the major ones is the possibility – or likelihood – that it will be judged by mono-disciplinary standards and be found wanting: the fallback position of evaluation is almost inevitably disciplinary. This discrepancy can have an impact on tenure and promotion evaluations, but also on peer review. And this is where power differentials re-enter the picture: in what journal and in which field will a team decide to publish? An article in a sociology journal may be of little professional use to an historian, even if the work the two did was truly interdisciplinary. And it has been shown that it takes longer for the impact of interdisciplinary work to be felt, because it is diffused across multiple disciplines. And what if there are differences in citation practices in different fields?

There might also be what could be called 'opportunity costs': if you are doing interdisciplinary work, it is likely going to be at the expense of keeping up in your own discipline. This may be particularly dangerous for students and younger scholars. After all, the job descriptions in academic advertisements in English departments in North America, for instance, are still strikingly period-, nation-, and genre-specific: departments will advertise a position in 19th-century British poetry, for example, and an interdisciplinary scholar will not likely be considered[5]. There are other, somewhat more minor, disadvantages:

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[3] See Judith Barnard, quoted in Barbara Kleban Mills (1984).

[4] For more on this, consult "Defining Interdisciplinarity", Austin *et al.* (1996).

[5] On other institutional constraints on fostering and valuing interdisciplinarity, see Manata (2023).

frankly, though it is a lot more interesting, it takes much longer to work collaboratively as a team. It is just not very efficient.

Despite this focus on the downsides to collaborative interdisciplinary work, we clearly enjoy doing this kind of work and doing it together. We know what the critical literature says are the positive results and we agree, for the most part (Frodeman *et al.* 2010). It tells us that this kind of research can facilitate the development of creative approaches – things like new methods and analyses of old problems. It can, at its best, identify oversights (and maybe even errors) in mono-disciplinary practice. It can challenge disciplinary paradigms in healthy ways through fresh perspectives. But it can also build bridges (Klein 1990: 27) – one of the most frequent metaphors for interdisciplinarity – and thus allow new and different kinds of communication. Alan Liu (perhaps rightly) stated back in 1989 that interdisciplinarity was then "the most seriously underthought critical, pedagogical, and institutional concept in the modern academy" (Liu 1989: 743). But surely today, with all the increasing interrogation of what it means and how it functions in individual cases, that cannot be true any longer.

To return to Robert Frost's poem with which we began, we are not on the side of the speaker's neighbour who repeats "Good fences make good neighbours": boundaries and divisions between disciplines are not necessary, in the end – not today. As the speaker of the poem puts it so well, there are, however, important questions to ask:

> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offence.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down.

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Carlo M. Bajetta

A New Version of "The Ways on Earth" by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex

Abstract I: Almeno come poeta, Robert Devereux, conte di Essex, non godette di particolare reputazione tra i suoi contemporanei. Furono le generazioni successive (per le quali il Conte fu epitome degli eroi di un'epoca svanita) a far a gara nel procurarsi copie dei suoi versi e delle sue ardenti lettere indirizzate ad Elisabetta I. L'articolo presenta una versione inedita di un suo sonetto "The Ways on Earth, have paths and turnings known", contenuta in una miscellanea solo recentemente venuta alla luce. Questo documento, oltre a costituire una nuova attribuzione del brano poetico ad Essex, è una significativa testimonianza della sua duratura fama: una reputazione postuma che lo ha reso protagonista di romanzi, melodrammi e film dal XVIII sino al XXI secolo.

Abstract II: Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex did not have a significant reputation as a poet among his contemporaries; nevertheless, both his passionate missives and his verses were much sought after by members of later generations who saw in him one of the last heroes of a glorious era. A hitherto unprinted version of one of his sonnets, "The Ways on Earth, have paths and turnings known" is contained in a recently rediscovered 17th century English miscellany. This article prints the text of this manuscript, a key document which attributes this lyric to Essex and a testimony to the long-lasting fame, which has made him the protagonist of novels, melodramas, and films from the 18th to the 21st century.

Keywords: Robert Devereux Earl of Essex, Elizabethan Poetry, Elizabeth I, Elizabethan Courtier Poets, Early Modern Manuscripts.

Few Elizabethan courtiers could dramatise their condition as well as Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (1565-1601). A member of the English élite aristocracy (his family could be traced back to the days of the Norman conquest) and one the Queen's chief favourites throughout the late 1580s and 90s, he nevertheless lost no occasion to advance his position at Court through a skilful use of his literary talents.

He could pose as a melancholic lover to attract Elizabeth I's attention, as he did on one occasion, when he protested her attention to a new favourite and

chose to evaporate his thoughts in a Sonnet (beeing his common way) to be sung
before the Queene, (as it was) by one *Hales*, in whose voyce shee tooke some pleasure
[…]:

> And if thou shouldst by Her be now forsaken,
> She made thy Heart too strong for to be shaken.

As if hee had beene casting one eye backe at the least to his former retirednesse.
But all this likewise quickly vanished, and there was a goodwhile after faire weather
over-head (Wotton 1641: sig. A3).

Nor was poetry his only gift. Essex could also write letters full of pathos and passion
to the Queen. While in Ireland in 1599, for example, he sent a missive to Elizabeth in which
he declared:

> Let me honestly and zealously end a wearisome life, let others live in deceitful and
> unconstant pleasure; let me bear the brunt, and die meritoriously; let others achive
> and finish the work, and live to erect Trophies. But my prayer shall be, that when my
> Soveraigne looseth mee, her Army may not loose courage, or this Kingdome want
> phisicke, or her dearest Self misse Essex, and then I can never go in a better time, nor
> in a fairer way (Moryson 1617: 36).

Significantly, both of the texts reproduced above appeared in collections published
after the Earl's death. Notwithstanding his patronage of writers such as Francis Bacon,
Henry Wotton, the classicist Henry Savile, and the linguist and translator William Jones,
Essex did not enjoy a vast reputation as a writer among his contemporaries. His letters and
verses, however, were much sought after by members of later generations, who saw in him
– as well as in other figures such as Sir Walter Ralegh – one of the last heroes of a glorious
era (cf. May 1980: 18-20; Bajetta 1998).

Celebrated by Shakespeare in *Henry V* as a military hero (act V, chorus), and sometimes
seen as an influence on the characters of Hamlet and Coriolanus (cf. Highley 1997: 135; Lacey
1970: 247; Holland 2013: 98-99; Tempera 2014: 2295-2296), Devereux was to be remembered
over the centuries mostly for his unfortunate rebellion of 1601 – which led to his execution
– and especially as Elizabeth's 'last love'. By the later decades of the seventeenth century, he
had already become the protagonist of a Spanish *comedia* (*Dar la vida por su dama: El conde
de Sex* by Antonio Coello, 1638), three French *pièces* (*Le Comte d'Essex* by Gautier Coste de
La Calprenède, 1639; *Le Comte d'Essex* by Thomas Corneille, 1678 and, in the same year, *Le
Comte d'Essex*: *tragedie* by Claude Boyer), as well as of one English play by John Banks, *The
Unhappy Favourite; Or the Earl of Essex, a Tragedy* (1682). The 'tyranny of passions' featured
prominently in these works as well as the image of the unfortunate lot of a man who, in
Banks's words, neither 'the Queen's repentance, nor her tears could rescue […] from the
malice of his enemies, nor from the violence of a most unfortunate death' (Sutherland 1977:
185).

Such a rich literary tradition eventually transformed Essex into the hero of melodramas and operas such as Saverio Mercadante's 1833 *Il Conte d'Essex* (with libretto by Felice Romani), Gaetano Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* (1837; libretto by Salvadore Cammarano based mainly on François Ancelot's *Elisabeth d'Angleterre*) and Benjamin Britten's 1953 *Gloriana*. Britten took inspiration chiefly from Lytton Strachey's famous *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), a book which was to influence much later productions, including Maxwell Anderson's 1930 play *Elizabeth the Queen*, the 1939 film derived from this, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (starring Bette Davis and Errol Flynn) and, at least in part, many of the filmic representations of Essex up to his brief cameo in *Anonymous* (2011; cf. Musio 2007; Paltrinieri 2007; Bertheau 2009; Caigny 2009; Teulade 2009; Zuili 2009; Hopkins 2013).

Essex's considerable European reputation in the seventeenth century was probably linked to the extensive number of international connections he had established in the 1590s in an attempt to equal the network of spies and informants Sir Francis Walsingham had set up in the previous decades (cf. Hammer 1999). The aura of myth that posthumously surrounded his character, however, derived mostly from the way his end had been depicted in his native England. After his execution, his figure was soon romanticised by the many celebratory poems and broadside ballads which appeared in print and in manuscript. It was in the Jacobean era, in fact, that Essex's name was in many respects vindicated as the victim of political intrigue, a view, as seen above, which figured prominently in Banks's play as well as in other contemporary works. Such a depiction of his character contributed greatly to the dissemination of Essex's texts, which were often accompanied by narrations of his end in manuscript miscellanies (cf. Beal 2005; Eckhardt 2009: 59-60; Gordon 2013).

One such miscellany is Bibliothèque National, Paris MS Fr 5549, a volume which has recently been discussed in connection with some unpublished mock-epitaphs by Raleigh and some of his associates (Bajetta 2022). This manuscript consists of two distinct sections, MS Fr 5549(1), the diary of the Parisian priest Jehan de La Fosse (cf. Venard 2004), and MS Fr 5549(2), and a collection of epitaphs, short poems and *dicta* written by at least six scribes on different sheets of paper between the late-sixteenth and the early seventeenth century (henceforth *Fr2*). Most of the entries in *Fr2* are transcripts of funerary inscriptions and epitaphs transcribed from Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, French, and English printed sources. These include Lorenz Schrader's *Monumentorum Italiae* (1592) and Tommaso Garzoni's *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (which, as shown by one quotation from 'fol. 929', may have been consulted in the 1588, 1592, 1593, 1599 or 1605 editions). Together with, and often alongside these, the manuscript refers to books such as William Segar's *Honor military, and ciuill* (1602) and William Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke, Concerning Britaine* (1605). Among the latest datable texts, one finds an epitaph for Henry, Prince of Wales (d. 1612), and one supposedly written by Thomas Walsingham (d. 1630). The fact that no other text quoted in the manuscript appears to be later than 1625 and that no mention is made of later important collections such as John Weever's *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631) indicate that the volume was probably complete by the mid-late 1620s.

On the first page (fol. 173) one scribe copied seven items which focus on events and figures from the 1590s-1600s: Latin verses for Sir John Norris (d. 1597), an epitaph on John

Story (the Regius lecturer and professor of civil law who was executed for treason in 1571), one on 'my Lord Treasurer' (either William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who died in 1598 or Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset, d. 1608) and two short pieces including a mock epitaph which appeared in Matthew Sutcliffe's *A ful and round answer to N. D. alias Robert Parsons* (1604: 238). The watermark in this section, quite probably a variant of Briquet 13194, may confirm that these pages were compiled about the late 1600s (cf. Briquet 1968, 4: 655).

Two poems connected with Essex appear on fol. 173v. The first is a copy of Robert Pricket's epitaph 'There sleeps great Essex, darling of mankind', in print by 1604 as the conclusive section of Pricket's *Honors fame in triumph riding. Or, The life and death of the late honorable Earle of Essex*. The manuscript version seems to be related to the one which appeared in this book, as it presents only spelling variants together with some occasional differences in punctuation:

> Of the Late Earle of Essex beheaded in the Tower
>
> Ther sleepes great Essex, darlinge of mankinde,
> fayre honors lamp, foule envies pray, art*es* fame,
> Natures pride, Vertues bulwarke, lure of mynde,
> wisdomes flower, valours Tower, fortunes shame,
> England*es* sonne, Belgias light, Fraunces starre, Spaines thunder.
> Lysbon*es* lightninge, Ireland*es* cloude, the whole world*es* wonder
> (*Fr2*, fol. 173v).

This is followed by Devereux's "The ways on earth have paths and turnings known", explicitly attributed to him by using both the word 'againe' before the beginning of the text, and adding Essex's name after the last line. This version presents some significant variants when compared to the ones in the other two most important witnesses of it, British Library Royal MS 17 B 50, fol. 2 (*R*), and Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poetry C.744, fol. 59v (*RC*). The sonnet as transcribed in *Fr* is printed below verbatim, followed by an account of the variants in *R* and *RC*. The later copies deriving from (*R*), British Library Sloane MS 4128, fol. 14v and Bodleian Douce MS e.16, fol. 118 have not been collated (cf. May & Ringler 2004: no. EV 24641. May 1980: 46, no. 8; 93, 125, printed from R). Brevigraphs have been expanded and italicised.

> againe./
>
> The waies on Earth, have pathes *and* turninges knowne
> The waies on sea are gone by nedles light
> The birdes in the ~~he~~ ayre the nerest way haue flowne,
> *and* vnder earth the moules doe cast aright
> a way more hard then these I needes must take   [5
> where none can teach, nor noe man can direct
> where noe mans good for me example makes,
> but al mens fault*es* doe teach hir to suspect.

her thought*es and* myne such disproportion haue
all strength of loue is infinite in me;   [10
she vseth the advantage tyme *and* fortune gaue,
of worth *and* power to gett the liberti*es*.
Earth, Sea, heavens, hell, are subiect vnto lawes:
but I must suffer, *and* can knowe noe cause.

                        Earle Essex.

0 againe] Verses made by the Earle of Essex in his Trouble *R*; *omitted RC.*
3 in the ayre] of th'aire *R*; in the ayer *RC*; haue] *om. RC.*   4 moules] Moulds *RC.*
6 none] noe man *RC.*   8 faults] thaughts *RC.*
10 in] to *RC.*   11 the] *om. RC.*   13 heavens] heaven *R.*
14 but I] but I, poore I, *R*;   and can knowe] and I knowe RC; and knowe *R*
Signature] My Lord of Essex verses *RC*; R:E:E *R.*

On the whole, *Fr* presents a better-scanning text than both *R* and *RC,* especially in line 14. As the collation can show, *Fr* disagrees with both *R* and *RC* at various places and does not appear to have been copied from either of the two witnesses. This manuscript, then, presents another, independent, attribution of this text to Essex, an element which is no doubt a confirmation of the authorship of "The Ways on Earth".

No concrete event can be linked with any certainty to Essex's sonnet. One could take the title given in *R* ('Verses made by the Earle of Essex in his Trouble') as a reference to the period after his return from Ireland on 28 September 1599. Royal displeasure of a less dramatic kind, however, cannot be ruled out: the poem quoted above, 'And if thou shouldst by Her be now forsaken', for example, was associated by Wotton (1641: sig. A3) with a momentary ascent to favour of the Earl of Southampton. Moreover, writing a poetic complaint was a strategy employed by Essex on various occasions – his competition with Ralegh in the late 1580s-1590s being just one instance (cf. May 1980: 87-88; 93).

Interestingly, *Fr* is not just an important document to understand Essex's paternity of these verses. One has just to think of the different ways he succeeded in self-fashioning his own figure. As Andrew Hiscock has efficaciously summarised:

> over the course of his lifetime, the mythologies of Essex (in which writers and the earl himself deeply invested) were both numerous and diverse. At Elizabeth's court, he began his career having a particular affection for the identities of knight errant and courtly lover, though these were displaced increasingly as the 1590s wore on: he strove tirelessly for national, nay international recognition as a man of state, a spymaster and as a distinguished military commander. The cultural mediation of all of these various personae was shaped in one way or another by his reputation for intellectual pursuits, most especially classical study […] Thereafter, he was all too often reduced to the principal role of anguished lover, of romantic lead on European stages during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – and indeed into the nineteenth century with *Roberto Devereux* (1837), Donizetti's opera or *tragedia lirica*, in which the by now

very familiar love triangle of Elizabeth, Essex and the Duchess of Nottingham was given yet another airing for a willing audience (Hiscock 2013: 121).

Devereux emerges in *Fr* in a very similar way: an unfortunate hero, a scholar, a patron of the arts, and ultimately as a passionate lover. He is first remembered in 'Ther sleepes great Essex' for his intellectual and military prowess, and as a man beloved and admired by all mankind, except England's enemies, and this image is matched by the one presented in "The Ways on Earth", which is clearly a special kind of love complaint. In this sonnet Essex's 'infinite' 'strength of love' is matched by another kind of force that derives from 'time', 'worth', 'position' and 'fortune'. He cannot match such power, nor really understand the behaviour of a lover whose actions are way beyond his control. This woman seems to be, in fact, almost beyond the control of Nature; her supremacy is simply overwhelming, but the reason for her actions remains undecipherable: the lover has no choice but to suffer in respect of some fault he has not committed.

Essex's reputation, then, appears here very much in line with the afterlives of his figure in the next three centuries. This sonnet – which knew a very limited circulation, typical of some of the Earl's secretive courtly lyrics – was no doubt written to elicit pity from the Queen. It must have been one of the many difficult moments of what is portrayed here, as well as in many other lyrics by Essex, as a tempestuous relationship. Certainly, at least in its early phases, when the Earl 'chose to evaporate his thoughts in a Sonnet' his poetic complaints managed to bring 'faire weather' again. No verses, however, could save him from being executed by his beloved monarch in 1601.

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Australian Fiction and the Lure of Painting

Abstract I: Questo saggio studia il perché i pittori, le tecniche pittoriche e i temi legati all'arte siano presenti nella narrativa australiana dal colonialismo ad oggi. La pittura infatti ha rivestito a lungo un ruolo importante nei diari dei coloni e nella loro narrativa, diventando un emblema dei dilemmi rivelatori e delle ispirazioni condivise dagli autori. In breve, viene dimostrato come l'arte pittorica sia stata scelta come Arte Sorella della scrittura antipodea dei bianchi.

Abstract II: This essay investigates the prevalence of painters, as well as painting techniques and concerns, in Australian fiction from colonial to modern times. Why this should be so is explored, while painting, it is argued, has long enjoyed a special prominence in settler diaries and fiction, been embraced as revealing cognate dilemmas and aspirations shared by authors, and singled out, in short, as the chosen Sister Art of white antipodean writing.

Keywords: Australian fiction, painting, settler diaries, modernism.

The literary appropriation of kindred art forms is arguably a key guide to national cultures and local attitudes. Germany, for instance, has long prided itself on producing epochal '*Dichter und Denker*', poets and thinkers. Names like Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin and Novalis, Kant, Schelling, Hegel and Marx, and a host of other seminal figures, have lent this boast trans-national credibility. But German-speaking Central Europe might equally well have celebrated its awesome contributions to music and the fact that, when German-speaking writers have sought cognate disciplines through which to depict imaginative creation and its national consequences, they have often focused on music. Novalis, as loyal to the muse of music as to his re-envisaged version of Christian Europe, wrote celebratory *Hymnen an die Nacht*, not poems but *Hymns to Night*. One of his would-be poetic competitors among the Jena Romantics, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, in *Heart-Outpourings of an Art-Loving Monk*, a volume devoted largely to painting, let art's sublimest heights, in the work's final section, be attained by organ music. Similarly, E. T. A. Hoffmann enriched world fantasy with a handful of obsessive composer figures, while Thomas Mann, when he sought to lay bare the fatal flaw in the German character that made it, Faust-like, engage in an infernal pact with Adolf Hitler, found no figure more apt for his updated Faustus than the demonically possessed composer Leverkühn. But whereas music, the apparently most free and ethereal of the arts, has repeatedly inspired the pen, and more recently word-processor keyboards, of

major German writers, in Australia a comparable ascendancy has been enjoyed by painting. Why this should be so, and in what ways Australian writers have drawn inspiration and succour from this Sister Art, is my subject today.

Initially white settler writing, with an artistic inflection, was inspired by two quite separate traditions. For those with an education in, or acquaintance with the classics, there was the tradition of the Sister Arts. This referred to the interchangeability, in certain respects, of poetry and painting, most famously expressed in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (*Art of Poetry*). From it came the Horatian tag "*ut pictura poesis*", "as is painting so is poetry", or the longer, more explanatory variant "*poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*", "poetry is a speaking picture, painting silent or mute poetry"[1]. This resemblance had been much exploited in eighteenth-century English writing, which was the immediate reading of the first white settlers in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. By the late nineteenth-century, as the popularity of prose increased and threatened verse's long-standing primacy, the novel or short fiction silently took the place of *poema*. Then there was the issue of mastering the polite domestic arts. Music and painting, or at least a facility in sketching, were desirable recreational skills among the disparate communities that contributed to the early white settlement of Australia. The latter was much in demand to memorialize new scenes and experiences, to make them transmissible, and in effect to lay claim to the continent. On the other hand music, associated necessarily with home, could lift the spirits, or momentarily whisk its listeners mentally far away from their crude frontier conditions to safer and, for them, happier climes. Painting and drawing therefore tended to engage more directly with local conditions.

Painting also offered a means of rendering the new world more familiar and intellectually manageable. For colonial amateurs it was inevitably mimetic in orientation which, incidentally, was the basis upon which Aristotle claimed their kinship[2]. Antipodean tyros (unlike their post-1945, fictional successors) were not interested in bold experiments or the traducing of hallowed conventions. They were happy, to judge from surviving sketchbooks, to capture the immediate scene, to hold fast a novel incident or passable likeness, and later to own a valuable, decorative composition, which testified to money and taste, and which, in response to specific commissions, celebrated recently achieved mastery of a once daunting landscape in the form of a homestead or substantial station[3]. At a time when educated Englishmen at home or on the continent might view a promising scene through a Claude glass (a specially tinted, convex mirror) intended to recast the natural givens as if from the brush of the master[4], an educated early settler, such as Louisa Clifton,

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[1] Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts* (1987) remains the best study of this tradition in terms of poets who enjoyed wide currency in the antipodean colonies.

[2] See Alan Filreis, "Beyond the Rhetorician's Touch: Stevens's Painterly Abstractions", https://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Stevens/talcoat-alh.html (consulted on 20/9/2023).

[3] The indispensable study of the art of this period is of course Bernard Smith's 1960 classic, which continues to provide the intellectual bedrock for later scholarly studies.

[4] Claude glass (or Claude Lorrain glass) is a small dark-tinted mirror, slightly convex in shape: "its effect [is] to convey a relatively wide-angled view on to a small-scale surface [...] Its tonal effect is to reduce glare at the top end of the scale [...] and thus to allow the subtlety of the middle tones to emerge" (Kemp 1989: 199).

had internalised the master's schema and so brought it to bear instinctively on novel settings in the Swan River colony: "We then mounted the hills […] and were charmed with the exquisite view of the estuary, the hills beyond, dips and dells and knolls beautifully studded with large and picturesque trees forming the nearest landscape" (Ackland 1993a: 6). Not only the trees, but the whole scene is strikingly picturesque, or (in its original meaning) that which can readily constitute a painting, and this aesthetic dimension renders the scene a true 'landscape' as well as a vista to be treasured by the connoisseur.

Crucially, too, painting encouraged a subtle imaginative and intellectual exchange with the antipodean countryside. At its simplest, the amateur artist, as well as later skilled practitioners, brought to a local setting the dominant European conventions of the picturesque, and sought scenes which could conform to its familiar repertoire of stepped *coulisses* and *chiaroscuro*, leading the viewer's eye to ever more distant, frequently sublime features. Settler diaries recount how immigrants, even before setting foot on this foreign soil, tried "to take some outlines of the coast" (Ackland 1993a: 4) – and frequently failed, then responded to events through borrowed prisms:

> We have been sitting on deck watching the fires on shore near Shenton's store. The scene has been most beautiful, worthy the pencil of a Claude Lorrain; the moon and sky dazzlingly bright; the sea glistening and perfectly smooth; the outline of the shore dark and clear; the lurid flash and the curling grey and vermilion smoke of the fires throwing a bright redness over the scene, investing it with a wildness congenial to the spot and exciting to the imagination (Ackland 1993a: 7).

Louisa Clifton's diary entry of 1841 (quoted above) is a veritable painting in words, as well as clear evidence of an imagination steeped in the traditions of the picturesque and sublime, associated in the Anglophone world with Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, and Salvador Rosa, and more recently John Constable, J. M. W. Turner, John Martin and a host of imitators. So engrained was this painterly way of viewing local landscape that, by the end of Queen Victoria's reign, Henry Lawson made a point of starting *The Drover's Wife* with a depiction that stresses the absence of picturesque elements:

> Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek (Ackland 1993a: 64).

How could one create a landscape painting from a scene without a horizon, or without fore and middle-grounds? Or without a gleaming, serpentining waterway, that gradually led the viewer's eyes past solid masses of trees, with ample green foliage and dense shadows producing a variety of effects and *chiaroscuro*, to a key fixed point of interest and beyond, to intimations of a grand, all-overseeing maker? Lawson's reduction of nature to monochromatic colour and feature constitutes a definitive anti-picturesque, while rotting scrub, plaintive timbers, and a waterless milieu suggest a realm without hope, help, or

deity. Naturally the full impact of the depiction depends on the widespread currency of the parodied, painterly ideal. As this and countless other examples testify, after a century of white settlement, the local landscape was as likely to be approached through the conventions of painting, as through literary figures inherited from pastoral antiquity or the eighteenth-century English landscape poets.

Herein, it seems to me, lay a seminal distinction between music and painting in Australia, which helps explain the later predominance of artists, rather than musicians, in Australian fiction. As practiced locally, painting connected with the landscape, music usually did not. The latter remained largely a cultural accoutrement associated with distant realms, whereas painting was intimately linked with individual endeavours to make sense of, to render familiar, and ultimately to possess (and later bond with) this alien domain.

By the late nineteenth century, a broadly educated, well-informed writer, with a limber imagination, could draw to great effect on a range of inherited stratagems borrowed from painting or classical rhetoric, as the short fiction of "Tasma" (Jessie Couvreur) amply demonstrates. "Tasma" was thoroughly versed in these traditions, and equally at home in English and French culture. The opening of her story, *An Old-Time Episode in Tasmania*, affords a *tour de force* enactment of the adage *ut pictura poesis* with a dual-aspect panorama that discovers in the setting of Hobart Town, first, a picturesque scene, then a complementary sublime landscape:

> From Trucaninny's perch […] she could see […] a considerable portion of the town, which took the form of a capital S as it followed the windings of the coast. Beyond the wharves, against which a few whalers and fishing-boats were lying idle, the middle distance was represented by the broad waters of the Derwent, radiantly blue, and glittering with silver sparkles; while the far-off background showed a long stretch of yellow sand, and the hazy, undulating outline of low-lying purple hills. *Behind her the aspect was different.* Tiers of hills rose one above the other in grand confusion, until they culminated in the towering height of Mount Wellington, keeping guard in majestic silence over the lonely little city that encircled its bases (Ackland 1993b: 127, emphasis added).

In this painterly panorama the human vantage-point shifts from on high to an overawed below, as befits the differing tenets of respectively the picturesque and the sublime. In the initial verbal canvas, apart from the distinct planes (foreground, "middle distance", "far-off background"), there is the equally mandatory "capital S" detail that leads the viewer ever deeper into the prospect, with visual variety provided by lively colour contrasts (blue, yellow, silver, purple), and distinct variations of light, from glittering sparkles to hazy outlines. This copybook exemplar of the picturesque is immediately played off against an equally standard, sublime tableau: hills that are almost vying with one another for ascendancy, an inveterate wildness, called here "confusion", which is positively "grand", while the whole is dominated by a stunning mountain. The observer is literally dwarfed by great and vast elements, but mentally expanded by a concluding image which implicitly evokes an invisible maker, mute but solicitous, protective rather than indifferent, with mankind's relatively puny achievement much in need of support and inspiration.

Far from being slavishly subordinate to a specific pictorial tradition, "Tasma" could play on a wide range of artistic motifs and contrapuntal settings, as is evident in *His Modern Godiva* and *Monsieur Caloche*. Many in the colonies knew of the artistic doings in the French metropole from the newspapers, but only "Tasma" made its famous "Salon", or grand annual exhibition, the focus and subject of equally modern fiction. *His Modern Godiva* plays interchangeably on the realms of art and literature, drawing at will on subjects, metaphors and settings from both, as if the two, together, constituted a single imaginative texture, while providing dramatic evidence of the adage *poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*. A young painter in search of a model for a portrait of Hester Prynne, the fallen heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and eventually for a study of Lady Godiva, finds a gorgeous young woman whom he marries and, through his love-informed art, transforms into a highly sensual Godiva. Her depiction becomes "the *clou* [hit] of the Salon" (120). Fiction has inspired art, now art energizes the fictional plot, as a notorious *roué* seeks to make the acquaintance of the model depicted in the portrait. This leads to a failed masquerade, a complex probing of male and female motivation, and a potentially fascinating meditation on the artistry of human life, all of which unfortunately lie outside the scope of this essay. *Monsieur Caloche* also turns on a crucial masquerade, on a different kind of, and transformative, *femme fatale*, and on fine portrayals of individuals and landscapes, such as the pictorially well-realized, outback station and motionless eucalypts, "as if [...] waiting to be photographed" (Ackland 1993b: 108).

Throughout *Monsieur Caloche* "Tasma's" skill in creating verbal canvases is clearly secondary to incisive thematic concerns, as her painterly impulse is subordinated to moral and humanitarian issues. The story begins with a recently arrived French youth, Caloche, seeking work at the commercial enterprise of the wealthy businessman, Sir Mathew Bogg. As unprepossessing as his name, Bogg is an ignorant, self-made man with singular failings. One of these is a delight in bullying and humiliating others, a spin-off of his mature life-pattern and commercial success, which have depended on the brutal repression of nature and basic emotions – eventually to his great cost. The overture to this critique takes the form of an accusatory paragraph of serried contrasts between the torrid outside antipodean realm, where dust, great heat, and searing wind rule supreme, and a series of comfortable, protective, 'private' environments created by great wealth, that make Bogg feel secure from nature's elemental dictates. The description of his place of business concludes:

> It was something to be surrounded by polished mahogany, cool to the touch, and cold iron safes, and maps that conveyed in their rippling lines of snowy undulations far-away suggestions of chill heights and mountain breezes. It was something to have iced water in the decanter at hand, and a little fountain opposite, gurgling a running reminder of babbling brooks dribbling through fern-tree valleys and wattle-studded flats. Contrasting the shaded coolness of the private office with the heat and turmoil without, there was no cause to complain (Ackland 1993b: 97).

Bogg's bureau, though not entirely sealed off from nature's sway ("his big thermometer [...] stood above 85° in the corner" [Ackland 1993b: 97]) conveys iron control, diversely

through "safes", "maps", and snug fittings. Here nature has been tamed, its timber transformed into furniture and paneling, its snowy peaks and tumultuous streams into pleasant, cooling memories. This is not only nature methodised (to borrow Pope's phrase), but managed and even mechanised, as a gurgling fountain attests. Here pictorial details, which in another setting might have contributed to a picturesque tableau, are nonetheless miniature "speaking pictures". But each is carefully subordinated within a rhetorical structure that reveals an individual's psychology and the shortfalls of his directive ideas, rather than as parts of an expansive tableau that offers an implied commentary on creation.

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From at least midway through the nineteenth century Western art underwent an accelerating sequence of transformations, that continued at a frenetic pace during the following century. New technologies, such as photography and the fledgling cinema, achieved previously unimaginable mimetic precision. Painting was henceforth free to reorient itself, to cast off the shackles of verisimilitude and to pursue new goals, such as the play of light, the evocation of motion, the interaction of pure, abstract forms and space, or the impact of a given scene on an individual artist. Henri Matisse's famous *Red Room*, for instance, depicts a state of mind and objects that have inspired it, or, to cite even better-known examples, the dancing stars or pulsating wheat-fields of Vincent van Gogh are indelibly stamped by individual imaginative perception. As William Blake stated matter-of-factly, and Turner repeatedly demonstrated, "For the Eye altering alters all" ("The Mental Traveller", Erdman 1988: 485). Western painting, in terms of its recurrent metaphors of the mirror and the lamp, long used to describe antithetical aims of art, was turning decisively away from the mimetic mirror that endeavoured to capture life's plenitude faithfully and realistically. Instead, it embraced the way of the lamp, which not only plays upon, but potentially penetrates and transforms quotidian reality to reveal a hidden, and arguably higher truth – a shift decisively registered in postwar Australian fiction.

Artistic modernism arrived late in the antipodes, where it was vociferously opposed, and its acceptance remained patchy (Ackland 2001: 29-82, Haese 1981). The equivalent of New York's Armory Show, which introduced North America to post-impressionist art in 1913, were the Herald exhibitions of 1939. Following the outbreak of war in Europe, their borrowed works by Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Cézanne and other established masters were not proudly hung on public exhibition in Sydney for the duration of hostilities, but consigned to the subterranean vaults of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where they could cause no further consternation and infection. According to Murray Bail and many others, this was part of a concerted pattern of cultural quarantining that extended well beyond 1945. Whereas avant-garde music, such as Stravinsky's, was often available at the flick of a switch, other artistic forms were less fortunate. Australia, with its long tradition of centralist paternalism, had routinely banned controversial novels like *Ulysses*, or those deemed morally reprehensible, like Christina Stead's *Letty Fox, Her Luck*, while ground-breaking movements in the visual arts were still stunningly under-represented even many

decades after the Second World War. "There just aren't any cubist paintings in Australia. Not one. So we've been deprived of the third great modern experience", Murray Bail asserted in 1982 (Davidson 1982: 276). Although Picasso had ushered in a new world pictorially with *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907, in the postwar Australia of Bail's youth the gum-trees of Hans Heysen and Albert Namatjira still held popular sway – a hegemony subtly called into question decades later in his novel *Eucalyptus*.

Fortunately, however, Australia's cultural guardians could control neither all the coastline, nor all their citizens. Transplanted Europeans had slowly bonded with the continent, identified with its flora and fauna, and fought to ensure the safety of its shores during the Pacific War. Many of course felt conflicting pulls, and the claims of diverse heritages. Nevertheless, they tended increasingly to identify with Australia, as the examples of Patrick White and David Malouf illustrate. The former, born in London and intermittently educated in England, began his career as a London intellectual, but felt that a unique heritage and themes were to be found among what he termed the dry sticks and bones of outback Australia. Malouf's Lebanese background and bonds with the European Mediterranean are equally well known. And both men turned to the legacy of artistic modernism to depict Australians' new appreciation of, and desire for oneness with, their southern homeland.

Though the Australian gallery-going public remained enchanted with the Heidelberg school, and its explorations of possibilities opened up by French impressionism, for both novelists a key artistic figure was the expatriate painter Ian Fairweather, which signaled an embrace of post-impressionist developments. While overseas, Patrick White had bonded with the avant-garde painter and proto-cubist Roy de Maistre in the 1930s. He returned to Australia in 1948, bearing with him a rich cultural legacy, and determined to challenge local complacency and self-satisfaction. Sporadically he bought local works of art, and viewed himself as a "painter *manqué*". Meanwhile Fairweather himself, another artistic path-blazer of British descent, settled in 1953 just north of Brisbane on wild Bribie Island. There, living isolated and in truly primitive conditions, he began his own uncompromising quest for painterly perfection, built on a confluence of Far Eastern and cubist heritages. Fairweather's doggedly eccentric trajectory attracted attention, as did his chromatically low-key but powerful abstractions. White acquired one of his major works, *Gethsemane*[5]; Malouf drew on his life-story for the artist figure in *Harland's Half Acre;* and Bail wrote a definitive, specialist tome on this painter's achievement, entitled simply *Ian Fairweather* (hereafter referred to as *IF*).

For these writers the attraction of modernist painting, and of Fairweather's life-story, was twofold. After four centuries, when one-point perspective and verisimilitude had dominated Western art, subjective perception and compositional experimentation now claimed centre stage, and Paul Cézanne, living in semi-seclusion near Aix-en-Provence, emerged as the prophet and precursor of artistic modernism. Ian Fairweather seemed to admirers his antipodean equivalent. Unquestionably he offered a striking example of what a dedicated, creative career might entail. Artistic individuality, as Fairweather knew

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[5] Unfortunately, the patchy record of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' reception of modernism continues to the present day. Some years ago it announced the deaccession of *Gethsemane* (gifted to it by White) in order to use the funds thereby generated to facilitate much needed acquisitions to its collection.

well, "is not spontaneous. It is a search" (*IF*, 118). From early on, Fairweather had "the sure knowledge that I am not going to paint as though through the lens of a camera. What I wanted to express was the effect the scene had on me" (*IF,* 118). This led away from conventional representation to compositions that were "fragmented, moving, regrouping, the outlines fluid and changing as they settled into the picture that conveyed my thoughts" (*IF*, 15). The result, according to Bail, were paintings or "visual equivalents which present ideas in a new and original way, often quite ravishing in its unity and clarity" (*IF*, 206), as well as a continual process of critique and quest: "there was nothing new here (Fairweather's constant phrase)" and "our ways of seeing are infinitely more complicated" (*IF*, 114). The other area of attraction was what the paintings themselves seemed to convey to an age in desperate quest of meaning. In Fairweather's canvases Bail perceived intimations of "the eternal mystery of the world" and "its comprehensibility" (*IF*, 128) – and so presumably did White and Malouf.

In their presentation of the painter as representative artist, these novelists have drawn on diverse transplanted traditions. Their characters are close kin of the "*poètes maudits/ artistes maudits*" (cursed poets/cursed artists) popularised in France, and confirmed by the Bohemian early life of countless iconic figures, from Picasso domiciled in his Montmartre atelier to Rauschenberg, scavenging detritus in the streets as the stuff of later Combines, when he lived down-at-heal in a dilapidated walk-up apartment in Lower Manhattan. The depiction of White and Malouf's painters is also informed by the Romantic doctrine of perennial dissatisfaction and striving as humankind's distinguishing trait and chance of immortality: whether in Goethe's famous formulation from *Faust*, "*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen*", ("Whoever continually strives, him we can save"), or in the purely artistic terms of Browning's "Andrea del Sarto": "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp/Or what's a heaven for?"– that imperfect but glorious reach which allegedly distinguished the ineffable life-force captured by Raphael from the colder, more purely technical mastery of Del Sarto. White's prototypal painter in *The Vivisector* dies trying to mix "the never-yet-attainable blue" and striving to transfer it: "All his life he had been reaching towards this vertiginous blue […] Only reach higher. Could. And will" (White 1970: 641) – before he Icarus-like crashes to the floor in his studio. His great gifts are accompanied by equally spectacular flaws – creativity springing, as Edmund Wilson long ago identified in *The Wound and the Bow*, from personal wounding (mental, physical or moral) and individual alienation. Genius and its handmaiden, imagination, usually came at a considerable cost – and in the antipodes it was no different.

In addition, the artistic pantheons of White and Malouf intersect in the figure of the poet, painter, and engraver, William Blake. To cite only the most obvious debt, both men have chosen from the English Romantic epigraphs for seminal works: respectively *Riders in the Chariot* and *Remembering Babylon*. White's quotation is drawn from plates 12-13 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (hereafter *MHH),* Malouf's from what Northrop Frye singled out as the greatest incomplete work in the English language, *Vala, or The Four Zoas*. The plates from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Blake engraved completed work onto copperplates, hence commentary usually refers to plates rather than pages) deal with the preconditions for prophetic utterance:

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert. that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded. & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote.

I then asked Ezekiel. why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side? He answerd. the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite this the North American tribes practice. & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience. only for the sake of present ease or gratification? (*MHH*, 38-39).

Crucial to understanding these lines used as an epigraph by White are the role of perception and the contrary finite/infinite. Basically, Blake maintains that mankind perceives only a fraction of what exists through his five senses. Though supposedly his gateway to reality, they actually enclose him and narrow his awareness to "a finite organical perception". If he could once change and expand his sensory capacities, however, what passes for reality would be remarkably different, in fact it could be "the infinite in every thing", hence the adage:

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,

Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? (*MHH*, 35).

For Blake there is always infinity, or the "eternal now", hidden under the apparent surfaces that surround us. We must strip them away, or cut through them (like the Bird in the above quotation). In short, we must cleanse the doors of perception, and learn to see not with but through the Eye, in the conviction that "the Eye altering alters all" (Erdman 1988: 485). Malouf's epigraph concerns the difficulty of evaluating and "knowing" the perceived object: "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not" (n.p.). Implicit in this dilemma, however, is the whole dialectics of vision just outlined, and to draw an epigraph from what is probably Blake's most difficult work already suggests a firm grasp of his directive ideas. To evoke Blake, then, at the very least is to suggest that other realities and the role of individual perception are to be in play, and in the case of White's epigraph, that his expected readership, his own society, will be hostile to his message, but honesty and artistic integrity leave him no other choice than to compose.

White's first portrait of a painter-in-the-making in *Riders in the Chariot* subsumes the antipodean heritage of an amateur training in the arts within a trajectory of genius and spiritual vision. His painter of course is no biblical prophet, but the mixed-race, aboriginal Alf Dubbo, who appears to the outside world stereotypically as drunken and bruised, or as "a brute that no decent man would touch" (309). White depicts Dubbo as a rootless,

unformed youth who passes from an initial struggle to comprehend his own intuitions, through moments of searing insight, to "a rage to arrive at understanding" of the divine mystery that surrounds him (371). His work, once he discovers a "tube of supernatural blue" and other oil paints (322), will eventually become "a bonfire", a "blaze of colour" (35). Yet Dubbo as artist is no simple *ingénu* let loose with a box of oil paints. Instead, at the hands of a minister's sister, the lack-lustre Mrs Pask, he passes through an artistic apprenticeship familiar to early colonists, gaining "technical facility" and learning "the principles of drawing" (315). But thanks to innate gifts his learning is accelerated, his application of the basics masterful and manipulative: "with a few ingratiating strokes the boy might reproduce the whole world as his teacher knew it" (321).

Ultimately Dubbo remains the focus of numerous artistic traditions rather than a new type of the painter – the full potential inherent in the figure is not realised. On examining the work of a fellow artist he is able, like Browning's Andrea del Sarto, to correct a mis-drawn arm, but goes beyond him in being able to infuse a lapidary depiction with deeper spirit: he would paint it "dropping sparks. Or stars. Moving" (320). What he produces in response to his own daemon is shocking to weak and conventional minds (as were Blake's compositions). "Things are not like this", expostulates an overtaxed Mrs Pask (326). "It's downright madness", she adds, thereby placing his works in the exalted company of Blake's and Van Gogh's. In White's hands the act of creation becomes the focus of complex effects: it resembles ejaculation, leaving the painter spent, "sweating. His thighs […] as sticky as though he had spilled out over himself" (354). And like Leverkühn (and his likely model Nietzsche) Dubbo suffers from the scourge of syphilis, with his fevered, tortured condition producing heightened vision. This affliction ensures that his being is swayed by "two poles, the negative and the positive […]: the furtive destroying sickness, and the almost as furtive, but regenerating, creative act" (341).

Strikingly, however, White makes no use of Dubbo's putative indigenous heritage. Even his "expected laziness" (that is, the disinterested attitude of the blackfellow) might have been inherited, the narrator is at pains to point out, "from some Irish ancestor" (314). Instead, the painter's aboriginality serves primarily as a marker and guarantor of his alienated status, like Jew or feral old woman do for respectively Himmelfarb and Miss Hare – all of whom are destined to feel firsthand the evil that resides in mankind, or, as White puts it, to "experience the knife" (309). Thus, White creates a familiar "*artiste maudit*", who differs from the stereotype principally in his aboriginality, but the novelist does not exploit the native's potential oneness with the land. This would have fitted neither a plot that calls for similar visionary status in four characters, three of them white, nor a vision of the spiritual informed by Judeo-Christian and occult Western heritages.

The postponed day of artistic oneness with the land comes in *Harland's Half Acre*. Like *Riders in the Chariot*, Malouf's book is concerned with the possibility of an enduring, profound and thoroughly unconventional way of laying claim to the Australian countryside. The novel first documents changes in temporal possession of a given terrain: how it passes from aboriginal to white hands after "one brief bloody encounter" (3), then how the invader-settler, having won it, is in turn dispossessed by his fellows. Among the progeny of these

feckless whites is another painter-in-the-making. Stage one of his *Werdegang* (his coming-into-being), associated with the use of water-colours, involves recording the countryside: "His pictures were a reminder and inventory […] a first act of repossession" that partakes of diluted magic (31). Both the medium chosen (water-colours) and his subject recall standard colonial practice; however, the reference to "magic" signals a key difference. Past practitioners strove for verisimilitude. It was mimesis pursued in many instances by the not-particularly-gifted. In Harland's case, what he brings to paper has undergone the alchemy of the artist's mind, and is far removed from the formulae of art academies: "the long undulations of the land under a sky that was filled with happenings […] such lyrical, slow tumblings and transformings in ice-blue or in opening mushrooms of black all ablaze at the edge" (30). Instead of seeing a landscape structured in terms of *coulisses*, planes, and other picturesque essentials, what he sees is highly personalised, as well as interactive and dynamic. Constant movement that unites is its key feature. "Filled with happenings", everything above and below, great and small, side by side, interacts and bears the stamp of the artist's mind, in this instance evoking primarily "events in the cloud-theatre above" (30).

The crucial step, which marks the divide between the broad categories of colonial and modern art, is summarised by Harland's approach to the artist's "sheet of paper" (29). His subject is not what offers itself immediately to his eyes ("It wasn't the objects themselves he was concerned with" [29]), nor is the process subject to rational control: "His mind, in its play-work, had got beyond that" (29). "Play-work" suggests a freeing of transformative capacities that transcend the usual compulsions of reason and conventional reality. Then comes the artistic act itself: like a Zen koan highly suggestive and minimalistic. Starkly white paper, a single black line, "slightly curved" (29) from his pencil, and a dent or conclusion to its movement. The mark is ambivalent. Does the black stop indicate closure or fullness and hence an opening? Malouf immediately answers: "It looked like a full stop, but was in fact an opening from which the lovely grey-black graphite flowed out" (30). Blake's famous challenge to "see a world in a grain of sand" ("Auguries of Innocence") is answered with the mark of a lead pencil.

> Hidden beneath it [the dent or full stop] was the world. He had only to let things emerge, to let his hand free them: on this occasion a head, a specific one, his brother Tam's […] the occasions were without end. The page and his mind could become one, and what they contained was the infinite plenitude of things that was Creation (30).

This is the fullness of life as known and perceived by the painter, but may not yet exhaust the plenitude that ultimately awaits him here. Up till now Harland primarily knows the land visually and through hearsay; it has not profoundly penetrated his being. To reach this higher stage he must become one with his subject. Malouf, whether by happy chance or design is unclear, locates this transfigurative event in a rubbish dump, the same site chosen by White for a similar experiential leap in *Riders in the Chariot*[6]. There Dubbo, having

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[6]   Nevertheless, Malouf's acknowledged immersion in White's fiction virtually rules out chance, as do important thematic continuities between the two passages, discussed in more detail in Ackland (2016).

fled the homosexual embraces of Reverend Calderon, arrives at a sorry rural "hole" called Mungindribble. He overnights, then prolongs his stay in its rubbish dump with the sexually predatory Mrs Spice, where he contracts the disease that will help him have extraordinary visions. Malouf uses a comparable setting, when feverish young Harland washes up one night in a car dump on the edge of an unnamed town, to mark an epochal change in this young painter's life. This transformation will enable him to realise in his own person a version of the unexplored potential of Dubbo to become a supreme celebrant of his native land.

Exploiting the conceit of Harland's fevered condition, Malouf makes him undergo an ultimate bonding with the great south land. Quickly the youth's plan to sleep in an abandoned car is thwarted when he finds a "black devil, all blue-black hair and breathing fire" already in possession of his chosen wreck (47). He reels back, falls to the ground, then experiences a terrifying antipodean version of a turbulent *Walpurgnis Nacht* when he is hurled aloft, shaken, clawed at, has his ribs crushed, and is finally "spat out" in an exhausted state. His tormentors, in fact his initiators, are black "stately figures", identified with the *genus loci* (47), to whose overwhelming power he can only submit. Vaguely he intuits that "he had disturbed a rite, or interrupted an assembly of the dispossessed" (48). Malouf stops just short of transforming his painter into an *indigène*, but Harland does become one with the natural surroundings:

> When he came to his senses it was daylight. Damp red soil was at his eyeball with blades of blunted, razor-sharp grass sprouting from it, so coarse you could see the crystals that would cut. A host of ants was going about its business all around him, intent and scrambling, as if he were just another element in the landscape they had to negotiate and had been lying here from the beginning […]
>
> His back, he discovered when he tried to move, was sun-burned right through the shirt, but when he staggered to his feet at last it was into a feeling of wholeness, of renewed power and strength, though he could never be sure afterwards which side he had come out on, or what pact he had made with his native earth (48).

Like Swift's Gulliver staked to the soil of Lilliput, Harland seems a giant in a miniature world, only here real power resides in what seems most mundane and diminutive. He finds himself returned to the very matter of primal creation ("damp red soil"), in preparation for a rebirth that will see his quotidian vision, his gates of perception, slashed and henceforth transformed to grasp the oneness of creation and be alive to even its most humble workings and interactions. Though not black, Harland is no longer merely a white, floating, impotent figure. Through this serendipitous rite of passage his former self has been broken down and transcended. This supposed "graveyard of journeys" (47) has actually marked their new beginning. Finally, expectations are high as this otherworldly 'pact' has been made not with a Mephisto-surrogate, but his native land.

Frank Harland, in his final avatar as an Ian Fairweather-like isolato, marks the apogee of that bonding between painting and literature, those foundational Sister Arts, which

began in colonial writing. Then white settlers freely appropriated painterly vocabulary and approaches as part of a wider endeavour to document and possess *terra australis incognita*. But their efforts remained largely an imposition of transplanted conventions onto the landscape, linked with a desire for mastery and a need to make it conform to their expectations. Generations later reconciliation was sought. Similar aspirations had been much earlier at work in Germany, where characteristically the desired harmony was expressed in musical terms: "Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,/Die da träumen fort und fort/ Und die Welt hebt an zu singen/Triffst du nur das Zauberwort" ("A song sleeps in all things, that dream on and on. And the world begins to sing, if you can only find the magic word", Joseph von Eichendorff, "*Wünschelrute*")[7] – a proposition presumably well known to that pronounced Germanophile, Henry Handel Richardson. For climactically, in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, she chose an embryonic musician as her type of the future great antipodean artist, and predicted his mission in terms similar to those used in the above lines by Eichendorff, that is, as releasing and articulating a new music inherent in the land. There a visiting German dignitary and botanist, Baron von Krause, tells Cuffy and his mother Mary: "Here is lying […] a great, new music hid. He who makes it, he will put into it the thousand feelings awoken in him by this emptiness and space", and by all that grows and inhabits it (III, 9 658). A translation of inspired feeling into other mediums, like painting, was of course possible, and in Australian fiction highly probable.

Repeatedly, then, Australian writers, colonial and modern, have turned to and drawn on painting as a kindred creative field. And they have kept abreast of major trends and innovations in Western art, as a means of depicting painters who encounter analogous dilemmas and breakthroughs to their own. At times they have also embraced a long perspective on this Sister Art. Thus, the attitude towards painting of many colonial settlers, which was seen primarily as a vehicle for instruction and recording, is both evoked and inverted in *Riders in the Chariot*, where the artist is ultimately instructed by the land. There Mrs Pask, when clearly feeling herself artistically overmatched by her pupil Dubbo, takes the ethical high ground: "Never forget, Alf that art is first and foremost a moral force" (315). But Alf is deaf to trite homilies, and dares to seek inspiration in the least conventionally picturesque aspects of antipodean nature. His artistic firstlings were "scribble[s] on the walls of the shed, the finespun lines of a world he felt to exist but could not yet corroborate" (314). Also Harland, around his Bribie Island campsite, discovers among the usually hidden doings of nature "scribbles under bark that might have been the most ancient indecipherable writing" (186). These reappear on his canvases, together with "the wandering crimson of ant-lines, companionable trickles" (186), as "sheets of newsprint" (187) are intermixed and overlaid with thick layers of household paint to capture his uncompromising vision. The Wordsworthian corresponding breeze, that famously buffets the speaker in the opening lines of *The Prelude*, is now surpassed by a constant interchange of "spirit that moved back and forth in him […] like the breeze that swung between land and sea, or the tides to which sandfly bites responded with itch and quiet" (187). Ultimately Harland does "not so much"

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[7] "A song sleeps in all things/That dream on and on/And the world begins to sing/ If you can once find the magic word".

paint nature "as paint […] out of it" (184). The intensely subjective vision of the abstract painter is in effect justified as an encoded speaking of nature's essential rhythms and being, while the supreme artist who envisages and depicts these transformations is a writer – a convergence hinted at when one of the last Harland canvases mentioned bears the title *Prospero I* (223). In short, the fabulous, wonder-working books described in *The Tempest* are potentially at work among us even as I write – though it may require an eye attuned to painting as well as literature to recognise them.

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Reversing Midsummer: Alexander Ekman's Dance-Theatre Adaptation of Shakespeare's
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Abstract I: Questo saggio analizza *Sogno di una Notte di Mezza Estate* di Alexander Ekman, un ambizioso progetto di teatro-danza che il celebre danzatore e coreografo svedese ha realizzato per la *Royal Swedish Opera* di Stoccolma nel 2015. L'allestimento di Ekman sovverte la commedia shakespeariana portando in scena il tradizionale festival svedese di mezza estate con le sue danze in cerchio attorno al "maypole", mescolando il balletto con canti e riti popolari, nonché nuovi dispositivi tecnologici per la performance. Nell'analisi mi focalizzo sull'innovativa "trama" coreografica di Ekman che, sebbene il coreografo stesso ritenga essere distante dalla commedia di Shakespeare, si rivela in realtà essere una riproduzione ravvicinata o "gioco" tra realtà (Atto I) e sogno (Atto II). In secondo luogo dimostro come, attingendo da temi tipicamente shakespeariani, Ekman riesca a destabilizzare modelli e paradigmi patriarcali e di dominio, in modo da poter abbracciare visioni di *partnership* (Eisler 1988) della realtà, che molto hanno da suggerire sulle nostre verità più intime e nascoste.

Abstract II: This essay focuses on Alexander Ekman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an ambitious dance-theatre project that the renowned Swedish dancer and choreographer produced for the *Royal Swedish Opera* of Stockholm in 2015. Ekman's performance "reverses" Shakespeare's comedy by bringing on stage the traditional Swedish midsummer festival with its ring dances around the maypole, while mixing ballet with chants, popular rites and new technological devices. In my twofold analysis, I focus first on Ekman's innovative choreographic "texture" which, despite the choreographer's assertion that it is completely detached from Shakespeare's story, is in reality a close reproduction or "play" between reality (Act I) and dream (Act II). Second, I show how drawing from Shakespearian themes, Ekman destabilises world dominator and patriarchal views in order to embrace imaginative partnership visions of reality (Eisler 1988), which have much to say about our most intimate and concealed truths.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Alexander Ekman, Partnership Studies, performance and adaptation.

1. Introduction: Transcoding Shakespeare Through the Art of Dance

Dance critics and literary scholars today all recognise the influence that William Shakespeare's works played on the dramaturgical 'voice' and creative insight of most dance producers in history and around the world (Isenberg 2016, 2023; McCulloch & Shaw 2019; Chevrier-Bosseau 2020). Choreographers dealing with the Bard's plays engage in a challenging endeavour that either allows them to be acknowledged in the plethora of dance innovators or to rework a universal 'stage' that may determine their failure.

Shakespeare continues to inspire generations of performance-makers, choreographers and dancers (Burnett, Streete & Wray 2011). In two articles that I published on balletic representations of Shakespeare (Mantellato 2020, 2022) I have emphasised how one of the most challenging aspects of "transcoding" and "transmediating" (Salmose & Elleström 2020; Elleström 2021) – from the written play to choreographic movements and gestures – is the ability to remain 'faithful' to the text and therefore to the Bard's world. The process of adaptation inevitably reduces or blurs some of the features that Shakespeare brought to the fore in his works. This occurs firstly because ballet needs concision and the presentation of 'readable' scenes that are easy to interpret without the aid of the spoken voice[1]. Secondly, because in adapting a text for dance performance, choreographers may wish to consider the socio-cultural scenario in which the production will take place (Russell-Brown 2011), to speak about and to the audience who will be attending the ballet[2].

Frequently, when revising a text for dance, choreographers follow the expectations and desires of their public, such as the urgency to deal with specific issues or cultural instances of the present[3]. In this case, "intertextuality"[4] as a form of textual decoding of dance (Adshead-Lansdale 1999) may be put into dialogue with other theoretical frameworks to uncover significant aspects addressed in the production. Indeed, as Isenberg suggests:

> Story-telling ballet, as it passes through our visual, auditory, and kinetic senses, bypasses the cognitive-analytical routes of verbal comprehension, arousing emotional participation, meaning, and understanding in us (more intensely during live performances) both kinesthetically and empathetically (Isenberg 2022: 190).

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[1] Adshead-Lansdale explains that the 'embodied' quality of the language of dance shows how "verbal language cannot be the 'primary modelling system', capable of translating all expressible content" (Adshead-Lansdale 1999: 9).

[2] In this regard I concur with de Marinis when he argues that a dance text is usually characterised by shifts between co-textual elements, which are the internal regularities of the dance (with its technique and structural forms), and contextual features, which respond to cultural content and contexts in which the performance will take place (De Marinis 1993).

[3] As Judith Hamera suggests: "performers remake themselves, often literally, corporeally. But more than this, they reshape possibilities for intimacy. They alter time and space, regulate or reconceive gender norms, fashion ways of entering or evading personal and cultural history. They tactically deploy the transcendent and the ineffable to act out, or dance with, the contingencies of the here and now. Dance technique puts aesthetics into motion" (Hamera 2011: 4).

[4] Intertextuality as methodological framework for dance productions tries to find correspondences between body-intertext and corporeal allusions that are closely connected to or refer to the source text.

This is relevant for today's productions, in which most choreographers feel the need to be agents for transformation[5], addressing issues such as the role of humans towards nature, or social exclusion and indifference towards caring or partnership relations.

In this context, the "partnership approach" propounded by Riane Eisler (Eisler 1998, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007; Eisler & Fry 2019) offers a useful perspective for reading and interpreting choreographies and dances that recover, actualise[6] and promote change against patriarchal dominator views of reality[7]. Eisler is an anthropologist and social activist who advocates for a "cultural transformation" (Eisler 1988: xvi) at the heart of societies, from gender balance to equalitarian attitudes towards the "more-than-human" world, without forgetting the fundamental role that the arts (and artists) have always played in the course of history for promoting messages of beauty and respect for all[8].

This essay focuses on Alexander Ekman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a visionary and ambitious dance project that the world-renowned Swedish dancer and choreographer produced for the Royal Swedish Opera of Stockholm in 2015[9].

Ekman's production is a festival of change and transformation, a cutting-edge multimodal piece (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010) of dance-theatre that mixes ballet with popular rites and chants without forgetting to take advantage of new technological devices, such as lighting 'design' and incredible use of stage props, which are widely recognised as some of the most distinctive features of Ekman's success.

In contradiction to Ekman's assertion that his adaptation "has nothing to do with Shakespeare"[10], in this essay I intend to illustrate how the production, in both its structure and unfolding, mirrors and evokes most of the play. Secondly, I analyse strategic dances of the first and second act, particularly the 'Hay' and 'Maypole dance', and the 'REM phase', the adaptation of the 'Dream' as conceived by Ekman. The final aim of this paper is to show how, despite their different expressive 'natures', Shakespearean texts and performative

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[5]   Hamera further explains that "the work of dance exposes aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporality, and irreducible difference. The resulting arrangements are processes, not things, hence the use of the gerund: *dancing* communities. They are constituted by doing dance: making it, seeing it, learning it, talking, writing, fantasizing about it" (Hamera 2011: 1-2).

[6]   Eisler's "actualization power" refers to "the power to nurture, support, create, and accomplish things together (power *with* and power *to*) appropriate for the partnership model, as opposed to the power to dominate, inflict pain, and destroy (*power over*) equated with power in the domination model" (Mercanti 2014: 3).

[7]   The Partnership Studies Group (PSG) at the University of Udine, comprising of renowned scholars and artists, applies Eisler's "partnership" methodology to the analysis of world literatures, pedagogy, linguistics and the arts in order to promote messages of care, love and respect for humanity and the environment, https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/.

[8]   Scholars and members of the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) have been widely promoting the work of artists, writers and pedagogues for a more peaceful and caring cultures. See: Riem, Conti Camaiora & Dolce (2007); Riem, Conti Camaiora, Dolce & Mercanti (2010).

[9]   In this essay I will refer to Ekman's original version of the show, which was recorded by BEL AIR MEDIA at the Royal Swedish Opera of Stockholm in September 2016.

[10]   Quotes from Ekman are transcriptions of his interview on the production made available in the DVD *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a piece by Alexander Ekman and music by Mikael Karlsson, produced by BelAir Classique.

adaptations are interrelated. They tell about the internal and external struggles of the human mind, the relationship between desire and love, and the acknowledgment of our most unconscious and concealed truths.

2. Ekman's *Midsummer*: A Modern-dance Adaptation from Shakespearean References to Contemporary Theatrical Innovations

Ekman's *Midsummer* symbolically begins with a young couple of lovers[11]. A man, "The Dreamer", is peacefully sleeping in bed when he is abruptly awakened by the sound of an alarm clock. A girl, the "Hostess", walks in and helps him dress while offering him some hay. In the recorded version of the performance, scene II is announced by a subtitle advising that it is "8:00 - Somewhere near Stockholm". The curtain opens to present one of the most remarkable pieces of the production since the entire *corps de ballet* is dancing in unison holding hay. The performers are festive, playful and cheerful. They kneel on the stage floor which is completely covered with hay. Their movements are coordinated and effortless. While holding hay, dancers create arm circles and diagonal movements, repeatedly throwing hay up to the ceiling and promptly bending over towards the floor in other synchronic gestures.

References to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer* are here implicit. The couple appearing at the beginning epitomise the loving pairs who confusedly alternate in the play. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents the story of four young lovers who try to elude society and familiar "order and degree" (Eagleton 1986) by escaping "the sharp Athenian law" (Act I, i, 162: 15).

Ekman immediately foregrounds the theme of reality versus dream, by titling Act I "The Dream of Midsummer", referring to another textual divide that occurs between Hippolyta and Theseus, respectively the Queen of Amazon and the Duke of Athens, and Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the fairies. In the interview he released for the DVD edition of his work, Ekman suggested:

> I studied Shakespeare's version […] and I thought there were so many characters [that] I did not really connect with the story myself. I liked the energy of the piece, and the comic, the lust and sensuality […] then I went to India, and [while I] was meditating it suddenly hit me: [my version] should be a Swedish version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's comedies alternate numerous characters and insert double distortions. Indeed, even the most attentive reader or viewer would hardly distinguish the differences between the two loving couples of Lysander-Hermia and Demetrius-Helena since they constantly swap thoughts and guises. Their roles tend to convey disorder and question the stability of male dominator patriarchal structures.

In his adaptation, Ekman presents chaos through peasants' traditions and community rites, in particular the Swedish summer maypole, which frames most of the scenes occurring

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[11]   In the performance libretto attached to the DVD, the characters are named as "The Dreamer" and "Hostess". Nevertheless, in the show Ekman presents all different kinds of lovers and couples, thus hinting at the many loving pairs we find in Shakespeare's play.

in the first act as a celebration for life's renewal. Indeed, scene II metaphorically concludes with a girl looking up in astonishment towards a projected backdrop of the sun. She is soon followed by the *corps de ballet*, which gradually falls into a trance-state symbiotic with nature. The music changes and slows down while the entire orchestra allows the piano (which is played by Henrik Måwe) to perform a solo. Dancers slowly interrupt their frenetic movements while they gradually lay down on the floor, thus connecting to the power of earth's fecundity, in a lyrical modern-dance reminder that emphasises the ground[12].

A sudden rainstorm interrupts the performers' enchantment. They start running and looking for umbrellas in order to set the next scene, the arrival of "Guests" at "10:02". At the beginning of this section, a harmonious duet between two dancers announces the arrival of the singer Anna Von Hausswolff, a fundamental character for Ekman's production even if the rest of the troupe does not notice her appearance. Anna represents one the first hints that will repeatedly connect the world of the living with the invisible and intangible forces inhabiting the woods. We possibly can interpret the character of Anna as Ekman's direct reference to Shakespeare's Puck or the world of fairies in general. Indeed, the singer's voice is angelic and unearthly, thus adding (in the words of Ekman) "another level, another layer [of meaning] to the piece".

Mikael Karlsson, a Swedish composer with whom Ekman has worked for many of his creations, produced the music for the show. In the first act, the music is mostly harmonious and fully employs the presence of the orchestra on stage in order to accentuate the theme of festivities. Ekman has praised Karlsson's ideas and rhythmical stances, repeatedly stating that their "mutual understanding" resulted in unexpected synchronicities between the "rhythms in my [Ekman's] head" and "the melodies [that he puts] on the top of it". Scene III is certainly a confirmation of this alliance since it foregrounds, apart from Von Hausswolff's chants, the rhythms and accents of the dance, which perfectly match the performers' simple movements with their arms. Hay balls are now rolled on stage while dancers start climbing on them in order to further investigate the instability of their unpredictable exchanges and duets.

At the end of this scene, dancers start clearing up the stage floor while the traditional Swedish summer maypole comes down from the stage ceiling. At "14.00" the section called "Festivities/Ringdanser" can finally begin. I fully analyse the structure of this dance, and the echoes that are connecting it with Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*, in the following section of this essay. Apart from the dance, Ekman brilliantly makes use of stage lighting and props in order to represent the cheerful atmosphere of his native country during the annual celebration of summer. Indeed, despite being a symbol of tradition and inherited value for peasant communities, Ekman's maypole is surrounded by modern scenery, such as a typical summer tent, a barbecue and an improvised market at which people may buy garlands.

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[12] The connection that dancers actualise with mother-earth is extremely significant for the (r)evolution of modern dance, since it symbolises a "return" to the ground. This inward direction re-connects humans/performers with reality, in contrast with the scopes of classical ballet which advocates for detachment from existence and the embracing of impermanent, ethereal, and ultimately unreal ways of being, sensing and experiencing.

Lighting also, which was designed by Linus Fellbom, is a technical instrument that Ekman fully exploits in order to emphasise important scenes and/or characters or to simply suggest the changing of time during the day. Indeed, as it occurs in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*, Ekman's ballet takes place within a single day, with an emphasis on the distinction between daylight (Act I) and night (Act II) fostering once more the gap existing between reality and fantasy.

The festivities of scene IV end with an unexpected moment for the audience since most of scene V occurring at "15:00" is the representation of "A Toast" to the public and the people who have come to enjoy the show. The scene takes place in the proscenium. The entire *corps de ballet* raises its glasses and cheers towards the audience to 'bring it into' the performative space. As a form of meta theatrical device, Ekman reinforces once more the idea of disruption of order suggested by Shakespeare's comedies[13]. This scene promptly recalls the ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, especially the theatre within theatre that Quince's company and his actors offer in order to celebrate Hippolyta and Theseus's wedding. What follows is an interesting and playful dance of the cups, in which performers can fully demonstrate their strong technical abilities and high level of artistic expertise.

In scene VI, Anna the singer finally reappears. This is the moment to celebrate "Midsummer Feast" precisely at "18:00". Candle lights are brought in, while a big table diagonally covers most of the stage. Dancers set up this Midsummer dinner table. They perform in unison jovial and yet sharp movements. Cups are filled with wine while the atmosphere becomes more and more rarefied and subtle. Dancers are called to alternate instances of bewilderment and pleasure with moments of stasis, thus emphasising the inebriating effects of alcohol. Once again, order is disrupted to allow performers to jump on the table and enjoy the blissfulness of carnal encounters. The act concludes with the man, "The Dreamer", smelling a bouquet of flowers before placing it under his pillow and falling asleep. Anna approaches and sings what sounds like a lullaby. According to Ekman:

> The first act is pretty realistic […]. We follow a group of people who are celebrating Midsummer [and] so it is light and fun, and it is a big celebration. […] Then in the end it turns to the tradition of Midsummer [in Sweden, where] you pick up seven flowers from seven different fields that surround your house and you put them under your pillow before you go to bed and you are supposed to dream about your future love.

Act II is emblematically titled "A Dream of Midsummer" and it begins at "02:03" in the deep phases of the performers' dreams. Scene VII is titled "REM Sleep" and therefore evokes the oneiric activity of the human brain, in the recognised phase of "rapid eye movement". According to neuroscientists, REM phases alternate with NON-REM movements in which dreamers confusedly associate images and occurrences that pop into their mind. In order

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[13] Apart from breaking up the 'fourth' wall of theatre-space, Ekman reinforces here the tradition of dance-theatre, which was firstly theorised by the pioneers of modern dance, such as Pina Bausch. For more information on the "partnership" qualities of this type of performances, which do not deny inter-transdisciplinary connections between the world of arts and dance, see: Climenhaga (2013) and McCormak (2018).

to present the effects of REM sleep, in these very first moments of Act II, Ekman evokes some iconic images and episodes that occurred in the first act, so as to prepare viewers of the performance for a shift of perspective, from reality to dream and imagination. The Dreamer's recollection is blurred and confused. Spectators can enjoy fragments of the maypole festivities, while the summer tent guests are now running away from the barbecue man who tries to kill them all with a gun.

Ekman follows the incongruous functioning of the human mind in the first phases of sleep, also echoing the moment when the young lovers in Shakespeare's play leave the protected walls of Athens and head towards the woods. These references become even clearer when Ekman introduces, in scene VIII ("03:22"), the appearance of overturned trees under which a couple of solo dancers perform a sensuous, rebellious and passionate duet. These scenes are called "Delta Waves", thus recalling the phases that intermittently alternate with REM sleep, in performative segments that are similar to irregular flashing of light-rays.

The confusion of these sections is furthered by the uplifting of the table towards the ceiling. It thus becomes a sailing ship, which dancers contemplate in admiration. As soon as it comes back to the ground, the table becomes a battle ground for two contesting groups of dancers. Two enormous fish silhouettes appear on stage while the performers keep on dancing with tablecloths and chairs. The "Delta Waves" section of the performance is quieter than the previous "REM Sleep" piece. Apart from the soloists' duet, and the falling of trees, the scene is characterised by a change of rhythm, recalling the sound of drums. This part introduces the dance of girl nymphs, reminiscent of Titania's dance with the fairies. In this part of the performance Ekman uses more the technique of classical ballet. Girls are wearing pointe shoes and they dance in unison with high straight legs (*développés*[14]) in iconic and suspended movements (such as *attitudes*[15] followed by a lot of *piqués arabesque*[16]). The second part of the girls' choreography is characterised by a series of jumps and dynamic gestures. It is a liberating dance, first because it is performed by women with only a single man watching and, second, because all female dancers are wearing men's shirts with their hair loosened, a direct reworking of the canonical rules of classical ballet tradition which obliges girls to have a *chignon* and/or wear tight-fitting costumes.

Scene IX ("05:13"), "False Awakening", is a transition scene that prepares the audience for the conclusion of the performance. Ekman wanted to recall here the last phases of sleep, when the mind tries to summarise in sequential visions what it has experienced in REM

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[14] A "développé" is "a smooth, gradual unfolding of the leg. The dancer raises the thigh to the side with the knee bent while bringing the toe of the working leg along the calf to the back of the knee of the supporting leg. The working leg is then straightened to the front, side, or back (arabesque)". See: https://www.britannica.com/art/developpe (consulted on 04/10/2023).

[15] An "attitude" is "a position similar to the arabesque except that the knee of the raised leg is bent. The raised leg is held at a 90° angle to the body in back or in front" See: https://www.britannica.com/art/attitude-ballet-position (consulted on 04/10/2023).

[16] "Piqués" are "traveling turn[s], the dancer stepping out onto the supporting leg before turning on it". Piqués can be concluded *en arabesque*. Arabesque and attitude are "positions in which the dancer stands on one leg. In arabesque the other leg (called the working leg) is stretched straight out to the back". See: https://www.britannica.com/art/dance/Basic-steps-and-formations (consulted on 04/10/2023).

and other deep phases of sleep. Again, spectators can see here some uncanny dances, such as a classical *pas de deux* between a male and a female, and simultaneously another duet performed by a contemporary-dance couple, as if they were competing. The *corps de ballet* reappears in a caterpillar formation that soon separates in order to allow dancers to yell and make weird noises that recall the sounds of fish while frying or swimming. What becomes important in this section is the strength of the *ensemble* that is evoked through the forming of circles performing the same sequences. Dancers are trying to wake up from the contradictions of dream-visions. They call for order and stability of the mind, an aspect which links them to Shakespearean protagonists, who at the end of the comedy long for light, while asking themselves whether their night adventures in the forest were real or unreal.

We can possibly interpret the closing dance of this section as a 'visionary' re-writing of the traditional midsummer dance of Act I. While performers are dancing, the Dreamer reappears on stage dragging his bed towards the corner of the proscenium. Anna is also present and her song is a more vigorous repetition of the lyrics that she sang for the closing of Act I. As becomes clear, Ekman proposes a reiteration of episodes and dances, so as to echo movements, gestures and words that the public can now remember.

The very last scene of the production is a re-evoking of the first scene of the performance, and so it is called "Traditions" happening precisely at "8:00". The episode depicts once again the Dreamer in the act of waking up, disturbed by the sound of an alarm clock. The Hostess walks in once again and helps him dress. Again, she offers some hay and the two walk off of stage through a back door. The finale signals that the performative cycle will constantly repeat itself and that life will continue in a redundant spiralling cycle of recurring occurrences and life transformations.

3. Shakespeare's Festivities and the Role of Traditional Dances for Transformation

Festivities are important features in Shakespeare's comedies (Wincor 1950: 219-240). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these destabilising celebrations are encouraged by those in power. Indeed, both Theseus and Oberon are organising "revels". Periods of chaos and disorder are essential for safeguarding stability, because people in the lower echelon of the dominator patriarchal system can finally experience momentary freedom and reversal of roles. As Barber suggests:

> The seasonal feasts were not, as now, rare curiosities to be observed by folklorists in remote villages, but landmarks framing the cycle of the year, observed with varying degrees of sophistication by most elements in the society (Barber 1959: 5-6).

Shakespeare uses festivities to question social categories and show, through the magical voyage of his young protagonists, the strength of a stable, hierarchical order or ordained 'civilisation'.

As the title of the play suggests, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* evokes the middle of summer, a time to celebrate the renewal of the land and the reaping of its fruit. Yet, in the text, there are very few references to summer festivities, since for Shakespeare the most important emphasis of his play is the division existing between the inner (the walled

city) and outer (the wood) worlds of Elizabethan society. I discuss the implications of this psychological and socio-cultural spatial division in the next section, when I deal with Shakespeare's dream. Apart from summer, Shakespeare puts to the fore other moments of change and transformation:

> LYSANDER
> If thou lov'st me then,
> Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow night;
> And in the wood, a league without the town
> (Where I did meet thee once with Helena
> To do observance to a morn of May),
> There will I stay for thee
> (Act I, i, 163-168: 15).

May and summer are for Shakespeare moments of revelation and awareness. These periods coincide with seeding and planting, therefore suggesting moments of growth and experiential understanding[17]. Indeed, when Theseus finds the young couple of lovers asleep in the woods, he promptly suggests to his entourage:

> THESEUS
> No doubt they rose up early, to observe
> The rite of may; and hearing our intent,
> Came here in grace of our solemnity
> (Act IV, i, 131-133: 95).

Apart from the human 'rational' world, it is in the dark and enchanted spaces of the woods that Shakespeare fully exploits the socio-cultural implications of celebrations. Oberon, Titania, Puck and all the creatures and fairies that dwell in this 'other' dimension are constantly singing, dancing and rejoicing with the land and animal world. These are the places of the irrational, where people are allowed to experience disorder and discover their inner (and secret) instincts, while embracing a new role, a new skin, or simply a new life. Barber suggests:

> This more serious play, his first comic masterpiece, has a crucial place in his [Shakespeare's] development. […] He expressed with full imaginative resonance the experience of traditional summer holidays. He thus found his way back to a native

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[17] As Wincor suggests: "A festival play may be any dramatic celebration, but the term is here applied to drama growing out of seasonal rites and worship. As a matter of fact, other festivals may have the same origin […]. Certainly there is a basic theme in many religious plays, folk plays, and pageants of all kinds; and this theme is what must be traced before we consider how Shakespeare made it into something rich and strange. It begins with primitive man first learning agriculture and being impressed by the momentous transformations that pass over the face of this earth. Changes attended the season, changes that had an apparently magical effect upon growth and life […]. Fertility magic is the beginning of comedy. The winter mock-death of good things in life is the source of tragedy" (Wincor 1950: 220).

festival tradition remarkably similar to that behind Aristophanes at the start of the literary tradition of comedy. […] Shakespeare never made another play from pastimes in the same direct fashion (Barber 1959: 11).

In Shakespeare's texts, the disruption of order fostered by summer rites and traditional celebrations highlights another fundamental element of human 'nature'. This is the need to re-connect with the power of environment and the more-than-human world, in the acknowledgment that apart from being 'rational' and ground-based creatures, we are also part of a more cosmic (and therefore 'irrational' for humans) system of "relational partnerships" (Eisler 1998, 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019).

In this sense, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a perfect example of how human desire, love and Eros cannot be fully expressed or experienced in the realm of patriarchal order, because they are forces that require an inner and outer voyage into the irrational mind. These are moments of growth, development and discovery which reconnect us with our most intimate and true feelings. These are phases in which we put aside our human need for stability and rejoice in the mesmerising power of life, with all its contradictions, synchronicities, and seemingly 'casual' coincidences. Read from this perspective, it comes as no surprise that Titania's calling to "roundel [and] song[s]" is associated with an interaction with nature. The Queen of the fairies knows that dances and songs have the power to appease human agonies and desires. In her magical world, she will be the only one able to experience metamorphosis, while embracing an irrational and yet mostly 'true' love for an ass.

> TITANIA
> Come, now a roundel and a fairy song;
> Then for the third part of a minute, hence:
> Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds;
> Some war with reremice for their leathern wings,
> To make my small elves coats; and some keep back
> The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots and wanders
> At our quaint spirits. Sing me now asleep;
> Then to your offices, and let me rest
> (Act II, ii, 1-8: 43-44).

Two qualities alternate in the world of the fairies. Firstly, the cyclical order of life, change and transformation embodied by Queen Titania, and secondly, the processional and formal system that pervades Oberon's mind and behaviour. In Shakespeare's misogynist society this should not come as a surprise. Yet, I find particularly interesting how Titania's disorder is essential to the structuring of the play and unfolding of the events. Indeed, beside fulfilling Oberon's wish to win the battle with his wife over an "Indian boy", the episode also subverts the order of the unreal world, thus reinforcing once more the ideas of change and transformation at the heart of the comedy[18]. These transitions between "dominator and

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[18] Significantly, Loomba argues that "mapping colonial and gender structures onto one another, critics have increasingly interpreted the struggle between Oberon and Titania over the Indian boy as 'a gendered contest

partnership systems" (Eisler 1988) of life and experience are also discernible in the reversal of Oberon and Titania's dances, songs and attitude towards festivities (Isenberg 2022: 193-194). Indeed, as Barber suggests:

> It seems likely that, as Dr. Johnson argued, there were two songs which have been lost, one led by Oberon and the other by Titania. There were probably two dances evolutions also, the first a processional dance led by the king and the second a round led by the queen. […] These two forms of dance are associated in origin with just the sort of festival use of them which Shakespeare is making. 'The customs of the village festival', Chambers writes, 'gave rise by natural development to two types of dance. One was the processional dance of a band of worshippers in progress round their boundaries and from field to field, house to house […] The other type of folk dance, the ronde or round, is derived from the comparatively stationary dance of the group of worshippers around the more especially sacred objects of the festival, such as the tree or the fire. The custom of dancing round the Maypole has been more or less preserved wherever the Maypole is known' (Barber 1959: 138).

In Ekman's choreography these contrasting embodied features are fully exploited in the first act. Indeed, at the beginning of the celebration for the coming of summer everything seems very formal and precise (see, for instance, the group dancing with the hay), while the appearance of the Maypole unveils a more dynamic and challenging form of dance. In my opinion, this diversion fully expresses and indirectly shows the different 'nature' of Titania and Oberon's agency and intent.

In particular, the hay dance is characterised by repetitive movements embodied in unison and focusing mainly on the performers' torso, as if dancers were presenting the beginning of celebrations. The piece follows a formal and structured order in a movement that recalls a "processional dance" to quote from Barber's words. This is an important moment because it prepares spectators, and also performers, for the "chaos" and disorder that will follow. In this sense, the Maypole dance configures as the truest and most subverting moment of change.

The hay dance is solemn and jovial. Dancers are moving precisely in unison as if they were one single body during a communal ceremony. At the beginning of the dance, there is no space for solos or individual characterisation because the final aim of this performative ritual is to connect with the land, thus welcoming abundance and pleading for a good harvest. Dancers are well placed on the ground on their knees, and they individually interact with the land. Sometimes they whisper and scream in a quiet way, as if they wanted to recall songs and ballads that most farmers were playing during harvest or summertime.

Movements of the torso are mostly connected with contractions so that the dancers can perform rounds and circles with the hay they hold in their hands. Indeed, the circle is the most recognisable geometrical form, while the dance is also characterised by falls and

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over the proper control of foreign merchandise', as 'a progression both patriarchal and imperial' […]. The patriarchal will is thus also an imperialist will" (Loomba 2016: 185).

Fig. 1: Alexander Ekman's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Detail of the 'hay' dance (https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/apr/27/alexander-ekman-eskapist-midsummer-nights-dream-review-audacious, The Guardian Online, photograph by Hans Nilsson, consulted on 13/11/2023).

recoveries and moments of stasis, which are expedients that emphasise the interacting with hay, a fundamental and strategic 'prop' for the aesthetics of this scene.

If one looks closely at the choreography, the maypole dance is more dynamic and transformative than that of hay. First, it is performed in a circle, therefore recalling traditional folk group-dances and, second, it is led by a single male dancer, who stands on a ball of hay to manage and incite his fellow companions to join in the celebration.

Just as in Titania's monologue, performers are now standing and dancing in circles. Their faces and gazes can finally meet because the aim of this exchange is a movement from the outer (nature) world towards an inner (human consciousness) and communal space. In this direction, dancers perform their fluid, repetitive and quick steps with an opening of the arms and torso with eyes closed. This is a recognisable signal that embodies an inner journey, the commencement of a transition that will put into question certainties and beliefs.

The process of transformation for regeneration is highlighted in the dance through

Fig. 2: Alexander Ekman's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Detail of the 'maypole' dance (https://www.barcelonaobertura.com/concert/a-midsummer-nights-dream/, BarcelonaObertura.com, consulted on 13/11/2023).

loud shouting towards the maypole, while performers start running and dancing towards the middle of the circle, in a communal ceremony or rite that has much in common with native, aboriginal or dervish dances. The goal is to lose geo-temporal coordinates in order to experience and enter in a trance-like dimension. This is the only way to disrupt the dominator patriarchal order and escape from fixed representations and certitudes.

With the passing of time, the dance becomes faster and faster. Performers start jumping, clasping hands and changing directions of movements. Nevertheless, towards the middle of the dance they stop. Indeed, they know that festivities need to be counterbalanced by unpredictability. In this sense, they perform a rather soave round dance which has a lot of similarities with neoclassical ballet. This mixture of styles and techniques is another expedient to foreground disorder and emphasise alteration from what spectators are expecting.

At the end of the dance, a girl joins the male dancer on the hay ball. The *corps de ballet* cheers the couple who have finally re-joined to express the power of their encounter, and in a broader sense the power of love and abundance for the future. This feature connects Ekman's perceptions and insights with Shakespeare's play, because at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all protagonists finally regain their roles. Nevertheless, even if the "order and degree" system of Elizabethan society is restored, their subjects have been able to experience *another*

dimension into the unconscious. In the second part of the performance Ekman investigates the irrational realm of existence, the space where our true inner desires can finally emerge.

4. Reworking Reality: Fantasies and Dreams for a Re-envisioning of the World

With his protagonists going into the woods, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes a physical and yet unconscious voyage into the realms of imagination. As Marshall suggests:

> The play swerves away from festive comedy as it radically places in question a social institution that embodies relations of power and stages conflicts of imagination, voice, and vision (Marshall 1982: 557).

As I have already suggested, for most scholars, Act II of the play represents an escape from the "order and degree" of Elizabethan society and therefore an intimate journey into the labyrinths of the self in order to question and negotiate positions of power, which are linked to the repression of human instincts to preserve dominator control[19].

Reworking reality can occur in the 'margins', at the borders of civilisations. These spaces cannot be controlled because they stand outside of 'rational' systems of thought. The wood, in particular, is an unmapped environment, a dark and mesmerising psychic maze, where fears and doubts can finally emerge. The wood mirrors the mind since it is distorted and chaotic. It represents "an-other" world order, the reign of the fairies and Oberon and Titania, who embody the magical couple matching the 'real' Queen and King of Athens.

As in Shakespeare's play, Ekman's second act takes places in an unknown and obscure space. Nevertheless, instead of presenting magical creatures, Ekman decides to rework the atmosphere of the forest with the inner psyche of his dancers, taking them directly into the world of dreams. In Ekman's words:

> The second act is a huge dream, and the dream-concept is always very good […] because you can go wild with your imagination […]. In the first part of the second act there is a huge nightmare. When I was going through my notes the other day, I called it 'the craziest storm', and that is what it feels like. So we go through a nightmare which is really strong and intense. And then after that it goes into [a sort of] 'wet dream'. And after that it kind of ends up with an absurd land, where you do not know where you are.

Through the dream dimension Shakespeare and Ekman are capable of offering an "other reality", thus realising the disruption of order that protagonists and performers have been looking for since the beginning of celebrations.

Entering the labyrinths of the self requires that the dancers experience their inner desires and aspirations. Overall, Ekman's Act II is elaborate and turbulent since its main

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[19] As Frosch emphasises "the action moves from an Athens ruled by harsh fathers to a world of female and maternal power" (Frosch 2007: 487).

function is to present different phases of human sleep, when it is believed we enter into another space. As McCarley suggests:

> Sleep may be divided into two phases. REM sleep is most often associated with vivid dreaming and a high level of brain activity. The other phase of sleep, NREM sleep or slow wave sleep (SWS), is usually associated with reduced neuronal activity; thought content during this state in humans is, unlike dreams, usually nonvisual and consists of ruminative thoughts (McCarley 2007: 303).

This is an opportunity to dismantle the hypocrisies of society and re-create a space of/for freedom, encounters and partnerships. Indeed, the dances introduced in Act II are visions and highly intense moments of acknowledgement. Dancers also dismantle and disrupt the techniques that Ekman introduced in Act I. This is the territory of the unknown, a performative and highly creative platform where everything becomes possible and yet remains incoherent.

The last dance occurring towards the end of the Act is emblematic of this change. In my opinion, it epitomises a more liberated version of the circle dances I presented in the third paragraph of this article. As symbols of correspondences, spectators can distinguish again "The Dreamer", who is a re-envisioning of the man standing in the hay ball in Act I, and the *corps de ballet*. As a reversal of order, the ensemble of dancers is now leading the performance. The Dreamer tries to follow the group, even when it becomes elusive and disorganised. At a certain point, in the same way as it occurred in the hay dance, performers lay back on the floor. This a reinforcement of the idea of communal destinies and aspirations. Indeed, the protagonists start dancing in unison, in formations that recall the maypole dance. The performance becomes very physical as it alludes to sexual poses and embryonic-like movements.

One of the features that mostly characterises this scene is the undressing of the dancers, who now wear only shorts and tops. In this way, the choreography connects firstly with their human 'nature', and secondly with their discarding familiar and societal 'ornaments'. After a call and response section between the male protagonist and the other dancers, a pianist walks in and starts playing the track and musical themes that viewers have enjoyed at the closing of Act I. Anna the singer also reappears singing again the same emblematic song of Act I titled *How Many More of These?* written by the composer Mikael Karlsson:

> How many more of these?
> How many more?
> How many friends like these
> have come here before?
>
> This one has barely begun
> Has barely begun
>
> How many years like this?
> How many springs?

How many rounds like this?
How many rings?

This one has barely begun
Has barely begun

How many drinks like these
can you swallow down?
How many fears of yours
can alcohol drown?

This one will surely go down
Will surely go down

How much faster than this?
How fast can you run?
Our race into the night, my friend
has barely begun.

The message that Ekman conveys, while referencing at the same time Shakespeare's play, is rather clear. The choreographer is drawing from traditional 'irrational' feasts to question life-order and reality and demands whether a change or transformation is possible. Through his production, Ekman is not able to provide an answer for his spectators, yet he prompts everyone to enter into this unworldly and authentic state of mind in order to leave behind judgements and fears. This is only a way to experience a different kind of reality, an imaginative world of fantasies and possibilities where a re-envisioning of dominator systems and views is possible. In this direction Ekman argued:

> The piece itself is also like a loop concept, [in which] you have the beginning and the end [like if they were] the same scene and that is kind of like life. Every year we do this silly tradition over and over and over, and then we all have our dark moments in life. When the [protagonist] wakes up, and he has been through all these things, in his mind, and it has been a very tough night for his mind, the girl comes in [and] she wants to do it all one more time.

5. Conclusions

Without acknowledging the real implications of his choreography, Ekman has created a ballet that mirrors and pays respect to his Swedish heritage, society and tradition. The "silly" dances and celebrations he mentions in his interview have an important function for communities at large for they are rare moments of partnership awakening and authentic relations with all existence. These are instances out of the ordinary and supposedly linear and 'rational' world we think we dwell in and therefore incredible spaces to question our lives and perspectives, while also embracing our irrational 'nature'.

In a similar way, Shakespeare's protagonists enter the woods in order to look for a different order and run away from responsibilities and dominator control. Yet, after their

night of reversals and destabilising occurrences, they understand that true change can only occur within themselves, thus interrogating and putting into question their beliefs and certainties. Indeed, as Frosch points out talking about Puck's epilogue:

> Rather than answering questions about enchantment and demystification, Puck's epilogue helps us recognize that we have been in a psychological place where such answers are irrelevant. Telling us that the fairies are just actors, but still calling himself Puck and Robin and promising that he will continue to exist in that role, Puck sends us back, refreshed, to the ongoing tension between external reality and internal subjectivity but reminds us that the transitional experience will be there for us in the future (Frosch 2007: 499).

This is a very effective and powerful way of building a partnership world of authentic, confident and caring relations, in which we question world-order and reality. The performing arts, and dance in this case, have the power to dismantle centuries-old disbeliefs in traditions and festivities that aim to re-connect us with who we truly are. These are practices and "artivistic" (Mead 2017) engagements which for both practitioners and spectators can become challenging journeys into ourselves, or imaginative voyages in which everything appears impossible and yet within reach.

Talking about the maypole Swedish summer tradition, Ekman concluded in his interview:

> It is a very strange tradition […] We raise this Maypole in history. I tried to study it and I still do not get what it [is]. We raise this Maypole and we sing songs and we still do this today […]. Just now, the past summer I was there in my country house with my parents and we were holding hands with all the neighbours and we were singing these silly songs, running around in a circle. It is such a strange thing to do. You know in Sweden we are not really outgoing in our culture. So it is very strange that we suddenly have to do this. Anyway, it is a great exercise for Swedish people to connect and get to know each other.

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Envelopes of Air: **Poetic Correspondence as Partnership**

Abstract I: Il 23 maggio 2018 è apparso sul *The New Yorker* un articolo intitolato "Envelopes of Air. Two poets forge a bond amid the shifting landscape of contemporary America". Al suo interno, la corrispondenza poetica tra Ada Limón e Natalie Diaz, nella quale la vita quotidiana si intreccia alle contraddizioni degli Stati Uniti contemporanei. Il presente articolo si propone di esplorare come Diaz & Limón mescolino voci e immaginario per creare un micromondo poetico comune, un "third space" di amicizia e partnership, fondato sull'intimità condivisa e in grado di sfidare il *dominator mindset* (Eisler 1988) attraverso l'esplorazione del corpo e della terra.

Abstract II: On May 23, 2018 *The New Yorker* published a feature titled "Envelopes of Air. Two poets forge a bond amid the shifting landscape of contemporary America". Within, the poem-shaped correspondence between poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz, regarding both daily life and the contradictions of contemporary U.S.A. This article seeks to explore how Diaz & Limón reveal and enmesh their voices, language and imagery to create an eight-poem world in itself, "a third space" of friendship and intentional partnership, built upon shared vulnerability and engaged in exposing and subverting the dominator mindset (Eisler 1988) through the exploration of body and land.

Keywords: Natalie Diaz, Ada Limón, *Envelopes of Air*, poetic correspondence, partnership.

1. A Braid of Poems

On May 23, 2018 *The New Yorker* published a poetry feature titled "Envelopes of Air. Two poets forge a bond amid the shifting landscape of contemporary America". Within, the poem-shaped correspondence between poets Ada Limón and Natalie Diaz.

Ada Limón has authored several poetry collections including *The Hurting Kind* (2022); *The Carrying* (2018); *Bright Dead Things* (2015); *Sharks in the Rivers* (2010); *Lucky Wreck* (2005); and *This Big Fake World* (2005). Her poetry won many accolades, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry for *The Carrying*. In July 2022, she became the 24th US Poet Laureate, the first Latina woman to hold such position. Natalie Diaz is a Pulitzer Prize-winning Mojave ('Aha Makhav)/American poet and language activist. Diaz is the author of *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020), winner of the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and finalist for the National Book Award and the Forward Prize in Poetry, and *When My Brother Was an Aztec*

(2012), winner of an American Book Award. She is an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian community.

Envelopes of Air consists of eight letter-poems, alternating between the four penned by Limón and the four by Diaz, like any epistolary venture: *Cargo* (Limón to Diaz), *Eastbound, Soon* (Diaz to Limón), *Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in The Air* (Limón to Diaz), *Isn't the Air Also A Body, Moving?* (Diaz to Limón), *Sway* (Limón to Diaz), *From the Desire Field* (Diaz to Limón), *From the Ash Inside the Bone* (Limón to Diaz) and *That Which Cannot Be Stilled* (Diaz to Limón). The collaborative, truly dialogical, approach to the undertaking can be also detected in the decision to include, within *The New Yorker*'s feature, audio recordings of the poets reading their letter-poems, as well as illustrations by Rachel Levit Ruiz, thereby integrating written word, audio and image.

The letter-poems are simultaneously poems *and* letters on a literary *continuum*. Their hybrid nature, part epistolary, part poetic endeavour leads to place where the public and private dimension collide, and questions of literariness and artifice arise (Guillén 1994). As will be demonstrated, the letter-poems did not originate with the intention of publication or for the completed lyrics to join the public sphere. However, in the end, they did, both as an independent poetic production with only digital distribution and as additions to the subsequent collections of both poets' works.

On a surface level, the letter-poems appear wide-ranging and vaguely hermetic. Diaz and Limón write to one another about their daily lives, made up of gardening and travels, insomnia, anxiety and health scares. On a closer reading, however, the lines of poetry unveil a far richer enmeshing, as well as a clear poetic (and political) intent. Exchanged during the course of nine months (January-September 2017), the eight works depict lives deeply rooted to the space they unfold in, where the world within and the world without of both poets are mutually resonant by virtue of the intimacy of their conversation. The poets' exchange engenders the actualization of a model of poetic collaboration whose premise and implementation are imbued with Riane Eisler's notion of "partnership model", that is to say, a social system based on equality, mutual care, respect, and reciprocity (Eisler 1988, 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019). Through their collaboration, Diaz and Limón not only challenge and subvert the perception of poetry as an almost individualistic, certainly solitary pursuit, but also demonstrate how, particularly when undertaken as a collective endeavour, it can serve as a means to critique what Eisler defines as "the dominator model" – a social system characterised by fear, violence, inequality, and authoritarianism (Eisler 1988, 2002; Eisler & Fry 2019). A model which, to a certain extent, can be regarded as the core configuration of today's American society.

At its core, *Envelopes of Air* is a creatively intimate and engaged partnership aimed at resisting erasure, while constructing a dialogic alternative to more usual methods of poetry-making (Kuusela 2015). According to Dominique Vargas, it can be regarded as an "embodied political, aesthetic response to settler colonial mapping" (2020).

That of a poetic correspondence was a format Limón and Diaz settled upon organically when deciding the shape and scope of a collaboration they had been meaning to embark on for some time. The first letter-poem was sent by Limón, who, when interviewed by Kevin Young, *The New Yorker*'s poetry editor, on the special edition of *The New Yorker*: *Poetry* podcast,

remarked that the main intention behind what later became *Envelopes of Air*, was that of genuine communication to a one-person audience (*The New Yorker: Poetry* podcast)[1]. Crucial to the collaboration was preserving its authenticity, thus Limón and Diaz did not establish any time restraint (no timeframe, nor deadline), ignored any idea of future collocation[2], and set a single rule: the letter-poems would exist in a place and time of their own, on the outside of any other form of communication (be it text, email, social media or in-person meeting). The poems were sent by email, in the form of attachments, with nothing in the body of the email save some words in the spirit of "a letter for you"[3]. This, and the degree of intimacy that developed within the exchange, allowed for the letter-poems to become what Diaz calls a "third space"[4] of friendship and vulnerability:

> They were that intimate time and space for us, of a poem, of a letter, of a room that was a new room for us to inhabit, individually, as we moved toward or away from ourselves and one another, and together, as we became a new space for each other to fill with words (Diaz 2018).

They became a stepping into one another's landscape, able to construct a third, merged one, born out of shared perspectives, voices blending without the need to over-explain or

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[1] From this point forward, all references to the podcast will be presented as TNYPP, accompanied by timestamps and by transcripts where necessary. The recording of the podcast is available at: https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/poetry/ada-limon-and-natalie-diaz-discuss-envelopes-of-air (consulted on 17/05/2023).

[2] At a certain point of the interview Limón states that they "had been asked by this anthology to perhaps work on a collaboration and so we kind of had it in mind that maybe it would become something but we also didn't want to give ourselves any restraints" (TNYPP, 00:23:42). The letter-poems were indeed later included in *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing* edited by Dean Rader and Simone Muench and published in June 2018.

[3] Diaz's reply to Young: "[What] we ended up doing is that when Ada would send me the letter-poem and I would reply back to her only with a letter-poem. We didn't write an email to give it any context or frame. We also texted but we never talked about [the letter-poems] so they had their own private space between the two of us". Limón adds: "When we would reach out to each other we would never actually speak about what we were talking about within the poems so that they only really conversed with one another. […] I think there was this idea of creating this kind of intimate protected space and keeping it somewhat sacred and not trying to muddy it with the everyday conversation […] but instead make sure that those the language of those poems lived in its own sort of hovering space (TNYPP, 00:02:50 - 00:03:53).

[4] The notion of a third, shared relational entity whose existence originates from collaboration, reciprocity and communal effort is by no means exclusive to Limón and Diaz's epistolary enterprise. For example, American poets Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton, during the course of a decades-long poetic collaboration – comprising of *Exquisite Politics* (1997), *Oyl* (2000), and *Little Novels* (2002) – have developed what they themselves define as a "a voice that is at the same time both of us and neither of us, the mysterious voice that sings between us" (Duhamel & Seaton quoted in MacDonald 2011). Despite the obvious differences in dynamics and methods, it is interesting to note how, for both duos of poets, the forging of some alternative, shared entity, be it a voice or a space, is inherently liberating as well as poetically and politically generative. If Diaz and Limón employ the "third space" as both a place for sharing with one another their thoughts and vulnerabilities as women-poets and a starting point for the fostering of an alternative reading of contemporary life as minorities in the USA, Duhamel and Seaton, with their "third voice", hope to promote in readers an understanding of their distinct yet interconnected position within the universe and a fresh perspective on femininity, and thus open-mindedness (MacDonald 2011).

perform for an audience, with the certainty of being understood as "a poet reader, a woman reader, a brown-woman reader" (Limón 2018b)[5].

The enmeshment of voices, language, imagery, and literary references which takes place in the tapestry-like epistolary has also the great merit of expanding the dialogue beyond the "third room", reaching into a far greater network. The connections made, the voices brought into the correspondence, are especially significant when looked at as collective re-writing of individualistic approaches[6]. One of such references is the mention, on Limón's part, of Robin W. Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*: *Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013): "the way *wiingaashk* (is that the word, / the name for sweetgrass that Kimmerer gives?)" (*From the Ash Inside the Bone*). In her work, Kimmerer, "narratively promotes a much-needed synthesis between indigenous and Western understandings of the environment and ecology" (Barnd 2015: 439) going beyond the conventional and accepted logics of "mainstream green politics or policies of preservation and conservation" (Barnd 2015: 439). What lies at the core of Kimmerer's narrative, and ultimately of her philosophy, is the recognition of the reciprocal interaction at the heart of all relationships with both the human and especially the non-human world. A notion that Native peoples – Kimmerer is herself an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation – have fostered and which the Western world has perhaps discarded or replaced (Kimmerer 2013). Being an exploration of sweetgrass, a sacred plant for many Indigenous peoples of North America (the braiding, drying and subsequent burning of which is used in ritual ceremonies as a way of cleansing, purifying or blessing), Kimmerer's book advocates for a renewed connection with the land, from a place of nurture and active, communal participation:

> A sheaf of sweetgrass, bound at the end and divided into thirds, is ready to braid. In braiding sweetgrass – so that it is smooth, glossy, and worthy of the gift – a certain amount of tension is needed. […] Of course you can do it yourself – […] but the sweetest way is to have someone else hold the end so that you pull gently against each other, all the while leaning in, head to head, chatting and laughing, watching each other's hands, one holding steady while the other shifts the slim bundles over

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[5] During the interview, Limón tells Kevin Young: "I think for me the wonderful thing about writing these poems was that those could just be self-evident and they could just be within the work and they could just be what they are which is part of life and it doesn't, didn't, necessarily have to be over explained for an audience or you know 'you may not understand this but'. And when I was writing to Natalie I never had to say that everything was understood, and that shifts the poems. There's a freedom in it. Like sort of a great opening" (TNYPP, 00:16:16 - 00:16:52).

[6] Identifying influences which might have played into Limón and Diaz's epistolary poetic practice, whether explicitly or not, is a complex procedure given the double nature of their endeavour, at once letter writing and poem crafting. When asked by Kevin Young, Limón states that she "thought about the feminist poets that started out [and] how a lot of those poems were talking to one another and sometimes they were chiding one another sometimes they were answering one another but it felt like there was a movement happening" (TNYPP, 00:25:30 - 00:26:40). Limón's answer appears to evoke the dual nature of her correspondence with Diaz, where the personal mixes with the political. While replying, she also explicitly mentions poets such as: "Rukeyser and Plath and Sexton, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde" (TNYPP, 00:26: 54) further solidifying the connection of the letter-poems with a sort of poetry able to join intimacy and advocacy.

one another, each in its turn. Linked by sweetgrass, there is reciprocity between you, linked by sweetgrass, the holder is as vital as the braider (Kimmerer 2013: ix).

Braiding sweetgrass is a collective act, the braid a *medium* of reciprocity and partnership. The "sweetest way" to braid is communally, helping one another, taking turns, feeling connected to a whole community that surrounds you. In this light, Limón and Diaz's correspondence can be regarded as an act of braiding, so much so that even the "ritualistic", cleansing quality of sweetgrass is conjured in *Envelopes of Air*: "I'll settle for these words you gave me: *sweet smoke*, / and I'll plant them into my chest so I can take this / circling spell and light it on fire" (*From the Ash Inside the Bone*). Here, Limón calls onto the page sweetgrass' healing properties to body and spirit.

The publication of *Envelopes of Air*, then, may be regarded as the act of burning the braid of sweetgrass, to propel the "*sweet smoke*" towards a wider audience, as a way of encouraging and honouring the chance at connection[7]. Central to the considerations and reflections found in *Envelopes of Air* is the exploration of the body as a channel as well as the place where that connection (with all its non-linear evolutions) takes place. Evoked in its corporeality and weight, its meaning and its relating to what surrounds it (whether through movement, place-making or touch), the body becomes the threshold between the world within and the world without, a site of resistance to wrongful mindsets and of promotion of more egalitarian, reciprocal ways of living.

2. Embodied Correspondence

Since its inception, Limón and Diaz's correspondence centres around the body as a place in which the intimate and the collective, the personal and the political, collide and enmesh. For both Limón and Diaz, the body is not a neutral terrain: theirs is a female body, a brown body and, for Diaz, a queer body. An entity that, to all intents and purposes, has been and still is marginalised, if not brutally erased, by dominator culture (Hooks 2009). Instead, what *Envelopes of Air* provides Limón and Diaz with is a space where the perspectives operating on the body can be dissected and rewritten in a positive way, no longer "the bruised or wounded or victimized body of brown women" (Diaz, TNYPP, 00:18:40). In addition, to both poets the body is a body-in-place, entangled in the land it inhabits: the U.S.A., whose past and present have been and continue to be shaped by colonial and dominator perspectives (Bacon & Norton 2019; Langman & Lundskow 2016; Steinmetz 2014). For instance, in 2017, at the time Diaz and Limón were corresponding, government executive orders increased the reach of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'s Enforcement and Removal Operations, which resulted in the arrests of a large portion of immigrants without authorization, regardless of whether they had a criminal record (Bialik 2018). It is

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[7] The act of burning sweetgrass (and other sacred herbs and plants) in ritual settings is called a "Smudging Ritual", its aim is "to better the lives of people and the places they live". Generally, smudging is regarded as "the bridge between mortal life and higher realms, bringing in good spirits and eliminating any negative, stagnant ones. This ceremony lifts away any sadness, impurities, and anxieties, and remediates poor health, leaving nothing but peace and harmony for both individuals and the environment after the cleansing", in https://www.powwows.com/native-american-smudging/ (consulted on 08/05/2023).

not surprising that such events engendered in both Diaz and Limón, the necessity not only to write to one another (without the need to perform, exposing their vulnerabilities) but also that their correspondence organically ended up focusing on the interconnections between body and land.

The centrality of the body is established within the poem's titles, which either explicitly contain the term (e.g. *Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in The Air*; *Isn't the Air Also A Body, Moving*) or refer to some embodied experience, be it the carrying of a weight/ burden, or movement (e.g. *Cargo*; *Eastbound, Soon*; *Sway*). The illustrations accompanying the epistolary appear to emphasise such significance, for they depict bodies, limbs or faces inspired by and in direct correlation to lines in the poems.

In *Cargo*, which ushers in the collaboration, Limón words revolve around the body, which appears at first as an entity submerged and perceivably corporeal: "the warm bath covering my ears – / one of which has three marks in the exact shape of a triangle", still at home in its "own atmosphere's asterism"; later as a subject whose movement has been restricted: "we're travelling with our passports now. / Reports of ICE raids and both our bloods / are requiring new medication"; and thus inhibited in its subjectivity by external authorities in a way that "changes the way the body occupies space" (Vargas 2020), specifically the way a certain type of body occupies space. The idea of movement (of a body moving) is exacerbated by Limón's use of train imagery, which swiftly starts to permeate the entire correspondence. Limón mentions the freight trains which "thunder by" her house, directing the readers'/listeners' attention to the poem's title, especially when she asks: "Do you ever wonder what the trains carry? / Aluminum ingots, plastic, brick, corn syrup, limestone, fury, alcohol, joy". It is the insertion of the term "joy" that furthers the idea of some sort of connection being traced between the body and the train, both *carrying* weight, whether in actuality or figuratively (as in the "gray and pitchfork" atmosphere that envelopes Limón's body and surroundings). Diaz's reply in *Eastbound, Soon* adopts a similar imagery, while expanding on the idea of limited movement: on one hand a body unwillingly restricted, her perspective, as an Indigenous woman, "always implicated by a feeling of loss that is similar to Limón's but distinct from it as the object of settler-colonial identity formation in occupied lands" (Vargas 2020):

> I have my passport with me these days, too, like you and Manuel.
> Not because of ICE raids, but because I know
> what it's like to want to leave my country. *My country* –
> to say it is half begging, half joke.

On the other hand, a body which finds in desire, in intimacy, its own dimension, its own willing immobility: "a wave of moonlight riding the dusked rails of her arms. / I was tied there – to the moon, those tracks". The use of the train *motif*, becomes a medium to describe Limón and Diaz efforts to reconcile their bodies and the space they inhabit (and are in turn inhabited by). *Eastbound, Soon* presents the body as a willingly or unwillingly restricted subject, yet also as an object, as *cargo*, by casting the shadow of Houdini's wife, who "died on our line, too, / on an eastbound train", over Diaz's own body: "I'm eastbound

myself, soon"; the ominous correlation is quickly turned on its head, since Diaz's voyage is presented as a celebration of embodied life: "the grime I might make of my body in that splendid city". The ambivalent superimposition of bodies and encounters is also present in Limón's reply, in *Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in the Air,* where, at first, she pictures "a body free of its anchors /…/ a locomotion propelling us", only to later scale back the scope of her flight: "but here I am: the slow caboose of clumsy effort". The shift in focus between "us" and "I", and in spatial dimension (locomotion propelling (far away)/ *here* I am) speaks of a sense of identity ever-shifting between the wish to be "untethered and tethered all at once", a body unmoored, and the feeling of being "lived in, like a room". It is important to note, however, that the relational, almost communal nature of Limón's sense of identity never wavers, despite the sensation of splintering it engenders: "I am always in too many worlds". Limón's fluctuation "disrupts the subject/object dyad, insisting on a flexibility of selfhood in communion with others" (Vargas 2020): "another me speeding through the air, another me waving / from a train window watching you / waving from a train window watching me".

Both Limón and Diaz sometimes appear to be in two minds when imagining alternative ways of inhabiting their bodies and the land. Whether fuelled by a sense of loss or anxiety, the uncertainty leaves them to grapple with the way their body occupies a space that has been made inhospitable, if not downright hostile, by history and politics, a space which, systematically "objectifies their presence" (Vargas 2020). Limón asks Diaz (and herself) "Creely says, *The plan is the body*. What if he's wrong?" (*Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in the Air*); Diaz gets stuck contemplating the role of air in the exchange, and how it too may be considered a body, a vital part of every connection.

What both Limón and Diaz enact within *Envelopes* is the capsizing of the condition of objecthood thrust upon minority and Indigenous bodies: the "*Dirty Indian*" that has internalised the insult, felt its weight, and has worked all her life "to feel clean", since "to be clean is to be good, in America", now refuses to be pathologized, and moves from being "a doctor with a diagnosis. / except I was the condition" to "America is the condition, of the blood and the rivers, / of what we can spill and who we can spill it from" (Vargas 2020). Such a declaration, tellingly, takes place in *That Which Cannot Be Stilled*, the poem with which Diaz closes the correspondence, whose eponymous words are effectively the last on the page – the last to be *heard* in the recordings.

The body becomes a site of resistance, a stepping stone from which to rewrite the land and the world from a perspective diametrically opposed to the dominant mindset – the colonizer's *credo* –, one able to offer a new philosophy. As noted by Vargas, when in *Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?* Diaz writes "I am touched – *I am*", she is deconstructing and effectively turning one of the most fundamental tenets of Western identity on its head (2020). Cartesian mind-body dualism, which regards the body as inherently separate from and inferior to the mind, is shattered. The dimension of touch, with its identity-generating powers, is further defined by Diaz as an embodied and bodily experience, integrally linked to its relational quality: "This is my *knee*, since she touches me there. / This is my *throat*, as defined by her reaching" (*Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?*). The same embodiment-inducing relational quality is extended to the relationship between body and air, no longer

merely an empty vacuum between one body and the others, but as the poem's title suggests, "also a body" with its relational capabilities:

> Sometimes I don't know how to make it
> to the other side of the bridge of atoms
> of a second. Except for the air
>
> breathing me, inside, then out. Suddenly,
> I am still here.

The air (the body-of-air) not only facilitates a construction of identity that is relational, communal: "How is it that we know what we are? / If not by the air / between any hand and its want – touch", but also offers an embodied space of continuous, communal connection:

> What if it's true about the air and our hands?
> That they're only *an extension*
> of an outside reaching in?
> I'm pointing to me and to you to look
> out at this world.

It is to this embodied, channelled connection that the title of the correspondence refers. Lifted from Diaz's *Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?*, the phrase evokes the creative potentiality of exchange and communal encounter, the embodied experience of touching and holding on, namely of expansion and connection, and, perhaps more prosaically, it also hints at the epistolary mode of communication by using the word "envelope"(while still preserving the bodied and embodied nature of the exchange: the hand as an envelope): "From the right distance, I can hold anything / in my hand – /…/ each is devoured in its own envelope of air / What we hold grows weight. / Becomes enough or burden".

That Which Cannot Be Stilled is also the place in which Diaz brings the correlation between body and land onto the page: "Except my desert is made of sand, my skin / is the colour of sand", with the *enjambement* drawing the eye to both "skin" and "colour", an association that carries a bloody burden. For an Indigenous body, for example, the colour red carries the hallmark of colonialism, an epithet fastened to the skin and used both to single out (a skin whose colour differs from white) and to erase (a skin the colour of land – its people, their bodies, indistinguishable from the dirt, the "Dirty Indian(s)")[8]. Therefore, it is significant that Diaz's use of red connects land, body and rage on a single spectrum. In *Isn't the Air also a Body, Moving?* she writes:

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[8] Colour and "colour-politics" are a crucial aspect of Diaz's poetics, for example, in *The First Water is the Body*, she writes: "The Spanish called us, *Mojave. Colorado*, the name they gave our river because it was silt-red-thick. Natives have been called *red* forever. I have never met a red Native, not even on my reservation, not even at the National Museum of the American Indian, not even at the largest powwow in Parker, Arizona. I live in the desert along a dammed blue river. The only red people I've seen are white tourists sunburned after staying out on the water too long" (Diaz 2020: 49).

> Everything is iron oxide or red this morning,
> here in Sedona. The rocks, my love's mouth,
> even the chapel and its candles. Red.
> I have been angry this week. A friend said,
> *Trust your anger. It is a demand for love.*
> Or it is red. Red is a thing
>
> I can trust – a monster and her wings,
> cattle grazing the sandstone hills like flames.

In her reply, Limón reinforces the association red-anger/red-land: "Red / like our rage. The red of your desert. Your heart, too" (*Sway*), yet she introduces a softer perspective. The use of "our" reconfigures the paradigm of rage: it becomes a shared rage, stronger perhaps, but easier to bear and to wield in proactive ways, to shift the narrative away from any dominator perspective. A few lines later, Limón introduces a counterpart to red by means of the colour green, in turn creating an alternative body/land paradigm: "Maybe this letter is to say, if it is red where you are, / know there is also green, the serrated leaves of dandelion, lemon balm, / purple sage, peppermint, a small plum tree by the shed"[9].

The use of green is extended further by Diaz in *From the Desire Field* in which the colour is evoked by the use of natural imagery ("field", "garden", flower", "meadow") as well as juxtaposed to desire, an association Diaz reinforces by quoting Federico García Lorca's *Romance sonámbulo* (1928) and its refrain "Verde que te quiero verde". The meandering, almost frenzied, rhythm, (reminiscent of Lorca's own) creates a sort of dream-like, "unfocused" parenthesis, a "thrashed field" where body and land collide in the quagmire of desire: "I am a field of it". Imbued with Lorca's influence, the "desire field", that blooms in the intimacy of the night, is green and anxiety-inducing, and Diaz pleads with Limón to tell her of the sweetgrass she planted, so that by hearing of the "sweet smoke" she can leave the field of desire. The image of a field is used by Limón, in her reply, albeit with a different intention:

> /…/I want to write
>
> of the body as desirous, reedy, fine on the tongue,
> on the thigh, but my blood's got the spins again, twice
>
> /…/ My body
>
> can't be trusted. MRI says my brain's hunky-dory
> so it's just these bouts sometimes, the ground rises

---

9 Limón's following words, "I don't know how to make medicine, or cure what's scarring / this planet" denote a wish to expand the scope of her call for steadiness and greenness to mankind's relationship with the non-human, upon which the dominator's perspective has wreaked havoc, and that would benefit from a more partnership-oriented approach: "How it's easier if we become more like a body of air, branches, and make room /…/ how afterwards our leaves shake and strand straighter".

straight up, or I'm trying to walk on water,
except it's not water it's land and it's moving when

it should be something to count on. A field of something
green and steady.

The contrast in colouring suggested by "reedy" and "blood", introduces a green/red contraposition that in turn speaks of the connection between body and land. By suggesting that when the body fails, land "should be something to count on", but instead "it's moving", Limón seems to be hinting at the fact that the land should be "a field of something / green and steady", instead, for minorities, and especially for Indigenous bodies, it cannot be counted upon, and the only colour available is the red of anger and of the forced-upon, colonial perspective. Limón's body, preyed upon by vertigo, and Diaz's own, lost in anger or in desire, are both ailing places, which have been stripped of their subject status; however, they are able to (re)articulate themselves and push back through poetry created in communion, from a place of vulnerable intimacy.

> Producing a critical poetics, an embodied communal lyric can transform aesthetics and engender a *poiesis* of space and community. As a possible site of resistance, the intimacy of this space may cultivate a subject that is anchored through touch and embrace, but also exceeds that encounter. In this turn toward radical possibility, a communal lyric can wield political power. Exploiting ruptures and deficiencies in dominant discursive modes, the communal lyric can inhabit and reorient settler colonial discourse that maps the world (Vargas 2020).

Following from Vargas, Limón's wish for a "field of something / green and steady" is an implicit acknowledgement of the need for an alternative measure of bodies and spaces, an "alternative mapping" traced onto the same land, but with a renewed, collective outlook. A mapping that could look like "the third space", in which the power of shared experience, collaboration and encounter, through which the body and the land are able to retrieve their due, can find expression and be projected outside, be the "extension of an outside reaching in" (*Isn't the Air Also a Body, Moving?*).

3. Opening the "Third Space"

The importance of such an unfettered and resonant space in which Diaz and Limón both express themselves and communicate organically is amplified when one considers that the work done with *Envelopes of Air* explicitly and implicitly resonates with their subsequent poetic endeavours. The inclusion of the letter-poems in Limón's *The Carrying* (2018) and in Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) speaks volumes about the genuine quality of the poets' exchange, not merely a performative exercise in aesthetic/political collaboration, but a concrete attempt at poetically re-wiring the circuit boards of Euromerican thought about bodies and land.

Limón's *The Carrying* revolves around the eponymous act, explored in its physical and metaphorical connotations: what we carry and what carries us, be it burden or buoy,

throughout our own existence. However, even though "many of the larger personal and political cogitations in this collection root themselves in desiring a child" (Mrjoian 2018), Limón reaches an all-embracing idea of motherhood, a being-in-the-world able to nurture both the human and the non-human (e.g. *Maybe I'll Be Another Kind of Mother* in Limón 2018a: 69). A sentiment whose seeds can be observed in *Envelopes of Air*: "I can't stop / putting plants in the ground. There's a hunger in me, / a need to watch something grow" (*Sway*). Her exploration is buttressed by the inclusion of all four of the letter-poems from *Envelopes of Air*, all nestled in the third and final part of the collection, with the exception of *Cargo*, inserted as the third-from-last poem of section "2". The incorporation into the collection's core is not accompanied by any direct reference to the four poems' genesis, save for an explanation in the "Notes" section at the end of the book[10].

Similarly, in *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Diaz includes three out of the four poems making up her part of the epistolary exchange. They are evenly distributed throughout the collection – one for each of three out of four macro-sections. Just like in *The Carrying*, there's no indication of the poems' initial receiver, save for a number of notes at the end of the volume detailing their origin and references. *Postcolonial Love Poem* interweaves different strands and thematic nuclei (erotic desire, family relations, colonial oppression), through which "the personal and the political not only ignore official borders, they are actively engaged in the business of tearing down the wall between the two entities and using the scraps for a new mosaic" (Miranda 2021: 95).

Despite the lack of direct acknowledgement on the page of the poems' birth as acts of poetic letter writing, there is a distinct feel to the poems that separates them from the others (for example, the use of the pronoun "you", the direct questions), the same impression that simultaneously rises no doubt at their place within each respective collection. Actually, the poems' unique genesis engenders an expansion in terms of reach, by creating a *fil-rouge* which ties *The Carrying* and *Postcolonial Love Poems* to both *Envelopes of Air* and to one another[11]. Even when separated into their own respective realms and themes (or collections/works), Diaz and Limón remain attuned, in conversation.

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[10] When asked about it, Limón replied that she wanted for the poems to live on their own as universal entities, not only as intimate conversations between two people. Given the fact that the letter-poems were written in the same time period as the poems in *The Carrying*, Limón deemed they fit in the world of the book, so much so that omitting them would, in a way, leave some of the personal narratives *The Carrying* touches upon unfinished (Sakasegawa, Mike (Host). 2018 (August, 29). Ada Limón (No. 73) [Audio podcast episode] in *Keep the Channel Open*. Transcript available at https://www.keepthechannelopen.com/transcripts/2018/8/29/transcript-episode-73-ada-limon (consulted on 12/05/2023).

[11] Peculiarly (or perhaps not), the collections themselves seem to validate such partnership, since they both open with epigraphs by Joy Harjo (the 23rd US Poet Laureate and a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation), whose words evoke and encompass the themes explored throughout each collection. *The Carrying*'s epigraph "She had some horses she loved. / She had some horses she hated. / These were the same horses" echoes the feelings of ambivalence one can surmise from reading the poems within, as Limón goes back and forth on her desire for motherhood (Lewis 2019). In *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Diaz opens the first section (and thus the collection as a whole) with "I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country" from Harjo's *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* (2015). Again, the epigraph sets the tone (and the scene) for the whole work "as an act against colonialism" (Neimark 2020) steeped in "bittersweet triumph" (McGeea 2020).

Moreover, as mentioned before, being the inaugural poetry endeavour in a new series of recurring digital/online-only features for *The New Yorker*, *Envelopes of Air* is accompanied by audio recordings (as well as a special edition of the monthly podcast) and illustrations – clearly with the intention of expanding upon the email exchange that brought the eight letter-poems into being. The use of email as the medium of correspondence, initially a logistical necessity, as Diaz and Limón reside in different States, allowed for the exchange to take place through a contemporary and commonly used *medium* combining the textual (the letter-poems as *attachments*, text-objects to be sent and received[12]), and the telematic (the exchange takes place somewhat outside of physical reality – within a space that can be kept separate and independent from any sort of influence save from what the correspondents decide to feed into it). As previously noted, Limón and Diaz were adamant that this alternative space remained unmediated and private during the course of their correspondence.

Yet, the publication of the letter-poems as *Envelopes of Air*, unmistakably opened up the digital (and metaphorical) space of the email correspondence onto a larger, albeit still digital, dimension. Such an opening, a *de facto* expansion from a dialogical one-on-one to a dialogical multiplicity, brought with it another sort of enlargement, both in terms of readership and in terms of modality, as suggested by the decision of interspersing the flow of Diaz and Limón's poetic (textual) back and forth, with visual and audio elements – which almost appear as simultaneous strains of correspondence, both lending power to the textual element, as well as translating it into different codes, in an approach reminiscent of mail-art (albeit perhaps as a digital, deconstructed and collaborative iteration of it). As a matter of fact, the illustrations were not part of Diaz and Limón email correspondence as it took place in 2017, however, their inclusion into *Envelopes of Air* through publication can be regarded as a secondary instance of artistic partnership, both in terms of modality, partnering the textual with the visual (and the aural), and as another strand in the braiding process, with the illustrator, Levit Ruiz, as a third correspondent, replying to the text via artwork.

Similarly, the inclusion of voice recordings of Diaz and Limón reading the words they wrote to one another, adds a layer of meaning, transporting the idea of partnership on a formal/modal level, effectively bridging the gap between "the textual and aural lives of poetry" (Rubeck 2018). Almost voicemail-like, the recordings expand the breadth of the written word, as well as the communication between Diaz and Limón, that are able to "blast past the time-space rift between themselves" (Rubeck 2018).

As a result, *Envelopes of Air* can be regarded as a layered and syncretic exploration of both the personal and the collective, engendered by the need to make sense of both the within and the without of present-day contradictions and paradoxes. Both as a concerted, shared effort and in its singular letter-poem components, Limón and Diaz's correspondence blurs the line between the intimate and the political in relational terms, calling into question the very idea that any sort of individualistic, imperialistic and dominator-coded perspective can

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[12] The choice of titling the feature *Envelopes of Air* acquires deeper meaning, since, as noted before, during the course of their correspondence, Limón and Diaz, explore the idea of "bodied-air" and its physical qualities in an exchange and in relation to the body. The "envelopes of air" are not empty as a one would surmise at first read – just as the emails the poets exchange carry the attached file, the text-object of the letter-poem.

actually expect to lead to anything other than mutually assured destruction. The weight of insults, microaggressions and injustices (the *cargo* of colonialism) finds a body emboldened and prepared by its encounter with other bodies, who discover, in communality and in proactive collaboration, a space of resistance, a "third space" from which to venture into deeper connections through dialogues of resistance: "Hermana, we know how to speak to our conquerors, don't we?" (Diaz, *That Which Cannot Be Stilled*).

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Costanza Mondo

Inclusive Artistic and Literary Narratives in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Abstract I: Questo articolo propone nuovi aspetti dell'interpretazione del personaggio di Richard in *Metà di un sole giallo* di Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Analizzando le narrazioni letterarie di Richard – rappresentate dalle idee per il suo libro e non solo – e la sua narrazione artistica di un antico manufatto Igbo, cercherò di sostenere che vengono messi in discussione presupposti sia coloniali che culturali. In un secondo momento, verrà anche esaminata e commentata l'inclusività delle sue narrazioni plurali, contenenti un complesso intreccio di diverse forme artistiche.

Abstract II: This paper aims to break new ground in the interpretation of the character of Richard in *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. By analysing Richard's literary narratives – in the forms of the ideas for his book, among others – and his artistic narrative of the roped pot, I will demonstrate that he challenges both colonial and cultural assumptions. By showing the intricate connection of different artistic forms in his multi-layered narratives, the inclusivity they reflect will be also examined and discussed.

Keywords: inclusivity, narrative, art, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Introduction
In 2008, while discussing *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Mabura pointed out that the novels "have so far generated hardly any significant criticism" (2008: 206). As for *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it can be safely stated that since then many thought-provoking contributions have been written. Nonetheless, Adichie's novel is so multi-layered that it keeps offering intriguing opportunities for academic enquiry. In this paper, I will try to break new ground in the interpretation of the character of Richard, Kainene's lover. However, I will not dwell on his identity, albeit complex and fascinating, since extensive and exhaustive analyses have already been provided by Strehle (2011: 664-665) and Cooper (2008: 146-147). Rather, I will try to tease out the deconstructive aspects of Richard's narratives in the novel by examining the literary and artistic spheres they hinge upon.

    In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard and Ugwu are by no means the only characters that engage in forms of narrative. Okeoma is most noticeable because his poems are interwoven in the story and add new layers of meaning: Adichie admitted that the poet was inspired by

Christopher Okigbo (Adichie 2008: 51). In spite of the strong presence of narratives in the novel, our attention is drawn to the precariousness and uncertainty of narrative gestures, which are eventually destroyed by the trauma and violence of the Biafran war. By the end of the novel, Okeoma's poems have disappeared after his death, Ugwu's copy of Frederick Douglass's memoir has been partly torn by a young soldier and Richard's manuscript has been buried in the garden by his servant, who is then unable to find it again. Even Odenigbo's research papers – which cannot be considered a fully fledged narrative, but certainly are an example of written testimony and a way of leaving a trace – are retrieved from his house completely charred because some Nigerian soldiers set them on fire.

In the novel, the concept of authorship is as fragile as that of narrative. Much critical attention has been dedicated to the unidentified author of *The World Was Silent When We Died*, whose chapters are reported in the novel in an interesting metanarrative twist. Whilst some critics reckon that the author is Ugwu (Strehle 2011: 665; Lecznar 2016: 125; Coffey 2014: 76; Cooper 2008: 143), Ganapathy maintains that both Richard and Ugwu are the likely authors, but adds that readers inferentially "identify Richard as the *most likely author*" [italics in the original] (2016: 95, 96), which is the viewpoint I am inclined to believe. The noticeable references to the third person pronoun 'he' in the chapters are particularly interesting; given that it is highly unlikely that Ugwu would address himself in the third person, it can be reasonably surmised that someone else is writing about him. Furthermore, Richard may be the author of the chapters in a postmodern way that further complicates the idea of narrative and authorship. As a matter of fact, it might be perfectly possible that Ugwu has written a book entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*, but that the chapters are not taken from it. Indeed, they look rather schematic and take on the tone of a summary, as if someone were concisely jotting down the main points touched upon by Ugwu in each chapter. At the end of the novel, readers are informed that Richard decides to remain in Nigeria and join the Institute for African Studies. It is in the light of the research he is doing, in my opinion, that the riddle of the chapters should be framed and thus solved.

Even leaving narrative and authorship aside, contrasting opinions have arisen around the character of Richard, who has been defined as "both quasi Igbo and also a typical white racist" (Cooper 2008: 146) as well as "one of the achievements of this work" (Nnolim 2009: 150). Strehle strikingly observed that the narrative "manages to know without knowing" as Richard witnesses events without understanding from a position of diasporic uncertainty (2011: 664), which is an interesting claim I aim to assess. Indeed, in this paper I will adopt a two-pronged mode of analysis in order to show how his literary and artistic narratives deconstruct colonial and cultural assumptions, thus reaching a wider understanding and hinting at inclusivity. The first section will examine his literary narratives – intended not as *The World Was Silent When We Died*, but as the failed projects he had dallied with before *The Basket of Hands* and *In the Time of Roped Pots*. The second section will revolve around his artistic narrative of the roped pot.

Literary Deconstructive Narratives of Colonial and Cultural Assumptions
Richard's three discarded ideas for his book are intriguing narrative cues. While reflecting on his inability to find a fit subject for his work, he confesses that "he had written a sketch about

an archaeologist and then discarded it, written a love story between an Englishman and an African woman and discarded it, and had started writing about life in a small Nigerian town" (Adichie 2017: 75). This string of apparently meaningless narratives will be analysed so as to demonstrate how they problematise tenets of colonial logic that are then debunked by reality.

As for the first idea, in another passage in the novel Richard elaborates on it and adds some details: "Perhaps a speculative novel where the main character is an archaeologist digging for bronzes who is then transported to an idyllic past?" (Adichie 2017: 72). Representing a variation on the "colonial fair land/black coast dichotomy" (Deckard 2010: 108) and paradisiacal view of Africa, the first idea presents a mythologised and idealised conception of Nigeria, seen in idyllic scenarios and endowed with a bucolic past. Even the language used by Richard's brother in a letter concerning his stay in Nigeria is rife with colonial implications. Indeed, he enthusiastically writes: "*Is 'going native' still used? I always knew you would!*" [italics in the original] (Adichie 2017: 137). Interestingly, the same expression can be found in *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, where the expression 'going native' is imbued with particularly negative connotations that lead an English pilot to thus warn the second mate of the Ibis: "Mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn't sound too good: don't want the world to think you've gone native" (Ghosh 2009: 51). In line with the idyllic perception of Nigeria, Richard then decides to write about ordinary life in a Nigerian village – thus going back to the third idea. Needless to say, Richard's romanticised image of Nigeria is shattered by the harsh reality of the Biafran war, which undermines his idealising fantasies.

By extension, the Nigerian land comes to be embodied by Kainene. In her allegorical reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Coffey contends that Kainene is an allegory for Biafra and Olanna a representative of Northern Nigeria (2014: 71). However, Richard's inability to clearly distinguish his lover from the much-admired roped pot is also noteworthy, thus pointing to Richard's conflation of Kainene and the idealised Igbo culture. He himself relates to Count Von Rosen that he fell for her after falling in love with the Igbo-Ukwu art. After his lover's mysterious disappearance, Richard's inability to extricate the woman from the artefact aggravates to the extent that often, when asking people if they have seen her, "in his rush, he pulled out the picture of the roped pot instead" (Adichie 2017: 407). To signal his double failure, by the end of the novel Richard has found neither the roped pot nor the woman he loves.

It is precisely his relationship with Kainene that informs the second narrative idea – 'a love story between an Englishman and an African woman' – and contributes to the collapse of another colonial assumption. The asymmetrical relationship between a white man and a local woman is often a colonial trope in literature. Various literary examples come to mind, ranging from Kurtz and the "wild-eyed and magnificent" Congolese queen (Conrad 2007: 76) to characters in more recent works such as *Desertion* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. In Gurnah's novel, the Englishman Martin Pearce leaves an indelible mark of shame on the life and offspring of Rehana, a local woman: "Martin and Rehana lived openly together, for a while, until he left to return home" (Gurnah 2005b: 119). In an interview, Gurnah specifically talked about the trope of colonial romance by underlining that when the narrator of Martin and Rehana's love story realises that the only way of writing it is as a

"popular imperial romance about a European man and a native woman" he refrains from narrating any further (Gurnah 2005a: 39-40).

Outside the pages of literature, Frantz Fanon exhaustively shed light on asymmetrical relationships between white men and black women, where the latter long for white lovers, who will never marry them (Fanon 2021: 31). This situation is perfectly illustrated by Igoni Barrett in *Blackass*. "[M]issing the white man to give her entry into the mixed-race babies club" (Barrett 2015: 253) of her friends who all married Europeans, Syreeta, a young Lagosian woman, consents to host a white man in her house in order to marry him and secure a safe future for herself. In the end, Syreeta is talked by her lover into aborting their child in exchange for marriage, but is nonetheless abandoned by the man. One of the characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* abruptly evokes the specter of asymmetrical colonial-like relationships. However, as he explains, these bonds usually shackle just poor women, not those from wealthy families like Kainene's:

> 'You know, what I am saying is that our women who follow white men are a certain type, a poor family and the kind of bodies that white men like […]. The white men will poke and poke and poke the women in the dark but they will never marry them. How can! They will never even take them out to a good place in public. But the women will continue to disgrace themselves and struggle for the men so they will get chicken-feed money and nonsense tea in a fancy tin' (Adichie 2017: 80-81).

Nevertheless, Richard and Kainene's relationship dramatically upends these assumptions, adding a curious reversal. Their love story is indeed riven with asymmetry, but it bends towards Kainene's side, rather than Richard's – he is "dominated by Kainene" (Nnolim 2009: 146). He soon realises that his lover's life is extremely busy and that it would go on unperturbed if he suddenly walked away. Rather than self-confident, Richard is constantly anxious and keeps fretting about potential rivals in love such as Madu or Inatimi. When Kainene discovers that he has cheated on her with her sister Olanna, he even feels 'transparent,' thus literally fading in front of her strong personality and anger.

Leaving behind Richard's ideas and taking a step further, it is paramount to catch the implications of a peculiar, possibly intertextual episode in his narrative of Nigeria, which defies a double assumption, both colonial and cultural. Achebe's influence over Adichie is evident; reading *Things Fall Apart* was a "glorious shock of discovery" (Adichie 2008: 42). Although it was highlighted that Adichie often alludes to Achebe in her non-fiction (Tunca 2018: 114), connections to Achebe's masterpiece are to be found in her short story 'The Headstrong Historian' (VanZanten 2015: 90), which is not the only text that presents Achebean intertextual references. In Wenske's opinion, *Half of a Yellow Sun* measures how Achebe's novels are still relevant in current times (2016: 73), whereas Lecznar pointed out that Richard is redolent of the district commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* when he admits that writing the history of Biafra is not within his purview (2016: 126). While I think that this connection is interesting, I argue that there are many more intertextual allusions to Achebe in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. For instance, in *No Longer at Ease*, Obi's thought that the members of Umuofia Progressive Union did not realise "that, having laboured in sweat and tears to

enrol their kinsman among the shining élite, they had to keep him there" (Achebe 2010b: 78) is extended and completed by Odenigbo's considerations: "'The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is […] that the majority have not been given the tools to *negotiate* this new world'" [italics in the original] (Adichie 2017: 101). Furthermore, Richard's participation in the *ori-okpa* festival might evoke *Things Fall Apart* and the confrontation between the priest Mr Smith and the masked spirits who reduce his church to "a pile of earth and ashes" (Achebe 2010a: 181).

However, I argue that the most interesting reference to Achebe is linked to Richard and concerns *Arrow of God*. Given the frequency with which comparisons between Achebe and Adichie are made, Tunca suggests close readings of their texts as a solid basis to make the point for specific similarities (2018: 116), which is what I intend to do. When visiting the village where ancient artefacts have been retrieved, Richard falls into conversation with a man and mentions the fact that a burial chamber was unearthed too.

> 'Do you think it was used by the king?' Pa Anozie gave Richard a long, pained look and mumbled something for a while, looking grieved. Emeka laughed before he translated. 'Papa said he thought you were among the white people who know something. He said the people of Igboland do not know what a king is. We have priests and elders. […] It is because the white man gave us warrant chiefs that foolish men are calling themselves kings today' (Adichie 2017: 71).

In this excerpt, there may be a double deconstructive process at work. On the one hand, Richard seems a newborn Captain Winterbottom, the district officer who similarly misunderstood Igbo culture and thought that the priest Ezeulu was a king fit to be appointed Paramount Chief for Umuaro: "The prefix *eze* in Ibo means king. So the man is a kind of priest-king" [italics in the original] (Achebe 2010c: 108). Much later, an Igbo man again rejects those colonial assumptions that ignored local customs and superimposed European conceptions of power over the locals'.

On the other hand, this passage could be more fine-grained in its relevance than it might appear at first sight. Indeed, after being reprimanded for his ignorance of Igbo customs, Richard protests that "[h]e did know that the Igbo were said to have been a republican tribe for thousands of years, but one of the articles about the Igbo-Ukwu findings had suggested that perhaps they once had kings and later deposed them" (Adichie 2017: 71-72). After demolishing a colonial assumption, his narrative defies the conception of local culture as fixed and monolithic – which could be also an inclusive way of deconstructing the idea of the cultural incompatibility between Africa and the West, which Pucherová says that Adichie is trying to break down in her writing (2022: 115). While Pa Anozie promptly identifies kings as alien to Igbos, it might not always have been the case. Culture is always in flux and, here and elsewhere, Adichie underlines that "there is not a 'single story' of the Igbo past" (Ejikeme 2017: 309), which goes for any culture. Moving to Mexico, Newns highlights that, in a work by Gloria Andalzúa, an irrigation system – whose loss to industrialised irrigation is criticised – was the product of Spanish colonisation (2022: 10, 12). Indeed, flexibility not only characterises culture, but also other concepts, such as that of cultural discovery. At the

very beginning, Odenigbo explains to Ugwu that the River Niger was not discovered by Mungo Park but by the Igbo people, who fished there long before his arrival. The colonial context is therefore picked up and its pristine conception of the colonised land dismantled, for "[a]ny 'newness' […] is simply the perception of the Imperialist mind" (Bullock 2000: 100). Therefore, while undermining colonial assumptions about power, Richard's narrative unmasks the tendency to arbitrarily select a portion of history and forge it into a static idea of culture.

The Artistic Narrative of the Roped Pot and the Calabash

> Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.
> […]
> Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
> Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
> And beatification, outstaring
> What had begun to feel like reverence
> (Heaney 2001: 32).

The roped pot is certainly a key element in Richard's narrative of Nigeria. As with the literary, this artistic narrative also transcends its immediate referent so as to reveal a double perspective that is inclusive precisely because of the different viewpoints it presents. Indeed, the artistic narrative may open up a circular route that moves from the beauty of the ancient artefact – the pot – to its sudden transformation into a horrifying testimony of the destruction of the Biafran war – a calabash containing the head of a dead child inside it. The image of the calabash – which is an emptied gourd – strikingly resonates with the poem 'Strange Fruit' by Seamus Heaney and its comparison of a girl's head with a gourd, as quoted in the epigraph. Yet, this Nigerian example of "the marvellous as well as […] the murderous" (Heaney 1995) might be also entwined with other intriguing literary references, which will be explored.

Interestingly embedded in a scene in which Richard is getting to know Kainene, the first description of the roped pot focuses on the charm exerted by the piece of handiwork over him, who saw it for the first time in a magazine: "The roped pot stood out immediately; he ran a finger over the picture and ached to touch the delicately cast metal itself. He wanted to try explaining how deeply stirred he had been by the pot but decided not to" (Adichie 2017: 62). Associated again with Kainene, the pot takes on idyllic traits for Richard and seems to undergo a process of abstraction and transformation into a representative emblem of an idyllic Nigeria. However, the roped pot could be strikingly associated with another, gorier kind of vessel, a calabash.

After the massacre of the Igbo, Olanna miraculously manages to leave Kano thanks to the help of her Hausa ex-fiancée. When she is on a train back home packed with other refugees, her attention is caught by a woman who keeps caressing a calabash and suddenly invites her and the other passengers to peer in it. Under the lid, there is the head of the woman's dead child, who was probably murdered in the massacre. Two perspectives are

provided on this scene, one in *The World Was Silent When We Died* and the other recounted by Olanna herself. In the first version, the artistic, refined carvings on the calabash are emphasised, thus transforming the vessel into an equivalent of the roped pot:

> Olanna tells him this story and he notes the details. […] She describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes the child's head inside: scruffy plaits falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O (Adichie 2017: 82).

Decorated exactly like the pot, the calabash possesses a "material sensuality" (Cooper 2008: 140) that echoes the details of the pot that attract Richard's gaze and prompt him to run his finger over its picture. Antithetical to the pot but linked to it in its irreducible aesthetic and materiality, the calabash exemplifies the horror of the war; it is as if the elegant roped pot had suddenly morphed into an emblem of death.

The connection between the roped pot and the calabash is further solidified by a potential intertextual reference to the fifth story in the fourth day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, namely that of Lisabetta and the pot of basil – with due emphasis on the word 'pot.' Aside from being one of the most famous stories in Boccaccio's masterpiece, the story inspired a painting by the pre-Raphaelite John William Waterhouse and a poem by Keats. Therefore, Richard's narrative may involve a network of different forms of art, namely prose, painting and poetry. Seemingly a "specific unmarked reference" in Mason's terminology (2019: 82) – since it alludes to a specific narrative which is not marked by title (2019: 82) – the description of the calabash may not be the sole intertextual allusion to Boccaccio's *Decameron*. After being approached by a woman who wanted to sleep with a white man out of curiosity, Richard remarks that it is as if people wanted to "grab all they could before the war robbed them of choices" (Adichie 2017: 172). In Boccaccio's *Decameron* a similar behaviour is portrayed, since some people react to the threat of the plague by indulging in pleasures and drinking heavily: "[P]eople behaved as though their days were numbered, and treated their belongings and their own persons with equal abandon" (Boccaccio 2003: 7). If truth be told, though, this might not be a wholly intertextual matter, since other literary sources describe similar tendencies. Indeed, in *Lessons* by Ian McEwan, the main character is induced to sleep with his piano teacher because he fears that a nuclear bomb might be soon released due to the Cuban Missile Crisis. When the crisis ends, he almost feels cheated: "The world would go on, he would remain unvaporised. He needn't have done a thing" (McEwan 2022: 143). Be it Boccaccio's 14th-century Florence, Adichie's 1960s Nigeria or McEwan's 1960s England, human reactions to crises thus prove to repeat in patterns.

Back to intertextuality, Boccaccio's story is concerned with a woman whose lover Lorenzo is murdered by her outraged brothers and buried in a forest. Once she has found the tomb of her beloved, Lisabetta cuts off his head, then "she wrapped the head in a piece of rich cloth, and laid it in a large and elegant pot […]. She next covered it with soil, in which she planted several sprigs of the finest Salernitan basil" (Boccaccio 2003: 328-329). Eventually, her brothers discover the head in the pot and leave town. Deprived of her basil, Lisabetta pines away until she dies. There are several similarities between the calabash and

the story from the *Decameron*. Exactly like the Nigerian mother, Lisabetta "would dearly have wished" (Boccaccio 2003: 328) to bring Lorenzo's whole body away with her. Becoming a centre of trauma, the basil pot is constantly tear-watered and tended to by Lisabetta, whereas the Nigerian mother obsessively asks people to look inside the calabash and realise the undescribable horror of war. Camboni stated that the pot is Lorenzo's grave (2017: 438), but it may become much more than a burial place. Concilio exhaustively investigated the meanings of metamorphosis into trees in wide-ranging and various literary texts (2021); in my opinion, a vegetal metamorphosis is at work in Boccaccio's story and in Adichie's novel too. Indeed, Ruggiero contends that Lorenzo's head "gives birth to a flourishing basil plant" (2014: 1185), which I fully subscribe to. While Lorenzo nurtures the earth, Lisabetta waters it with her tears: the basil becomes, de facto, the child they could not have in life. As in the story – where the imagined child is transformed into a plant and made visible –, the head of the Nigerian woman's child is kept in a natural vessel and shown to people. Furthermore, in Boccaccio's story, emphasis is placed on Lorenzo's "riccioli" (Boccaccio 2014: 345) – his curls, the only element through which Lisabetta's brothers recognise his decomposed head. In 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' Keats even wrote: "She calmed its wild hair with a golden comb" (2006: 251). Harrowingly, the Nigerian mother reminiscences about her child's braids: "'Do you know […] it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair'" (Adichie 2017: 149). While Lisabetta's mourning for her lover has romantic connotations, the Nigerian mother's grief is maternal. Although their modalities of grieving process are related to life and to different kinds of love, in both cases accepting the death of loved ones proves impossible and makes mourning fraught with trauma.

The calabash-pot and Boccaccio's story both investigate and deepen our understanding of grief, tragedies and human emotions. The image of the calabash could be a sound way of "turning facts into truth" (Adichie 2012). The second consequence is an artistic interaction that brings into the picture other forms of art than the aforementioned prose and painting, and might add new meanings to the calabash-pot of Adichie's novel. At the end of Boccaccio's story, Filomena – its narrator – informs her peers that Lisabetta's tragedy inspired a popular song which "they had heard […] on a number of occasions without ever succeeding, for all their inquiries, in discovering why it had been written" (Boccaccio 2003: 330). In addition, unbeknownst to Boccaccio, his story inspired another artwork, namely Keats's poem 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil'. This artistic transformation is remarked upon by Keats: "There is no other crime, no mad assail / To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet: / But it is done – succeed the verse or fail – / To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet" (2006: 244). Thus, song and poetry germinate from Lisabetta's story.

In a way akin to this, the image of the calabash-pot may be forged into an emblem of endurance and transposed into another artistic form, namely poetry. One of Okeoma's poems reads: *"Clay pots fired in zeal, they will cool our feet as we climb"* [italics in the original] (Adichie 2017: 175). In Okeoma's intention, the poem salutes the freedom of Biafra – and it is thus interpreted by people – but, again, this form of poetic narrative that noticeably includes pots might harbour another hidden meaning that becomes explicit much later and deals with the Biafran war. Indeed, Okeoma's lines are echoed at the end of the novel, when

Olanna is at the mortuary in search of Kainene's body. Surrounded by people who have lost their loved ones in the war, Olanna evokes his lines and, suddenly, the reference to pots is made conspicuous and sinister, as if it hinted at all those who have been murdered in the war, at all the heads put in calabashes: "[S]omething about placing clay pot on top of clay pot to form a ladder to the sky" (Adichie 2017: 411). In this context, the pot might be circularly picked up again in a closure which assigns it values of resilience and strength in the face of suffering, and at the same time underscores the connection with the calabash, thus making it an image of the terrible toll that war has taken on people.

Conclusion

After writing the present novel, in *Americanah* (2013) Adichie went on to describe the condition of Nigerian immigrants who go abroad – where they "negotiate interstitial spaces" (Uwakweh 2023: 73) – and then return home. With due differences to acknowledge, both Richard and the returnees "back home with an extra gleaming layer" (Adichie 2013: 502) share a condition of liminality, which becomes an occasion for inclusivity for Richard. At first sight, the character can be considered 'inclusive' because of his desire to fit in Nigeria and be accepted by Nigerians. However, the real inclusivity lies in his two-pronged literary and artistic narratives, which may also throw forth references to poetry, prose and painting – thus being doubly inclusive. Far from undermining inclusivity, his multifaceted narratives foster a real understanding of Nigeria, which is seen in a balanced way. Only by knowing all the true sides of a story can we avoid the "danger of a single story" (Adichie 2009) and easy partiality. Inclusivity is the product of the knowledge of reality and its acceptance as it is, without sugar-coating or demonising it. The sharpness of Richard's narratives and the open-ended questions they spur proves that it is indeed true that, whilst Richard witnesses in uncertainty, "the narrative itself manages to know without knowing" (Strehle 2011: 664).

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Of Rainbow and Granite: Androgynous Narrative in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*

Abstract I: L'articolo si propone di delineare un'analisi comparativa tra *Orlando* (1928) di Virginia Woolf e *How to Be Both* (2014) di Ali Smith. In particolare, si intende dimostrare come l'opera di Smith rielabori in modo creativo il romanzo di Woolf, andando così ad incarnare e ad esprimere con vividezza il concetto di 'mente androgina' teorizzato dalla stessa autrice. Ciò avviene attraverso la rimozione dei confini temporali tra passato e presente, l'ambiguità sessuale delle protagoniste e, soprattutto, attraverso un paradigma letterario capace di indagare la necessità di un'interazione reciproca tra autrici e lettori, e di un più ampio dialogo tra il testo letterario e le altre influenze artistiche e culturali con le quali instaura un imprescindibile rapporto dialettico.

Abstract II: This article attempts to conduct a comparative analysis between Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014). Specifically, this study posits Smith's novel as an appropriate successor to Woolf's work, as it successfully embraces and expresses the 'androgynous mind' theorised by Woolf. This is achieved through the removal of temporal boundaries between past and present, the ambivalence of the protagonists' sexual identity and, most importantly, through a literary paradigm that is able to explore the need for co-participation between authors and readers and the broader interplay between the literary text and other artistic and cultural sources with which it has a necessary dialogical relationship.

Keywords: androgyny, duplicity, mutual participation, reader's engagement, reciprocity, sexual identity, visuality.

> Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous […]
> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928: 21).

1. Reading between the Lines

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf formulates the androgynous mind as an essential literary ideal. Rejecting the notion that an author's sex should determine his or her

literary output, Woolf argues that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (Woolf 2007: 627). In support of her argument, Woolf cites famous male writers such as Coleridge, Cowper, Keats, Lamb, Shakespeare and Sterne, arguing that they exhibited an androgynous writing style and intellectual disposition. In Woolf's view, these writers were able to transcend gender stereotypes and create works that were simultaneously masculine and feminine. By arguing for an androgynous approach to literature, Woolf not only challenges readers to question and transcend traditional gender categories, but also promotes a fluid and inclusive literary culture. Since the publication of Woolf's groundbreaking work, feminist and queer literary scholars have extensively explored the concept of androgyny and gender ambiguity in literature. For example, *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1990) and *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kozofsky Sedgwick (2008) are both influential works in deconstructing binary, static notions of gender.

In this respect, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is an epitome of gender ambiguity in English literature. It is the story of Orlando, an English aristocrat who experiences both extraordinary longevity and a mysterious sex change. She is born a man, but at the age of 30 undergoes a significant transformation and becomes a woman. The character then lives for three centuries without showing any signs of ageing. Due to her unique mix of male and female characteristics, Orlando's gender identity is complex and difficult to define. As González (2004) points out, Orlando is neither entirely male nor fully female, but an androgynous figure who challenges the rigidity of traditional gender roles. *Orlando* was not the first work of fiction to explore the theme of androgyny. The concept has a long history in literature. Among the best-known precursors are Henri de Latouche's *Fragoletta* (1829), Balzac's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1835), Swinburne's *Hermaphroditus* (1863) and Joséphin Péladan's *The Androgyne* (1891). *Orlando*, however, stands out as a pioneering work in which the question of sexual androgyny is grafted onto narrative details. For example, the ambiguous use of personal pronouns in the novel is closely linked to a narrative in which the present and the past merge to critique conventional genre classifications and argue that traditional biographical forms cannot accurately reflect the nuances of personality and life experience. In Woolf's words, "if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility, and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers, for the most part failed to solve it" (Woolf 2008: 95). Woolf also unsettles traditional notions of truth and gender by suggesting that they are not immutable concepts. Rather, Orlando's personality and gender are constructed through a shared interaction between the reader and the narrator. Not coincidentally, readers are sometimes asked in the novel to use their imagination and actively participate in the creation of the character's identity (Woolf 1928: 27, 91). In this sense, for Woolf, the concept of an androgynous mind in literature goes beyond the mere representation of the coexistence of seemingly different aspects of sexuality within a single subjectivity, as it involves the active participation and collaboration of the reader in the resolution of the story.

Ali Smith offers an ideal extension of Woolf's argument when she asserts that style

plays an important role in engaging readers. According to the Scottish writer, style is not something that defines or adds to the content, but is itself the content. Style is what makes up the characters of a novel, and at the same time what stimulates, motivates and captivates readers, what arouses their interest in the story, what evokes emotions and reactions:

> A style is its story, and stories – […] like style – are layered, stratified constructs. Style is never not content. [...] It's an act at once individual and communal, to read a book, which is why the question of how much we're asked to engage is such a loaded and interesting one. […] The last thing literary style is is a matter of indifference; that's why it's so powerful a stirrer of love and passion, anger and argument. That's why it can really trouble us. That's why a style you don't take to can feel so like a personal assault (Smith 2012a).

Marina Warner's (2013) critical analysis of Ali Smith's literary work highlights the author's distinctive literary innovation, which lies in her meticulous scrutiny of minor linguistic elements such as prepositions and definite articles. According to Warner, Smith's attention to even seemingly insignificant parts of speech enables her to convey profound meaning and carry substantial weight within her writing. In her opinion, this attention to detail is reminiscent of Woolf's painstaking craftsmanship in concealing deep meaning in even the smallest linguistic components:

> But possibly Ali Smith's most particular innovation is the attention she pays to tiny parts of speech, how she presses prepositions and definite articles to reveal their depths: each one a life, each one a loaded gun. Since Virginia Woolf began *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with 'But …' there has not been another writer who can make a little do so much (Warner 2013: X).

Warner's comparison of Smith and Woolf's writing styles underscores the power of language to engage. Just as Woolf's use of the word 'but' at the beginning of her essay challenges conventional narratives and paves the way for a critical exploration of gender and literature, Smith's focus on the nuances of language similarly subverts expectations and opens up new avenues of interpretation. Undoubtedly, this assertion holds considerable merit when applied to Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*, wherein the inclusion of 'both' in the novel's title becomes a manifest expression of its thematic and stylistic intentions, underscoring its programmatic significance.

2. Narration in *Trompe-L'œil*

In an article published in *The Guardian* (2014a), Smith explains the genesis of the framework for her novel, which was inspired by her discovery of sinopias – original drawings hidden beneath frescoes damaged by floods in Florence in the 1960s. The author was intrigued by the idea of creating a work characterised by an intimate or inherent duality, or rather, a texture composed of layered elements where each part interlocked with the other in such a way that they could exist simultaneously as one 'and' the other. The internal structure of *How to*

Be Both is apparently bipartite, consisting of two sections that focus on as many characters constantly shuttling back and forth between the present and their respective memories. The order of the two sections depends on the particular edition the reader purchases. In half of the published copies, the narrative begins with 'Eyes', the story of Francesco del Cossa, a Renaissance painter with a "habit of putting […] 2 dots between clauses where a breath should come" (Smith 2014b: 153) who, born female, is persuaded by her father to assume a male identity in order to pursue her artistic vocation. In the other copies, however, Francesco's story comes at the end, preceded by 'Camera', the story of George, a young girl in late 20th century London who seeks solace in art while coping with the grief of her mother's death.

Francesco's narrative unfolds as her consciousness seems to transcend the boundaries of time and space[1], transporting her from 15th century Ferrara to contemporary London. Her ontological status, whether she is deceased or merely displaced in time, remains ambiguous[2], leaving the reader to puzzle over the nature of her existence. Upon her arrival, Francesco finds herself standing directly behind George, who appears to her like a "boy in front of a painting" (10)[3]. Francesco soon realises that George is staring at a portrait of Saint Vincent Ferreri, a work Francesco herself painted during her lifetime. It soon becomes clear, however, that Francesco cannot wander freely, for she remains tied to George and is forced to follow her wherever she goes. She is unable to interact with George or anyone else in the present, existing instead as a ghost from a bygone era. This gives the reader a unique perspective as the past is expressed through the ethereal figure of Francesco, commenting on the events of the present. It is George's actions and experiences that give shape to Francesco's descriptions and observations as she struggles with the limitations of her outdated vocabulary when trying to name objects and understand contemporary phenomena. This dilemma leads to a tender, vaguely quixotic comedy as Francesco struggles with the lack of appropriate words to capture the essence of the sights before her, and resorts to attributing to them the terms of her past lexicon.

George, on the other hand, is struggling to come to terms with the deep grief she has felt since losing her mother. In search of comfort, she turns to her close friend Helena Fisker, with whom she may be romantically involved. But the present is inextricably linked to George's memories of the previous May, when her mother had taken her and her younger brother, Henry, from their home in Cambridge, England, to Ferrara to see Francesco's works at the Schifanoia Palace[4], as she was a great admirer of her art. Although she maintained a certain emotional distance from her mother during her lifetime, George has set out to reconstruct

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[1] The depiction of her journey, visually rendered by a zigzag arrangement of the text, conveys the sense of being propelled beyond earthly limits and then returning.

[2] As Smith herself notes, very little is known about Francesco del Cossa's life and even less about the circumstances of his death: "he'd not just died in his early 40s in the plague in a year no internet site could be completely sure of, he'd also literally disappeared off the face of history" (Smith 2014a). The masculine form is used here because it refers to the historical figure who actually existed and not to the character in the novel.

[3] From here on, bibliographical references to *How to Be Both* will be given with page numbers only.

[4] Also referred to as the 'palace of not being bored' within the novel.

her mother's existence by exploring the passions that drove her when she was alive. This quest culminates in George lingering in front of the painting of Saint Vincent Ferreri in the National Gallery, a work that was particularly meaningful to her mother because it was painted by Francesco. In this particular setting, Francesco's art takes on a retrospective significance, bridging George's present and her mother's past. By activating George's feelings of connection with her deceased mother, the emotions emanating from the artwork conversely also unfold Francesco's introspective journey of memory and self-discovery. It is from this perspective that Francesco's phantasmal presence in George's mourning present can be understood. Francesco's ghost materialises in relation to George's future actions, emphasising the interdependence and influence between the two. In the style of Florentine frescoes, George appears as the visible surface of history, while Francesco occupies a hidden but integral role in George's life. Without this interplay, especially when George's section is encountered before Francesco's, the depth and complexity of Francesco's narrative would be diminished. As Francesco and George stumble upon fragments of each other's stories, the attempt to establish a definitive linear chronology becomes elusive even though the vast historical gulf of five centuries separating the protagonists might suggest otherwise. The novel resists a linear conception of time, allowing for a multi-layered arrangement in which one narrative may precede or anticipate the other, depending on how the reader happens to encounter or view each story. The lack of a clear chronological sequence challenges readers to find their way through the narratives without relying on a predetermined order, so that the beginning and end of each story intertwine and the boundaries between them become blurred.

3. Androgyny and the Challenge to the Visual Paradigm
Through this intricate interplay, the novel's themes and characters gain depth and resonance, making for a rich and dynamic reading experience. At a pivotal point in the novel, George and her mother discuss whether there is a precedence or hierarchy between the visible and the hidden: "But which came first?" she asks. "The chicken or the egg? The picture beneath or the picture on the surface?" (284). The question serves as a metaphorical exploration of the nature of perception and the hierarchy of appearances. George claims that the image underneath was there first because it was created first, suggesting that there is a foundation or origin that precedes the immediately visible. However, her mother challenges this idea by pointing out that what we see first, the image on the surface, often dominates our perception and becomes the primary focus. This raises the question of whether the visible, even if it comes later in the sequence of creation, takes precedence in our understanding of reality, while the hidden or unknown is dismissed or ignored. Consequently, the reader's intellectual engagement with the novel should also consist of making connections, deciphering the interplay between past and present, visible and invisible in the lives of the protagonists, and taking up the notions of simultaneity, participation and mutual influence.

Although Francesco is trapped in her physical confinement, her ability to 'feel' is intimately intertwined with George's visual perceptions and physiological responses. For example, when George notices the presence of a beautiful blonde woman to whom she is

obviously attracted, Francesco is able to sense her presence through the physical sensation of the hair on the back of George's neck standing up as the woman enters the room. This unique interplay of their sensory experiences underlines the profound nature of their shared reality and highlights the commonality of a homosexual inclination in Francesco and George, which further strengthens their bond. This sense of mutual belonging and participation encompasses their position in the world and includes the characters' biological sexual orientation. In her childhood, Francesco abandoned her female identity and took on the guise of a man to overcome the social constraints imposed on women. As a result of this strategy, she gained access to the public and was able to pursue her artistic passion, which she otherwise would not have been able to do. Yet, somehow this transformation does not signify Francesco's rebirth under a male identity (for her original baptismal name remains secret, and the new one is in fact the only one under which the reader ever comes to know her), but a continuation in order to gain new possibilities of self-exploration.

The notion of gender indeterminacy and the concurrent manifestation of male and female attributes in a single character is a prominent theme in *Orlando*. In the narrative, the veracity of Orlando's transformation from male to female remains nebulous, leaving open the possibility that it serves as an allegorical illustration of the character's inherent fluidity. Drawing on Freudian theory, González (2004) argues that Orlando's transformation is not a true metamorphosis, as the character neither wrestles with the spectre of castration nor shows discomfort in the face of change. This assumption suggests that Orlando has always embodied an androgynous or even inherently feminine being. At the beginning of the novel, Woolf meticulously highlights the gender of the protagonist by asserting the undeniable nature of Orlando's masculinity: "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (Woolf 1928: 1). Paradoxically, the narrator's explicit insistence on the absence of sexual ambiguity in a hitherto unknown character without additional contextual information serves as the first indication that Orlando's gender may not be as clear-cut as it is initially presented, or at least deserves closer scrutiny. The allusion to the fashion trends prevalent at the time, which disguise Orlando's masculinity, is based on the notion that they could be perceived as feminine features because of their flamboyant and ornate nature, which stands in stark contrast to modern associations of masculinity with austerity and minimalism. This subtle interplay between appearance and gender identity forms the basis for the exploration of androgyny and ambiguous gender relations throughout the novel.

Admittedly, one puzzling aspect of *How to Be Both* lies in the fact that it is never clear to what extent the characters who interact with Francesco are aware of her ambivalence. Mr de Prisciano[5] cryptically notes that Francesco's main rival at the Estense court, Cosmé Tura, addresses her as Francescha, using the Italian suffix 'a' to refer to her feminine form, perhaps in a derogatory manner. Mr de Prisciano's maid reveals with a subtle wink that she is attracted to Francesco, even though she is disguised as a man. At first, one might assume

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[5] Also known as The Falcon, the man who entrusts Francesco with the creation of a painting depicting an entire season – comprising March, April, and May – on the eastern wall of the Room of the Months within the Schifanoia Palace.

that the maid is attracted to Francesco's masculine appearance; however, the relationship develops into a full-blown physical connection, suggesting that the maid may have sensed Francesco's femininity from the beginning. Similarly, Orlando's inability to determine the gender of others mirrors the ambiguity of her own identity. The novel is replete with characters such as Archduchess Harriet, Sasha and Shelmerdine who have analogous, indeterminate gender identities. As a result, Orlando's romantic entanglements take on an androgynous character. Woolf emphasises that despite the apparent gender change, Orlando's identity remains fundamentally unaltered: "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (Woolf 1928: 39). Interestingly, Woolf uses the plural pronoun 'their' in this passage, creating a sense of conflation between the masculine and feminine facets of Orlando's identity. Orlando subverts such conceptualisations by proclaiming the notion that "nothing is any longer one thing" (Woolf 1928: 89), thus undoing the restrictive parameters of traditional gender constructions.

Above all, it is the focus on the unseen aspects within Smith's novel that makes it a brilliant contemporary reinterpretation of *Orlando*. In Francesco's childhood, even before she is given a male designation, a deep-seated bond with her mother manifests itself in the form of an intense longing to merge their identities as Francesco finds comfort in her mother's clothes after her death. Francesco immerses herself in her mother's remaining essence to become "nothing but fabric that'd once been next to her skin" (31). This longing acts as a mechanism to maintain the semblance of her mother's enduring presence, and it proves successful as her father interprets Francesco's actions as manifestations of the mother's ghost. The maternal figure takes on a phantasmatic role in Francesco's life, a condition that Francesco will later mirror in George's existence.

In *Orlando*, Woolf also addresses the phantasm of the relationship between the present and the past to some extent, when she expresses gratitude to the great writers of the present and the past to whom she is directly indebted, acknowledging them as her own source of inspiration and greeting them as if she had met them in person:

> Many friends have helped me in writing this book. Some are dead and so illustrious that I scarcely dare name them, yet no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Bronte, De Quincey, and Walter Pater – to name the first that come to mind (Woolf 1928: 1).

Woolf acknowledges the impact these writers have had on her personal and artistic life and the debt she owes them in her writing. Their legacy is still alive and present in her work. Reading the writings of Bronte, Defoe and Sterne was not only a source of personal enrichment but also an intimate experience. It allowed Woolf to enter into a productive, if imaginary, conversation with them. This passage reflects Woolf's belief in the power of literature to connect people across time and space. And yet, hidden among them is another name which, though invisible, has perhaps contributed most to the characterisation of

Orlando. Indeed, traces of Woolf's romantic liaison with the poet Vita Sackville-West emerge in the narrator's portrayal of Orlando. Although Sackville-West is not formally mentioned in the novel's prefatory remarks, Woolf subtly praises her in the text, as revealed in the exquisite physical portrayal of Orlando with "shapely legs, the handsome body and the well-set shoulders" (Woolf 1928: 2). These attributes are in fact indirect compliments that Woolf pays to Sackville-West. The narrator also expresses gratitude for having had the opportunity to record the life of such a person: "Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!" (*ibid.*) Sackville-West's presence is well hidden beneath the visible layer of the novel; yet, though unacknowledged, Orlando's character owes as much and more to her influence than to those officially credited. Art is indebted to both recognisable figures and those who remain obscured, for together they contribute to the creation and vitality of artistic works and their characters. To detect the presence of these concealed layers or 'ghosts' in the narrative, the reader must pay close attention to details, such as the ambiguous use of pronouns or the omission of words that might otherwise resolve existing ambiguities.

A similar process of gender stratification takes place in *How to Be Both*. Francesco deliberately builds complementary layers into her fresco compositions, fostering a sense of sexual ambivalence in the subjects depicted, who can be perceived as "objectively present, or only subjectively present, or both" (Ranger 2019: 409). She also professes a preference for *trompe l'oeil*, a technique known for its ability to blur the distinctions between reality and illusion:

> It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, behind that, and again behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. […] The picture makes you look at both – the close-up happenings and the bigger picture (238).

This is due both to the layering of the fresco, which is composed of pigments, water and plaster, and to its allegorical content, which has multiple meanings at once: "what is apparent to the eye (as far as gender is concerned, but not only) is displaced on closer inspection" (Coppola 2015: 179). Coppola suggests that the fresco functions as an allegory for gender and androgyny at large. In order to fully grasp the complexity of George and Francesco's identities, one must examine both the intricate layering and the overarching narrative, indicating that gender is fundamentally a construct shaped by the viewer's perception. Weaver (2018) further asserts that Smith's writing confronts the visual paradigm by consistently embodying a multi-referential quality, such that any attempt to capture identity visually is doomed to inadequacy from the outset. As a result, the artist's approach requires a broader exploration of the interwoven layers that make up the human experience, transcending the boundaries of traditional representational techniques: "one moment a character is male, and the other female – depending on the particular angle from which he or she is viewed" (Weaver 2018: 539). Francesco's work is characterised by its ability to convey multiple narratives behind a seemingly singular plot, a skill gleaned from

a careful examination of Piero della Francesca's works: "from looking at [which] I learned [...] how to tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it" (55). This approach creates a milieu in which a range of interpretations can coexist, all of which retain their validity. Androginy thus transcends Francesco's physical form and also permeates her artistic work, which, akin to her clothing, conceals an additional level that cannot be directly attributed to its appearance: "I made things look both close and distant" (121). This underlying quality is present before the viewer's eye, but remains elusive.

4. Mutual Participation between Arts and Life: the Question of Engagement

Through Francesco, who describes herself as existing in an "intermediary place" (43) suspended between worlds, and for whom "pictures can be both life and death at once and cross the border between the two" (159), Smith suggests that paintings have the extraordinary capacity to dwell in an intermediate realm between life and death, transcending the boundaries that separate these discrete realities. Seen in this light, the author seems to be seeking to demonstrate a hidden connection between her own artistic endeavours as a writer and the teachings of Piero della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti, to whom Francesco attributed an understanding of "the bareness and the pliability it takes [...] to be both" (53). Smith recognises in Alberti the birth of Renaissance perspective, the emergence of a concept of art as an amphibious entity capable of existing as more than one thing. Following the great masters of Renaissance painting, Smith also strives for her narratives to contain a subterranean, hidden or ghostly element. This approach allows for the coexistence of two or more narratives in what appears to be one. These narratives can run simultaneously, operate in temporal continuity or even converge. By indirectly acknowledging the vivid, living presence of these artists in her life, Smith's own existence and literary output seem to be retroactively projected, participating in their lives unbeknownst to them, much like Virginia Woolf had done in *Orlando*. This reactivation, as discussed earlier, is mirrored in the relationship between George and her mother in relation to Francesco.

Within this paradigm, a recurring theme emerges that Smith values and that permeates her writing: the concept of mutual influence and interaction between different art forms and between art and life itself. This theme serves as the basis for a particular narrative style in which a hidden narrative lies beneath another, more prominent story. Just as Francesco's narrative is hidden within George's, actively participating in and contributing to it without George's knowledge, a number of Smith's works use an overt plot as a means of concealing another story through subtle details in the text, or even through gaps and omissions in language and narrative. Storytelling can be seen as a container for imperceptible information that is only indirectly accessible. The intricate entwining of themes is for example discernible within one of Smith's earlier novels, *The Accidental* (2012), in which the character Amber can be said to assume a transworld identity that transgresses the boundaries of the text and has the ability to inhabit multiple worlds, exhibiting different qualities and characteristics in each. This condition is not openly acknowledged in the text; it can only be discerned by paying attention to the subtle allusions skilfully woven into the tapestry of language, particularly

through the allusions to *Teorema* (1968) by Pier Paolo Pasolini. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom argued that literature is based on the principle of reciprocity, in which the author and the precursor enter into a symbiotic relationship mediated by the influence of each other's work. This phenomenon is also evident in *The Accidental*, where the possible correspondence between Amber and Pasolini's enigmatic visitor is by no means explicit; it can only be restored if the reader chooses to 'collaborate' with the author, to investigate and understand the allusions scattered throughout the novel. For Smith, art takes on the role of a medium for exploring the world, allowing us to see it from different perspectives and to participate in discourses that cut across temporal and spatial boundaries.

There has long been critical debate about the extent to which literary texts are able to connect with other texts, mutually influencing them and their readers. Stanley Edgar Hyman (1947) was a pioneer in exploring the ways in which different literary works enter into a dialogue of mutual inspiration. This interaction, like the meeting of rivers in a fertile delta, enriches each individual work and also creates a broader literary landscape[6]. Northrop Frye (1970) also challenged the traditional notion of literature as an architecture of autonomous works by extending the idea of the mutual influence between texts, inherent in their social circulation. They create symbolic structures and patterns of archetypes that recur across different eras and works, like planets orbiting independently but influenced by other gravitational forces. Intertextuality ensures that the literary tradition is not simply a chronological sequence of texts, but rather a dense web of relationships in which each text is influenced by those that precede and follow it. Furthermore, Annabel Patterson (1993) illustrates how writers can use tradition as a cover or disguise to hide their messages and thus evade censorship. As a living organism, literature can be seen as a kind of 'anatomy': a dense body in which visible and hidden elements coexist in constant metamorphosis. Robert Stolorow (2004) elaborates on such experiential element, arguing that the reader's perception is crucial to decoding a text. He sees the text as a 'dynamic' or interactive channel that not only affects but is also shaped by the reader's emotions and experiences. As different readers bring different perspectives over time, adding a new fragment of colour and form, it is possible to ascribe constantly changing and sometimes even contradictory interpretations to the same text.

Within this succinct critical genealogy of intertextuality and reader engagement, Helen Vendler (2005) introduces the concept that authors can create enclaves in their works that allow them to speak to 'invisible listeners' who are intimately involved in the construction of meaning. Through direct or indirect apostrophes, self-isolation or openness, and the subtle use of pronouns, writers can create an intimate connection with an audience they have never met (in much the same way as both Woolf[7] and Smith, as I have tried to show). It is not just

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[6] Hyman distinguished between a 'vulgar' approach to Marxist criticism, which sees literary texts as mere reflections of the social and economic context of their time, and a 'humanist' approach, which grants art a sense of autonomy from such factors. Hyman believed that the best way to analyse literature in relation to socio-economic conditions was to integrate humanist and vulgar approaches into one conceptual fabric.

[7] In this respect, Nadia Fusini's lifelong contributions to the study of Virginia Woolf may prove valuable. The *Italian Virginia Woolf Society* was founded as a testimony to her commitment, and its activities can be viewed on its official website, as mentioned in the bibliography.

a matter of responding to predecessors and contemporaries, but also of anticipating future readers and interlocutors. The resulting dialogue transcends time and space, allowing for the exchange of ideas between different works. As an example, Vendler cites Herbert and Whitman as influences on Ashbery, whose work can be traced back to his two mentors. By taking up related themes, the newer poet succeeds in reinterpreting earlier works. In the process, he captures and expresses variations of feeling, some of which had remained unexpressed, awaiting revision and expansion by an unseen listener. The result is a play of contaminations that follow and overlap like waves in a lake, constantly changing its appearance.

While the critiques of these scholars differ in many ways, a common thread emerges: the recognition that the relationship between reader and text is one of reciprocity, with each party offering something in exchange. The reader must be willing to devote his or her attention and effort in order to realise the author's intentions. On the other hand, Smith herself recognised the book as a dynamic process, valuable for its transformative capacity: "great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives" (Smith 2012a). One of the possible aims of androgynous storytelling, from this point of view, can be summed up in the quest for freedom to explore oneself and one's full potential, to "unchain […] the eyes and the lives of those who see it and give […] them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both" (124). Maybe, Smith wants the reader to look at the story from an androgynous perspective in order to gain a deeper understanding of its depth, and to have an experience similar to Francesco's: with her eyes floating free from the chains that bound her during her lifetime. Only in this way can he or she experience that 'moment of freedom' that frees them from a linear and partially predictable historicity, from a configuration of identity based only on the performativity of the visible; and grasp, beyond the façade of apparent normality, that: "double knowledge [which] will reveal a world to you to which your mind's eye, your conscious eye, is often blind" (129).

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Il personaggio di Dr Jekyll nella serie tv *Penny Dreadful*: un'analisi transmediale e postcoloniale

Abstract I: In questo contributo si intende analizzare, dal punto di vista transmediale e postcoloniale, il personaggio di Dr Jekyll nella serie tv *Penny Dreadful*. Attraverso il confronto con il protagonista di *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* di Stevenson, si sottolineerà come il regista Logan colga gli elementi coloniali presenti nel romanzo e li adatti a una prospettiva postcoloniale, attribuendo al personaggio di Jekyll origini indiane. Allo stesso modo, il rapporto che Jekyll stabilisce con Victor Frankenstein è funzionale a mostrare l'evoluzione della figura archetipica del *cercatore della conoscenza proibita* nel passaggio transmediale. Inoltre, si evidenzierà come la trasformazione in Lord Hyde assuma un significato non solo psicologico, ma soprattutto identitario e sociale, in grado di spiegare la presenza del male nel carattere dell'ambizioso scienziato, nella società inglese vittoriana come in quella contemporanea degli Stati Uniti.

Abstract II: In this article I will analyse, from a transmedia and postcolonial point of view, the character of Dr Jekyll in the TV series *Penny Dreadful*. The correspondences between Dr Jekyll in *Penny Dreadful* and the mad scientist protagonist of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* underline how the director John Logan captures the colonial elements present in the novel and adapts them to a postcolonial perspective, attributing Indian origins to Jekyll. The relationship that Jekyll establishes with Victor Frankenstein conveys the evolution of an archetypal figure, the so-called *seeker of forbidden knowledge*, in transmedia storytelling. Finally, Lord Hyde's transformation is relevant for the understanding of psychological and socio-identity issues, which are connected to the emergence of evil in Victorian English society and in contemporary U.S.A. society.

Keywords: transmedia, Jekyll, Penny Dreadful, postcolonialism, Stevenson.

1. Introduzione

Tra i personaggi letterari che affollano la Londra vittoriana della terza stagione della serie tv *Penny Dreadful*, diretta da John Logan e prodotta da Sam Mendes, spicca certamente il dottor Jekyll. Nella serie tv, il protagonista del romanzo *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

(1886) di Robert Louis Stevenson assume le sembianze di un dottore di origini indiane[1], interpretato da Shazad Latif.

Nel tentativo di analizzare da un punto di vista transmediale il personaggio occorre far riferimento alla teoria di Jenkins. Nel blog *Transmedia Storytelling 101* pubblicato su *Confessions of an AcaFan*, Jenkins definisce la narrazione transmediale un processo in cui gli elementi integranti di una storia vengono dispersi sistematicamente su più canali di distribuzione allo scopo di creare un'esperienza di intrattenimento unificata e coordinata. L'esempio riportato da Jenkins è quello di *Matrix*: per poter comprendere pienamente la storia è necessario guardare non solo i film, ma anche leggere i fumetti e giocare ai videogiochi di *Matrix*, senza esserci quindi un unico medium di riferimento (Jenkins 2007). Sia i film sia i fumetti e i videogiochi offrono, pertanto, un contributo distinto e ugualmente rilevante all'intero complesso narrativo di *Matrix*, così come avviene nell'Universo Marvel.

Allo stesso modo, Medaglia osserva che, nel passaggio dal testo alla serialità televisiva, "le narrazioni diventano più rapide e multiformi, in quanto sono legate in molti casi a un ampliamento del nucleo narrativo originario, al quale ogni medium aggiunge qualcosa nei diversi passaggi transmediali" (Medaglia 2022: 289). Ogni espansione della narrazione diventa così un nuovo prodotto narrativo che aggiunge profondità e comprensione al nucleo fondativo (Mallamaci 2018: 47). Inoltre, la narrazione transmediale implica ciò che Richard Saint-Gelais ha definito "transfinzionalità" (Saint-Gelais 2011), ovvero il passaggio di elementi finzionali provenienti da diverse fonti (Ryan 2015: 3).

Venendo meno la corrispondenza univoca tra la narrazione transmediale e un unico testo d'origine, come nel caso di *Penny Dreadful*, è possibile sfruttare versioni alternative delle stesse fonti che risultano reinterpretabili: così, nella serie di Logan, Victor Frankenstein ha dato vita a Lily, la donna che, nel romanzo di Shelley, lo scienziato pensava di affiancare alla propria creatura spaventosa, senza poi però generarla, temendo le possibili conseguenze di una progenie di mostri. Nel film *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) di Whale, invece, il dottor Frankenstein dà vita a una compagna per il mostro.

La transfinzionalità può manifestarsi in tre modalità diverse: l'espansione della vicenda, cioè la possibilità di ampliare la storia con un prequel o un sequel; la trasposizione della trama in una nuova ambientazione; il cambiamento di una parte della trama e, quindi, del destino dei personaggi, cioè il caso di *Penny Dreadful* (Ryan 2008: 385-417).

In realtà, per la serie tv di Logan è più corretto parlare di narrazione transmediale e non di adattamento[2]: la differenza fondamentale tra queste due modalità rappresentative, secondo Jenkins, risiede nel fatto che l'adattamento cerca di raccontare la stessa storia attraverso un mezzo diverso senza sostanziali mutamenti, mentre la narrazione transmediale

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[1] Nella serie tv Jekyll resta alquanto vago riguardo le proprie origini, senza specificare la città esatta dell'India da cui proviene né approfondire le difficoltà della sua infanzia e adolescenza, che sarà possibile ricostruire solo parzialmente attraverso le parole dell'amico Frankenstein.

[2] Infatti, come spiega Perazzini, *Penny Dreadful* non può essere considerata un adattamento, poiché non è mai chiaro quale sia la fonte da cui sono stati importati i caratteri dei personaggi e a partire dalla quale potrebbero essere stati modificati (Perazzini 2021: 56). Al contempo, Askander, Gutowska e Makai definiscono la serie "un'appropriazione palinsestuale" (Askander *et al.* 2022: 273), dal momento che, pur rifacendosi a modelli ben precisi, il regista in questo caso li rielabora con lo scopo di veicolare nuovi significati politici e sociali.

presenta storie diverse provenienti da uno stesso mondo narrativo (Ryan 2015: 2), cioè nel caso di *Penny Dreadful* il vasto repertorio della letteratura gotica.

Nell'adattamento il processo di rinnovamento viene sacrificato in funzione di una sostanziale reiterazione: si tratta, pertanto, di riproporre personaggi, storie e situazioni note su un altro medium, senza tuttavia sfruttarne le peculiari caratteristiche, cioè quello che Greenberg ha definito "lo specifico" (Greenberg 1966). Una volta stabilita la categoria in cui collocare la serie tv, sarà utile sottolineare che *Penny Dreadful* è stata trasmessa per la prima volta negli Stati Uniti dall'11 maggio 2014 al 19 giugno 2016 per un totale di tre stagioni, con l'aggiunta di uno spin-off dal titolo *Penny Dreadful: City of Angels*, ambientato a Los Angeles nel 1938.

La protagonista della terza stagione è Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), vittima di forze demoniache e sedotta dal Conte Dracula. La ritroviamo dopo la conclusione della seconda stagione, in cui viene tormentata dalle creature della notte. Una congrega di streghe comandate da Evelyn Poole vorrebbe catturarla e convincerla a diventare la compagna del Diavolo, mentre Dracula e suo fratello Lucifero appaiono in lotta per la sua conquista. Vanessa è, insieme a Dorian Gray e Victor Frankenstein, il personaggio che assicura la continuità tra le tre stagioni.

Nella terza sezione, in particolare, ormai priva di Ethan e Malcolm a proteggerla, Vanessa decide di rivolgersi alla psicologa Florence Seward, la quale riesce a svelare parti del passato della protagonista e la spinge a intraprendere nuove relazioni, come quella amorosa con il dottor Alexander Sweet. Il seducente uomo, curatore del museo di storia naturale a Londra, si rivelerà essere Dracula. Intanto, Victor Frankenstein riceve la visita del suo vecchio amico dell'università, Henry Jekyll, a cui rivela di aver rianimato Calibano (la creatura del romanzo di Shelley) e Lily, un'immigrata irlandese morta giovane e prima chiamata Brona Croft. Victor, dipendente dalla droga, chiede l'aiuto di Jekyll per distruggere Lily, che nel frattempo si è emancipata, ha organizzato un esercito di donne assassine e vive con Dorian Gray, di cui si è innamorata.

Jekyll inizialmente rifiuta, cercando di dissuadere l'amico dai suoi intenti omicidi. Tuttavia, in seguito, cede alle sue richieste: Henry accetta di aiutarlo, ma solo con l'obiettivo di addomesticare Lily e farla tornare allo stato iniziale di sottomissione.

Prima di attuare il piano, Victor assiste agli esperimenti di Jekyll nel manicomio dove lavora: in particolare, Henry stava sperimentando una pozione capace di rendere docili e calmi i suoi pazienti. Il siero iniettato a un uomo schizofrenico inizialmente riesce a renderlo pacifico; tuttavia, in un secondo momento, scatena in lui uno stato di agitazione incontrollabile peggiore dei sintomi precedenti.

Henry e Victor, con l'ausilio di Dorian Gray che la inganna, riescono a catturare Lily. Poco prima che le venga iniettata la pozione, Lily, disperata, racconta al suo creatore la storia della sua vita precedente, cioè prima di essere rianimata da Frankenstein, quando era una prostituta, e della dolorosa perdita dell'unica figlia che aveva. Victor, commosso, la libera, suscitando l'irritazione di Jekyll che rimane deluso sia dall'amore di Victor per Lily sia dalla debolezza dell'amico. Jekyll si congeda dal collega, annunciando la morte del padre a lungo odiato, cioè Lord Hyde: si completa così la trasformazione di Jekyll nel malefico Hyde.

In seguito, Victor si unisce a Ethan, Malcolm, Kaetenay e alla dottoressa Seward per

affrontare Dracula e salvare Vanessa, che era stata sedotta e rapita nel frattempo dal Conte. Alla fine, la protagonista della serie chiede a Ethan di ucciderla per porre fine all'oscurità che Dracula ha fatto calare su Londra. Dopo aver recitato il Padre Nostro, Ethan a malincuore esaudisce il suo desiderio e riesce a mettere in fuga il Conte.

Il titolo della serie tv, vincitrice di tre BAFTA Television Craft Awards nel 2015 e oggi visibile in Italia su Prime Video, fa riferimento al fenomeno letterario di massa che interessò il Regno Unito nella seconda metà del XIX secolo: i *penny blood* o *penny dreadful*. Queste pubblicazioni settimanali, molto economiche[3], presentavano storie che spaziavano dal genere gotico all'horror e al pulp. Il gotico, che aveva avuto larga fortuna già a inizio secolo con *Frankenstein* e la poesia romantica di Keats, Shelley e Byron, diventa così un genere popolare, diffuso e apprezzato in ampi strati della popolazione britannica (Perazzini 2021: 48-51). *Penny Dreadful* intende collocarsi sul solco di questa tradizione.

La serie di Logan ha la particolarità di racchiudere in "un'unica narrazione alcuni tra i personaggi gotici maggiormente famosi e sfruttati, ivi compresi Dracula, Frankenstein e il suo mostro, il lupo mannaro, Dr. Jekyll e Dorian Gray" (Casoli 2021: 301). In particolare, *Penny Dreadful* propone, attraverso la deformazione gotica, un ritratto complesso della società inglese del XIX secolo: la Londra tardo-vittoriana appare frammentata tra la vita e il benessere del West End e il degrado delle strade dell'East End (Akilli & Öz 2016: 18).

Dal momento che la serie tv prevede "l'interazione tra una pluralità di personaggi letterari pre-esistenti che si relazionano in una dimensione gruppale", si tratta di "una forma di *ucronia meta-finzionale*" (Bellavita 2019). La narrazione di Logan descrive, infatti, uno sviluppo alternativo ai singoli apparati diegetici degli ipotesti, fondato sulla convergenza dei personaggi principali[4], che alterano il percorso narrativo per portare a termine un nuovo lavoro di gruppo.

La scelta di attribuire origini indiane al personaggio di Jekyll assume un preciso valore, se analizzata secondo la prospettiva postcoloniale. È necessario sottolineare che il genere gotico, nelle sue diverse declinazioni, si presta fin da subito a inglobare l'elemento coloniale, attribuendogli generalmente un valore sovversivo (Paravisini-Gebert 2002: 229)[5].

In questo senso, lo sguardo postcoloniale, inteso "come una lente di analisi che può essere applicata senza restrizioni cronologiche ai film di tutti i tempi" (Ponzanesi 2012: 97), permette di analizzare e dotare di un nuovo significato personaggi già celebri come quello di Stevenson, sovvertendo i precedenti rapporti di potere e proponendo differenti interpretazioni dell'opera.

Inoltre, alcuni adattamenti e narrazioni transmediali "contrastano la politica imperialista in una prospettiva postcoloniale, operando conseguentemente modificazioni del contesto

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[3] Queste storie, in vendita al costo di uno scellino, presentavano un'omogenea miscela di terrore e suspense che entusiasmava il pubblico vittoriano soddisfacendo la sua sete di violenza, orrore e crimine (Perazzini 2021: 49).

[4] La convergenza, nelle narrazioni transmediali, è "un processo che si realizza grazie a due spinte provenienti da lati opposti: una top-down operata dall'alto e una bottom-up" da parte dei fruitori, spesso entrambe compresenti (Medaglia 2022: 288).

[5] In particolare, secondo Mighall, il romanzo di Stevenson stabilisce il prototipo di "un nuovo genere di narrativa gotica", all'insegna di un maggiore realismo (Mighall 1999: 138).

originario dell'opera adattata" (Hutcheon 2014: 214). Al contempo, però, il genere gotico, come dimostrato dalla ricca produzione di serie tv e film, è molto sfruttato nelle narrazioni transmediali e con grande successo, al punto da dare vita a veri e propri *memi* (Perazzini 2021: 56), cioè elementi culturali facilmente replicabili e trasmissibili per imitazione da un individuo a un altro e da uno strumento di comunicazione all'altro, come i giornali o il web.

In *Penny Dreadful*, in particolare, secondo Monterrubio Ibáñez, si verifica un passaggio ulteriore: la risemantizzazione di ogni personaggio gotico, come Jekyll e Frankenstein, genera una sorta di "mitologia postmoderna" che esprime valori tipici della contemporaneità come la solitudine e la depressione, ma anche il razzismo (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2020: 15).

A partire da questi presupposti, la seconda parte di questo articolo avrà l'obiettivo di mostrare i punti di contatto e di divergenza tra il personaggio di Jekyll nella serie tv e nel romanzo di Stevenson. Attraverso uno sguardo che integrerà la prospettiva postcoloniale e transmediale, si esaminerà il significato sociale che assume la conversione di Jekyll al male e, quindi, la sua trasformazione in Hyde nella serie di Logan.

La terza sezione del contributo si prefigge, invece, di spiegare come il 'dispatrio' (Meneghello 1993) influisca sulla personalità di Jekyll. Infatti, nonostante Henry provi a imitare e rispettare i canoni sociali del modello inglese attraverso l'assimilazione della sua cultura scientifica e delle sue usanze, il processo di anglicizzazione resta sempre parziale. Attraverso la duplicità del personaggio e il conflitto identitario che ne deriva, sarà possibile spiegare l'evoluzione della figura archetipica del *cercatore della conoscenza proibita*[6] nel passaggio transmediale.

Nella quarta parte si analizzerà il rapporto che si instaura tra Jekyll e Frankenstein in *Penny Dreadful*, sottolineando come il tema del doppio, che si lega tradizionalmente al represso omoerotico, emerga, in questo caso, in contrapposizione all'immagine stereotipata degli indiani nelle serie tv inglesi e americane.

A partire dall'individuazione di questi tratti standardizzati, sarà possibile rilevare gli elementi di maggiore originalità attribuiti al personaggio di Jekyll nel passaggio transmediale. Infatti, Logan fa in modo che il giovane scienziato, vittima di razzismo e costretto a tacere la propria omosessualità, sia dotato di una carica eversiva, impossibile da contenere, che sarà la causa primaria di un male non solo individuale, bensì collettivo. La necessità di sovrapporre l'identità sessuale a quella postcoloniale cela altresì un'altra ben più problematica corrispondenza tra l'Inghilterra vittoriana e la realtà contemporanea statunitense.

2. Henry Jekyll tra romanzo e serie tv
Sin dall'inizio della serie, il dottor Jekyll confida all'amico Victor Frankenstein di odiare il padre per aver causato la morte di sua madre, abbandonata con un figlio illegittimo. Nella trasposizione televisiva di Logan, Henry Jekyll è quindi figlio di un aristocratico inglese e di una giovane donna indiana morta di lebbra.

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[6] "The seeker after forbidden knowledge" (Punter 1996: 87). Ribelle e maledetto come il dottor Faust di Marlowe e Goethe, il *cercatore della conoscenza proibita* è un errante punito per una specifica forma di ribellione alla legge naturale (Onega 2019: 119).

Nella prima puntata, nonostante neghi il risvolto economico della morte paterna e affermi di voler vendicare sua madre, il giovane Jekyll attende il decesso del padre per poter ereditare il titolo nobiliare e i suoi ricchi possedimenti: "E ti chiedi perché attendo che quell'uomo muoia. Non è per i soldi o per il titolo. […] Lui è completamente malvagio" (*Penny Dreadful*, S3 E2). In questo caso, la trasposizione televisiva ribalta la posizione sociale di Jekyll, che, da ricco e rispettabile possidente nel romanzo, si ritrova a essere un giovane *self made-man* desideroso di raggiungere lo status paterno.

Se nell'opera di Stevenson è Hyde il personaggio selvaggio e istintivo che incarna l'identità coloniale (Daly 2007: 31), nella serie questo ruolo è affidato a Jekyll. In *Penny Dreadful* il giovane Henry mostra un lato irascibile del proprio carattere, che si associa alla sua funzione di *cercatore della conoscenza proibita*. La ricerca, dettata da ragioni personali e non in nome del progresso scientifico o umanitario, si lega direttamente alle ragioni della sua rabbia coloniale contro il padre e il suo Paese.

L'elemento della pozione, presente nel romanzo, diventa oggetto del lavoro comune dei due scienziati Victor Frankenstein ed Henry Jekyll. Poi, combinando i propri studi, modificano il siero per rendere definitiva la trasformazione che il precedente composto di Jekyll permetteva solo temporaneamente. La metafora dell'ipocrisia vittoriana, rappresentata dal bipolarismo di Jekyll e Hyde nel romanzo (Veeder 2009: 112), è reinterpretata da Logan attraverso il conflitto interiore dello scienziato di Stevenson, ridotto a un giovane studioso e diligente, alla luce del razzismo e dell'opprimente colonialismo inglese di metà Ottocento. Infatti, nella prima apparizione del personaggio nella serie, Jekyll attraversa le vie della città e subisce le ripetute critiche degli abitanti, che lo bollano come immigrato.

Nella serie, Logan attribuisce alla popolazione di Londra la stereotipata visione orientalista che percepiva gli indiani in Inghilterra come figure irrazionali o quanto meno a-razionali, non solo incapaci di ogni dinamismo ma spesso preda di atti di violenza: "la figura del selvaggio" (Surdich 1993: 937)[7]. La violenza, che Jekyll manifesta nel romanzo attraverso il suo alter ego Hyde, è analizzabile, in una prospettiva postcoloniale, come la reazione nei confronti dell'inarrestabile azione vessatoria dell'Occidente (Lewis 1990).

Una signora anziana addirittura rovescia dell'acqua dal proprio balcone, intimandogli di tornare in India[8]. In pochi secondi Logan tratteggia, da un lato, il quadro di un'età vittoriana che tende ad associare al razzismo, di matrice imperialista, un'aggressività giustificata dal colonialismo; dall'altro, ricostruisce, attraverso le persone assiepate nelle scale del palazzo dove vive Frankenstein, il ritratto di un'epoca di contraddizioni e dislivelli sociali. Infatti, il regista sceglie di presentare un quadro storico ben preciso: la Londra dei *penny dreadful*, dei crimini sensazionali e delle violenze orribili, ma soprattutto del capitalismo che privilegia il profitto rispetto a qualsiasi senso di moralità e solidarietà sociale (Lee & King 2015).

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[7] Van Ginneken sottolinea che i personaggi indiani nelle serie tv americane sono rappresentati come emblemi di un'alterità inconciliabile con lo stile di vita e le usanze statunitensi, subendo un processo di stereotipizzazione, simile a quello toccato ad altri popoli indigeni (Van Ginneken 2017: 224).

[8] Il razzismo britannico era cresciuto specialmente dopo la rivolta dei *sepoys*, gli indigeni indiani arruolati come ausiliari nei reparti dell'esercito britannico, che diedero vita a una ribellione nel 1857 contro l'oppressivo potere coloniale esercitato dalla Compagnia britannica delle Indie Orientali (Torri 1975: 17).

Nella scelta di Logan di sfruttare un contesto storico per inserire tematiche come l'integrazione sociale, il razzismo e l'omosessualità sembra di poter scorgere un riferimento politico: la terza e ultima stagione di *Penny Dreadful* viene trasmessa negli Stati Uniti tra maggio e giugno del 2016, proprio nei mesi di campagna elettorale per le presidenziali americane da cui sarebbe uscito vincitore Donald Trump. Come sarà ancora più evidente nello spin-off *Penny Dreadful: City of Angels*, che contiene una critica alla politica migratoria dell'amministrazione Trump e in particolare al progetto del Muro tra Messico e Stati Uniti[9], anche dietro le tematiche della terza stagione della serie è possibile intravedere un riferimento all'antisemitismo, al razzismo e all'omofobia che aleggiano nella società americana e saranno sfruttate dai repubblicani per le elezioni del 2016.

Lo stesso Jekyll, rivolgendosi a Frankenstein, appare cosciente delle potenzialità rovinose della rabbia che porta dentro, ma è anche convinto che si tratti di un male collettivo:

> Alla fine, dobbiamo essere ciò che il mondo ci chiede. Dobbiamo prendere la lussuria, l'avarizia e l'ambizione e seppellirle. Tutte le cose estranee e brutte! Tutte le cose che siamo veramente! L'altro! L'altra parte di noi! Non possiamo permetterlo! (*Penny Dreadful*, S3 E3).

Nonostante lo scienziato della serie di Logan sia notevolmente diverso da quello del romanzo, la base dell'opera di Stevenson resta salda: lo "sdoppiamento gotico" rappresenta una scissione dell'individualità che ha origine dalle contraddizioni sociali del contesto tardo-vittoriano (Akilli & Öz 2016: 20). L'elemento coloniale è originariamente presente nel romanzo: infatti, Hyde viene paragonato da Utterson a un "maledetto Juggernaut" (Stevenson 1985: 9)[10] e il suo aspetto è associato direttamente a "Satanasso in persona" (13)[11]. Il tema del doppio è elaborato secondo una corrispondenza tra un'identità razionale e una selvaggia e, quindi, tra britannici e immigrati[12].

Hyde rappresenta l'alterità in senso assoluto ed emerge nel romanzo come un personaggio sinistro associato implicitamente al mondo coloniale. Tuttavia la sua presenza nella società appare inevitabile. Hyde non può essere espulso dalla personalità di Jekyll, così come gli immigrati indiani da Londra, che, al contrario, sono sempre più numerosi durante l'età vittoriana[13]. In questo senso, la vicenda di Jekyll e Hyde diventa espressione

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[9] Lo spin-off della serie nasce con il preciso intento di mostrare al pubblico, pur attraverso un'ambientazione storica, i fallimenti e le mostruosità che Logan attribuisce all'amministrazione Trump (Öz 2023: 265).

[10] "Some damned Juggernaut" (Stevenson 2008: 7). Il termine deriva dallo hindi *jagannath*, uno degli appellativi di Krishna, e si riferisce per sineddoche all'idolo della divinità trainato su un carro sotto le cui ruote talvolta si gettavano i fedeli. Il riferimento allo "Juggernaut" è utilizzato però da Utterson nell'uso comune vittoriano, cioè come dispregiativo verso coloro che facevano abuso di alcol.

[11] "Really like Satan" (7).

[12] Per il tema del doppio nel romanzo di Stevenson: cfr. Dryden 2003; Riem 1990; Rutelli 1984; Ghezzani 2017: 351-379.

[13] Per tutto il XIX secolo i britannici incentivarono l'"immigrazione forzata di lavoratori" provenienti dall'India verso il Regno Unito e le altre colonie, imponendo spesso forme di sfruttamento di matrice razzista (Caccamo 2021: 213).

della paura coloniale nell'Inghilterra di fine Ottocento (Bernhard Jackson 2013: 81). Inoltre, rispetto agli altri personaggi del romanzo, Edward Hyde ha poche possibilità di esprimersi nel corso della narrazione.

Si tratta di un comportamento tipicamente colonialista: assicurarsi che il colonizzato rimanga un soggetto passivo e sottomesso (Mishra 2021: 81). Anche quando tenta di parlare, mostrando l'ipocrisia della società vittoriana, Utterson lo mette a tacere e dà mostra di un atteggiamento educativo di superiorità colonialista: "Non è questo il modo di parlare" (Stevenson 1985: 35)[14]. Al contempo, Jekyll è convinto che Hyde eserciti un "gelido livore" (12-13)[15] su di lui.

Jekyll nel romanzo individua in se stesso l'esistenza simultanea del Bene e del Male, ma mostra un certo disprezzo verso il dualismo. Volendo riconoscere la propria identità nella sua purezza, si chiede: "se ognuno di questi [elementi] avesse potuto essere confinato in un'entità separata, allora la vita stessa avrebbe potuto sgravarsi di tutto ciò che è insopportabile" (139)[16]. Anche questo passaggio conserva un valore coloniale: la separazione dell'identità e, quindi, il dualismo, in opposizione alla fluidità di carattere e d'azione, rappresenta un modo di esercitare il proprio controllo sulla parte socialmente meno accettabile (Mishra 2021: 81). In questo senso, Jekyll non solo si fa interprete delle paure della società vittoriana che, attraverso il colonialismo, vede minacciata la purezza della propria identità inglese, ma risulta vittima delle norme sociali, anche quando potrebbe essere libero trasformandosi in Hyde (Saposnik 1971: 715).

Il dottor Jekyll di Stevenson appartiene a una classe sociale elevata, come dimostrato dalla servitù ai suoi ordini e dall'abitazione dotata di un laboratorio, acquistata da un chirurgo. Nel romanzo, lo scienziato mostra un duplice atteggiamento verso la socialità[17]: da un lato, si sottolinea come Jekyll sia molto sincero e generoso con i suoi amici al punto da organizzare pranzi a casa sua, a cui era spesso invitato anche l'avvocato Utterson; dall'altro, il protagonista del romanzo tiene i propri amici all'oscuro degli esperimenti che conduce. Inoltre, con la trasformazione in Hyde, il personaggio manifesta tutto il proprio individualismo privo di ogni freno inibitore, godendo di "sussulti improvvisi" e "reconditi piaceri" (Stevenson 1985: 161)[18].

Se, nell'opera di Stevenson, la ricerca della purezza per Jekyll risponde a un'esigenza scientifica, nella serie tv appare un'urgenza identitaria, dettata dalla necessità di acquisire un preciso ruolo sociale e, una volta occupato, di consolidarlo: Henry deve, cioè, convincersi di poter essere aristocratico. Infatti, il suo status di *lord*, ereditato dal padre defunto nell'ultima puntata, rappresenta il lato oscuro della sua personalità. Jekyll vive sospeso in un limbo

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[14] "That is not fitting language" (Stevenson 2008: 15).

[15] "Black, sneering coolness" (7).

[16] "If each […] could be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable" (53).

[17] Come osserva Saposnik, l'uomo vittoriano era costantemente perseguitato da un ineluttabile senso di divisione. La contraddizione di essere una creatura razionale e impulsiva, civile e bestiale, con un comportamento diverso nella sfera privata e pubblica, lo spingeva a diventare un attore, capace di interpretare la parte di sé migliore che la situazione sociale richiedeva (Saposnik 1971: 716).

[18] "Leaping impulses and secret pleasures" (Stevenson 2008: 60).

identitario per tutta la terza stagione della serie tv, in attesa di trovare la posizione certa e rassicurante a cui è destinato: la nobiltà e, cioè, il male.

3. Il male e il dispatrio

Per cogliere il significato politico del personaggio di Henry Jekyll all'interno della serie, è necessario analizzare in che modo il genere gotico stabilisca un legame ideologico con la prospettiva postcoloniale: l'idea del male nella letteratura gotica e le dinamiche relazionali tra colonizzati e colonizzatori, accanto allo studio della subalternità e della marginalità, convergono nel comune interesse per l'Altro e per tutti gli elementi ad esso legati (Khair 2009: 3).

Il giovane Henry sembra vivere una condizione traumatizzante di dispatrio[19]. Il termine *dispatrio*, usato per la prima volta da Meneghello, traduce *dispossessed* usato da Henry James in *Turn of the Screw*, combinando l'italiano *espatrio* con il prefisso *dis-* di derivazione vicentina in un neologismo al crocevia delle tre lingue (Sulis 2012: 79-102). In questo caso, la categoria del dispatrio è funzionale a rendere contemporaneamente il senso di disappartenenza culturale e territoriale e la volontà, almeno iniziale, di distaccarsi dall'esempio paterno. Infatti, Lord Hyde, il padre di Henry nella serie, in quanto membro della comunità imperialista britannica, incarna il male ontologico, che Jekyll crede di portare dentro di sé.

Il dualismo dell'animo umano tra il Bene e il Male non si configura solo come un'eredità genetica trasmessa dal padre, bensì come una condizione universale, ricollegandosi al messaggio originario del romanzo: "Siamo tutti doppi in un certo senso, nel nostro intimo. Angeli e demoni, luce e buio. La spinta tra i due è la vera forza che dà energia alle nostre vite" (*Penny Dreadful*, S3 E2). Infatti, le parole di Henry della serie tv ricalcano in questa concezione dell'uomo quelle pronunciate, nel momento della confessione finale, dal dottor Jekyll nell'opera di Stevenson: "Gli esseri che incontriamo sono una mescolanza di bene e di male: solo Hyde, nel novero degli umani, era il male allo stato puro" (Stevenson 1985: 147)[20].

La condizione esistenziale descritta da Jekyll, tuttavia, assume un significato diverso nella prospettiva postcoloniale. Infatti, la condizione di scissione interiore e di perenne sospensione, in bilico su un margine identitario e sociale, produce in Jekyll un sentimento di estraneità verso la sua patria, cioè l'India. La dialettica conflittuale che si instaura prevede prima la negazione dell'appartenenza a una patria e poi la necessità di riconoscere l'Inghilterra come il Paese dove vuole vivere e dimostrare le proprie capacità[21]: quest'aspetto giustifica e spiega il bisogno di perfezionamento e integrazione del personaggio.

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[19] Per il nesso che lega trauma e migrazione: Schouler-Ocak 2015: 179.

[20] "All human beings, as we meet them, are commingled out of good and evil: and Edward Hyde, alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil" (Stevenson 2008: 55).

[21] Gli individui che hanno vissuto personalmente il dispatrio difficilmente tornano ad abitare la propria terra d'origine, ma conservano "una memoria acuta che li mette in una posizione privilegiata". Sono individui dal doppio sguardo perché, giunti adulti nel Paese d'arrivo, osservano la società "con gli occhi di chi ha già un'ampia esperienza nella vita, un'esperienza quasi sempre molto intensa, qualche volta addirittura drammatica" (Vanvolsem 2002: 8). Il dualismo identitario di Jekyll segue l'immagine del Giano bifronte, dotato di un duplice sguardo, interno ed esterno, necessario per trovare il giusto distacco per guardare e raccontare (Brodskij 1988).

Jekyll, ad eccezione del primo incontro con Frankenstein, non fa mai riferimento alle proprie radici indiane o alla propria religione, né mostra di conoscere bene o voler approfondire la lingua indiana. Proprio attraverso gli studi di chimica, il giovane Henry prova a ritagliarsi uno spazio emotivo nuovo e unificante, un "terzo spazio" sovversivo (Bhabha 1990: 211), in cui il personaggio soggetto al dispatrio "riscrive i confini della propria identità e della propria storia personale" (Trifirò 2013: 109).

Se il colore della pelle e la lingua parlata, che conserva un accento indiano[22], rappresentano un ostacolo per l'inclusione sociale, il successo negli studi non solo lo dovrebbe porre al pari dei propri interlocutori, ma dovrebbe consentire il proprio riscatto personale. Jekyll individua nello studio uno spazio "in-between", all'interno del quale possono coesistere e dialogare "metamorfosi, estraneità e conflitti", capace di colmare con l'impegno e la creatività "lo spazio del trauma" (De Rogatis 2023: 5).

Lo studio è accompagnato da un atteggiamento di diligente imitazione del modello inglese attraverso l'assimilazione della sua cultura scientifica, del suo linguaggio, delle sue forme espressive e persino del suo modo di vestire. Nel caso di Jekyll, pertanto, la *mimesis* diventa *mimicry*, cioè la forza che spinge a voler somigliare a un modello di riferimento e innesca il desiderio mimetico (Benjamin 2005: 720). Si tratta della stessa spinta che Bhabha individua alla base del comportamento ambivalente del *mimic man,* cioè del colonizzato indotto ad adottare lingua, cultura e valori del colonizzatore (Bhabha 1994).

In questo modo, il giovane Henry prova a superare il conflitto tra "vuoto identitario e identità 'multipla', tra il non-essere-più e l'essere-molti-insieme, tra l'io-non-sono e l'io siamo" (Quaquarelli 2010: 146), ma non può giungere a una completa anglicizzazione. Tra gli elementi che definiscono la sua incompiutezza emerge l'impossibilità di affermare il tratto più pericoloso per la società vittoriana, cioè l'omosessualità. La società vittoriana non tollerava l'omoerotismo, che era sistematicamente represso. Inoltre, la Gran Bretagna si distingueva nell'Ottocento come l'unico Paese dell'Europa occidentale che criminalizzava tutti gli atti omosessuali maschili con pene draconiane (Adut 2005: 214).

Il confronto tra Victor Frankenstein ed Henry Jekyll, accomunati dalla condizione di *cercatori della conoscenza proibita*, è funzionale a mostrare la parabola discendente del secondo che, alla fine della serie, diventa Lord Hyde. Al contempo, la personalità di Victor, che decide infine di non iniettare la pozione a Lily e di liberarla, segue un'evoluzione positiva. All'inizio, il desiderio spasmodico di possedere la donna lo fa apparire un amante disperato, pronto a rapire Lily pur di soddisfare i propri impulsi pigmalionici. Nel corso della stagione emerge la sua umanità, la sua capacità di mettersi in gioco per le forze del Bene, come appare chiaramente nello scontro finale con Dracula.

Jekyll inizialmente si impone come la parte razionale della coppia di amici, cioè l'Io freudiano che cerca di contenere gli impulsi dell'Es: infatti, cerca di dissuadere il collega Frankenstein dal suo piano ai danni di Lily. La sovrapposizione tra le due figure di scienziati, che fondano lo stereotipo dello "scienziato pazzo" (Poore 2017: 20), è ricorrente

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[22] L'accento è uno dei fattori che più caratterizza i personaggi indiani nelle serie tv americane. La cosiddetta *brown voice* diventa un "marcatore etnico" per tutti gli immigrati indiani di prima generazione (Davé 2005: 316-319).

nelle trasposizioni cinematografiche o televisive. In particolare, nel film *Frankenstein* (1931) di James Whale si verifica un caso di sincretismo tra le due figure: il protagonista si chiama Henry Frankenstein (Frayling 2005: 114).

Nel corso della terza stagione di *Penny Dreadful*, la figura di Jekyll muta rapidamente, manifestando una graduale opacizzazione che lo spoglia di ogni valore umano. Più che un'evoluzione, si tratta di una regressione, un ritorno alla rabbia adolescenziale, come emerge dalle parole di Frankenstein:

> Ricordi quando a tarda notte, nella nostra stanza, davanti al narghilè, elencavi i nomi di tutti i ragazzi che ti avevano insultato? L'elenco delle tue potenziali vittime. Le tue preghiere notturne. La rabbia che avevi dentro, tutta quella rabbia (*Penny Dreadful*, S3 E1).

Il giovane Henry resta fedele a un ideale di scienza in grado di farlo sentire socialmente accettato e al livello del titolo aristocratico che erediterà. In questo senso, tra Jekyll e Frankenstein si instaura, nella serie di Logan, un dualismo oppositivo che svela due diverse interpretazioni della figura del *cercatore della conoscenza proibita*. Punter ha dedicato un ampio spazio all'analisi a questa figura archetipica del gotico[23], che ha trovato la più matura realizzazione ottocentesca proprio nei protagonisti dei romanzi *Frankenstein* e *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*[24]. La sua caratterizzazione, modellata sul Satana del *Paradise Lost* di Milton, lo rende un efficace esempio di eroe *outcast*: i dottori Frankenstein e Jekyll, come il Satana di Milton[25], "una volta ripudiati e cacciati dalla grazia del proprio creatore, decidono di ricoprire il ruolo di avversari nei confronti dei responsabili della propria origine e di contrastarli colpendo chi è a loro più caro" (Borroni 2022: 14). Infatti, una delle caratteristiche fondamentali della ricerca sacrilega del *cercatore* è proprio la morbosa insaziabilità[26]: "esaminare le cause della vita"[27] (Shelley 1994: 52) diventa per Frankenstein e Jekyll un'ossessione irrefrenabile.

La pulsione patologica, che spinge i due scienziati a continuare la propria ricerca, li rende schiavi delle loro ambizioni. Tuttavia il Dottor Jekyll della serie, come moderno *cercatore*, ha perso il tratto eroico che apparteneva ai personaggi prometeici di Shelley e

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[23] Si fa riferimento al significato attribuito da Frye all'archetipo, inteso cioè come "un simbolo, di solito un'immagine, che ricorre nella letteratura abbastanza spesso da essere riconosciuto come uno degli elementi di un'esperienza letteraria nel suo complesso" (Frye 1969: 481).

[24] In particolare, Punter sottolinea che il sapere a cui tutti vogliono accedere è il segreto per sconfiggere la morte. La conoscenza proibita che l'uomo ottocentesco ricerca è simile a quella degli alchimisti: la conoscenza della vita eterna, la pietra filosofale e tutte quelle forme di sapere che potrebbero rendere gli uomini pari agli dèi (Punter 1996: 105).

[25] Anche la creatura, e non solo il dottore, in *Frankenstein* mostra una caratterizzazione miltonica. Infatti, nel quindicesimo capitolo, la creatura non solo afferma di aver letto e apprezzato il *Paradise Lost* di Milton, ma persino di identificarsi con la figura di Satana (Wollstonecraft Shelley 1891: 180).

[26] In riferimento alle figure del vampiro, del *cercatore* e dell'*errante*, Punter osserva che la possibilità di soddisfare i loro desideri e saziare i propri istinti comporterebbe un disastro sociale e la trasgressione dei confini tra naturale, umano e divino, ragion per cui i loro piani sono destinati al fallimento (Punter 1996: 105).

[27] "To examine the causes of life" (Wollstonecraft Shelley 1891: 69).

Fig. 1: Jekyll scopre che Frankenstein è dipendente dalla morfina. © Jonathan Hession.

Byron, conducendo i propri studi lontano dalla vita sociale[28]. Rispetto al dottor Frankenstein, viene meno nel ruolo di *cercatore* svolto da Jekyll quell'osmosi tra individuo e società che vedeva lo scienziato violare le regole della natura per il futuro benessere dell'umanità. Si esaurisce, cioè, la contraddizione morale tra giusto e sbagliato contro cui combatteva il dottor Frankenstein di Mary Shelley, nel tentativo di rianimare i corpi defunti e, quindi, di vincere la morte: Jekyll, ormai disilluso dalla realtà esterna, ha perso questo scrupolo.

4. Il doppio e l'omosessualità
Il dualismo è un tratto tipico della serie tv di Logan. Se è vero che tutta la serie tv è articolata secondo corrispondenze tra i personaggi, è necessario sottolineare che il tema del doppio è tradizionalmente legato a un'emersione del represso omoerotico (Roda 2008: 27): infatti, il narcisismo che crea la duplicazione si può intendere come una forma di omosessualità solo apparentemente sublimata (Conrotto 2000: 168)[29].

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[28] Questa è una tendenza comune a tutti i personaggi della serie, che si trovano, pertanto, nella condizione di "outcast" (Ladwig 2019): Ethan proviene dagli Stati Uniti, Brona/Lily è un'immigrata irlandese, Mr. Lyle è ebreo e omosessuale; Calibano è una creatura deforme, con un aspetto fuori dall'ordinario; Vanessa, per gran parte della terza stagione, vive in isolamento la propria depressione.

[29] Dello stesso tema si è occupato anche Freud per il caso Schreber: cfr. Freud 1986: 76-77; Izcovich 2020: 57.

La storia di Jekyll e Hyde, secondo Clover, subisce nel passaggio transmediale una sessualizzazione della trama e dei suoi temi (Clover 1992: 24), come si evince da *Psycho* di Alfred Hitchcock. Questo dato assume un valore decisivo se confrontato con l'immaginario occidentale che è tradizionalmente associato all'India.

L'idea di una famiglia numerosa e patriarcale, dominata da valori positivi come il rispetto e il lavoro, ma anche anacronistici come l'omofobia e il sessismo, è tra gli stereotipi più radicati e sostenuti dalle serie tv e dai film americani e britannici degli ultimi anni, come *The family* o *Bing Bang Theory* (Malik 2013: 510-528). Inoltre, alcuni reality show come *Indian Matchmaking*, prodotto da Netflix, riaffermano la tradizione dei matrimoni combinati in India. In questo contesto, il personaggio di Apu Nahasapeemapetilon di *The Simpsons* esprime perfettamente la percezione americana degli immigrati indiani, rappresentati in uno stato di subalternità sociale, dimostrato dai lavori umili che spesso svolgono (Gottschlich 2011: 283).

Il caso di *The Simpsons*, insieme ad altri sceneggiati come *Bridgerton 2*, è utile per spiegare come la presenza degli indiani nelle serie tv britanniche e americane rientri nel fenomeno del *tokenismo*, che prevede l'inserimento di gruppi subalterni o donne in rappresentazioni mediali, funzionale a evitare l'accusa di sessismo o razzismo "senza però agire di concerto sulla reale inclusione" (Putignano 2022: 96). Il risultato è un'immagine stereotipata del gruppo etnico radicata nell'immaginario collettivo americano e, in generale, occidentale.

Al contempo, come osservano Vanita e Kidwai, la società indiana è tradizionalmente contraria alle unioni omoerotiche e rifiuta i matrimoni tra persone dello stesso sesso (Vanita 2001: XVIII). Solo nel 2018 è stata abolita la legge, in vigore dal 1861 e quindi risalente al dominio britannico, che definiva i rapporti omosessuali contro l'ordine naturale e li puniva con una multa e con una pena detentiva fino a dieci anni.

Anche la percezione delle relazioni omoerotiche tra bianchi americani e indiani, nella letteratura come nel cinema, è legata a una serie di preconcetti diffusi: le relazioni di omosessuali occidentali, come Andrè Gide o E. M. Forster, con uomini arabi o indiani possono essere intese in termini di riconoscimento e scoperta reciproca, oltre che di turismo sessuale e sfruttamento (Dyer 2013: 8).

Un primo passo in avanti contro questa visione stereotipata è stato compiuto da Kureishi con *The Buddha of Suburbia*, prima con il romanzo e poi con la serie tv ad esso ispirata. Il giovane protagonista Karim è figlio di una donna inglese e un uomo indiano, cioè la situazione di partenza opposta rispetto a Jekyll di *Penny Dreadful*, ma anche lui si sente inglese e vorrebbe essere riconosciuto come tale dalla popolazione londinese: "Mi chiamo Karim Amir e sono un vero inglese, più o meno. La gente mi considera uno strano tipo di inglese, come se appartenessi a una nuova razza, dal momento che sono nato dall'incrocio di due vecchie culture" (Kureishi 2003: 7)[30].

Il padre, per sentirsi socialmente accettato, si fa interprete del sapere esotico della cultura indiana e diventa un vero e proprio guru, il "Budda delle periferie" famoso in tutta la città: solo così riceve la stima e l'ammirazione dell'alta società londinese. Spinto

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[30] "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories" (Kureishi 1990: 3).

dall'esempio paterno da cui vuole prendere le distanze, Karim si mostra desideroso di fuggire dalla periferia londinese: nonostante cerchi di allinearsi alla cultura inglese, ogni confronto con le altre persone smentisce la sua ambizione di essere percepito come inglese (Cornea 2010: 66). Infatti, come primo ruolo a teatro gli viene assegnata la parte di Mowgli di *The Jungle Book*, la celebre opera colonialista e razzista di Kipling.

Anche Karim subisce episodi di violenza per motivi razziali, come dimostrato dal caso del padre di Helen. La sua contraddizione identitaria, come per Jekyll, ha un pieno riscontro nell'orientamento sessuale: Karim è attratto dal giovane Charlie, ma, al contempo, ha un rapporto sessuale con Helen ad Anerley Park[31]. Il personaggio di Jekyll creato da Logan, pur secondario nella trama, a differenza di Karim, e quindi privo dello spessore psicologico che avrebbe meritato, nasce proprio in contrapposizione a ogni stereotipo culturale attribuito al mondo indiano: Jekyll è un medico di successo, omosessuale e totalmente privo del sostegno di una famiglia.

Non a caso, nella serie, Jekyll si congeda da Frankenstein solo dopo che l'amico gli ha dato prova di un sentimento non solo platonico, ma proprio pigmalionico e carnale per Lily: il disvelamento dell'amore eterosessuale convince il giovane Henry ad andarsene. I loro rapporti, nella serie tv, sono attraversati da una sottile ambiguità che rivela una certa carica erotica.

Infatti, nel primo episodio, Jekyll, con evidente gelosia, critica l'amico per non avergli mai scritto in cinque anni e tuttavia accorre in suo sostegno, appena gli chiede aiuto. Le dichiarazioni di affetto[32], gli sguardi carichi di pathos, i momenti di contatto e intimità, associati alla sostanziale solitudine di Jekyll, suggeriscono una diversa natura di sentimenti che entrano in contrasto con la rispettabilità vittoriana.

La soluzione che Henry escogita nella serie tv risiede nella possibilità di sublimare i propri impulsi: la sublimazione, nella visione freudiana, consiste nella trasformazione dell'energia dei desideri dell'Es, in particolare gli impulsi sessuali, in pensieri e attività socialmente utili e apprezzati (Chauchard 1990: 77)[33]. Gli impulsi istintuali vengono quindi repressi, con la possibilità di sfruttarli per attività non istintuali e socialmente valorizzate.

Anche quest'elemento potrebbe derivare da uno spunto del romanzo: infatti, l'ipotesi dell'omosessualità aleggiava tra le possibili ragioni che legavano Jekyll ad Hyde nell'opera di Stevenson (Dean 1996: 16). Se il romanzo di Stevenson è stato considerato come un'allegoria gotica dell'omosessualità repressa e dell'abuso occulto di sostanze stupefacenti (Schauer 2012: 1), è anche vero che *Penny Dreadful* propone spesso una rilettura dei miti gotici in chiave *queer* (Bogdanski 2023: 233). Lo stesso Logan riconosce una corrispondenza tra il proprio orientamento sessuale e alcune caratteristiche dei mostri gotici (Sottilotta 2017: 13):

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[31]   Kureishi non esprime giudizi morali sulla sessualità dei suoi personaggi, al contrario li libera dai tabù sociali. Infatti, i personaggi di *The Buddha of Suburbia* stabiliscono le loro relazioni sessuali sia con maschi che con femmine indistintamente (Kumar Upadhyay 2021: 149-150).

[32]   Jekyll ricorda a Frankenstein: "Sono un tuo amico vero. Ieri, oggi e sempre" (*Penny Dreadful*, S3 E1).

[33]   Secondo Mieli, Freud riconosce "un contenuto omosessuale profondo in quei tipi di sublimazione che si traducono in dedizione alla comunità e agli interessi pubblici". Il desiderio omosessuale si trasformerebbe quindi in una "forza di coesione sociale", come traspare dall'impegno scientifico di Jekyll (Mieli 2017: 118-122). Tuttavia è solo un passaggio momentaneo: quest'impegno sociale viene meno quando Frankenstein libera Lily e Jekyll vuole continuare a condurre i suoi studi in autonomia.

[*Penny Dreadful*] affonda le sue radici nella poesia del movimento romantico e nell'orrore gotico di Shelley, Stoker e Wilde, ma anche nelle lotte personali di un drammaturgo nato nel ventesimo secolo, nella cui mente le loro belle parole - e i loro bei mostri - si sono combinati per trarre una nuova narrazione dai loro temi eternamente riconoscibili (Gosling 2015: 10, traduzione mia).

Jekyll non solo auspica che Victor si emancipi dall'uso della morfina, ma offre il proprio contributo per strappare Lily a Dorian. In questo senso, l'attrazione omosessuale mostrerebbe come, dietro l'apparente generosità di Jekyll nella serie tv, si nasconda in realtà un fine individualistico, l'unico amore di cui Jekyll dà prova in *Penny Dreadful*: ciò spiegherebbe la contraddizione su cui poggia il suo comportamento tra egoismo e generosità.

5. Conclusione

L'immagine complessiva di Jekyll che emerge dalla caratterizzazione della serie tv riassume i tratti letterari ereditati dal romanzo di Stevenson[34]. Pur essendo un personaggio secondario e quindi privo dello spessore narrativo che avrebbe permesso di approfondire le sue origini, il passaggio transmediale dal romanzo alla serie tv rivela la frustrazione e la debolezza intrinseca di Jekyll (Favaro 2022), sfruttando un punto di vista inquisitorio verso la società, che richiama quello prescelto in seguito da Philips per *Joker*.

Alla luce di quanto analizzato finora, la prospettiva transmediale permette di considerare *Penny Dreadful* un perfetto esempio di *transfinzionalità*. Nel passaggio dal testo letterario al medium televisivo il dualismo rigido viene scardinato in funzione di una maggiore fluidità o, meglio, "confluenza" (Akilli & Öz 2016: 25). La metafora della "confluenza", che rappresenta il congiungersi di due corsi d'acqua in un corpo unico ma eterogeneo, può essere usata nel caso di *Penny Dreadful* per riferirsi al dualismo che è alla base di quasi ogni personaggio della serie[35], senza presentare però più confini netti e distinguibili: le due parti dell'anima dei personaggi convivono e si influenzano reciprocamente, pertanto non restano separate.

La possibilità di modificare parti delle storie originarie di questi personaggi gotici e trarre elementi narrativi da fonti eterogenee, tipica della *transfinzionalità*, consente la convergenza di trame teoricamente indipendenti che ora si ritrovano invece collegate[36], come quelle di Frankenstein e Jekyll.

Al contempo, *Penny Dreadful*, in virtù delle sue particolari caratteristiche transmediali,

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[34] In particolare, Stevenson attinge la sua concezione della personalità multipla dalle teorie frenologiche sviluppate dal medico austriaco Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828) (Stiles 2006: 881).

[35] Nella serie tv Dorian Gray ama il potere e la libertà, anche se inizialmente è succube dell'amore per Lily. Frankenstein crede nelle potenzialità della scienza, ma rifiuta la propria creatura rianimata, cioè Calibano. Anche il personaggio di Vanessa presenta un dualismo evidente: è profondamente cristiana e, al contempo, viene posseduta dal Diavolo, di cui subisce il fascino.

[36] Si realizza, nel caso di *Penny Dreadful*, quello che Mittiga ha definito "ubiquitous storytelling", cioè una struttura finzionale spesso priva di consequenzialità temporale, per cui i personaggi muoiono e risorgono per fini narrativi, ma soprattutto al cui interno "i differenti universi narrativi, prima relegati ad ambiti specifici, tendono a collidere, a sovrapporsi e a ibridarsi" (Mittiga 2020: 111).

sfrutta a proprio vantaggio la *memoria* del personaggio riprodotto, cioè la somma delle stratificazioni, delle caratteristiche figurative e narrative che, nel corso degli anni, si sono accumulate sullo stesso personaggio.

Così come ciascuna versione di Frankenstein con i suoi elementi distintivi, dal romanzo di Shelley ai modelli cinematografici di Brooks e Branagh, esercita un'influenza sull'immaginario collettivo del personaggio, allo stesso modo Jekyll di *Penny Dreadful* presenta elementi del precedente di Stevenson e del film di Mamoulian. In particolare, Logan coglie il tema della repressione sessuale presente nella trasposizione cinematografica *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) di Mamoulian, legato però al puritanesimo vittoriano, rielaborandolo in chiave *queer*. L'ibridismo letterario e cinematografico di Jekyll in *Penny Dreadful* è funzionale, pertanto, alla discussione di temi attuali come l'inclusione sociale e l'integrazione di culture diverse, legate da rapporti coloniali.

La compresenza di Bene e Male nell'anima del personaggio di Stevenson assume una maggiore complessità nella serie tv: Logan, infatti, sceglie di analizzare l'evoluzione della personalità di Jekyll, che, sebbene appaia destinata al male per l'eredità paterna in senso morale e darwinistico, è in realtà il risultato dei condizionamenti sociali subiti.

A differenza di Frankenstein, che pur insegue un amore impossibile e disperato, Henry Jekyll è un uomo solo, orfano e privo di qualsiasi relazione sociale, ad eccezione dell'amicizia con Victor. Lo studioso di origine indiana vive alienato dalla realtà nei sotterranei del Bethlam Royal Hospital e riscopre con Victor il valore di un'amicizia fraterna e del contatto umano. La prospettiva postcoloniale permette di spiegare il passaggio da uno stato iniziale di *mimic man*, in cui Jekyll è spinto ad adottare la lingua e la cultura inglese, alla conclusiva "violenza epistemica" (Spivak 1988: 57) di Hyde, causata dall'imposizione coloniale di una gerarchia sociale, razziale e, in questo caso, anche sessuale.

Il razzismo della popolazione inglese, il dissidio paterno e l'omosessualità latente caratterizzano una nuova figura di *cercatore della conoscenza proibita*, basata sulla ricerca di un compromesso tra l'identità indiana e quella inglese, tra la libertà sessuale e l'idea di onorabilità vittoriana.

Jekyll si discosta, quindi, dalla figura prometeica, incarnata da Frankenstein: Henry non studia per assicurare all'umanità un futuro migliore, bensì per migliorare la propria vita. Infatti, riguardo i suoi attacchi improvvisi di rabbia, il giovane scienziato dichiara all'inizio per poi ricredersi: "Ho imparato a controllarlo. Questa è l'essenza del mio lavoro ora" (*Penny Dreadful*, S3 E1).

La trasformazione in Hyde coincide con il momento in cui avviene il distacco da Frankenstein, che mette in luce tutte le debolezze di Henry: il successo professionale non lo renderà un vero inglese. La volontà di sottolineare la solitudine e l'emarginazione, che la società vittoriana impone a chi non è conforme ai suoi canoni, spiega come questi due fattori siano le cause della sinistra trasformazione di Jekyll in Lord Hyde in *Penny Dreadful*. In questo senso, l'ambientazione storica è funzionale a rilevare i problemi del presente: Logan proietta l'ombra della società vittoriana sulla realtà contemporanea statunitense, mandando un messaggio chiaro sui rischi e i possibili risvolti di una politica intollerante e nazionalista.

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Elisabetta Marino

A Multimedia Artist in an Ever-changing World: An Interview with Samit Basu

A filmmaker, a comics writer, a short-story author, and a novelist, Samit Basu is unquestionably a wide-ranging artist and one of the most interesting voices in contemporary Indian speculative fiction. Born in Kolkata in 1979, he earned a degree in Economics before dropping out of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, to pursue a writing career. He furthered his education in London, where he took a course in broadcasting and documentary filmmaking at the University of Westminster. He is now based in India and works between Delhi and Mumbai. He has also penned children's and young adults' narratives, as well as being a columnist and essayist.

Elisabetta Marino How did you start your career as a writer? What prompted you to undertake such a challenging life project?

Samit Basu I started writing at the age of 22, in a somewhat dramatic fashion – I got the idea for what became my first novel while in my first month at a big Indian business school, and dropped out and went home to write it. Two years later, it was published by Penguin India. I was lucky, it sold well and reviewed well and was a bestseller for several months, which started me off on this career. This was in 2003-04, and it was still a time when the West was not interested in genre books from India, so it was several years later that I had novels published in the UK and the US.

What prompted me... I had always wanted to do something creative for a living, though I did not know what it could be. India is still a very feudal, rigid society and most people still do not have much choice in what they do for work – they end up following conventional paths that are supposed to lead to financial success, social status, or immigration, ideally a combination of these. But around when I was in college, the country was changing, and for my generation it seemed possible to not go the doctor/engineer/lawyer/MBA route. I had no idea or opportunity to study the creative fields, but I had been a very enthusiastic participant in anything writing or performance related all through my childhood, and promised myself that if I ever had an idea that I thought was good enough to be a book, I would drop everything I was doing and work on that. That happened at an impractical time, but I decided to dive in when it did.

EM Your debut novel, *The Simoqin Prophecies*, is probably the first science fiction fantasy book ever published in India. Can you tell us more about it? What about the readership's reaction?

SB There are publishing worlds in a number of languages in India, and genre is not really something that we pay attention to in this part of the world – so I am sure there are multiple works between magic realism, children's books, science fiction and fantasy that were published before mine, especially if including short-form work and multiple languages. But *Simoqin* was certainly the first major-publisher English-language "big" fantasy book to be successful and go "mainstream", and was marketed by the publisher as India's first SFF novel in English – I did not know of any other, at least, but the chronology is not something I take a lot of specific pride in. I did not know much about genre when I started writing – I had read anything I could get my hands on, of course, but I had thought of SF and fantasy as convenient ways to describe books, not as whole publishing/cultural ecosystems in themselves. I got a sense of all of that only after getting published, after which I got to experience all the cultural barriers relevant to my field. The book itself is a large fantasy novel set in a multicultural world, where each region is based on a different mythology. One of the key ideas in this book was that it would be centred around an imaginary south and east, as opposed to north and west, and tell a classic fantasy story but reexamine the parts of it, subverting tropes, inserting humour, examining ridiculous cultural assumptions while also being a straightforward fantasy saga drawn from myths, folklore and pop culture. It was not a big release from a publishing point of view, so I think everyone was surprised when it hit number 1 – I certainly was, my dream at that point was just to write a novel that got published. It is difficult to place *Simoqin* genre-wise in a country that did not see genre – but it was clear that nothing like this book had been published in India before, and I think there was a certain curiosity about a young author doing something unusual as well. Whatever it was, it helped people find me, and so projects from comics and films and other media arrived, and two decades later here we are.

EM In your artistic career you have also authored some graphic novels. Why did you choose this genre? What are the advantages it offers, if compared to other expressive forms?

SB I cannot draw, and I knew no one in the comics industry, so I was delighted and surprised when a comics company approached me to write for them. Like with film, afterwards, the joy of collaboration in the core of creation is something authors rarely get to feel – it is not that publishing is a solo act, there is a whole set of people who work on a book to improve it, but the experience of working with artists in comics/graphic novels to create something bigger than the sum of its parts is truly wonderful. With film, of course, it is a hundred people working together. Artistically, each medium teaches you new ways to approach work, tell stories, consider aspects of craft that you would miss from just writing prose. Comics teaches you to edit writing better, work better with dialogue, break down stories into their elements, and consider space and layout. Spatial and visual thinking are not absolutely necessary for writing prose, but the ability to see stories visually absolutely makes you a better writer. I have come to realise over the years that I am essentially a novelist, that is where I do my best work. But working in other media certainly taught me many interesting lessons.

EM Indeed, you have also proved successful as a director. Can you tell us more about *House Arrest*, the Netflix film which was released a few months before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic? What are the issues you tackle in it?

SB To be quite honest I do not feel like I am anywhere near successful as a director – though I do think it was a personal achievement to have managed to have a film out with my name on it as writer and co-director. I do love the intersection between the arts, and have really loved working in comics, film and TV, and other media, even for projects that never saw the light of day (I did a public art project with an artist once, almost worked on a Japanese videogame, and once almost got to produce a Pokemon music video, for example). I do not think I can explain in words how chaotic Bollywood is though – it makes publishing look remarkably stable and organized – but ever since my first few books were successful, I started getting offers to write screenplays, and after writing many screenplays over many years that never got made (usually because they were ambitious fantasy or sci-fi projects that conservative Indian studios did not want to invest in), I decided to write a screenplay that was so small – set in a single flat – that no producer could tell me it was too big to make. I wrote the film that ended up becoming *House Arrest* in 2012, I think – by the time it was released it was 2019, there were very successful stars and a senior director involved, and it was very different from what I had envisioned, but I was very grateful to get the opportunity to be on set as co-director, because the process of actually making a film from start to finish is something you can only understand by going through it – much like writing a novel, though of course infinitely more chaotic.

EM How do you think the pandemic has changed our world? Have we really become better and more responsible human beings?

SB I am not sure it has changed our world – though it should have. I think it showed us a lot of things in the world that needed changing, and that humankind was not anywhere near as advanced as it thought it was. When the next crisis comes, will we do any better? I do not know.

EM Let us move to *Chosen Spirit* (2020), newly released in 2022 under the title *The City Inside*. What are the major differences between the first and second version of the narrative?

SB There are about 10,000 extra words, some of which are about including the events of 2020 and 2021 into the decade-ago background of the near future. But I do not think these are major changes, really – *Chosen Spirits* and *The City Inside* are still the same book. I look at *The City Inside* as a new draft of *Chosen Spirits.*

EM *The City Inside* has been labeled "a dystopia" or "an anti-dystopia". Yet, in the "Acknowledgements" section of the volume, you argue that your book "is set not in a dystopia, but in a best-case scenario". What do you mean by that?

SB I mean that dystopia is a function of distance. I do not see the book as dystopian, it is just a projection of real India a slight distance into the future – and a fairly optimistic prediction, the real future is going to be grimmer, but I wanted the book to be hopeful. To the rest of the world, and to relatively privileged Indians – who are the readers, I guess – it may seem dystopian, but that is because they clearly have not been following news about India, or not thinking about what it means and where all of it will go. And the book is not even about the underprivileged, or the absolutely poor and oppressed – the protagonists are all privileged, so if that seems dystopian …

When I say best-case scenario, I mean that I tried, in the book, to find hope and meaning for the central characters, but honestly if the current social, political, and economic trends in India continue, real-life future is going to look worse than anything in the book.

EM What is the role played by technology in *The City Inside?* Is it a valuable resource? Does it pose a threat to society?

SB The technology in *TCI* is all real technology, already invented, just not as widely available yet – the idea was to look at technology that is definitely going to be around a decade in the future, not invent technology in a sci-fi sense that would end up dominating the plot. For this book, the important aspect of technology was its effect on human life at the individual and societal level, and the different ways it is used for different people – technology in the US, or Europe, is very different from tech in India or China, and tech use is radically different even within India, or other countries, depending on what layer of society you are in – in terms of how much choice you have in its use, what is forced on you, what it gives you, what it takes from you. That is because people have different rights, safeguards, and opportunities in different places.

EM The society you depict in your novel is thoroughly homogenised. Difference is censored or suppressed. Is this a prerequisite for manipulation?

SB I do not think it is homogenised any more than our present-day world. But yes, censorship of difference helps manipulation. And the homogenisation of society in the book is not as terrible as it could be.

EM Current political events in India constitute the background for the novel. Can you tell us more about it? Did readers recognise that the near future you depict closely resembles their present?

SB The idea was that readers did not need to know the news the book referred to – the point was the atmosphere of the present. I was pleased to see that readers both in India and abroad managed to feel the "vibe" of the book and relate to it, which was the goal. I am not sure if readers in the west thought there were specific references they missed, because there were not in particular, or if they were there, they were explained. Most of the news

in the book is made up, or projections of previous news but knowledge of those previous real incidents is not necessary. It is very strongly rooted in Delhi, of course, but the aim is to centralise the universal experience across the world as we all face the same technologies and the same vast challenges, however differently we experience them. I strongly believe that we can understand the local environment and the local culture of any place, because differences are all surface – if we engage with empathy, nothing is foreign.

EM In your narratives characters are often on the move, drifting to other cities, looking for a place to call home. What is the meaning of "home" nowadays?

SB I do not know! I do not feel at home in the country I live in, but certainly would not feel at home elsewhere. I like to say home is wherever the wi-fi is, but I think home is really where the people you care about are. You can make new homes by caring about new people.

EM From your point of view, the point of view of a committed writer, how can literature and the arts contribute to fighting inequalities, post-truth scenarios, neoliberal hegemony? How can they foster a more equitable, just, and inclusive society?

SB I think they can do what they always have, which is inspire people, move people, make them feel things, build their empathy, entertain them. But the key victories against all these things will be won by politics, not art. Art both shapes and influences politics, but that is not its key function.

EM Can you tell us more about your latest novel, *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport*?

SB It is a science fiction adventure, out in October from Tordotcom in the US and Canada. Here is the description: Shantiport was supposed to be a gateway to the stars. But the city is sinking, and its colonist rulers are not helping anyone but themselves. Lina, a daughter of failed revolutionaries, has no desire to escape Shantiport. She loves her city and would do anything to save its people. This is, in fact, the plan for her life, made before she was even born. Her brother, Bador, is a small monkey bot with a big attitude and bigger ambitions. He wants a chance to leave this dead-end planet and explore the universe on his own terms. But that would mean abandoning the family he loves – even if they do take him for granted. When Shantiport's resident tech billionaire coerces Lina into retrieving a powerful artifact rumoured to be able to reshape reality, forces from before their time begin coalescing around the siblings. And when you throw in a piece of sentient, off-world tech with the ability to grant three wishes into the mix … None of the city's powers will know what hit them.
　　I wanted to do a fun adventure after the realities of *The City Inside*, though the book also deals with several themes.

EM What are your artistic plans for the future?

SB I honestly do not know! I have been a full-time writer for the last two decades, but the world is changing so fast, and the creative industries are under so much strain, that it is absolutely impossible to make plans. There is lots of work I want to do, and a few things in progress, but what medium it will be in, what country it will come out in and when … I have no idea. I am working on another novel, and doing a few film projects on the side, trying to make sure I remember I am very lucky to get to do any of it, and trying to make difficult guesses about what will help the work survive. Coming from where I do, I am very used to a lack of infrastructure, no supportive institutes, general confusion and chaos – but that does not make these things easier to deal with. All that said, it is lovely to have found ways to get the work to endure for two decades now and find new people to engage with in various parts of our world, so I look forward to all of it.

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Coral Ann Howells

The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry

Francesco Benozzo, *The Ridge and the Song. Sailing the Archipelago of Poetry*, preface by Antonella Riem Natale. Udine: Forum, 2022, 32 pp., € 14.25, ISBN 978-88-3283-341-6

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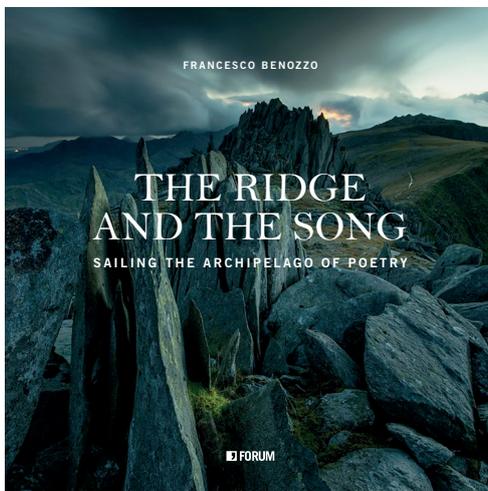
Francesco Benozzo begins his slim volume with a sweeping view back into prehistory: "We have been on earth for some 5,000,000 years […] Poetry belongs to the 5,000,000 years of our history" (13). Within this panoramic perspective across aeons of time he tells a story of origins – about human habitation on earth, on the development of language, on the birth of poetry ("Poetry is connate with the origin of man" as Shelley phrased it), when the human brain first revealed its ability "to create stories, songs, rituals, and explorations of the inner world" (13). He takes us through the long evolutionary process on a journey back towards beginnings in his urgent quest for "the indispensable awakening of poetry through these challenging and anaemic times" (15). This is his *Defence of Poetry*, for Benozzo is a practising poet, musician, and scholar of international reputation, and this beautifully produced text is a theoretical study of poetry and poetic creativity cast in the form of a long prose poem.

     This book is such a brief distillation of the man's lifetime work in its vast scope that

readers may initially feel (as I did) the need for some guidance, and Antonella Riem's preface, like her afterword in the latest publication of Benozzo's complete poems (*Sciamanica*, Udine, Forum, 2023), provides the necessary context for our understanding of his visionary thinking. She also spells out the aim of this study: "[the] goal of this intense and passionate book is to map poetically and echo the ancestral gift of naming" (8), returning to the role of our Palaeolithic ancestor *Homo Poeta*. We are given further guidance through the constant reminder of resonances between past and present provided by the photographs in the text of massive rock formations, hard geological evidence of prehistory coded into the landscapes of Benozzo's native Apennines and his adopted Welsh mountains. These images form the author's signature visual trope which is amplified in its realistic and metaphorical dimensions as he sails through the archipelago of poetry.

Poetic art might be related to cartography, a multidimensional mapping of the interrelation between humans and the world outside, given its unique capacity to name the world and to remind us now of "feelings and affections that bear something of our removed and most heartfelt origins" (16). Benozzo proposes an elemental poetics which has affinities with contemporary models of ecological thought and ecocultural studies, though he adopts a more radical view of the genesis of poetry. For him, poetry is an elemental life force like "the anarchy of the clamour of stars" (17), and in this body-centred poetics of nature he sees no separation between subject and object where poetry was the human expression of corresponding rhythms between inner and outer worlds: "We did not create words; we translated the world around […] *Homo Poeta* preceded *Homo Loquens*. We were poets before being able to speak" (17).

This radical revision of the concept of poetic creativity is based on his theoretical writing in *Speaking Australopithecus: A New Theory of the Origins of Human Language* (2016), which is a chronicle of transformation and loss as the Palaeolithic incantation of primeval songs was dominated and almost silenced by the Neolithic formalisation of that primordial language into symbolic thinking. Benozzo calls for a revolution in sensibility, for a reawakening of the ancestral poetic awareness of the world, guided by the poet. That ancient rupture was for Benozzo nothing less than apocalyptic, a process registered here in his intensely poetic scenario of visions of darkness and geological turbulence as the Neolithic era dawned on a new landscape where only vestiges of the old Palaeolithic poetry remained. But the poets have always remembered: "Songs sung by *Homo Poeta* may arise in asymmetric ridges […] poets can still walk along them, crossing with awareness the layers of ancient poetic art" (24-25). In his endeavour to translate the chthonic power of poetry Benozzo employs a riot of geological and biological images, for poetry is not purposive in an evolutionary sense, "not asked for, unexpected […] adrift, with no direction, at the mercy of its own needs" (28). In his provocative thought experiment he envisages a rewriting of Western cultural tradition where the disciplinary structure of Greek, Latin, and Humanism would be replaced: "Instead of evolutionism, diffusionism shaped what we are" (29).

With his nostalgia for origins, Benozzo tells another story about the genesis of poetry, "related and then lost in that estuary of dynamic matter" (29) out of which life was created. Perhaps the art of poetry is, as he suggests, "nothing but the memory of other reigns" (31), an appeal to unconscious memories deeply embedded in the human psyche. The book ends

in the present with the figure of the poet, a lone singer striding high on the mountain ridges, which becomes a metaphor ("Poetic language is vitally metaphorical" said Shelley) for the territory of poetry, that archipelago with its scattered islands thrown up from the deep substrate of prehistory. This richly challenging text is a modern version of the poet-shaman's journey, which the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood described as a special task: "to journey in spirit from this world to another one […] and then to bring back some knowledge or power that would be of use to the community" ("Literature and Environment" 2010). That is a perfect summary of Benozzo's purpose and his destiny.

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Michela Compagnoni

Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms

Simona Corso, Florian Mussgnug & Jennifer Rushworth (eds). 2022. Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms. Cambridge: Legenda, 236 pp., € 85.00, ISBN 978-1-839540-35-6

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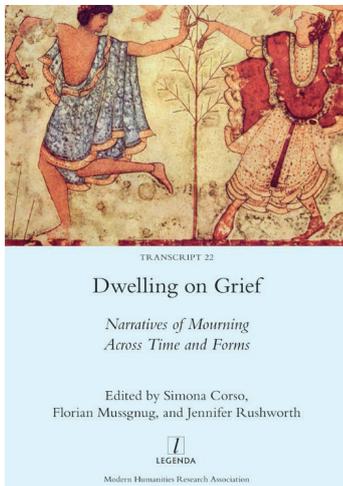
As a timely response to the new challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, *Dwelling on Grief: Narratives of Mourning Across Time and Forms* offers a uniquely rich investigation of cultural practices and literary/artistic forms of mourning. Against the hyper-specialisation that is increasingly narrowing the scope of humanistic research, this volume addresses the topic from a remarkable variety of disciplines, methodological approaches, chronological and geographical perspectives. It moves in a broad temporal and cultural spectrum across fields that range from Literary Studies and Modern Languages, to Biology, Music, Political Theory, and the Environmental Humanities, in a nonetheless compellingly consistent overall structure created by the constant, thought-provoking dialogue between sections and chapters, as well as the core theoretical premises they share.

Drawing upon the understanding of mourning as an inherently personal and yet universally shared experience that generates an urge to overcome the limits of language,

Dwelling on Grief seeks new theoretical frameworks and calls for new terminological distinctions. On the one hand, we have the notion of "narratives" as inextricable from the individual mourning they relate to explore the "ethical and aesthetic possibilities of literary expression as a necessary form of cultural mediation" (3). On the other hand, the editors foreground the idea of "dwelling", that is, of engaging with works that linger over suffering for the death of loved ones in action or thought. In this sense, mourning is explored as "an ongoing, unfinished, and unfinishable, yet ever-changing experience" (4) that can raise (self)awareness of mortality and thus hopefully bring change.

This volume not only combines private and public, past and contemporary, human and non-human perspectives on mourning but also blurs the boundaries between academic and creative contributions. Following an introduction that illuminates the complexity of a topic that defies straightforward definitions, the collection is structured in four thematic sections interspersed with three experimental literary *intermezzi* and an epilogue – poems by David Bowe and Elena Buia Rutt, a contemporary novel review by Timothy Mathews, and the record of a live performance by Zoe Papadopoulou.

In Part I, "The Poetry of Lament", Catherine Keen shows that Dante's *Vita nova*, exceptionally written *after* Beatrice's death, in fact explores the importance of mourning beyond personal experience and presents it as a collective condition. Helena Phillips-Robins draws from medieval sermons to claim that Dante's grieving for Virgilio's sudden disappearance at the end of *Purgatorio* emotionally involves readers to the point of "giv[ing] a script for their own voicing of compassionate grief" (35). Luca Marcozzi moves to the analysis of how late Petrarch, by warning against excessive displays of sorrow, turns from mourning to consolation, and from lyric poet to moral philosopher. Part II, "Lineages of Grief", focuses on responses of twentieth-century readers to medieval representations of lament. Jennifer Rushworth illuminates how Roland Barthes's grief for his mother's death is mediated by his reading of the *selva oscura* as a metaphor for Dante's suffering at the loss of Beatrice, a reading which changes our understanding of Dante by suggesting "a new, personal, emotional reading" (71). Susan Irvine offers a comparative analysis of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* and its imaginative recreation by engraver Laurence Whistler in the window of St Nicholas Church in Moreton. In both examples, the expression of mourning is transfigured into one of joy, "into a yearning that reaches beyond the human towards the mystical or divine" (77). The section ends with a chapter by Jürgen Pieters that moves from a letter René Descartes wrote to poet Constantijn Huygens. Here Descartes invites to find consolation for the death of his wife in rational thought and opposes suffering and reason as a warning against inconsolable despair. In Part III, "The Politics of Mourning", the focus shifts to the political side of grieving, since – as the editors remind us – mourning always "takes place within and is inflected by broader societal structures and norms" (10). Uta Staiger analyses burial practices through the paradigmatic case of Sophocles' *Antigone* as a model for "the nexus between mourning and the law as the place where political action is possible as well as constrained" (111). Luca Aversano examines String Quartet n. 8 in C Minor, op. 110 composed by Dmitri Shostakovich and dedicated "to the victims of fascism and war". In this piece, the apparent contradiction between individual and collective mourning is reconciled through the blending of examples of lament from different musical

traditions, including Shostakovich's own compositions. Finally, from the interdisciplinary perspectives of archaeology, anthropology, and biology, and within the new field of "evolutionary thanatology", Aarathi Prasad looks at evidence of burial practices among our human ancestors and the animal world, starting from the assumption that "any analysis of a burial is an analysis of a symbolic action" (131). The last section of the volume, "Breaking the Silence", begins with a contribution by Simona Corso on the recent emergence of grief memoir in contemporary anglophone literature. The three examples provided witness to the ability of this genre to break long-standing taboos surrounding death and loss by establishing an intimate connection between writer and reader and providing an aesthetically refined space to dwell upon grief. Adina Stroia addresses the relationship between mourning and photography from Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire* to the *récit de mort*, a genre that follows a "photographic logic" (170) in the depiction of grieving: photographs are often evoked through ekphrasis or textual disposition in line with Barthes's treatment of the most moving picture of his mother in his book. Finally, Florian Mussgnug turns from the human to the "more-than-human" world in contemporary writings that engage with the environmental crisis. He suggests that mourning is always communal and creates shared experiences, especially now that the coronavirus pandemic has proven "a powerful reminder of the omnipresence of death, but also of the inexhaustible, generative force of human and more-than-human communities, and of the strength of social ties" (181).

As a much-needed addition to the recent wave of scholarly debate on the topic, *Dwelling on Grief* marks a very significant contribution to our understanding of mourning. The vast purviews and far-reaching overtones of this volume are effectively epitomized by its uniquely broad disciplinary, methodological, national, and chronological focus, which will pave the way for future research in the different fields that the authors navigate in each chapter. The volume's fascinating combination of academic and creative reflections will also stand as a brilliant example of how creative experimentation can enrich each field of research with insights resonating with our lived experiences, and disclosing alternative visions.

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Anne Holm

Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness

Jean-François Vernay, Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness, New York: Routledge, 2021, 158 pp., £15.19, ISBN 9781032078533

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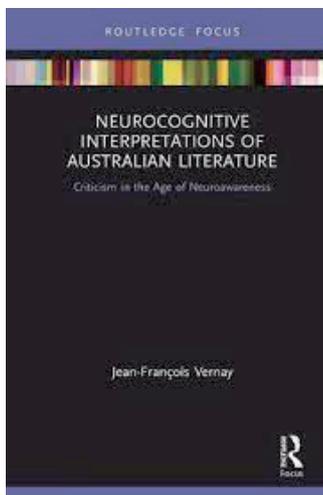
Jean-François Vernay's monograph *Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness* (2021) is the first book-length investigation of Australian literature through a cognitive lens. Drawing on a variety of cognitive concepts and theories, such as work on neurodiversity and moral emotions, the book highlights the possibilities that this relatively new and dynamic research field offers for Australian literary criticism. To this end, the book takes up a range of case studies, including best-sellers and literature from the margins alike, and discusses themes ranging from coming-of-age to literary fakes. The book is divided into four parts, each with a broad theme inspired by the theoretical framework: while Parts I and II ("Cognition and Literary Culture", "Cognition and the Mind") deal with the cognitive processes of writers and readers, Parts III and IV ("Cognition and the Body", "Cognition and Emotions") revolve around affect.

In the Introduction, Vernay presents important conceptual distinctions informing the book's analyses. Cognitive literary studies is defined as "a cluster of various literary criticism-related disciplines forming a broad-based trend that draws on the findings of cognitive science to sharpen their psychological understanding of literature by exploring the cognitive processes at work in the creative minds of writers and readers" (xiii.) While acknowledging the undeniable diversity of approaches within this interdisciplinary research field, the definition also leaves room for the book to incorporate a range of theoretical input without aligning with a particular corner of the "cluster." At the same time, the title of the book suggests a focus on neuroaesthetics, which is most prominently picked up in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. However, the introduction also makes an explicit point about steering clear of overt use of jargon, or "neurobabble," "to avoid turning literary reception into a scientific method" (xiv). Correspondingly, cognitive terminology is used in moderation throughout, and lengthy discussions of cognitive concepts are entirely absent from the book.

Continuing on from these distinctions, Chapter 1 gives examples of the kinds of literary phenomena that the cognitive approach is particularly suited to analysing, such as works that involve psychological complexity and speculative fiction capitalising on the untapped potential of the mind. The chapter then sketches out a succinct overview of cognitive Australian literary studies, singling out schema theory and affect theory as particularly prominent areas of inquiry. In describing the state-of-the-art, which should be very useful for any reader seeking an introduction to or synthesis of the field in Australia, Vernay emphasises the many opportunities the cognitive approach affords and argues that it offers welcome theoretical and methodological invigoration for Australian literary studies. However, Vernay writes that the field has met with resistance and outlines concerns that critics have raised. Among them is the difficulty of taking on board the specialist language of a scientific framework, which indeed makes truly interdisciplinary cognitive literary research a particularly demanding undertaking.

The first case study is Markus Zusak's popular novel *The Book Thief* (2005). The discussion focuses on the appeal of books as physical objects through the protagonist Liesel Meminger. With theoretical grounding in the neurocognitive processes of sensory pleasure and human–object relations, Vernay demonstrates how Liesel's material engagement with books becomes a consuming attachment, even at the face of danger. The analysis additionally considers the physical dimensions of *The Book Thief* itself in embodying its theme through enticing cover art. This is very much in line with cognitive literary approaches to reading as they emphasise that cognition is embodied (as well as enacted, embedded and extended, abbreviated as 4E) – engaging with literature is always a situated process. While the 4E view of cognition is not discussed in detail, on the whole the chapter offers a convincing cognitively informed take on the role that the materiality of books plays in the aesthetic experience. The attention given to the non-professional reader (in the form of Liesel Meminger) is especially inspiring. This is an often-neglected aspect particularly in cognitive poetics, which tends to assume a specialist reader's expertise in connecting cognitive effects with aesthetic features.

Chapter 3 explores transformation and the tradition of *Bildungsroman* in C. J. Koch's works. The historical contextualization of *Bildung* forms an interesting point of comparison

to the cognitively oriented discussion of the transformative potential of coming-of-age fiction. Although literary reception has been subject to plenty of empirical research, long-term mental change prompted by fiction is notably difficult to study. In the case of Koch the conclusion is that the novels analysed certainly gaze inward as regards formation, but also reach outward to the reader for example by building on resonant conceptual metaphors. Vernay cautions against being overly speculative about this outward reach having lasting effects on the reader, but also points to the prospect that this may be something cognitive literary study will have more to say about in the future.

Taking a different perspective on social cognition, Chapter 4 delves into the depiction of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Graeme Simsion's *Rosie* trilogy. The trilogy is compared with Mark Haddon's best-selling *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) since both portray "scientific minds who do not see themselves as high-functioning autistic" (49) and are written by neurotypical authors. Furthermore, the discussion parallels growing awareness about neurodivergence with the emergence of (high-functioning) ASD fiction as a genre, illustrating its salient traits with examples from the *Rosie* trilogy. In addition to the combination of a neurotypical author and a neurodivergent protagonist, these include "the difficulty for the neurodivergent character to achieve social inclusion", "a brain-conscious narrative whose protagonist is essentially perceived as a cerebral organism" and "an ambiguous blend of autistic and scientific cultures" (50). While Vernay critically examines Simsion's advocacy and acknowledges the potential issue of the books romanticizing the reality of living with ASD in a world that caters to neurotypicality, a further challenge with adopting a cognitive perspective on such texts is that neuroscientific knowledge on ASD is ever-evolving, as evidenced in the fairly recently proposed inaccuracy of the term "mind-blindness" (50)[1]. In other words, when literary works are "informed by neuroscientific culture" (51), there may be lag in culture absorbing new scientific input – something that the chapter could have addressed more prominently.

In Part III, the book adopts a bodily perspective to two very different types of texts: explicitly erotic literature and indigenous depictions of colonial trauma. In Chapter 5, Australian (underground) erotic literature is viewed mainly through a literary historical lens, with psychoanalytical and neurophysiological insights additionally informing the exploration of responding to such texts. The cognitive component here is how literary cues grab the reader's attention to trigger arousal, however the specific trigger mechanism is not explored in detail in the chapter. Chapter 6, on the other hand, develops a detailed analytical take on bodily response to trauma. Vernay shows how Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) and Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (2017) depict trauma through "mental scars […] and physical damage" (89). As such, they bypass the traditional Western body/mind dualism, a move that is also at the core of current cognitive approaches. Though the cognitive lens is quite implicit in this chapter as well, the finding that in these books "the physical bodies of characters become a reading map for their psycho-emotional states" (90) nevertheless resonates deeply with recent Enactivist discussions of cognition.

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[1] See Eliane Deschrijver & Colin Palmer. 2020. Reframing Social Cognition: Relational Versus Representational Mentalizing. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146: 11: 941–969.

The final part of the book focuses on affect, first zooming in on the portrayal of anger in gay fiction (Chapter 7) and then tackling moral emotions in the reactions to a famous literary fraud, the case of Helen Demidenko and *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994) (Chapter 8). Chapter 7 considers violence as a literary trope in relation to the neurophysiological mechanisms giving rise to rage, while Chapter 8 investigates a somewhat different negative affect, the complex ways in which moral judgment ties into anger and disgust. In both cases, the neurophysiological dimension is closely connected with social triggers and the cognitive consequences of expressing emotions. With the literary texts analysed in Chapter 7, the release of anger caused by social injustice is shown to produce a cognitive reward in the character, and interpreting these releases in context also makes them more socially acceptable for the reader. As for the non-unanimous moral outrage following the uncovering of Demidenko's disingenuous appropriation of real-life events in her fictive novel, Vernay asks whether it is so that "a cluster of emotions" inevitably turns into "a situation where one emotion would have the capacity to overpower all others" (121). The analysis suggests that when a literary response includes identifying with a social group that has been wronged, moral judgment is likely to align with the group, which may quite possibly lead to shunning literary and emotive complexity.

Overall, Vernay's book offers an engaging application of cognitive approaches to Australian narrative fiction. It is especially valuable for a reader interested in acquainting themselves with Australian writers who explore emotions and psychological themes and for a reader interested in the study of these themes in Australian fiction. The choice to weave relevant theory into the case studies, rather than to offer a separate literature review, allows the close readings to take centre stage and avoids burdening non-specialist readers with an abundance of terminology. On the other hand, the diversity of the cognitive approaches in use and debates around key cognitive concepts are backgrounded with this choice, and readers unfamiliar with the basic tenets of 4E cognition, conceptual metaphors or mind style will need to look further to form a deeper understanding. Doing so will likely also make it clearer what is at stake in the objections to cognitive literary study outlined in Chapter 1.

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