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HISTORY AS DISCOURSE IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE PASSION*: THE POLITICS OF ALTERITY

María del Mar Asensio Aróstegui
Universidad de La Rioja

ABSTRACT. *Set in the historical context of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, Jeanette Winterson's* The Passion *is an outstanding example of the kind of fiction that Elizabeth Wesseling (1991: vii) calls postmodernist historical novels, that is, "novelistic adaptations of historical material". Besides, being profoundly self-reflexive, the novel also falls under Linda Hutcheon's (1988) category of historiographic metafiction. The present paper focuses on Winterson's political choice of two representatives of historically silenced groups, a soldier and a woman, who use two apparently opposed narrative modes, the historical and the fantastic, to tell a story that both exposes history as a discursive construct and provides an alternative fantastic discourse for the representation of feminine desire.*

> The materiality of language is always in view in a postmodern text, and any putative "neutrality" that language might once have appeared to possess remains conspicuously absent. Language is not neutral and not single. In postmodernism, language means residence in a particular discourse, and alternative semantic systems or discourses are not just alternate views or versions of "a reality" that remains beyond them (Ermarth 1992: 3-4).

Historiographic metafiction and *postmodernist historical novels* are two different terms, coined by Linda Hutcheon (1988) and Elizabeth Wesseling (1991) respectively, which nevertheless allude to a literary phenomenon that is characteristic of contemporary fiction: the merging of historical material with the fantastic as a means to point out the contradictory nature of postmodernism. Like historiographic metafiction, postmodernist historical novels become overtly self-reflexive by turning "epistemological questions concerning the nature and intelligibility of history into a literary theme" (Wesseling 1991: vii). They emphasize the notion that, if history is discourse, it is constructed in and through language and that, consequently, it is open to revision and recontextualization. Hence postmodernist historical novels, Wesseling (1991: 13) argues, may "turn to the past in order to look for unrealized possibilities that inhered in historical situations". By exploring their linguistic and literary conventions, these novels allow for the representation of alternative versions of history and alternative personages that have been systematically excluded from historical texts.

Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* is an overtly metafictional novel that rewrites the story of the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte from the point of view of two representatives of traditionally inarticulate classes and equally silenced groups: a French soldier-cook, Henri, and a Venetian bisexual woman, Villanelle, who gambles away her freedom and is sold to the army as a prostitute. This paper focuses on Winterson's dialogic use in *The Passion* of two apparently opposed narrative modes, historiography and fantasy. As this paper intends to demonstrate, Winterson chooses a very precise and utterly meaningful historical period as a contextualizing frame for the development of the story her characters tell in *The Passion*, but only to problematize established notions from within: firstly, through Henri's exposure of history as a totalizing discourse and, secondly, through the creation of a peculiarly fantastic realm that guarantees the fulfilment of Villanelle's *unnatural* desires.

The action referred to in the fabula (Bal 1985) of the novel expands for about half a century and deals with a highly emotionally intense historical moment. It begins in approximately 1769 and ends at some indefinite time well after 1821. This is a very important period in the history of France, first, and of the whole of Europe, later, not only in social and political terms but also in terms of cultural manifestations. I am obviously talking about the painful transition from the French Revolution to the forthcoming rise and fall of Napoleon's Empire. It had been hoped that the French Revolution would give birth to a new social order. However, when in 1793 France declares war on Britain, bliss is followed by disillusion. Suddenly the same tyranny, the same ambition and desire for expansion and conquest that had been fought by the three principles of the French Revolution –Freedom, Equality and Fraternity– reappear in harshness in the guise of an intemperate conqueror, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Traditionally the Napoleonic wars have been portrayed as the story of the military success of a great man whose deeds expanded the French Empire in the last decades of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Jeanette Winterson offers a different version of the same events in *The Passion*, by resorting to the perspective of a disillusioned young man, who initially shares in the general climate of passionate enthusiasm, and decides to become a soldier, but who is physically and spiritually destroyed by Napoleon's unquenchable thirst for power. The rise of Napoleon paradoxically installs the *naturalization* of a repressive political discourse which does not differ much from the monarchical one and which equally silences any claim to plurality. In the novel, two patriarchal figures, the French emperor and the Russian czar, become the symbols of power and oppression, the butts of Winterson's criticism. Behind this subversive move, lurks Winterson's politics: patriarchy has to be exposed as a socio-historical construct before giving way to the representation of an alternative feminine discourse.

Winterson chooses Henri, the male hero of the novel, to undermine patriarchy and its claims to universal history. He not only rejects the drab future that awaits him, if he sides with the patriarchal standards established by Napoleon, but is also capable of showing in practice that history is but a narrative of past events that is subject to political and ideological manipulation. Henri is a homodiegetic narrator (Bal 1985). He first takes notes of his experiences in the army in a war journal and then rewrites his story from a retrospective point of view. This means that his narrated memoirs no longer correspond to the events he focuses on as a direct witness. *The Passion* presents the reader with two distinct voices, that of the optimistic young man who believes in the promising career of his Emperor and the subsequent flourishing of his country, and that of the grown-up man who has experienced all the abominations of war and becomes profoundly disappointed with Napoleon and history. His memoirs are narrated from a distance by an adult Henri, who is already *imprisoned* in the madhouse of San Servelo and who can review his experience in Napoleon's service from a critical perspective. The ironic distance that the adult narrator-author maintains concerning his past adventures as a young character, as he rewrites them, is one of the keys to success in his reduction to mere discourse of the monolithic categories of religion, masculinity and nationalism.

Henri's undermining process implies the rejection of a set of principles he had been taught to take for granted. His memories of childhood and early youth present the reader with a Henri who not only inhabits and defends his patriarchal world but also learns to be in close spiritual contact with its two representative Father figures: Napoleon and God. Henri grows up surrounded by nature and partaking in its innocence. He invariably associates his memories of childhood with the natural space of his village and with the memory of his mother. When the nostalgia of a happier past assaults him in the army, he always resorts to strikingly poetic descriptions of the natural environment that surrounded him as a child: "I was homesick from the start. I missed my mother. I missed the hill where the sun slants across the valley. I missed all the everyday things I had hated. In spring at home the dandelions streak the fields and the river runs idle again after months of rain" (6). Nevertheless, he gets in touch with religion and politics very early, through the odd influence of a rather unorthodox priest, who is in charge of his *education*:

> Thanks to my mother's efforts and the rusty scholarliness of our priest I learned to read in my own language, Latin and English and I learned arithmetic, the rudiments of first aid and because the priest also supplemented his meagre income by betting and gambling I learned every card game and a few tricks. (12)

The priest sacrilegiously talks about Bonaparte as if he were a new Messiah sent by God and impiously affirms that his choice of the priesthood amounts to: "if you have to work for anybody an absentee boss is best" (12). His manifest scepticism concerning his job contrasts with the romanticized version of the world he feeds Henri with. When Henri arrives at the camp at Boulogne, he cannot help comparing what the priest had told him with what he actually sees. Two examples could be mentioned in this respect. The first would be Henri's forced visit to the brothel, an explicit critique of what certain theories of masculinity understand as a necessary rite of passage from childhood and innocence to adulthood and experience for boys:

> I had expected red velvet the way the priest had described these seats of temporary pleasure, but there was no softness here, nothing to disguise our business. When the women came in they were older than I had imagined, not at all like the pictures in the priest's book of sinful things. Not snake-like, Eve-like with breasts like apples, but round and resigned, hair thrown into hasty bundles or draped around their shoulders. (14)

The second example exposes the harshness of military life. Henri has been taught that "soldiering is a fine life for a boy" (8) but his very first impression appears to be otherwise when he visits Napoleon's storeroom for the first time:

> The space from the ground to the dome of the canvas was racked with rough wooden cages about a foot square with tiny corridors running in between, hardly the width of a man. In each cage there were two or three birds, beaks and claws cut off, staring through the slats with dumb identical eyes. I am no coward and I've seen plenty of convenient mutilation on our farms but I was not prepared for the silence. Not even a rustle. They could have been dead, should have been dead, but for the eyes. (5-6)

Silence, mutilation, dumbness, and the choking sensation of being a prisoner in a wooden cage are metaphorical images for the way in which Napoleon, as Henri will soon learn, will treat his soldiers. Like his chickens, soldiers become objects in the hands of the Emperor, military toys with dumb identical eyes.[1] "July 20th, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today" (24) Henri sadly notes in his war journal: "In the morning, 2,000 new recruits marched into Boulogne" (25).

More important still for the argument, Henri eventually realizes that the romanticized image of Napoleon that the priest had drawn for him is but a construct, when he says: "I invented Bonaparte as much as he invented himself" (158). Only when Henri is deprived of his imbued idealistic frame of mind –the logical outcome of a human longing for greatness that explains and perpetuates patriarchy and its values– does he see his own mistake: "They [the Russians] called the Czar 'the Little Father', and they worshipped him as they worshipped God. In their simplicity I saw a mirror of my own longing and understood for the first time my own need for a little father that had led me this far" (81).

It is this radical rejection of the three holding values of patriarchy –the czar, as the representative of political power, God, as the supreme religious authority, and the father, as the sole arbiter in the family– that marks Henri's decisive turn of mind. He suddenly confesses in his memoirs: "If the love was passion, the hate will be obsession. […] The hate is not only for the once loved, it's for yourself too; how could you ever have loved this?" (84). Unable to escape from this "hate for oneself", Henri refuses any further contact with his patriarchal world. Instead he consciously retreats to the realm of the mind and sticks to language and literature in order to try to explain and give unity to an otherwise painfully chaotic past. By presenting the reader with a story made up of the dialogic interplay between his war journal and his more elaborate memoirs, Henri destroys the constructed boundaries between history and fiction and clears the ground for the inscription of a third, much more subversive and innovative discourse in the novel: Villanelle's story.[2]

Villanelle believes in "the truth-revealing power of storytelling" (Onega 1995: 143). She relies on fantasy and the fairy tale to offer an alternative space to the historical background of the novel: a feminine fantastic that has its origins at the margins of patriarchy and heterosexuality. Her task as a woman, in Judith Butler's (1990: 115) words, "is to assume the position of the authoritative, speaking subject –which is, in some sense, [women's] ontologically grounded 'right'– and to overthrow both the category of sex, and the system of compulsory heterosexuality that is its origin." Her discourse is anchored in the fantastic and constitutes a revision of the traditional values of the fairy tale. The fantastic as an alternative discourse allows Villanelle to openly express her alterity, not as man's *Other*, but as a bisexual woman and consequently "as a powerful destabilizing agent of political culture and discourse" (Doan 1994: xi). On the other hand, this fantastic space enables Villanelle to openly acknowledge feminine desire and to choose motherhood while remaining an independent *femme seule*.

---

[1] 1. The fact that Winterson has chosen chicken as Napoleon's favourite food is by no means gratuitous. *Le coq gaulois* is the emblem of the French nation, so choosing chicken as Napoleon's favourite and only food amounts to implying that he is eating his own children. For a further explanation of this issue, see Onega 1996.

[2] 2. For a detailed analysis of the hierarchical structure of Henri's and Villanelle's narratives implied in this statement and its political impact, see the article "Written Narration Versus Oral Storytelling in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*" (Asensio Aróstegui 1994).

Kathryn Hume (1984: xii) defines fantasy not as a secondary mode but as "an impulse as significant as the mimetic impulse."[3] Hume, like Jeanette Winterson in *The Passion*, proposes the subversion of essentialist notions of *either* fantasy *or* mimesis and defines fantasy as "the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal". This definition perfectly suits Villanelle's narrative in *The Passion* in so far as it proposes a deliberately political departure from the limits of a patriarchal world that presents woman as man's *Other*, and lesbianism and bisexuality as heterosexuality's *Other*. In this line, Rosemary Jackson (1981: 3) states that "fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss." A bisexual woman, Villanelle takes sides with that huge group of *ex-centrics* marginalized by society and made invisible and silent by the standards of patriarchy and heterosexuality. Since patriarchy has already been exposed as a linguistic construct by Henri's narrative, Villanelle is allowed to explore a different narrative mode, the fairy tale, as an alternative for the textual representation of feminine desire. Her discourse masquerades as conventional fairy tale, but both the language and the ideology that she inscribes behind such an apparently complying gesture manage to rewrite the fairy tale as a mechanism for the exposure of patriarchy rather than exclusively using it as a surrogate literary form of the dominant order. In this respect, *The Passion* succeeds in overcoming one of the limitations of the fantastic pointed out by Jackson's (1981: 4) words: "Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, re-covering its dark areas."

Villanelle is no conventional fairy-tale heroine. Physically, she is born with webbed feet, a genetic mistake of the utmost socio-political significance, because only men, and more precisely boatmen, have webbed feet in Villanelle's patriarchal society. Webbed feet are therefore the symbol of the phallus. In spite of her being a woman, Villanelle is also in possession of the distinctively masculine trait in the novel: "My feet were webbed. There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (51). She becomes thereby an androgynous character, an outsider in her phallocratic society that cross-dresses as a boy and proves that sex categories are not essences but positions:[4] "My flabby friend, who has *decided* I'm a woman, has asked me to marry him" (63; emphasis added).

---

[3] In doing so, Hume prefigures the paradoxical move from margins to centre that the fantastic in literature seems to be in the process of undergoing in contemporary fiction. Neil Cornwell (1990: 211) explains this situation in the following terms:

> In the twentieth century, in the age of modernism and postmodernism and under progressive impact from the ideas generated by (or encapsulated in) psychoanalysis, existentialism and dialogism (Freud and dreams, Sartre and being, Bakhtin and carnival) the fantastic has, arguably, reached a position in which it is increasingly itself becoming 'the dominant', as it continues to develop not only its dialogical, interrogative, open and unfinished styles of discourse but also a strong social, political and ethical thrust.

Ideologically, Villanelle is a rebel inside the established system both as character and as narrator. Traditional fairy tales "glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues" and "suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity" (Rowe 1979: 239). Villanelle is not used to complying with the authority of Father figures. Unlike Henri, Villanelle is not a religious person and she criticizes Napoleon's politics of rationality from the very beginning. She even gets rid of her biological father by alluding to his *fantastic* disappearance, a story which is characterized both by a gloomy and a comic atmosphere and which is framed by the conventions of the fairy tale:

> There was once a weak and foolish man whose wife cleaned the boat and sold the fish and brought up their children and went to the terrible island as she should when her yearly time was due. […] This boatman, ferrying a tourist from one church to another, happened to fall into conversation with the man and the man brought up the question of the webbed feet. At the same time he drew a purse of gold from his pocket and let it lie quietly in the bottom of the boat. […] The next morning, the boat was picked up by a couple of priests on their way to Mass. The tourist was babbling incoherently and pulling at his toes with his fingers. There was no boatman. […]
>
> He was my father.
>
> I never knew him because I wasn't born when he disappeared. (50)

The fantastic nature of the events described transports the reader to a realm of enchantment and magical spells. Villanelle's father seems to have been punished with disappearance for contravening one of the golden rules established by the hermetic guild to which he belongs by profession: "no boatman will take off his boots, no matter how you bribe him" (50). A second, more rational reading of this passage is also possible. Villanelle's father is tired of an excess of responsibility, hard-work and economic penury. As Villanelle remarks: "Their house was hot in summer and cold in winter and there was too little food and too many mouths. […] Winter was approaching, the boatman was thin and he thought what harm could it do to unlace just one boot and let this visitor see what there was" (50). Having fulfilled his part of the treaty, Villanelle's father takes the money and runs, leaving the maddening tourist and his pregnant wife behind.

---

[4] This exposure of categorization according to sex is also present in Villanelle's description of the ritual performed by boatmen's wives when they are pregnant, as analyzed in Asensio Aróstegui 1996: 268-270.

The second reading proves especially significant for our purposes because it allows Villanelle to subvert one of the structuring elements of the fairy tale: the nuclear family and the figure of the *pater familias*, traditionally in charge of the well-being of his wife and children. Villanelle's biological father disappears before her birth, but her mother is already living with another man when she is born. No mention of her having got married is made in the novel. What Villanelle does tell is that her mother is not looking for protection in her new partner; she is neither looking for a father to her newly born baby. Villanelle's mother chooses her partner out of a need to satisfy her sexual desire, an attitude that her society sees as unnatural and as a possible cause of her daughter's *deformity*: "Or perhaps it was her carefree pleasure with the baker she should blame herself for?" (51). Villanelle's mother chooses an open-minded, liberal man who does not belong to the hermetic guild of the boatmen and is also an outsider in this ritualized society with arbitrary rules based on sexual differentiation. Villanelle's stepfather always adopts a marginal position in the family and never shows any sign of intolerance or prejudice: "a shrug of the shoulders and a wink and that's him. He's never thought it odd that his daughter cross-dresses for a living and sells second-hand purses on the side. But then, he's never thought it odd that his daughter was born with webbed feet" (61).

Villanelle's discourse also rewrites the romantic notions of love, sex, marriage and motherhood as sustained by fairy tales and their traditional happy endings. Villanelle falls passionately in love when she is eighteen years old, as any fairy-tale heroine would be expected to do. The object of her passion is, however, not a man, but a woman "of grey-green eyes with flecks of gold. Her cheekbones were high and rouged. Her hair, darker and redder than mine" (59). Although this is not Villanelle's first romance –"I am pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women, but I have never needed a guard for my heart" (59-60)–, this mysterious lady becomes the unique owner of Villanelle's heart by literally stealing it and keeping it in an indigo jar wrapped in silk. However, Winterson refuses to indulge in a successful lesbian love story –like the one she recounted in her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*– and makes a married woman of the mysterious lady who turns out to be in love not only with Villanelle but also with her husband. Hurt by this revelation, Villanelle decides to comply with heterosexuality and accepts its ultimate manifestation, marriage to a male-chauvinistic French cook who promises her that "we could travel the world" (96). Marriage is for Villanelle a means of escape, a running away from her consuming passion. As she explains: "We were married without ceremony and set off straight away to France, to Spain, to Constantinople even. He was as good as his word in that respect and I drank my coffee in a different place each month" (97).

Such a confession may sound like a variation of the happy ending of fairy tales, "and they lived happily ever after". It is not so, though. An independent woman, Villanelle abandons her husband after two years of marriage, but her refusal to comply with the requirements of heterosexuality is severely punished in the narrative. The cook, who is still her husband and who subsequently possesses all authority upon her, decides to make her into an object of male pleasure, a commodity in the economy of exchange, by selling her to the French army, where she is exposed as an oddity for the pleasure of the male gaze because of her ability to masquerade as a boy:

> This officer looked me up and down in my woman's clothes then asked me to change into my easy disguise. He was all admiration and, turning from me, withdrew a large bag from within his effects and placed it on the table between himself and my husband.
>
> 'This is the price we agreed then,' he said.
>
> And my husband, his fingers trembling, counted it out. (99)

It is in the army that Villanelle meets Henri, with whom she will desert three years later. While they are travelling back to Venice, Henri falls in love with Villanelle, but she is unable to return his passion, because the Venetian lady still has her heart. Nevertheless, Villanelle confirms her pragmatism about sex by considering Henri an object of her pleasure, thus reversing sexual roles and textualizing feminine desire. Henri himself remembers how "one night she turned over suddenly and told me to make love to her" (103). Villanelle overtly explains that:

> He had a thin boy's body that covered mine as light as a sheet and, because I had taught him to love me, he loved me well. He had no notion of what men do, he had no notion of what his own body did until I showed him. He gave me pleasure, but when I watched his face I knew it was more than that for him. If it disturbed me I put it aside. I have learnt to take pleasure without always questioning the source. (148)

Sex, desire, and pleasure have never appeared to be a proper province of women in fairy tales.[5] This would explain why feminine desire and feminine pleasure are never explicitly mentioned in the writings of this genre.

---

[5] This is not so in the tradition of the picaresque and of medieval fabliaux, for example, elements of which can also be traced in this novel.

Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 70) assumes that "there are, in my understanding, three irresolvable problems associated with the notions of desire we have generally inherited in the West". First, Plato's description of desire as "a lack in man's being, an imperfection or flaw in human existence" which "can function only if it remains unfilled" (Grosz 1994: 70-1). Secondly, as a result of its being defined "in negative terms, in terms of an absence", psychoanalytic theory has produced desire as inherently masculine.[6] A third related problem is what "could be described as the implicit 'homosexuality' of desire" (Grosz 1994: 73). Villanelle problematizes traditional notions of desire and proposes instead a space in which feminine desire is made visible and can therefore be both experienced and expressed freely.

Once she is back in Venice after an absence of eight years, Villanelle resolutely goes to the house of her lady lover to face her past. The Queen of Spades proposes to her to continue their love affair, but Villanelle refuses this second chance. Maintaining the love affair with the Queen of Spades would immediately transform Villanelle into the *queer* element in an otherwise stable heterosexual relationship. Instead of a subversive element of heterosexuality, by entering this love triangle Villanelle would become a marginal figure, "a pose instead of a position, the lesser version of the same instead of a difference" (Roof 1994: 51).

Villanelle, who is still having sexual intercourse with Henri, gets pregnant. This gesture leads Henri, and the reader, to assume that they will finally get married and that romantic love will eventually be triumphant, but Villanelle subverts once more traditional happy endings. She has already experienced that, far from constituting a reward for the heroine, marriage actually "require[s] that the heroine's transference of dependency [from father to lover] be not only sexual but also material. Beneath romantic justifications of 'love' lurk actual historical practices which reduce women to marketable commodities" (Rowe 1979: 245). Villanelle, who has never complied with the authority of a father, will never accept the authority of a husband. Thus her revision of the fairy tale ends in a completely unexpected manner. Villanelle gives birth to her daughter, but refuses the basic structure of patriarchal societies: the nuclear family. She favours rather the mother-daughter bonding defended by feminist writers and guarantees that no masculine presence will ever constitute a threat for the special relationship held among women. Villanelle does not reject sexual pleasure nor does she renounce the experience of motherhood, but manages to maintain her independence.

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6. Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 72) further explains that for Freud "there is only male or rather masculine libido; there is only desire as an activity (activity being, for Freud, correlated with masculinity); in this case, the notion of female desire is oxymoronic."

The Passion reveals a polyphonic narrative structure that merges two apparently opposed narrative modes, the historical and the fantastic. Henri, a narrator and author of a war journal that he rewrites into his memoirs, illegitimizes history as a grand narrative and shows instead that history, like the past, is always subject to manipulation. Henri's historical discourse propounds the collapse of the holding values of patriarchy and provides the necessary space for the development of Villanelle's alternative discourse. Villanelle, a feminine narrator, exposes the fairy tale as an ideologically laden literary genre based on sexual categories and patriarchal structures. Villanelle's alternative fantastic discourse revises romantic notions of love, sex, marriage, motherhood and the family and creates a narrative space in which feminine desire can be successfully represented, a narrative space in which women can be mothers without having to renounce either their freedom or their sexuality. As a postmodern text, *The Passion* emphasizes the discursive and plural nature of all narratives and insists on the fact that *reality* may be endlessly rewritten because it is nothing but a linguistic construct.

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THE SEMANTICS OF SOLIDARITY AND BROTHERHOOD IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE*

MERCEDES BENGOECHEA
(*Universidad de Alcalá*)
GEMA S. CASTILLO GARCÍA
(*Universidad de Alcalá*)

ABSTRACT. *We intent to shed new light on the role of Pidgin, one of the languages used by Achebe's characters in* No Longer at Ease. *We suggest that, contrary to what some literary critics have interpreted, Pidgin, far from being the language of triviality or of the uneducated alone, represents in Achebe's work an honourable rite of passage from rural life into urban development in a multilingual post-colonial nation, and a bridge between conflicting worlds, Africa and Europe, tradition and innovation. Furthermore, a close consideration of the semantics of solidarity in the novel reveals the importance of the roles played by two languages, Ibo, and, more outstandingly, Pidgin, as vehicles of fellowship and brotherhood. This is revealed by examining the use of three of the linguistic varieties present in* No Longer at Ease: *Ibo, conversational English, and Pidgin. Our analysis discloses a transfer of legitimacy from English to a communally owned Pidgin.*

Nigeria has some 90 million people who speak about 450 different linguistic varieties, the main ones Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo, the three of which serve over 75 million of the population and are are being developed as official languages for the north, west and east areas of the country respectively. English, introduced by the colonial administrators and early missionaries, is the official language of the country, almost exclusively a second language, spoken with varying degrees of competence all throughout the land, and used as a medium of instruction at the secondary and tertiary levels, and as the language of the administration, of the Government and of the elite. But the most idiosyncratic constituent of the repertoire of West Africans is Pidgin, one of the outcomes of linguistic contact in a polyglot society: it arises whenever people speaking mutually unintelligible languages need to communicate. Pidgin English has been used in Nigeria ever since the first Europeans arrived. It has been employed all along the country as a diglossically Low language of informal oral communication, both an inter-ethnic lingua franca and a relaxed or joking language (Brann 1988: 1421), for long, but nowadays, in the second half of the 20th Century, new forms of Pidgin English are emerging in many urban centres which may serve all communicative purposes (Shnukal and Marchese 1983). The complex and flexible linguistic usages of the varieties available to their speakers reflect Nigeria's constant state of flux and "expanding consciousness" (Bisong 1995: 125), and are described at their best in the works by Chinua Achebe.

From the beginning of his career, Chinua Achebe's skill for combining the role of novelist *and* anthropologist has been emphasized (Carroll 1980; Wilson 1979). This becomes evident in his second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, published in 1960, which depicts the downfall of Obi, a young "been-to"[1] Nigerian who returns home after a period of study in England, becomes a civil servant, experiences an acute shortage of money, gets into debt, accepts bribes and finally is convicted of corruption. The action takes place in the 1950's, a few years before Nigerian independence, and although the novel cannot strictly be considered a historical document, it is nevertheless an ethnographic record of an African society shaking in a period of emotional upheaval and social transformation from traditional rural to modern urban life, and from colonial to postcolonial.

One of the means Achebe brings into play in order to transmit and interpret African social history is his masterly articulation of values, social identities and language. As has been noted, in the novel not only is the division between the city and the village marked by language, but "languages are closely related to values; English and Ibo[2] are not merely different ways of saying the same thing, but vehicles for expressing completely different attitudes to life. Where one language or the other proves inadequate, so for the same reasons do the values it represents" (Riddy 1979: 150). In this sense, we can claim that the role of the three languages featured in *No Longer at Ease* goes much further than being mere vehicles for communication. They are one of the "themes" of the novel, entities loaded with a highly symbolic value, sometimes even of more significance than the characters themselves. The linguistic variety that any given character opts for in different situations (namely standard English, Ibo or Pidgin), as well as being indexical of their social identity, testifies the changes in social relations and alliances that were taking place in Nigeria. Fictional conversations in Achebe's novel are thus useful tools to define the new order which was about to evolve, and to re-create the cultural transformations which were to transpire. They confirm Achebe's concern for certifying the historical changes which had occurred in Nigeria, an interest which establishes him as one of the most celebrated figures of post-colonial literature, as from the 80's post-colonial studies have highlighted the role of post-colonial writers as witnesses and anthropologists of social life.

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[1] 1. A local word to refer to those lucky ones who have "been to" Europe.

[2] 2. As noted above, Ibo, or Igbo, is the language of the Ibo, one of the indigenous peoples of Eastern Nigeria.

Achebe, who sees himself as a social historian, commentator and interpreter, has claimed that African writers in the twentieth century need to write stories which follow

> human societies as they recreate themselves through vicissitudes of their history, validating their social organizations, their political systems, their moral attitudes and religious beliefs... but they also serve to *sanction change* when it can no longer be denied. At such critical moments.. stories ... tend to be brought into being to mediate the changes and sometimes to *consecrate opportunistic defections* into more *honourable rites of passage*. (Achebe 1988: 112) (our emphasis)

In this paper we intent to shed new light on the role of Pidgin, one of the three languages used by Achebe's characters in *No Longer at Ease*, the first of his works where Pidgin plays a central symbolic role. We suggest that, contrary to what some literary critics and sociolinguists have interpreted, the use of Pidgin, far from being only the language of triviality or of the uneducated (Yankson 1990; Riddy 1979: 157; Zabus 1991: 82), is in this novel, and borrowing Achebe's words in the previous passage, an *honourable rite of passage* from rural life into urban development in a multilingual post-colonial nation, and a bridge between conflicting worlds, Africa and Europe on the one hand, tradition and innovation on the other. Pidgin does not represent in Achebe an abandonment of pure African modes or a dereliction of the duty of maintaining Ibo spiritual idiosyncrasy, that is, it is not an *opportunistic defection*. Instead, one of the most important of Achebe's achievements has been to *sanction* linguistic and cultural *change* and to *consecrate* a mixed hybrid impure denigrated code which enacts the difficult process of compromise: Pidgin.

Furthermore, our hypothesis is that a close consideration of the semantics of solidarity in the novel may reveal the importance of the roles played by two languages, Ibo and (perhaps more outstandingly) Pidgin, as vehicles of solidarity and brotherhood. This we shall reveal by examining the use (either in dialogues or in authorial comments) by the fictional characters of *No Longer at Ease* of three linguistic varieties: Ibo, conversational standard English, and Pidgin[3].

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[3] The fourth variety would be literary English (Riddy 1979: 155).

In order to analyse the semantics of the three languages, and starting from the premise of the multifunctional treatment of Pidgin in the novel, we shall not be concerned with how the language helps to shape style, characters or situations, but rather, we shall be focusing on instances in which Pidgin and the other two linguistic varieties become powerful instruments to convey cultural meanings of affiliation or disaffiliation. In the pages which follow, then, and with an aim to establish the overall significance of each of the three linguistic codes throughout the novel, we shall not be particularly interested in the communicative role of the languages, but in their identificative or disidentificative role only. We shall concentrate particularly in situations where characters use one of the languages or another to establish their identity and alliance to a social group, and shall consider code-switching[4] between the three languages as acts of identity of multi-faceted fictional characters.

1. IBO (OR IGBO)

Following a tacitly established convention in West African novels, Ibo, the mother tongue of Obi, Clare and most of the protagonists, is typically rendered in the novel by a cadenced, rhetorical, proverb-laden standard English. Rich in images, tales, songs and phrases drawn from traditional African rural life, with maxims, sententiousness, and proverbs (Riddy 1979; Jones 1964, 1965), Ibo is the language of Umofian identity and cultural filiation, encoding traditional Umofian values[5]. All through the novel, whenever Achebe renders Ibo style into English in the mouth of one of the characters, the mode of speech stands for a traditional view and perspective, as in Joseph's comment, when he reacts using Ibo after Obi has accused him of having a "colonial mentality" because he endorses and defends traditional roles: «`Call it what you like´, said Joseph in Ibo. `You know more book than I, but I am older and wiser. And I can tell you that a man does not challenge his *chi* to a wrestling match´» (37). As Riddy puts it: "the `Ibo´ style not only stands for a mode of speech but also symbolizes a whole way of life: ceremonial, ordered, governed by traditional wisdom and rooted in the soil" (1979: 152). That is why when Christopher, Obi's friend, in order to find words of advice and encouragement, after a sentence in English, resorts to Ibo, bringing up the story of the bedbug, a tale which belongs to Umofian traditional heritage and knowledge:

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[4] Code-switching refers to the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation. It is quiete common in societies where people are polyglot, and has been studied as a strategy of projecting two or more social and political identities at the same time or alternatively.

[5] Umofia is an Ibo town in Eastern Nigeria, the home town of Obi, the main character of the novel.

> «Obi had been advised not to try to see Clara again in her present frame of mind. ' She will come round,' said Christopher. `Give her time.´ Then he quoted in Ibo the words of encouragement that the bedbug was said to have spoken to her children when hot water was poured on them all. She told them not to lose heart because whatever was hot must in the end turn cold. » (144)

Apart from that, Ibo also represents the language of the clan and a sense of ethnic brotherliness. This is reflected in the fact that Obi uses standard English at the office, but turns to Ibo when he speaks to some of his people and does not want Miss Tomlison, the British woman who shares his office, to understand: «He sent for Charles and asked him in Ibo (so that Miss Tomlinson would not understand) why he had not fulfilled his promise» (88). Although this switch into Ibo might be interpreted only as a wish to ensure secrecy in conducting their talk, it also helps to reinforce brotherhood ties, as Charles is thus reminded firstly that he is part of the in-group of speakers of Ibo, and then that he should have fulfilled his promise of paying back the money he had borrowed from Obi.

Obi also switches to Ibo when requested by Mr. Mark, a fellow countryman who is trying to bribe him: «If you don't mind, shall we talk in Ibo? I didn't know you had a European here» (78). Mr. Mark's comment is suggesting Obi's "obligation" towards him who belongs to the group of his kinsmen. Ibo is here a symbolic means to bring to Obi's mind the established fact that for any Umofian their primary duties are to the clan, and, ostensibly, using his influence should be one of them.

Convergence towards Ibo seems to be the essential requirement for the recognition of ethnic fellowship, as Miss Mark exemplifies in her intentional switch into the local variety when she visits Obi to offer herself as the "price" for bribery: «'You must be surprised at my visit'. She was now speaking in Ibo» (82). And conversely, the use of Ibo entails the acknowledgment of mutual ethnic alliance, as when the policeman at the Victoria Beach Road changes his hostile attitude and converges his speech when he discovers that Obi and Clara are, like himself, Ibo: «Clara told me in Ibo to call the driver and go away. The policeman immediately changed. He was an Ibo, you see. He said he didn't know we were Ibos» (67).

As a result, when interacting with a fellow countryman, divergence from Ibo into English means lack of membership, as when Obi is tempted to bribery for the first time. In spite of Mr. Mark's efforts to convince Obi to help him –by means of using Ibo and even appealing to Ibo values: «I was told that you are the secretary of the Scholarship Commission, and I thought that I should see you. We are both Ibos and I cannot hide anything from you» (79)-, Obi rejects the idea of taking bribes from him in exchange of getting a scholarship for his sister. This rejection is shown in his comments and in his detachment through his use of English: «`I'm sorry, Mr. Mark, but I really don't understand what you are driving at.´ He said this in English, much to Mr. Mark's consternation» (79).

The same lack of acknowledgement of membership by not reciprocating in the use of the shared mother tongue can also be seen in the early stages of Obi and Clara's affair. He and Clare, the girl he falls in love with, belong to the same people, both are Umofian and share the same native language. They meet at the ship when both come back from Britain, and interact in English at the beginning. After a couple of days, Obi got seasick, and then she gave him some tablets, while addressing him in Ibo: «She had treated him just like another patient... but then she had spoken in Ibo for the first time, as if to say, `We belong together. We speak the same language´» (22). Her using Ibo creates a feeling of comradership in Obi which he attempts to maintain next morning. However, as if afraid of any kind of personal attachment to him, Clare intentionally diverges into English and the conversation continues in this language: «`Thank you for the tablets´, he said in Ibo; `Did they make you feel better?´, she asked in English» *(*22).

Although Ibo gave Obi pleasure in London, as the reader infers from the episode in which we are told that: «he spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus» (45), things change when he he is back in Nigeria. Back home he begins to feel oppressed by the burden of the impositions of his people, who had paid eight hundred pounds to train him in England, and expected that the communal effort in sending him to England, an investment which must yield heavy dividends (on influence), should revert to the clan. As Carroll suggests: "As soon as Obi gets home, the claims of kinship begin to reassert themselves almost imperceptibly through the casual introduction of songs, tales and proverbs. These, which were part of the accepted texture of traditional life in Umofia, now nag persistently at the independence of the hero" (1990: 79). Trapped between his personal life and the communal demands, he will challenge the latter and will disappoint the clan first by not using his profession to pay back his fellow villagers, and then by trying to marry an *osu* girl, an outcast. And just as Obi feels himself liberated from the rigid conventions and obligations of his clan, he loses mastery of the Ibo language. Obi is not even able to find an appropriate Ibo proverb when he looks for it, and Clara recriminates him: «I have always said you should go and study Ibo» (99). In addition, he gets stuck and stammers at the prayers in his father's house, and when he tries to speak Ibo at the meeting of the Umuofia Progressive Union, he fails. His informality is misinterpreted as heedlessness. As his friend Joseph put it, «Obi's mission-house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his own country» (64-5).

Obi's reluctance to compromise and his inability to understand and keep to the values of the language in the Nigerian linguistic community is a crucial ingredient in his fall. His is a community characterized by a respect for the spoken word, where the language of formal rhetoric, sermons and ceremonial address is deeply appreciated, as Obi himself puts it: «Let [the British] come to Umofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation» (45). Obi's combination of social circumstances and personal qualities (an intelligent educated "been-to", with theoretically a perfect command of Ibo, and whose expensive education had been funded by the Ibo village of Umofia) should have produced an accomplished talker drawing on themes, conventions and material handed down from previous generations. Instead, he will diverge from the expectations of the clan and will renounce this heritage, adopting the neo-western value of casualness and informality, which will make him grow further apart from his ethnic group. The loss of control over his native language is a fundamental step in his process of disidentification with Umofia and its customs. His incompetence in the vernacular helps him to dissociate himself from the rural traditional background which he deems too heavy a burden and a nuisance in the modern metropolis. The Ibo language is a reminder of his clan and duties which he must forget in order to accommodate to urban integration and successful detribalization. Significantly Obi, the name of the protagonist, is spelled in reverse order to Ibo, as if he represented a turn round of Ibo's standards and principles.

Obi's failure in the novel then is perhaps not grounded, as Riddy puts it, in his inability "to find a means of expression" (159), but in his inability to find a symbolic vehicle for brotherhood once he has accepted that the traditional modes and views that Ibo represents are not valid for him any more. Instead of acknowledging his filiation to the African indigenous tongue, which he has somehow abandoned, he mistakenly turns to English.

2. Ordinary Conversational English

When Obi was in England with other Nigerians from different ethnic groups who did not share Obi's mother tongue, English represented for him the "default" code (Bokamba 1991: 499). He felt ashamed about this language though, as stated here:

> When he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. (45)

Although in England there was no other alternative language –thus the language of "lack"-, when he arrives in Lagos, English becomes the language he chooses for most of his interactions. As a “been-to”, he now feels part of the sophisticated avant-garde who defiantly challenges some African customs, -the ban to marry an *osu* among them-, and resists tribal impositions, not yielding even to the tradition of using formal oral Ibo and formal clothes for ceremonies, as stated above. Detached from Ibo and its values, Standard English represents allegiance to a particular post-colonial system of signification: that of the educated élite.

Back home, English has transformed itself in a badge of prestige and a mark of Westernization. As a “been-to”, Obi feels proud of his English: after all, it was the subject he studied for his degree. His adherence to English represents for him membership in “the shining élite” (90) which was beginning to consolidate itself as a class and which will recognize themselves as a group through an adopted code, that of standard English, the language of identification with *la crème de la crème*, the members “of an exclusive club” (90). Standard English, with its authoritative connotations as dominant language, is therefore both a means to impress and the language of position, as can be seen in Joseph’s use of English on the phone, which reveals his desire to sound important in front of his audience, to become a member of that “shining élite”: «`Good! See you later´. Joseph always put an impressive manner when speaking on the telephone. He never spoke Ibo or pidgin English at such moments» (70). As regards Christopher, another of Obi’s friends, we perceive how he uses Standard English to show that he knows “how to move in élitist circles” (Schmied 1991: 130).

In the novel, standard English in conversation clearly stands for lack of solidarity with the powerless, as we have seen in Obi’s attitude towards Mr. Mark mentioned above. This is also clearly revealed in several instances of interaction between Obi and lower-status characters. In those examples, Obi diverges consciously into English as a sign of indignation or disagreement, which may be interpreted as a bid for authority. His attemp to redefine the interaction in the power arena is patent when he is talking to Charles, one of the department’s messengers, or in some occasions that he is speaking to his servant Sebastian. For instance, when he had decided to introduce “sweeping economy measures in his flat” (89), he tells so to Sebastian in English. The servant answers back in Pigdin, to which Obi converges using Pidgin as well. But then, as if afraid that Pidgin might undermine his authority, and as a way to re-establish his power, he turns to standard English again:

> «`The fridge must be switched off at seven o’clock in the evenin and on again at twelve noon. Do you understand?´
>
> `Yes, sir. *But meat no go spoil so?´*
>
> `No need to buy *plenty meat* at once.´
>
> `Yes, sir´

> `*Buy small today; when he finish buy small again.*´
>
> `Yes, sir. *Only I tink you say I go de go market once every week´.*
>
> `I said nothing of the sort. I said I would only give you money once.´» (92)

Obi diverges from Ibo or Pidgin into English when he wants to show lack of solidarity, distrust, or disagreement, adopting the language of power towards the less or non-educated, as in this other instance with his servant Sebastian:

> «When he got back to the flat he told Sebastian not to cook any supper.
>
> `*I don start already.´*[6]
>
> `Then you can stop,´ he shouted.» (93)

Standard English may also be used to express the power exerted by (educated) male speakers towards women, this being exemplified in Christopher's use of this linguistic variety when interacting with one of his girlfriends, Bisi. Christopher, who had been speaking Pidgin to show that he was not rich enough to offer his visitors champagne to drink, turns into standard English when he listens to his girlfriend say in Pidgin that she would like to go to the cinema:

> «`What are you people doing this evening? *Make we go dance somewhere*?´
>
> Obi tried to make excuses, but Clare cut him short. They would go, she said.
>
> `*Na film I wan' go*,´said Bisi.
>
> `Look here, Bisi, we are not interested in what you want to do. It's for Obi and me to decide. *This na Africa*, you know´» (100).

Standard English becomes here the tool for downgrading Bisi's opinions, bestowing importance on men.

Significantly, ordinary conversational English in *No Longer at Ease* has no distinctive rhetoric; it is laconic, almost abrupt (Riddy 1979: 155-6) and coincident with the casualness of relationships in colonial urban society, which lack a genuine sense of community. It is especially represented in the language spoken at the club in Lagos. When Obi endeavours to speak it, "he is in a sense acting out a part" (Riddy 1979: 156), as if wearing a mask which permits playing a role, but which in the end proves to be not a tool for communication but a master over speakers.

In spite of the fact that standard English makes Africans "European", the ambivalence of their position is reflected in the fact that occasionally, when they wish to dissociate themselves from expatriate attitudes or feel uncertain about their own position, they switch into Pidgin. As an example of dissociation with the language of the colonizer, we can refer to the episode of Obi's deliberate mispronunciation of an English sentence when he wants to show his disapproval for not being served Nigerian food at the "Palm Grove", the restaurant in Lagos: «Then he added in English for the benefit of the European group that sat at the next table: `I am sick of boilèd potatoes.´ By calling them boilèd he hoped he had put into it the disgust he felt.» (31).

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[6] `I have already started ´.

Even more revealing of the cultural meanings of standard English are those instances in which Obi chooses to switch from English into Pidgin as a way to show his affiliation with Nigerian urban folks, as when he was interacting on the phone with the receptionist downstairs: «`A gentleman? Send him up, please. *He want speak to me there? All right, I de come down. Now now´*» (78). Solidarity towards urban speakers is also expressed in Obi's interactions in Pidgin when addressing the school boys in the Imperial's parking («*Na me go look your car for you […] O.K. make you look am well» (*101), or when speaking with Samsom, Hon. Sam Okoli's steward: «*Wetin Master and Madam go drink? […] Make you no worry, Samson»* (86).

Those dialogues manifest that Pidgin had already become the new symbolic element of a new alliance: that among post-colonial individuals in a multicultural and polyglot setting, in which, as Zabus has remarked, there may be a "need to do away with the formality and unnaturalness of Standard English in the social arena" (1991: 84), and with its connotations of power and distance.

3. PIDGIN

The main character of the novel, Obi, stands for the hybrid mixture of several cultures and forces: European education, Christian religious thought filtered by the African mind, traditional tribal Africa, colonialism, and attraction for the city (one of the outcomes of twentieth-century development), not fused and consolidated yet, but in a process of change which in that historical moment results in a conflicting salmagundi, a miscellaneous potpourri. Although it has been pointed out that those various ingredients of Obi's background "remain quite separate and unsynthesised" (Carroll 1990: 83), this being a fact which will partly account for his failure, a careful reading of the novel reveals that even though the main characters may still be on the verge of crystallising (but have not crystallised yet) out of these disparate fragments, there is a symbolic element all through the novel which represents the fusion and welding which has already emerged out of that miscellany of cultural elements: Pidgin, the linguistic outcome of the melting of several cultural and linguistic traits in the pot of the towns of West Africa.

Pidgin is the language which belongs par excellence to urban Nigeria: a compromise between Europe and Africa, the skill manipulation of the two worlds, one of the ways to redress the balance and reconcile conflicting cultures and modes of thought. Pidgin is a language built to suit new African conditions. As Gerard claims, "Culture change always involves language change and ... culture contact, even in the form of notorious culture clash, always leads to the mode of linguistic hybridization" (1991: ii). Far from being the language of a semi-literate urban sub-culture as depicted in novels such as Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961), or Joseph Mangut's *Have Mercy* (1982), and in plays such as those by Soyinka, or Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), Achebe chooses Pidgin as a side-effect of the "civilising" process of colonization on African cultures, one of the ways for Africans to superpose two apparently irreconciliable sets of cultural elements.

Apart from its obvious function of lingua franca of the non-educated in multilingual Nigeria[7], Achebe starts using pidgin in *No Longer at Ease* as the informal and more personal language of urban characters living in West African towns, spaces where influences and cultures meet, and tribal identities blur. It is the tongue fashioned in the African city, a place which "stands midway between Europe and Umofia, and creates its own highly spiced amalgamation of their cultural ingredients" (Carroll 1990: 65). This can be seen in urban characters such as Mr. Omo, the Nigerian Administrative Assistant at Mr.Green's service, who expresses himself in Pidgin in several instances, or the African steward at the Palm Grove Restaurant, the witty nurse at the doctor's surgery, or the two ward servants at the hospital, among others. Most of those characters speak Pidgin, not in default of English, but side by side with it. Pidgin is thus "elevated to the status of a legitimate register, worthy of rivalling Standard English" (Zabus 1991: 78) in conversation.

Pidgin also serves in Achebe the purpose of expressing urban-folk philosophy, in social remarks such as the ones made by the patients waiting at the doctor's surgery when Obi jumps the queue: «*you tink because Government give you car you fit do what you like? You see all of we de wait here and you just go in. You tink na play we come play*» (137); or in the scene where the taxi driver runs over a dog and explains Obi: «*Na good luck […] Dog bring good luck for new car. But duck be different. If you kill duck you go get accident or kill man*» (14). Its function is probably one means of insisting on African otherness, and to remind the reader that Africans possess a system of thought and a culture of their own. In fact, as Zabus notes, Pidgin has "developed an as yet tiny arsenal of maxims and urban saws which complement the original proverbs or stand on their own" (1991: 75). In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe occasionally resorts to one of those to illustrate the narrator's words, as in:

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[7] As used by the coach driver and his passengers in chapter 5, and by the people he meets in chapter 15, when he is driving back to Lagos after visiting his parents.

> «Ibo people in their fair-mindedness, have devised a proverb which says that it is not right to ask a man with elephantiasis of the scrotum to take on smallpox as well, when thousands of other people have not had even their share of small diseases. No doubt it is not right. But it happens. "*Na so dis world be*", they say». (90)

Even more importantly, the brotherhood of the dispossessed is also expressed through Pidgin, which is also a medium to create solidarity with fellow urban people, as opposed to Ibo, which fulfils the function of creating solidarity with fellow countrymen, and as opposed to English, the imperial dominant language. Thus, after using English on the phone, Joseph switches to Pidgin to talk to his colleagues: «*That na my brother […]'E no be like dat. Him na gentlemen. No fit take bribe*» (70) as a sign of his solidarity attitude, which shows his personal and informal relationship with his mates at work. This connotation of informality and camaraderie that Pidgin holds has been noted by some critics, who suggest that Hon. Sam Okoli's speech, whenever he feels at ease and expansive among a few friends, "slips" [*sic*] into Pidgin (Ravenscroft 1969:18; Wilson 1979: 166).

When the speakers want to diverge from the conversation held in Pidgin, they turn into the language of power, English, which acquires a non-solidarious, impositive connotation. We have already mentioned Obi's indignation with Sebastian and his disagreement with Charles, the messenger, and in both cases Pidgin disappears and the speaker reverts into English. A more significant example of this non-supportive attitude is found in Obi's episode with the Customs Clerk, who tries to bribe him. The interaction starts in English, but the Clerk continues his speech in Pidgin when he feels uncomfortable using the standard language. It seems that bribery is better dealt with in Pidgin, this suggesting a sense of urban brotherhood in crime which Obi rejects:

> «`I can be able to reduce it to two pounds for you.´
>
> `How?´ asked Obi?.
>
> *`I fit do it, but you no go get Government receipt.´*
>
> For a few seconds Obi was speechless. Then he merely said: `Don't be silly. If there was a policeman here I would hand you over to him.´» (27)

Something similar occurs when Obi was paying a short visit to Umofia, his home town. While he was travelling on a coach (a *mammy-wagon*, as they say), its driver tried to bribe two policemen. Considering that he is above that kind of things, Obi consciously refuses to converge towards the language of solidarity:

> `*Why you look the man for face when we want give um him two shillings*?,´[8] [the driver] asked Obi.
>
> `Because he has no right to take two shillings from you,´ Obi answered.
>
> `*Na him make I no de want carry you buk people,*´[9] he complained. (39)

4. CONCLUSION

For some time, African critics interpreted the use of Pidgin in novels by white writers as a subjective characterization of African speakers as linguistically incompetent and even inferior. Chantal Zabus explains this stigmatization of Pidgin in literature written by white authors when she discusses the pidginization of Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson*: "[Joyce Cary's] rendering of Pidgin has been seen as part and parcel of a colonialist strategy aimed at establishing a captious equation between the `baby talk´ of [the Nigerian character] Mister Johnson and his putatively infantile mind" (Zabus 1991: 59).

Following this line of thought, some eminent (African and European) scholars have done what we consider neo-colonial readings of the function of Pidgin in West-African anglophone literature. Uncritically accepting common widespread (colonial) attitudes towards the languages, they have come to consider Pidgin in literature as the language of triviality alone[10]. Surprisingly, not even Nigerian sociolinguists escape from this perspective: Yankson, for example, interprets the narrator's comments on Pidgin all through *No Longer at Ease* as "clearly showing how low or unsophisticated pidgin is regarded" (1990: 5). He considers that the characters "do not use Pidgin for any serious purpose" (1990: 6), and that "its use is confined to topics which are not serious. This [...] shows that the author, consciously or unconsciously, wants us to feel that in the world of *No Longer at Ease* pidgin is a sub-standard language" (1990: 7). Even Chantal Zabus' analysis, although much more multifold, remarks that codeswitch from Pidgin to English in *No Longer at Ease* "may signal that the locutor relinquishes `the levity of Pidgin´ to broach a serious topic" (1991: 82). In most West African novels, she adds, "Pidgin *remains* an 'auxiliary´ language into which a character slides, slips, lapses, as in a fall from a higher register" (1991: 76, our emphasis), something which had also been stated by other critics before, as we mentioned (Ravenscroft 1969:18; Wilson 1979: 166).

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[8] ´Why did you look into his face when I was giving him two shillings?´

[9] `That's why I don't want to carry educated people on my coach´

[10] Mocking those Africans conscious of their social or educational status who despise Pidgin, Achebe himself will ironically refer to this by putting the following words in one of his characters' mouth in a later novel «`But Standard Six in your time was superior to Senior Cambridge today´, I said in our language, refusing to be drawn into the *levity of pidgin*» (Achebe 1966: 99, our emphasis).

These interpretations, in our view, not only help to perpetuate the colonial status of Pidgin as a mere contact language, therefore contributing to the linguistic imperialism (or colonial "glottophagia", as Louis-Jean Calvet called it), but they are inaccurate as well, as they fail to see the crucial role played by Pidgin in *No Longer at Ease*.

What Achebe does is to acknowledge Pidgin as one of the several components of the linguistic repertoire of the immigrant population of Nigerian urban centres, and as a lingua franca of inter-class and inter-ethnic interaction, characterized by a multiplicity and specificity of functions as represented in Achebe's novel. Although Griffiths, discussing later novels by Achebe, has suggested that some characters use Pidgin as a (negative) "mark of `successful´ detribalisation and social advancement" (1979: 79), and Chantal Zabus remarks that in Cyprian Ekwensi's novels "Lagos emerges as a linguistic crucible seething with Pidgin-speaking characters. Pidgin [...] here becomes the lingua franca of materialistic and ambitious characters caught in the whirlpool of modernity" (1991: 65), we observe that in *No Longer at Ease* this is not the case yet (if it ever will be).

In Achebe's novel, Pidgin is patently the link between two worlds. Faced with the dilemmas and conflicts of the complex African society of the 50's and 60's, the only possible accommodation is Pidgin. It represents a certain African encoding of reality, the reality of a people who have come to terms with their history, culture and influences in ways that permit them to survive. It is a way to "answer back" white society as well, and thus not the lingua franca of the uneducated but a new code which in this novel is at the same time the tongue of urban people and the language of modernity, "the language of urban integration", which "reflects both her successful integration in the urban milieu and her alienation from her original linguistic community", as Zabus put it to refer to one of the female characters of Ekwesi's novels (1991: 68). Pidgin represents symbolically the urban aplomb to manipulate several cultures, and Achebe depicts characters who successfully manipulate and reconcile the different worlds, as for example, the Hon. Sam Okoli: «'Lady first; that is what the white man has brought. I respect the white man´ [...] `All the same they must go. *This no be them country´»* (61-2).

Achebe's utilization of Pidgin is a way to demonstrate how Africans have "indigenized" English, subverting the dominance of the standard, and investing Pidgin with a new legitimacy and authority. He has inherited a rich African culture which regards highly the values of solidarity and community. As Skinner puts it, "If the European literary archetype for two hundred years has evolved round the rebellious gesture, then its modern African counterpart is the communal act" (1998: 82). The new communality and the compromise between Western and native impulses is expressed in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* by his characters' use of Pidgin. By doing this, one of his foremost achievements is an undermining of linguistic hierarchies, dislocating European canonical views on language, and displacing conversational English, the Nigerian "stepmother tongue", to the bottom of the set of values.

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"*TOUCHING THE FUTURE*: NATION AND NARRATION IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH CANADA"

EVA DARIAS BEAUTELL
University of La Laguna

ABSTRACT. *This paper intends to revise Canadian narratives of identity vis-à-vis the changing nature of recent fictional production in English. Cultural nationalism no longer seems to hold in the face of the contradictory movements of globalization and fragmentation of the national culture. The writings of Rohinton Mistry and Thomas King can be seen, I will argue, as paradigmatic of the physical and cultural displacements implied by those two instances of change respectively. I will then focus on two recent and very successful novels, M.G. Vassanji's* The Book of Secrets *(1994) and Anne Michaels's* Fugitive Pieces *(1996), which are partially or totally set outside Canada and have an emphasis on place as open text, as the site of complex negotiations of identity at the turn of the century.*

In his book *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, William New (1997) analyses the representations of place, site, space and land in Canadian culture. The fiction written in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, New notes, is often set abroad and exhibits an aesthetic of place and time radically different from the one written by the country's cultural nationalism. Instead of focusing on the meaning of an essential Canadianness, these texts often deal with the technologies of travel, information, and electronic communication, with the flow of people and cultural productions across literal and metaphorical frontiers, with the narrativization of history, with the connections between national and international histories, and with the epistemological changes that these developments imply. If the texts are set in Canada, the Canadian territory is often represented as *other* space for the exploration of the notions of history, identity and culture.

This paper intends to revise Canadian narratives of identity vis-à-vis the changing nature of recent fictional production in English. Cultural nationalism no longer seems to hold in the face of the contradictory movements of globalization and fragmentation of the national culture. On the one hand, there is the increasing lack of coincidence between identity and place as experienced, for instance, by diaspora writers. On the other, there is the growing presence of Native Canadian voices which question the existence of a relation of sameness between nation and culture. The writings of Rohinton Mistry and Thomas King can be seen, I will argue, as paradigmatic of the physical and cultural displacements implied by those two instances of change respectively. I will then focus on two recent and very successful novels, M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). Like the also very successful *The English Patient* (1992), to which they owe much, these two novels are partially or totally set outside Canada across the Atlantic Ocean in Africa and Europe, exhibit a strong tendency towards the historiographic and have an emphasis on place as open text, as site of complex negotiations of identity at the turn of the century.

We are all familiar with the articulation of a Canadian identity in negative terms. Beginning in the late 1960s, the leading Canadian critic Northrop Frye and one of his most famous students and disciples, the well-known writer Margaret Atwood, put forward a national(ist) identity in terms of the very crisis of such identity (see, for instance, Frye 1971 and Atwood 1972). At the time, this effort expressed a desire for a much-needed Pan-Canadian identity then framed in opposition to British, French and American cultural forces and feebly found on/in the bilingual/bicultural model that led the nationalist movement of the 1960s. The process of nation construction was seen, in this way, as specially complex not only because of Canada's colonial history and geographical location but also because of the very double nature of the colonial powers and, moreover, the nation's own search for uniqueness in that bilingual/bicultural structure. As a result of the pressure put by these binary schemes, the argument goes, Canada's self-image has historically suffered from a lack of strength–the famous crisis of identity, allegedly a constitutive element of the Canadian character and paradoxically one that has given Canada the narrative needed to construct itself as a nation.

The scheme, however, has proved stronger than its designers had first thought in the 1960s. Although soon to be succeeded by the declaration of official multiculturalism, the binary structure introduced by the bicultural form of national identification seems to still dominate the official narrative of the nation. Today, that structure works, as Katarzyna

Rukszto (1997: 152-153) observes, to contain the difference produced by the growing multicultural counternarratives (Quebec, regionalists, natives, cultural minorities, new immigrants). It serves, in other words, to contain those counternarratives within a related formula for national identification: unity in/through diversity (see also Widdis 1997: 55-57).

At stake here is the construction of a national identity as predicated on laws of exclusion and inclusion which are constantly thrown off balance by the presence of other forms of identification and representation. Rukszto (1997: 154-158) selects the Flag Day incident in 1996 as an instance of the widening gap between the official pressure for unity and the Canadians’ insistence on dis-identification. On February 15, 1996, Canadians celebrated the National Flag of Canada Day as a national holiday for the first time. The celebration was part of the “Citizenship Week,” designed by the Chrétien government to sell and promote a pan-Canadian identity upon the already mentioned principle of “unity in diversity.” Conversely, the day brought an unwelcome surprise. An incident happened between Prime Minister Chrétien and a demonstrator who was protesting against the cuts in unemployment insurance and, the following day, a videotape was circulated that showed Chrétien unfortunately grabbing the demonstrator by the neck.

Linda Hutcheon (1991) would certainly interpret the event as an instance of the typically Canadian irony. Irony is produced in the gap between what is said and what is meant, in the difference, in this case, between the intended meaning and the actual results of the celebration. The event also, most importantly, underlines the gap between what Homi Bhabha (1991: 291-322) calls the pedagogical and the performative functions of narrating the nation. The processes of this narration, the strategies of nation-building and the construction of a national identity, are especially evident in the Canadian case. As Rukszto (1997: 151), drawing on Bhabha’s theories, points out, the official announcement of the Flag Day as a national holiday was designed to construct a sense of unity based on a equally constructed shared experience of the nation:

> The argument here is based on the idea that the social narrative, such as the narrative of Canadian identity and belonging, produces meaning by appealing to subjects through its representations. The narrative is both a participant in and a product of historical and social relations. It allows individuals to see themselves in stories about “their” social/historical context.

It is the simultaneity of those two strategies, the narrative as participant (performative) and as product (pedagogical), that constitutes the people as nation by situating them within a discourse of cultural identification. The narrative of nation, in other words, constructs the people both as its object (sharing a common historical experience) and as its subject. The people see themselves in this way as both made by and makers of the nation, a double (and contradictory) movement upon which the legitimacy of any national narrative depends (Bhabha 1991: 301).

In their repeated attempts to construct and promote a more or less coherent version of the nation, the different Canadian governments have given priority to artistic and cultural productions with a Canadian content, whatever that may mean. Although lately, and largely due to a lack of consensus about the meaning of Canadianness, the idea is losing supporters, Canadian-content policies are still applied officially and defended by a large sector of the population. Let us look, for instance, at Douglas Ivison's analysis of the situation in Canadian music (1997). Although Ivison recognizes the problems derived from the implementation of Canadian-content policies, he still argues for the presence, in Canadian songs, of culturally specific allusion, meaning by that, "vocabulary, names of places, people, or institutions, or references to contemporary or historical debates, issues, or incidents which those within the culture, English Canadians in this case, are presumed to recognize and understand, and which foreign listeners may be unable to identify or may at least recognize as signs of alterity" (Ivison 1997: 53-54).

The problem appears when the definition of English Canadian culture is unstable or unclear. The national references that Ivison presents as culturally identifiable and unified by consent–the Mounties, Tom Thomson's paintings, Jacques Cartier–are far from providing the desired images of the nation today. As many recent works of fiction seem to put forward, contemporary English Canada does not necessarily feel identified with that official iconography and concerns itself at least as much with places and cultures outside Canadian geography as with beavers, bears, maple leaves, and the wilderness. This, in turn, brings to the fore the question of what it means to be Canadian at the end of the century. And, in so doing, it implicitly puts forward, as Janice Kulyk Keefer (1996: 63) has argued, the need for a shift in the conception of the nation, from a dialogue, with its English/French binary model of a nation, to a *polylogue* or "the creation of a discursive arena in which the full range of ethnocultural and racial difference can be meaningfully articulated."

That shift is all the more necessary when we are increasingly dealing with a people who imagine their history and culture as different from the official account and often taking place out there, outside Canadian soil (see Turner 1995). In the process of writing the Canadian nation, the measure of temporality has definitely broken the apparent linearity of such national narrative, an event which, according to Bhabha (1991: 292), "produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories, like people, minorities, or 'cultural difference' that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity."

One needs only to think of the native population whose version of history often clashes with the narrative presented by the pedagogical strategies and whose idea of social and political representation is often cut short by the proposed performative strategies of nation narration. The identification of the country with the wilderness, for instance, has proven more than questionable from the point of view of the native production. Such identification was largely promoted during the first third of the century by Canada's most popular movement in painting, the Group of Seven, and gladly adopted by an official iconography badly in need of a sign of distinctiveness. Today, we see the paintings of the Group of Seven, with their representation of landscape without people or animals, with their sense of empty space, no longer as innocent choices but as consciously or unconsciously contributing to the equation between Indians and land, enabling thus the process of colonization of both (see Bordo 1997).

Contemporary native production parodies and contests most notions of Canadian identity as feeble and/or wilderness-related. In Thomas King's short story "The One about Coyote Going West" (1996), Coyote, the quintessential Native North American trickster, goes around "fixing" the landscape to her taste, putting some rocks here, some waterfalls there. In this story, the equation between Indians and wilderness is disturbingly dismantled by Coyote's shocking approach to the landscape. We thus see the creation of some televisions, vacuum cleaners, air humidifiers, portable gas barbecues, and department store catalogues in an apparently empty North American landscape, before the actual discovery of the Indians. "We need these things to make up the world," the text reads. "Indians are going to need this stuff" (239). The tale provides a sharp parody of Western narratives of discovery and national narratives of identity. Here, the directionality of progress, ironically incorporated in the story by the movement West, is reversed and we find people named Jacques Columbus and Christopher Cartier getting lost and the Indians, suffering from no crisis of identity yet, just waiting to be discovered, waving and calling "here we are, here we are" (King 1996: 234).

Another example that would contradict the narrative of the lack of a national identity is that of the ethnic minorities and new immigrants to the country who, taken together, represent more than 40% of the total population and who, more often than not, *do know who they are* and have a very strong sense of history and culture. The presence of these other texts of nation introduces a vacillating effect to the still dominant construction of Canada as a feeble nation just recovering from a long and historically justified identitary vacuum. Instead, it draws our attention to other important sites of nation narration, to other different processes of narrativization of history, of culture, and thus of the nation.

Let us take Rohinton Mistry's collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), since it provides an excellent example of the changing relations between place and culture. The text negotiates the complexities of the diasporic experience as it incorporates the contemporary emphasis on movement, literal and figurative, of travelling texts, writing and reading subjects. The stories portray the life of a Parsi community (already a diaspora back in India) both in India and in Canada. The collection traces a gradual movement from Bombay, India (the early stories are about the people living in an apartment complex called Firozsha Baag) to Ontario, Canada (to another apartment complex in Don Mills), the middle stories appropriately depicting the circumstance of the characters who leave Bombay for the West. The very last story, "Swimming Lessons," is structured as a double narrative and moves back and forth between the Canadian apartment building, where the narrator lives, and Firozsha Baag, in Bombay, where the narrator's parents live.

The connections between this last story's two narrative frames happen at first by association: A phone ringing in Don Mills is connected in the text to the sound of a doorbell in Bombay, or the aseptic waters of the public swimming pool where the narrator has registered for lessons act as a link with the polluted sea of Chaupatty beach in Bombay, where the narrator used to go to as a child. At one point in the story, however, the narrator sends the parents his first book, a collection of short stories whose reading becomes then the subject of the Bombay narrative. In this way, we begin to read the parents' interpretation of the very book we are reading, concluding with the closing story, with which both our reading and the text's reading of itself wonderfully coincide.

It is that fictional process reading itself, the portrayal of a fiction within a fiction within a fiction, that provides the formal structure for another most important negotiation: the negotiation of cultural dislocations, displacements, and transformation in both countries, India and Canada. The text posits the impossibility of defining identity in terms of either cultural origins or assimilation into a new culture alone. On the one hand, the readings of the stories about India and Canada necessarily modify the parents' experience of both. On the other, the Parsi immigrant narrator is as influenced by the host culture, the Canadian culture, as is the latter modified by the presence of the former.

The emergence of texts like Mistry's signals the need to move beyond purely nationalistic approaches to national literature and culture in general. It underlines the processes of construction of what we call tradition, the shifts in the nature of what is found important or meaningful by particular people at particular times and places, the presence of non-national forms of identification (see Rukszto 1997; also Seiler 1996). In the struggle over the question of a national identity and over the different forms of national belonging, the debates about the canon, multiculturalism, political correctness and immigration policies get intertwined. Mistry, a Parsi, part of Indian diaspora, and resident in Canada, won the Governor General's Award, Canada highest official prize, with his novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) about the Parsi community in Bombay. And he is only one among many recent immigrant writers who have also won important national prizes. As Ranu Samantrai (1996: 34) wittingly argues, events like this one seem to explode the idea of a national identity,

> impossibly stretching its boundaries to include places, people, and memories conventionally excluded from the Canadian mainstream. The fact that Mistry’s work is also claimed by Indian fiction and by Parsis as Parsi fiction suggests a breakdown and an overlap of nations such that it is unclear where India ends and Canada begins. Far from coherent, self-enclosed facts of nature, nations and cultures (which themselves fail to coincide) are revealed as interpenetrating, not distinct from each other but made by, and making, each other.

In what follows I wish to briefly focus on two recent and very successful novels that capture and draw on, in my opinion, that transcultural approach to the processes of nation narration: M. G. Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). These two novels participate of an archaeological/genealogical notion of history and tradition, and are made up in the fashion described by Linda Hutcheon (1988: 13) as *historiographic metafiction*, that is, “fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in the historical, social, and political realities (...). These works,” Hutcheon continues, “are not quite historical novels in the traditional sense, for they are also very metafictional in their attention to the processes of writing, reading, and interpreting.” Both Vassanji’s and Michaels’s texts also implicitly break the boundaries of the nation by showing that identity depends on temporal and spatial paradigms that are always in flux.

Like Mistry, Vassanji is part of a double diaspora, coming to North America from the Kenya/Tanzania region where his family settled during colonial times, when Indians were transported as indentured labourers to British Africa and the West Indian colonies. This movement constitutes the first phase of the Indian diaspora starting a geographical displacement which is going to produce very complex and often contradictory allegiances (see Bharucha 1995; also Chelvakanaganayakan 1991). Set in a border territory between the German and the British colonies of East Africa, *The Book of Secrets* deals with those complexities in a very subtle way, constructing its narrative, as Allan Casey (1994: 34-35) points out, “against a tide of political change, depicting a web of ethnicities and cultures, and juggling a large cast of characters” from the early 20th century to the narrative present in 1988.

Vassanji’s novel is structured as a historical research work featuring, in its opening pages, a map of British East Africa at the beginning of the century, and a prologue in which the narrator, Pius Fernandes, a retired history teacher, is given the diary of Alfred Corbin, a former British Commissioner to the region. The narrator’s research about this diary constitutes the corpus of the book, divided into two main parts and interspersing the contents of Corbin's diary with correspondence, historical documents and other miscellaneous information of the time presumably found by the narrator in his research. The book closes with an epilogue and a glossary of terms in Swahili and Indian languages.

The time span, 1913-1988, is strategically framed by the double-voiced structure of a diary within a diary: Pius Fernandes's personal notebook in 1988 provides the story's outer framework and a contemporary perspective on colonial life, while Alfred Corbin's diary, written between 1913 and 1914, marks the story's point of departure around the events of World War I, a time which also saw the beginning of the end of colonialism. The choice of a diary is indicative of the novel's intent on exploring colonial history, diaries providing sometimes the only written documents of life in many isolated postings. The further inclusion of personal letters, official correspondence, Memoranda, newspaper clippings, riddles and poems signals the text's subscription to a well-defined line of writing in contemporary fiction, "one in which the sorting, and not necessarily the finding, is the nature of the quest" (Redhill 1994: 22).

As soon as the book starts, the reader is filled with a sense of premature inconclusiveness. "Because it has no end, this book," the very first pages tell us, "it ingests us and carries us with it, and so it grows" (Vassanji 1994: 2). The description of Alfred Corbin's diary (Vassanji 1994: 7-8), with its yellowed, stained, or simply missing pages, its faded ink and often unreadable handwriting, adds little to rectify the initial impression that we are entering a world of secrets without the promise of revelation. The diary is given to our narrator by a former student, Feroz, who has found it bricked-up in the wall of the back room of his store in Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania). Its contents pose a number of questions both personal and historical:

> Even before I began to pore over Corbin's entries which would subsequently so grip me, I could not help but feel that in some mysterious manner the book touched our lives; was *our* book. There was, I felt, much more than the contents of its pages; there was the story of the book itself. Written here amongst us, later perhaps hidden, and now found among us, it must have left a long and secretive trail, a trail that if followed would reveal much about the lives and times it witnessed, and tell us why the diary finally surfaced where it did. (Vassanji 1994: 7-8)

The narrative that follows will certainly reveal the trail of the diary, from its owner, Alfred Corbin, British Commissioner in the small town of Kikono (now Kenya) in 1913, to Feroz's back room in 1988. Other than that, however, the narrator's attempts at answering the questions posed by the contents of the private document are fraught from the beginning by the very structure of the narrative plot. The text's historical and cultural significance grows as the number of characters (sometimes only tangentially involved) also increases to touch the very narrator, Pius Fernandes, and, with him, the reader. The multiple narrative layers move in unexpected directions, losing at times the point of reference, the origin of the story, the diary; then, also unexpectedly, recapturing it again. "The novel's style of opening out, rather than focusing in, on the diary's mystery," writes Michael Redhill (1994: 22), "is a courageous gambit which works because the novel charms us away from the narrowness of desiring an answer and into the realm of greater questions."

In Part One, the writing of the diary (and our reading of it) is interrupted by the events of World War I. The diary is then stolen by Mariamu, a member of the Shamsi community and one of Corbin's servant with whom he might have had, the text suggests, a sexual relation. After Mariamu is murdered in mysterious circumstances, her husband Pipa, a street seller from the German side (now Tanzania), keeps and worships it thinking, not knowing how to read English, that it contains the secret of their son (Ali), who is born with fair skin and grey eyes. The paternity of Ali represents the original (and unsolved) secret in the diary, but other secrets will appear as the plot opens out.

Part Two of the book deals with the relationship between Pipa and his son Ali in the post-war period and follows the life of Ali, who marries Rita, from Dar-es-Salaam to London. Rita, named after Rita Hayworth, happens to be one of Pius's former students and proves to be a good source of information in the narrator's research. It is Rita who presents Pius with a book of poems written by Gregory, a former school teacher at Dar and one of Pius's colleagues. The last section of this part reveals then hidden connections between Gregory and the Corbins, including personal letters between Gregory and Corbin's wife, Anne. These letters introduce, in turn, a new secret and give the story yet another twist. Like the very plot, the representation of subjectivity in the novel follows an inverse direction and, instead of trying to produce a unifying consciousness, it disperses the writing/reading subject through an ever wider range of texts and new characters. "Gregory would have understood this idea of fulfilment in the eventual dispersal of oneself," Pius reflects (Vassanji 1994: 316).

The Book of Secrets has thus many books inside. This type of books was kept in Ancient Arab cultures with the conclusions of the Muslim sages. The physical book was seen as the keeper of precious knowledge, as sacred in itself and was therefore worshipped (see Woodcock 1994). In Vassanji's novel, the diary of Alfred Corbin would provide the most obvious example of such a book and is thought of as trapping the soul of the people named inside it. But many other books of secrets follow: there is Richard Gregory's posthumous *Havin' a Piece: Collected Poems 1930-1967*, there is Alfred Corbin's memoirs *Heart and Soul*, there is Pius Fernandes's journal, there is the very book we are reading, a new book of secrets, tracing unexpected connections between the two narrators, "from the pen of a lonely man to the obsession of another" Pius writes, "from ancient lives caught up in imperial enterprise and a world war to these, our times: and finally to myself, and the hidden longings of my past. At the end of it all, I too lie exposed to my own inquiry, also captive to the book" (Vassanji 1994: 8).

The Book of Secrets won the first Giller Prize, Canada's richest fiction award. The story happens almost entirely in East Africa, a small section of it set in London, and Canada only appears in passim because one of Pius's former students, Sona, now an active correspondent involved in the research of the diary, writes from Toronto. The characters are mostly African Indian Muslims, although there is the colonial British officer and the narrator himself, who is a Christian Goan. There is a subtle way, however, in which the history of these East African Indians becomes the history of Canada, for the 20th century has seen the second wave of Indian migration. Originally settled in East Africa as merchants, the independence of Kenya and Tanzania brought great confusion to the Indian diaspora, mostly loyal to the British Crown, and now discriminated, their properties sometimes confiscated, by the newly empowered African leaders. This time they moved to England, the United States, and Canada. Seen in this light, Vassanji's novel is *about* Canada as it draws on important connections between national and international histories. Moreover, it pushes the boundaries of what we call national literature, expanding it to include places and cultures out there, beyond Canada's borders (see Dyer 1995: 21).

Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) is another book of secrets. Set in Poland, Greece, and Canada, the novel starts, like Vassanji's, with a discovery; and this time, a miraculous one: Athos, a Greek archaeologist excavating the Stone Age town beneath Biskupin in Poland, discovers and rescues Jakob, a Jewish boy who has been hiding in the mud of the drown city after the Nazis have murdered his family. Jakob is about to be taken for a bogman when tears from his eyes crack the mud covering his face. Such is the beginning of this extraordinary novel. Like Vassanji's, Michaels's text has a clear focus on discontinuities, interruptions, displacements, transformations.

Visually divided into two main parts, *Fugitive Pieces* announces the death of its first narrator, Jakob Beer, in the form of a prologue. The first part of the book reveals, then, the contents of Jakob's private notebooks, telling us about the peculiar circumstances of his life: his hiding in the mud of the Polish town of Biskupin during World War II, his serendipitous rescue by the Greek geologist and humanist Athos Roussos, his secluded childhood as a refugee on the Greek island of Zakynthos, and his later life in Toronto as he becomes a poet and a translator. The narrative comes to being slowly through the magic codes of archaeology, geology, botany, cartography, music and poetry, dreams and nightmares, silence, "every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language" (Michaels 1996: 111). The narrator moves tentatively in this way trying "to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications" (Michaels 1996: 109).

Ben, the Torontonian son of a Polish refugee couple, is the narrator of the second part. It will be Ben who, fascinated by Jakob's poetry and having being profoundly moved by the poet's sense of serenity on their first meeting, travels to Greece, after Jakob's death, in search of the notebooks whose contents constitute the first part of the book. Although the reader will only gradually become aware of the connections between the two narrators, Ben's attachment to Jakob seems inevitable from the beginning given Ben's unlikely interest in weather and biography and his fascination for the perfectly preserved bog people (discovered at 12 in the *National Geographic*):

> I drew the aromatic earth over my shoulders, the peaceful spongy blanket of peat. I see now that my fascination wasn't archaeology or even forensics: it was biography. The faces that stared at me across the centuries, with creases in their cheeks like my mother's when she fell asleep on the couch, were the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be. (Michaels 1996: 221)

Thus, through the reading of Jakob's notebooks, Ben imagines who this peculiar person, once bog-boy to save his skin from the Nazi armies, might have been. The two narrators are haunted by the brutalities of World War II: Jakob by the death of his beloved sister Bella, Ben by an inherited fear, a fear whose cause, he will later discover, is also the death of a brother and a sister in the war. The two stories contain each other, are porous like Athos's favourite stone, limestone, "organic history squeezed into massive mountain tombs" (32). Through the character of Athos, the novel posits history as prehistory. "Out of fertile ground, the compost of history" (161). This, in turn, succeeds in undoing threatening claims to the land, to origins and purity. "I could temporarily shrug off my strangeness," says Jakob as he and Athos enjoy their weekly explorations into the Torontonian ravines, finding the living traces of prehistoric lakes and primeval forests, "because, the way Athos saw the world, every human was a newcomer" (103). Place is an open site for physical and imaginary explorations. "Michaels beautifully unifies the book's different settings," writes Diane Turbide (1996: 61), "the ancient city lying beneath Biskupin, Poland, where Jakob was born, a tiny Greek island and 1950s Toronto–by viewing them through the eye of a natural scientist."

It is also Athos that offers the arguments for the novel's implicit participation of a Foucauldian notion of history, its tacit dismantling of the narrative of progress and continuity. History is seen as archaeology, as genealogy and geology, as meteorology and botany, as porous limestone, as a series of interruptions, interconnected accidents, improbable coincidences:

> "The spirit in the body is like a wine of glass; when it spills, it seeps into air and earth and light.... It's a mistake to think it's the small things we control and not the large, it's the other way around! We can't stop the small accident, the tiny detail that conspires into fate: the extra moment you run back for something forgotten, a moment that saves you from an accident - or causes one. But we can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see." (Michaels 1996: 22)

The characters in Michaels's novel seem often subject to this rhetoric of small accidents: Jakob is miraculously saved from the Nazis but dies when he is run over by a car. Other than the powerful historical narrative behind, there seems to be no large plot to their lives. "Since the uniting thread is the Holocaust," Nancy Wigston (1996: 27) complains in this sense, "Michaels' characters are often smaller than the landscape of horrors they inhabit." And one must admit that the plot of *Fugitive Pieces* is not focused on the external but rather on the transformation of an individual consciousness (see Rubin 1997; also Kakutani 1997). Still, as Michaels herself comments, the novels explores the relationship between large historical events and everyday individual decisions. "And then," says Michaels, "there can also be a great deal of plot buried in a small gesture, in walking across a room to open a door, huge plot implications in deciding to avert your eyes when you see an escaped prisoner across a field" (Tihanyi 1996: 7).

In times of great fragmentation, of a general skepticism, of the hypostatization of absence and the questioning of language, history and knowledge, *Fugitive Pieces* is about remembering, about human emotions and beliefs, about believing in language, the importance of naming, the preservation of history: "*One man's memories then another's, thousands whose lives it was their duty to imagine*" (279). The book carefully traces Jakob's and Ben's itineraries of (be)longing through love and hate and fear and stones and lullabies: "There is no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence... If one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map" (193). *Fugitive Pieces*, as Mark Abley (1996: 74) asserts, "is a book of love: a book to love."

We seem to be living a time of transformations. The ongoing movement of people and information across barriers, both physical and metaphorical, has brought important changes in our approach to the notions of identity, nation, and culture. Contemporary Canadian fiction now seems to work with a notion of identity as highly textualized; that is, as made up of texts which, paradoxically, produce both centripetal and centrifugal effects on the individual subject. Similarly, many recent novels exhibit a very strong sense of history as historiography; that is, as text, as fiction, as narrative of identity. Thus, the very fictional texts often look very much like Pius's notebook in Vassanji's novel, containing Alfred Corbin's diary as well as the narrator's notes, scribbling, and research about it; or like Jakob's diary in Michaels's book, containing poems, meteorological information, Athos's historical research about the Nazi atrocities, cooking recipes. This process of intertextualization of identity is wonderfully condensed in the character of the English patient, in Michael Ondaatje's best-seller of the same title (1992). The whole novel is haunted by the non-identity of this burned man who also, significantly, keeps a palimpsestic book with him, his only possession when found. The English patient, the text reads,

> speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, the woman who bit into his flesh. And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories*, are other fragments–maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron. (Ondaatje 1992: 96)

In their "anonymous" erudition, these texts cannot be contained by the nation narration. They exhibit a degree of what Homi Bhabha (1994: 9) has called "unhomeliness," which is not 'homelessness' but rather "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations." To be unhomed, according to Bhabha (1994: 7), is to establish a bridge, to dwell *in the beyond*, that is, "to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now."

Contemporary Canadian fiction certainly participates of that revisionary act. The answers to the questions of identity, nation and culture it poses are complex and necessarily incomplete. The tendency is double and simultaneously to the very global and to the very local, to unify (the common background of the texts of a particular culture) and to differ (the very specific contexts of each text and each writing/reading subject). Whatever the results, the very process of questioning implies irreversible changes in the approach to any of the identitary categories involved. And, in so doing, this kind of fiction is moving ahead of time, almost *touching the future*.

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A CHICANO CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE

AMAIA IBARRARÁN BIGALONDO
University of the Basque Country

ABSTRACT. *The difficult social and cultural situation that the Chicano community has suffered after the signing of theTreaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, has been overtly manifested in the Literature produced by its writers. Themes such as the social and economical conditions of the members of the Chicano community, schooling and housing, the situation of the workers in the fields, portrayals of the first organized political movements, family and domestic relationships etc., are widely found in the Literature written by Chicano authors. Chicanas, on their part, also use the novel for vindicatory purposes. Their body of Literature also deals with subjects that account for their constrained existence as members of an oppressed gender and ethnic group. The first Chicano novels are, in general terms, therefore, "adult" novels even though Monserrat Fontes´* First Confession *is one of the exceptions in which childhood and children's voices are portrayed in a novel, a thematic analysis of the novel demonstrates that many of the most recurrent themes of the female novel are present in this story.*

A CHICANO CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE

The Literature written by the Chicanos after the decade of the 60s is, as Francisco Lomelí and Julio A. Martínez point out (1985: xi), "the Literature written since 1848 by Americans of Mexican descent or by Mexicans in the United States who write about the Mexican-American experience". This Mexican-American experience after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 is, on the other hand, one of marked discrimination and rejection by the mainstream, anglo-dominant society. Occupying the lowest positions in the value system of the American social scale, the Mexican-American is a hard-working citizen, who, nevertheless, is looked down on. Moreover, he is incapable of clarifying and demystifying the stereotypes that describe him as a lazy "alien". As a consequence, the struggle of the first Mexican-American is aimed at the quest for recognition and acceptance as a fully-fledged member of society.

The decade of the 60s, a time of radical changes, gave rise to the first rebellious consciousness-raising movements, which paved the way for the creation and organization of what has been called the "Chicano Movement". The Chicano, thus, became a political activist who was eager to break down the ideological and social barriers that had enslaved him throughout the ages. Amongst other devices, this community found in Literature an extraordinarily valid mouthpiece for spreading the ideas and new values of the emerging Chicano, and concomitantly, for denouncing and revising the aforementioned discriminatory ones.

The novel represents one of the best channels for transmitting these ideas as well as the expectations of the Chicano community, for it clearly portrays the different situations its members live in, and provides its readers with the necessary impetus for their personal awakening and subsequent joining of the Movement. It is a novel of becoming which deals mainly with the process of consciousness-raising that its protagonists go through, and thus becomes the chronicle of the reconstruction of a fragmented and colonized identity. Themes such as the social and economical conditions of the members of the Chicano community, schooling and housing, the situation of the Chicanos in the fields, portrayals of the first organized political movements, family and domestic relationships etc. are largely in evidence in the Chicano Literature written throughout this period. The majority of the first Chicano novels are therefore, in general terms, adult "socio-political" novels (novels that show the tendency to portray the social and political plight of the Chicanos among its most recurrent themes). Given that the first steps towards the demands for the rights of the community were taken by male adults, one may assume that the presence of children or childhood as the central theme of a story is scarcely found in these first novels. As Martínez and Lomelí (1985:111) point out,

> In the past the Chicano child has had little interest in literature because its irrelevancy to his or her existence. Today, the Chicano child is more likely to relate to what is read, for the literature has a more acceptable depiction of the Chicano.

Nevertheless, some of the first Chicano novels, and probably some of the most influential ones at that time, such as Jose Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959), a work of fiction that deals with the conflict that Richard, the protagonist, a young *pocho*, experiences between the traditions of his family and community and the new ways of life and behaviour he is just discovering, Rudolfo Anaya´s *Bless Me, Última* (1972), the story or Tony, a young boy, who seeks for healing and guidance in Última, the *curandera* of the community, and Tomás Rivera's *…y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), a collection of stories, whose main protagonist is also a young boy, which portray the situation of Mexican-American migrant workers, present young boys/adolescents as their main protagonists and expose the harsh reality of the Mexican-American experience of their times. However, whenever children who do not have the role of the protagonist of the story are portrayed in the novels written by Chicanos, they are generally depicted as passive members, like their mothers, of the family unit, stronghold of the community. Children are regarded as the outcome of the natural flow of life, the product of the widespread Christian belief that accounts for the fact that the role of the woman within the community is that of bringing up and rearing children. Therefore, the children portrayed in these novels are neither important nor decision-making-provoking characters.

This tendency changes drastically when the Chicanas force their way towards the dismantling of the patriarchal hierarchy, which they consider oppressive and constraining. Never having been considered fully-fledged members of their own community, but passive tradition-bearers and nourishers, the Chicanas opt to free from these chains, and, in the same way that in the case of their male counterparts, to reconstruct their colonized identity. As Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995: 97) explains in the following words, both the Chicana woman and the writer in particular, try to contribute to the writing of the story of their community, which had so far silenced and muted them:

> However, when early Chicana writers began to try to define their identities form their own perspectives on the social and political situation, it was a struggle to define themselves both as women and as members of a ethnic group. Because theirs was a subjugated or subordinated discourse, they were trying to "inscribe" themselves in a collective and historical process that had discounted and silenced them.

Describing their situation of colonization as a three-pointed one, the Chicana finds the strong moral and religious values obsolete and considers them to impose a tradition that oppresses her. The idea of motherhood is thus depicted as the result of the dispossession by the woman of her own body, which consequently becomes a reproductive tool, controlled by male Chicanos. Nonetheless, these important efforts towards the appropriation and regaining of the female colonized body, result in the concept of motherhood as the most rewarding and self-defining processes a woman may endure. Understood as a spiritual gift exclusive to women, motherhood becomes the uppermost fulfilment of a woman's self. Furthermore, this regaining of the ability to be mothers, directly links them to their ancestors and becomes the nexus of union between the contemporary Chicanas and their more spiritual traditions, for as Ana Castillo (1995: 13) points out, “Woman’s ability to give birth to a human being was acknowledged as sacred in the earliest traces of human history”.

What is more, for the new Chicana woman, the capacity to bear children and raise them symbolizes the complete liberation of her body from the moral and social restrictions it had been subjected to since time immemorial. The stereotype of the woman as a passive mother is altered and develops into a more active, self-conscious one. Nevertheless, even though children acquire a great importance in the lives of the Chicana protagonists of many novels, we very rarely find stories whose main protagonists are children. In general terms, the Chicana novel, as Annie O. Eysturoy (1996: 3) describes, is a novel of becoming that chronicles the struggle for the creation of the identity of its protagonists.

> This process of becoming, whether it is that of the child and adolescent or the somewhat older woman, is a recurrent theme in Chicana Literature, and due to this very subject matter, many Chicana narratives belong to the Bildungsroman genre, the literary form traditionally used to portray the process of self-development.

The figure of a Chicano/a adolescent, examples of which are found in Sandra Cisneros´s *The House on Mango Street* (1989) or Denise Chavez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1987) etc, is more common than the one of the Chicano child in general terms. Monserrat Fontes´s *First Confession*, stands out as one of the few novels written by Chicana authors whose protagonists are two children. On the basis of the importance of a thematic approach to establish analogies and/or divergences among different works, posited by Menachen Brinker amongst other critics, the aim of this essay is to discover the way in which several recurrent themes found in the body of Chicana Literature, in which the main protagonists are adult women or adolescents, are also present in Fontes´ work, a story that at a first glance, could be depicted as a story of two children and of the account of the “ infantile” problems they go through.

> Theme’s most common function for critics is the aid it affords in the description and interpretation of a work or group of works. Accordingly, changes tend to occur in degree of generality vs. particularity or of abstractness vs. concreteness as scrutiny shifts from the individual work to a group of works (…), to the whole corpus of an author’s work, to the work a literary group, generation, or school (Brinker 1993: 22).

First Confession is the story of two kids, Andrea and Victor, who are members of a high class Mexican family. Like several other works written by Chicanas, it is a story of becoming, of the process of an identity that needs to be reconstructed. The easy and comfortable existence of the two children at the outcome of the novel, develops into a complex inner contradiction, in which their passage into the adult, morally correct world becomes the catalyst of the fragmentation of their naïve, controlled, past experience. Gloria Anzaldúa´s notion of the dual identity of the Chicana woman, together with the idea of her existence in the limit, in the border of two worlds, is present throughout the novel, and becomes materialized in the personae of the two children. They hence become representative of the child/adult transit, of the enormous border existing between the controlled, organized, thus accepted "mainstream" society, and the disorganized, feared "other" society that they encounter outside the walls of their domestic environment.

Andrea and Victor's existence, parallel to that of the Chicanas, is one of constraint within the confines of their house, understood by their family as the only secure space for the children to be kept away from the influences of the outer, dangerous world. Nonetheless, this accommodation in the feminine, domestic environment produces a sense of anxiety in the two children, and more concretely in Andrea, who feels marginalized from the real life and understands her reality as one of enclosure and limitation. This experience recalls Leela Gandhi´s (1998: 84) idea that accounts for the fact that "The "third-world-woman" is arguably housed in an "identifiable margin", a margin that becomes obviously unsatisfactory". Furthermore, the strong Christian values that they are acquiring at the time the story is taking place, for they are preparing for their First Communion, are also envisaged as non-consistent with the reality of the life that they are discovering beyond the frontiers of their house and their high-class, domestic existence, and thus becomes a symbol of their border existence.

Andrea´s natural, domestic environment is one of women, even though her cousin Victor becomes her best companion during the summer holidays chronicled in the novel. The influence these women exert upon Andrea is extremely important, and is explicitly described as such in the second part of the novel, when the protagonist is portrayed as a young woman, and recalls her adventures and experiences throughout the summer of her First Communion. She says:

> We were all girls.
>
> These women had once been my size. There was Armida with her dress up behind the curtain, Candelaria with her pipe and her dead kids, Mother waiting for Father and Petra who seemed no other functioning life but to care for us (Fontes 1991: 129).

As may be inferred from the words above, each of the women who surrounded her was instrumental for the delineation of her identity, which began to emerge at that moment of her childhood. In a remarkable way, the vast majority of them symbolize the “traditional” woman, representing diverse manifestations of the role ascribed to women, and described by Mae Henderson (1995: 34) in the following terms: “women are supposed to live stably and provide stability for others”. Her mother is the portrayal of the faithful and submissive mother and wife, who lives enclosed within the walls of her house. She clearly represents Alfredo Mirandé´s (1979: 166) idea of the image of women in Chicano Literature, who are “universally warm, enduring, and uncomplaining”. Candelaria, on the other hand, is the wise woman, the *curandera*, respected by everyone in the house. Petra, on the contrary, represents the woman who is always keen to help all the components of the family. She fulfils the characteristic role of the mother, for Andrea´s family, having a comfortable economic situation, hire somebody to carry out the task traditionally linked to the mother.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that all these traditional women represent different images of the roles imposed upon women, they are all treated in a loving and respectful way by the writer. Notwithstanding, Andrea envisages a diametrically opposed type of woman as the model for the creation of her identity, her North American, Anglo grandmother, Paulette. She symbolizes the independent and free woman who voluntarily decides upon her life and breaks with the traditional Mexican vision of the feminine role. Andrea regards her as the mirror she wants to see herself in, as inferred from the following words:

> I looked at Cristina and Reymundo and said, “Someday, I’ll be her Paulette”. Only Petra and Mother seemed slightly amused by my announcement. (Fontes 1991: 303)

She represents the feminist woman of the decades of the 60s and 70s, and is described in direct contrast to the rest of the women in the story, who are the silent, submissive women of the Chicano community. Andrea´s admiration for her grandmother, symbol of the white American society, together with her enforced accommodation in the traditional atmosphere which the feminine domestic environment represents, creates another important contradiction in the girl, whose existence becomes fragmented and divided, reinforcing the idea of her border existence. Notwithstanding, in an extremely (r)evolutionary way, she chooses to adopt and assimilate her dual existence and construct her identity on the basis of her ambivalent personality. This positive approach to the “marginalized”, border position in which she lives, accounts for the idea of the constant reinvention and development of the individual identities of the members of “other” communities who experience continuous developing processes of socialization (Sollors 1989).

The idea of silence as one of the most repressing constraints that keeps the Chicana identity from developing, is also one of the aspects that directly links the story to the rest of the body of Literature produced by Chicana writers, and in this particular case, it becomes the core of the novel. The story of the Chicana woman has been one of imposed silence and muteness. Never allowed to express herself in a free way, the language of the woman, is also a colonized one. On the one hand, since it is a male-constructed and male-oriented kind of language, and on the other hand, because she is not authorized to use it in a free way, in order to generate her own, individual identity. As the feminist critic Elaine Showalter (1986: 255) explains,

> The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution.

Furthermore, and directly connected to this idea of silence, the concept of the colonized, and therefore, non-existent feminine sexuality is deeply rooted in the traditional patriarchal community. Thus, the good woman is symbolized by a silent, submissive, childbearing woman, whose role in life is to perpetuate her community. These two concepts, which at a glance seem to be directly related to adulthood, are on the contrary, found in the story of our two kids. Their story takes place in a little town in Mexico, where the kids live an apparently easy, comfortable life. The reason for Victor's visit to his cousin is to spend his vacation with her, and at the same time, to prepare himself for his First Communion, a ritual that becomes the central axis that the plot of the novel revolves around. Religion, understood as one of the most important institutions within the Chicano community, is therefore, the catalyst behind the story of the kids, as well as Fontes´s criticism. In Ana Castillo's (1995:11) words,

> At this point in our this twenty plus years of Chicana conscientización and activism, women have begun and ardent investigation in many ways our spirituality and sexuality have been denied us by male legislature and religion.

The novel, thus, chronicles the painful dichotomy and the uneasiness that it exists between the need to transmit what life outside the sheltered walls of the house has taught them and the imposed silence that they have assimilated in their preparatory classes before their communion, which must only be broken when the ritual of the *First Confession* is celebrated. Drawing an analogy between the situation of the Chicanas and the one of the two children, Fontes strongly criticizes this imposed silence. In the case of the Chicanas, this muteness has contributed to the existence of strong fears and frontiers which are problematical for the development of their individual identity, for as Cherríe Moraga (1981: 30) posits,

> How have I internalised my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word "oppression" has lost its

> power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women's fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.

The strong sense of responsibility and the step towards an adult Christian life that the First Communion represents clashes directly with the discovery of sex by the two children. As in the case of the Chicana community in general, the important moral values the Chicano community relies on describe the idea of sexuality as something dirty and sinful for the two kids. Nevertheless, this revelation represents for them at the same time, a complete breakthrough due to the concept of goodness and rightfulness. The idea of sex as something obscure that has to be done in the darkness is clearly represented by Armida, a woman who "gets money from letting herself being touched".

> While they touched her she raised her head and smiled and we could see her front teeth, all of which were framed in gold. While the boys touched and squeezed, and tasted her breasts, she would flutter her fingers up and down the zipper of their pants" (Fontes 1991: 117)

The discovery of this unknown world, which is presented as extremely dirty and as a taboo, is of the utmost importance for the development of the story. Furthermore, the idea of silence which is so deeply rooted in the minds of the children, brings with it consequences that affect their development towards adulthood. The body and sexuality as something shameful and to be hidden, represented in Armida, creates a strong state of guilt in both of them. Speaking the body, thus, among other devices, becomes essential for the positive development of the woman´s/children´s identity, for up to that moment, as Ana Castillo (1995: 122) explains, "We maintained the business of our bodies behind closed doors. ... We had been taught not to name those feelings and fantasies, much less affirm their meanings".

Notwithstanding, as the novel portrays, whenever the body preserves its negative connotations, it becomes the jail in which the identity is trapped and subjugated. In the case of Victor, the fact of growing up denying his homosexuality (a fact that will be discovered in the last pages of the novel), leads him to the uppermost rejection of his existence, by means of committing suicide. Trapped in his self-imposed silence, he does not feel strong enough to bear the denial of his existence within his own community. On the contrary, the novel portrays the importance of speaking, whenever it implies a conscious, personal movement towards the emergence from the "underworld". The power of the use of words and speaking out about one's own feelings and ideas have to be accompanied with a desire to do so. In the case of the First Communion, it is a powerful institution that manipulates and colonizes the children's ability to speak. Fontes strongly criticizes this type of colonization, which evokes the patriarchal tendency to decide for the rest of the members of the community. These imposed words are not valid for the definition of the children's identity, and become a dangerous weapon against themselves, creating a strong sense of culpability in them. Pushed by the obligation to speak they confess the fact that they have seen Armida sell her body. Consequently, she commits suicide, terrified by the violence of his husband's reaction.

The novel is therefore a harsh criticism of the power exerted by traditional religious institutions over children, who in this case, may well symbolize the innocent/naïve woman who lacks language and knowledge, and has to be instructed in the laws of moral rightfulness. These laws, nevertheless, become repressive and diminish the capacity of the "inferior being" (children/women) to create and shape his own identity. Therefore, the dichotomy between the need to speak freely and the imposed moment to speak, ends up in a negative and painful way. On the contrary, the free, voluntary act of giving words to one's innermost desires, is presented as extremely healing and positive. In contrast to Victor, the depiction of Andrea in her adulthood, as a singer who uses her words to denounce and vindicate what she thinks should be changed, symbolizes the importance of the individual use of one's own language.

In conclusion, it could be stated that Fontes´s novel, though one of only a handful which deal with childhood as the main subject, can indeed be considered a novel that follows the tendency drawn by Chicana writers in the last decades, for as Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995: 107-108) explains, "As Chicana writers "remember" their childhood, they are witnesses to the construction of their own identities and the development of an understanding of their historical role in their families and communities". Consequently, some of the most recurrent themes found in the literary production of contemporary Chicana authors, such as the relationship among women, the house and the family as a symbol of constraint and enclosure, the need to break an imposed and painful silence and the discovery of sexuality as a turning point in the process of delineation of the decolonised Chicana identity, are clearly found in the novel, for as Steven Hannabus(1986: 103) posits when theorizing about the idea of presenting children as protagonists of "adult" novels,

> Often, such works are not *for* children: they simple use them as narrative devices or convenient mediums to gain access to hidden and over-covered dimensions of memory and sensation.

The utilization of the novel as one of the main devices to denounce the situation of Chicanas and propose solutions is clearly reflected in *First Confession*, which becomes a fierce criticism of the religious, personal and linguistic colonization. Childhood is thus presented as a parallel to the situation of the Chicana. Both communities having been considered naïve, submissive and dependent on the adult male figure, become the targets of its colonization. The adult male Chicano community, turns its wrath, provoked by the mainstream society, towards children and women, thus reproducing the discriminatory devices exerted upon it. Fontes´s novel, together with many other Chicana novels, calls for the decolonisation of the children and women's selves, as well as for the revision and redescription of many of the restrictive traditions which the Chicano community relies on.

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NEW DIRECTIONS OR THE END OF THE ROAD? WOMEN´S TRAVEL WRITING AT THE MILLENNIUM

MAUREEN MULLIGAN
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

ABSTRACT. *Women´s travel writing in the twentieth century can be seen as an area of new literature which both absorbs earlier styles of both male and female travel writing, while developing in the direction of certain discourses which have found strong ideological support in social and literary concerns at the end of the century. The key discursive trends in post-colonial women's travel writing can be defined as those of feminism, (anti)-tourism, 'tough' travel, post-colonial awareness, and concern for certain environmental issues. In this paper we will consider how these trends are reflected or challenged in some recent examples of women's travel writing. The texts referred to here offer a range of positions and concerns which in some ways suggest the limits and possibilities of contemporary travel writing. Without wishing to reduce the books discussed to a single interpretative position, it may be helpful to highlight two differing approaches to the continuing problem of how to write about the Other and how to represent oneself and one's own culture in the process.* Desert Places *by Robyn Davidson (1996) is considered in terms of its author's loss of conviction in the travel writing project; and* Terra Incognita *by Sara Wheeler (1996) in terms of travel as an interior, imaginative venture into a landscape of myth and emptiness.*

Women´s travel writing in the twentieth century can be seen as an area of new literature which both absorbs earlier styles of both male and female travel writing, while developing in the direction of certain discourses which have found strong ideological support in social and literary concerns at the end of the century. The key discursive trends in post-colonial women's travel writing can be defined as those of feminism, (anti)-tourism, 'tough' travel, post-colonial awareness, and concern for certain environmental issues. In this paper we will consider how these trends are reflected or challenged in some recent examples of women's travel writing. The texts referred to here offer a range of positions and concerns which in some ways suggest the limits and possibilities of contemporary travel writing. Without wishing to reduce the books discussed to a single interpretative position, it may be helpful to highlight two differing approaches to the continuing problem of how to write about the Other and how to represent oneself and one's own culture in the process.

Desert Places by Robyn Davidson (first published, 1996) is considered in terms of its author's loss of conviction in the travel writing project; and *Terra Incognita* by Sara Wheeler (first published, 1996) in terms of travel as an interior, imaginative venture into a landscape of myth and emptiness. Both these texts will be discussed from the point of view of motivation for travel, choice of destination, aims and achievements on the part of the author, and relationship with the people among whom the writer travels. The rhetorical presentation of the first person narrator will also be an important aspect of this analysis. Finally, an understanding of travel writing as a series of re-writings and interconnecting discursive codes will enable us to read other travel texts in the context of a literary tradition which is still learning from its ancestors and redefining its contemporary codes through the interplay between individual writer / traveller and the intertextual nature of all written discourses.

Desert Places by Robyn Davidson (1997) recounts the experiences of the author, an Australian who lives in Britain, when she travelled with a group of nomads known variously as the Rabari or the Raiki in northern India. Initially the project follows the pattern of much women's travel writing in the post-colonial period: the writer signs a contract to provide articles for a magazine in return for financial support; she is allocated a professional photographer; she knows little about where she is going because she has deliberately chosen a tribe and an area which is almost undocumented, and by its very nature as nomadic, cannot be pinned down. Despite the lack of information available, she is inspired to travel with them because of the avowedly romantic image evoked in her by the idea of the nomadic life:

> A wish was forming. It took the shape of an image. I was building a little cooking fire in the shelter of soft, pink dunes, far away from anything but a world of sand. It was twilight, the lyrical hour. The nomads were gathering beside me by the fire. There was fluency and lightness between us. We had walked a long way together. The image exalted the spirit with its spareness and its repose (Davidson 1997: 3).

She does not speak any useful languages and has no experience of tribal nomadic life. Thus far her journey resembles many others, going back to that undertaken by Mary Kingsley (1993) in her desire to enter the life of a completely alien and unknown social system alone, and reminding us of journeys by Ella Maillart (1986), Alexandra David-Neel (1988) and Isabella Bird (1982) in the way she is searching for a people who offer a more primitive and therefore supposedly more 'genuine' or 'authentic' alternative lifestyle. Her romantic view of desert life as an escape from twentieth century civilisation echoes the enchantment felt by Gertrude Bell (1907) and the young Freya Stark in Iraq (1938). However, despite conforming to the general tradition of destination and style of journey identified as common to the twentieth century travel writer, *Desert Places* is not simply another account of the Western woman's intrepid spirit triumphing over hardship and cultural difference to reaffirm the bonds between herself and her third-world sisters. Although these ideas are there in the first part of the book, in fact the journey turns out to be a personal nightmare and an admitted failure in terms of her aim of studying the Raika. There is a three year gap between the end of the journey (which, with various false starts, seems to have lasted about a year) and the writing up of the account:

> For a long time I could not see how to write about my experiences. They were nothing but a series of disconnected events, without shape, without meaning. I had passed through India as a knife does through ice and it had closed behind me at every step. How does one write about failure? (Davidson, 1997: 275).

Part of the problem, both with the journey itself and with the form of travel writing attempted, is caused by Davidson's tendency to romanticise the nomadic Other, when the reality she experiences is anything other than romantic. For her, the Rabari represent a return to a more authentic past which was lost with the advent of agriculturalism; the nomads are a special people who embody an alternative path for mankind which echoes in our collective memory. She writes "Rabaris were the keepers of the original way - nomadism" (ibid: 57); "This century [...] is witnessing the end of traditional nomadism, a description of reality that has been with us since our beginnings - our oldest memory of being" (5); "Their history began in Jaisalmer in the Thar Desert, from which over the centuries they had spread with their animals into other states, splintering into other sub-castes but retaining, always, their 'Rabariness', their otherness" (12). Here she even uses the key term of structural difference, 'otherness', reminding us of its use in work by Edward Said in *Orientalism* to signify the Western way of representing the East. As a people without a homeland, even within the social structure of the East the Rabari remain Other. To the Western reader or traveller, they are thus doubly 'othered', and as such an object of anthropological and historical interest.

At the same time, Davidson chooses to identify herself with this romanticised nomadic tradition because she has (voluntarily) moved between various First World countries and no longer feels particularly identified with any of them; she represents herself as a modern nomad:

> There are new kinds of nomads, not people who are at home everywhere, but who are at home nowhere. I was one of them. After the first abandonment of the place of my birth I had lived in England, in America, lost count of the countries I had visited and had several times returned to Australia only to leave again. Somewhere in the midst of that tremendous restlessness I had lost the sense of a gravitational centre, a place with which to compare elsewhere. I now felt as much an anthropologist (mystified, alien, lonely) at a dinner party with my peers, as I did with a family of Aborigines eating witchetty grubs in a creek bed (Davidson 1997:5).

Thus the author situates herself as a person without cultural identity who has more in common with simple native peoples existing in unadulterated natural conditions, than she has with her Western peers. She actively desires identification with the nomad tribe before she has even met them, and is keen to reject the life of 'civilisation' she has access to in the West. But as Amit Chaudhuri (1997: pp.19-20) writes in his review of *Desert Places*:

> Time and again, Davidson, in her account of her life with the Rabari, returns to the subject of herself. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in this: the problem is that Davidson, like so many Western travel writers, relinquishes the specificity, the particularity, of her own - Australian- background and identity for the archetypal persona of the 'Western' visitor to India. Does an unequivocal, homogeneous entity called the 'West' really exist?

The focus of the book is suggested in the quotation from Robert Frost's poem of the same name which identifies the 'desert places' as interior, existential states, not foreign landscapes. But apart from her ultimate frustration with her companions, we learn little about Davidson's interior journey and less about the minds of the Rabari. Amit Chaudhuri points out the fundamental flaw in the project:

> It is not difficult to imagine what it would be like for a middle-class Australian woman were she to find herself for days on end with a group of nomads; and there is very little in the book to subvert our expectations. It is more difficult, perhaps, to imagine what it is to be a Rabari, sleeping among five thousand sheep and drinking Guinea-worm-infested water; but Davidson, constrained by her ignorance of their language, and their ignorance of hers, offers few insights on this subject. From time to time she laments that her journey has

> provided her with no 'illumination'; yet it is not illumination one seeks in this account, but something more humble, a small-scale but sustained going-out-of-oneself into other people's lives. To me, the idea that living in the most trying conditions with a group of strangers, and getting infected with the same diseases and sores as they have, will lead to a greater knowledge of oneself, or others, or a culture is simply wrong-headed. (Chaudhuri 1997: 20)

This is a fundamental critique of the travel writing project as undertaken by Davidson (and others). In trying to cover in a single book the metaphysical ground of the interior existential journey, at the same time as dealing with the socially and politically correct agenda of feminism, environmentalism and 'World-culturism', the danger is that the writer falls between the two and fails to provide either an insight into how the alien culture affects her self-definition, or an objective account of how the alien culture constructs the world.

One of the main themes throughout the book is Davidson's attempt to find acceptance within a 'family', to become an insider, to be, as she puts it, "allow[*ed*] inside the frame" (Davidson 1997: 279). Describing the sight of some of the Rabari women at the well, while she herself tries to hide from the endless intrusive stares and hostility she elicits wherever she goes, Davidson writes:

> I imagined going with them to the shop to haggle over the price of grain, felt the physicality of the heavy pot, the intimacy of a sister's arm around the shoulder, of gossip. I had imagined that I could become, over time, an element within the picture rather than an observer peering in. But it seemed more likely that I would never find myself there, inside the frame (Davidson, 1997: 46).

The idea of 'sisterhood' occurs repeatedly, resonating as it does in the anthropological discourse of family structure as well as in a feminist or woman-centred discourse. References to physical contact between women are frequent, as are comments about the writer's appearance, clothes and hair, and how these are seen by the local women. Without any language to communicate, the strength of international sisterhood initially enables Davidson to overcome cultural divisions by having her eyes made up with kohl by a Rabari woman: "We managed to communicate about the important things - clothes and make-up. Did I happen to have any nail-polish with me?" (108). Elsewhere: "Everyone got down to serious female politicking, or, as it is fallaciously known, gossip" (116). The effect is a deliberate challenge to male discourse in travel writing in which it is supposed such 'girly' and trivial issues are not discussed. In terms of tradition it reminds us of Freya Stark getting access to Iraqi princesses in the harem which would be denied to male travellers. In terms of locating the discourse of the text in the post-feminist culture of the intended readership, the device may be effective; however, the actual relationships developed with the women she meets hardly move beyond bemused incomprehension on both sides, breaking at times into direct hostility on the part of the Rabari women towards someone who spends months with a small group and is unable to learn even their names:

> They had welcomed me into the warmth of their communion; now I was out in the cold watching them through a window. They would see me peeping at them and turn away as if to say, Why are you looking at us? Go away! What had begun with good will was atrophying for the want of a language to nourish it. I had imagined I could understand, through a kind of pre-lingual sign language, quite complex interactions, as if I could just manage to stay afloat on an ocean of incomprehension. The truth was I was going under. There were more than forty people on the dang. Jaiva said disparagingly, 'We can remember all our sheep. How come you can't remember our names?' (Davidson 1997: 134).

Almost all the emotionally charged epiphanic moments which punctuate a text otherwise full of negative experiences, culminating in a kind of insane hysteria towards India and Indians, are to do with Davidson's temporary sense of belonging to a family, though we are also aware that this is a privilege she pays for in rupees:

> At last the price was fixed - two thousand rupees a month. I must provide my own food and buy my goat milk from them. They would provide camel, saddle and gear. Narendra proclaimed, 'From now on Pala bhai's family is your family', and everyone stood up and shook hands and ordered tea in celebration. (Davidson 1997: 92)

However the reality of 'family' life with the Rabari leads to the darker side of this theme developing as an obsession with her loneliness, boredom and gradual recognition that she is an outsider who is only accepted in so far as she proves useful to the tribe. The jeep she has bought and hardly uses is her greatest asset in the eyes of the exhausted Rabari, who cannot understand why anyone would choose to walk when they could ride:

> I drove the women into the nearby village for provisions, which completely turned their heads. On the way back my sisters sat in the front with me, heaping scorn on mere pedestrians. Parma, thinking I couldn't understand her, announced, 'This is our taxi and Ratti ben [*Davidson*] is our driver' (Davidson 1997: 148).

Davidson resents the way her jeep is used for tribal business when Phagu, the leader, uses it to save time scouting the land ahead, and she interprets their behaviour, on one of the few occasions on which she inadvertently contributes something useful to the long-suffering Rabari tribe, as a clever trick to exploit her:

> It was not the recce I resented, it was his manipulation of me [...] By the time we got back it was dark. The whole community welcomed me home with prashad and high praise but I was too fed up with them to be conned out of my mood and went straight to my tent. In my notes I wrote 'I am their milking cow' (Davidson 1997: 163).

Davidson is offended that they are too ready to reject their traditional ways and 'exploit' her as a free taxi-service, when she wants them to offer her the 'genuine' nomadic experience (as long as she can get off the camel and into a jeep whenever the reality of poverty becomes too painful or boring). She shows apparently no awareness of how the whole tribe's efforts in putting up with and looking after a completely useless extra body who cannot communicate or make chapatis or load her own camel or wash her nether regions without offending people, perhaps deserve to be rewarded with something more than the chance to appear as photo-opportunities in a book they will never read.

The solitariness of Western life, the alienation of cities, the breakdown of the family: these are the classic tropes motivating romantic travel writing, often juxtaposed with the glorification of the close physical and relational solidarity evident in poorer societies whose members stick together in ways that have been forgotten in the consumerist, divisive West. Annette Kobak (1997:35) argues in a review of *Desert Places* that the book fits into a tradition of 'elegiac' travellers who feel the West turns to primitive cultures in a search for lost roots, and for women, lost freedoms:

> Like many elegiac travelers (Norman Lewis, Wilfred Thesiger, Bruce Chatwin), Ms. Davidson feels that humans lost something when they abandoned the ancient nomadic life. Women particularly lost out, she thinks, observing that nomads breed far less than, for example, women in purdah, who are permanently confined in both senses. Nomadism leads, she feels, to a better balance of power between the sexes among the Rabari [...] The book is an X-ray of what the industrial West has lost and, in equal measure, why we wanted to lose it.

Yet Davidson discovers the hard way that such solidarity among the poor and dispossessed cannot be bought or created during a short trip; on the contrary, it only serves as a contrast with her own lack of identity and direction. Her doubts about the value of the journey are a recurrent *leitmotiv* in the text:

> But was it really useful, I asked myself, to travel with a bunch of nomads no one has ever heard of? So what if the Rabari will be extinct within fifty years? Who in the world will give a damn? [...] And so what if nomadism was about to go out, phut, like a candle, the whole world over? The culture of the millennium had bigger things to worry about. But I'd committed myself and there was no turning back (Kobak 1997: 35).

If Davidson herself questions her motives, the Rabari are completely bemused by what seems to them complete insanity:

> Men would come and sit with me, polite as ever, and gradually get round to asking, 'You have lakhs and lakhs of rupees, and you have a jeep. Why do you want to live with poor people? Why do you want to walk?' I never found a suitable reply to this but it did indicate how far from enviable they saw their own lives and how incomprehensible they found mine (Davidson 1997: 48).

The very meaningless of the trip is used as a justification for continuing what has become not only an artificial but also a masochistic exercise: "There was a deeper motive for the prolonging of self-punishment: the quest for meaning, of which, so far, this curious journey had remained void" (182). However, even Davidson's masochism has its limits, and when life with the Rabari gets too unbearable, she (unlike her 'family') has several escape routes. One is her deep grounding in a romantic view of the Third World, which she uses to revive her spirits by equating poverty with 'inner freedom':

> That old sunset and dune picture, which I had thought long lost, was still there - blotched, faded and curling at the edges, but romantic still. In my imagination I saw a country road winding through granite hills or threading the sides of dunes [...] people on bicycles or bullock carts came along [...] With this image went a sense of inner freedom, a kind of expansiveness in the chest as if a tight band had been loosened. I would be able to 'see' at last what was around me, able to engage with it. I would be allowed 'in'. I would find some way of camouflaging myself (Davidson 1997: 182).

Colonialism has left a heritage that the white female visitor to India cannot ignore, yet evidently feels uncomfortable with - though it does not stop her exploiting its benefits when convenient: Davidson makes a joke about being referred to as 'Memsahib' by her various servants, but accepts the role of mistress; she resents being stared at for her whiteness, but accepts the privileges of queue-jumping in doctors' waiting rooms and access to exclusive hotels. There is even a 'Livingstone / Stanley' joke, as though she were an explorer.

Following the agenda set by the photographer as to what is worth researching, the text includes occasional forays into watered-down anthropological description of those aspects of Indian life most appealing or shocking to Western readers: child marriages, mythical histories of the Rabari involving animal gods, women and betrothals, religion and the routines of pastoral life. But we have to remember that the information provided has been filtered through a 'contact' whose linguistic skills preclude any normal conversation. This deficiency considerably reduces the value of the information she presents, which is in any case minimal and anecdotal: the vast bulk of the text focuses on her sufferings and deprivations at the hands of the "inconsiderate" Indians she is forced to deal with. There is little room left for an objective study of their lives and concerns.

In an interview with Robyn Davidson on Australian radio, the author focuses on an epiphanic moment in her trip when the apparently beautiful, picture-postcard image of the nomadic life is contrasted with her awareness of the image's falsity:

> Of course, what I know by that point is the truth of that picture which is that the little Rabari men are starving and the ribbon of water is full of malarial parasites and the Aravali Mountains are being deforested and there is junk in the streams and there are hideous, kitsch hotels where middle-class people can stay and not see. (*ABC Charting Australia 108*, broadcast 28 April 1996)

This makes good postmodern, pro-green, minority-culture journalism, but it is difficult not to agree with Annette Kobak's comment (1997: 36) that the book "does not quite escape an aura of bad faith" when we realise that Davidson herself was only too happy to stay in such hotels, and that her own participation in the culture of consumerism and environmental destruction is embodied in her purchase of an unnecessary jeep.

In classic orientalist discursive tradition, Davidson presents the Rabari as not only geographically and culturally alien to Western culture, but also temporally alien through references to the *Arabian Nights*; to Sinbad; to parts of India that "would have looked just like this centuries ago" (13); "I was a tourist in pre-industrial time" (162); "I would be - had already been, without realizing it - a traveller in medieval time" (237). This is, of course, one of the most obvious tropes of orientalist thinking identified by Said as a way of fixing the East permanently in the past, in opposition to Western modernity, progress etc. Despite Davidson's romantic view of the timelessness and picturesqueness of nomadic life, she finds that the Rabari would be only too happy to move into the twentieth century and enjoy some of its comforts, and are only barred from doing so by their extreme poverty. Equally, the reality of twentieth century 'development' impinges on their lives in a way she had not anticipated, affecting nomadic routes and customs. (The appearance of Davidson herself in the tribe is an example of the Western impact she would prefer them to avoid). The clash of expectations on the part of Davidson and her tribal hosts is at times unconsciously funny; she cannot believe the women will take the bus rather than walk to Pushkar, and they cannot believe that anyone would walk if there is an alternative (25).

The book is structured around these contradictions, and it is to the author's credit that her honest doubts about the nature and value of her project eventually come to be foregrounded in the text. However the extreme level of anger, complaint, insult, frustration and unhappiness revealed in the detailed account of the journey raises difficult questions about the role of travel writing not just in the case of this book but in general, given the specific situation of the Western traveller in the world at the end of the twentieth century.

The nihilism of the book suggests we have reached the point at which any form of travel into a third-world country, however much the author wraps it up in terms of pseudo-anthropology, pseudo-international sisterhood or pseudo-environmental concern, is getting too close to an unjustifiable mixture of cheap tourism, voyeurism, exploitation and game-playing in the face of other people's poverty and misery. Kobak (1997: 36) writes, "The whole very western enterprise of a lone traveler alighting amid some remote group of people and making a living by writing about them is getting ethically trickier". In the last chapter before the Coda, Davidson describes her anger (both with herself and with the whole of India) thus:

> The anger chewed me up. I could not sleep at night with it. There was nowhere to dump it. Everything I had done here was fraudulent and absurd. I knew nothing about the Rabaris and, even if I did, it would mean nothing to them, make no difference to them. I had understood nothing of where I was. And I would perpetuate the fraudulence by producing yet another bit of noise for a culture drowning in noise - an article for a glossy magazine with beautiful photos of beautiful India, beautiful noble Rabari, so that people could sit in comfort in their homes or doctors' waiting-rooms and not see (Davidson 1997: 272).

Yet despite this insight the demands of the career travel writer triumph: it is true that the colour photographs are included in the paperback edition, and give it precisely the feel of a *National Geographic* article rather than an individual's experience of travel; they contrast remarkably with the bitterness and realism of the text. Davidson realises the journey "is reduced to kitsch" (273) because by the end she is commuting between the first and third worlds as she stays in air-conditioned hotels and is driven to the Rabari in her jeep for photo-shoots that provide a "visual reconstruction" (263) of the proposed walk.

The journey fails on many levels: personally, she cannot bear to be with her camel driver Chutra whom she refers to as a "bastard", "arsehole", "idiot" , etc. She discovers that the tribes do not migrate in the old sense, with whole picturesque villages of happy, wild nomads following their flocks across romantic deserts, but tend to take the bus where possible, and often leave the women behind. The route she finally follows forces her to abandon her original romantic image:

> In locating a group of Raika I always took into account such things as desert vistas, pretty jhumpas, dramatic photos of arrivals in Pushkar - that sort of thing. Bhairon's people, I knew, lived in boring, eaten-out farmland, and would take their animals along the Chambal river beside factories, sewerage outlets and leaky

> nuclear power stations, and on into the dacoit-infested badlands. Not exactly the sunset sand-dune descriptions with which I had secured the magazine's interest and cash (Davidson 1997: 67).

Instead of considering the implications of such poverty and destruction on a social and environmental level for the Indians who have to suffer these consequences of third-world 'development' (itself part of the same Western capitalist system which is paying for her trip) the only interpretation offered is a complaint that her photo-opportunities are not classic tourist images. Kobak highlights these contradictions pointing out that while Davidson takes it on herself to "ask belligerent questions about corruption in the community and puts under scrutiny the evasions that allow her hosts to get by", her own moral high ground is increasingly suspect: "Yet she doesn't feel obliged to lay bare with equal candor her own economics: how much she gets paid by her publishers and how much of that goes to the Rabari. It is the particular puritanism of the genre to stop not at the bedroom but at the airplane door" (Kobak 1997: 36.).

Davidson hides behind the myth of India as the ultimate spiritual cleanser, the desire for self-annihilation in the face of timeless nature, travel as escape from reality - we are back in the discourse of romantic, orientalist constructions of the 'mysterious East', in which the reality of the experience, however negative, must not be allowed to override the perpetuation of the myth of the Other. The transcendental 'moments' sketched by Davidson as a riposte to her growing doubts are the necessary poetic mythologising of a professional writer who cannot admit that she has reached the end of the road.

The quotation from Thomas Pynchon's novel *V* with which Sara Wheeler prefaces *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica*, "'You wait. Everyone has an Antarctic'", is one point of connection between this text and Robyn Davidson's *Desert Places*, which as we have seen, takes its name from a poem by Robert Frost: "They cannot scare me with their empty spaces / Between stars - on stars where no human race is. /I have it in me so much nearer home /To scare myself with my own desert places." (in Davidson 1997: i.)

To both women, writing in the 1990s, their choice of destination represents a deliberate exteriorisation of a state of mind as much as an actual geographical place.

In the increasingly post-modern, postcolonial, global-village world of late twentieth century travel writing, this focus on travel as a metaphor for the subjective journey of the human spirit, rather than as an objective, descriptive, guide-book-style investigation into an unknown culture, is an inevitable development. Travel writing has to justify its existence in the face of scientific and anthropological approaches, television documentaries, even accounts of life outside the metropolis by the 'natives' themselves, some of whom now have academic research grants and publishing power from which to "write back" to the former empire. We have moved from Marlow's "blank spaces on the map"[1] to the claim by Sara Wheeler and Dea Birkett (1998: viii) in their anthology *Amazonian: The Penguin Book of Women's New Travel Writing* that "there are no longer any empty spaces on the map".

The coincidence in the choice of metaphorical focus of the travel accounts by Davidson and Wheeler goes further: not only is the journey about the writer's psyche rather than about the landscape and people encountered, but both choose to undertake trips to hostile, apparently inhospitable regions which they visualise as embodying pristine emptiness (in fact in neither case is this so). The Northern Indian desert and the snowy wastes of Antarctica are both connected and opposed as metaphors, but both emphasise the extremes of an environment as far from the comfort of Western civilisation as possible, in which the traveller is thrown back on her own mental resources to survive the isolation and the strangeness of the journey. Wheeler comments that in her initial research into Antarctica, based mainly on its literary and cinematic treatment, she saw that

> Antarctica existed most vividly in the mind. It was a metaphorical landscape, and in an increasingly grubby world it had been romanticised to fulfil a human need for sanctuary. Mythical for centuries, so it remained (Wheeler 1997: 3).

If the rationale for the journey is to provide an appropriate symbolic setting for the inner landscape and interior adventures of the individual writer's personal odyssey, then perhaps it makes sense to choose a destination whose overriding feature is emptiness. It is then up to the writer to fill that emptiness with the literary re-creation of the distance travelled psychologically. Robyn Davidson's version of this in *Desert Places* becomes a kind of sense-deprivation chamber, in which her frustration at having deprived herself of the ability to communicate curdles into paranoia and hatred of the people she chose to travel with. Sara Wheeler avoids this danger partly because Antarctica has no indigenous population: the people she has to deal with, mainly male scientists (referred to metonymically as 'beards') and workers on the research stations, are both objects of her humour and sources of assistance and friendship. No-one alive is given much of a role in her portrayal: even the man with whom she has a brief affair and the artist with whom she shares an isolated camp are thinly-sketched caricatures. Her real interest in the human aspect of Antarctica lies with the past heroes, the mythical explorers of what she calls the "Heroic Age": Scott, Shackleton, Nansen, even Captain Cook. The key to Wheeler's construction of the Antarctic lies in what Apsley Cherry-Garrard, one of Captain Scott's men on an expedition south in 1911, describes as "the response of the spirit". Within the history of exploration, Antarctica holds a special place as the last of the blank spaces to be explored, and within the British tradition of martyred heroism, Scott’s silver medal to Amundsen’s gold is the archetype of the tragic failure which is subsequently converted into success by the myth. It is in this sense that the ‘response of the spirit’ is crucial: the British party may have failed to reach the Pole first and died on the return journey, but they died heroically, and this heroism was largely created through Scott’s letters and diary. Wheeler uses the myth of Scott and his men as a way of filling the emptiness of the Antarctic with the history of a Golden epoch, while recognising that this very myth is a literary creation, a work of the imagination: this is the centre of her own exploration of the meaning of the South Pole:

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[1] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness,* 1898/1973: p.8.

> Through his writings, Scott elevated the nature of the struggle. It was no longer man against nature, it was man against himself. The diaries reveal a sense of apotheosis: the terrible journey back from the Pole was a moral drama about the attainment of self-knowledge. Scott went to the mountaintop, there on the blanched wasteland [...] Defeat on this earthly plane was transfigured. The journey becomes a quest for self-fulfilment, and Scott’s triumph is presented as the conquering of the self (Wheeler 1997: 52).

Thus we return to the interest in the self as the true material for twentieth century travel writing. It is understandable; it is also convenient as it fits into popular concerns promoted by feminism and post-colonialism. Wheeler and Birkett, in their introduction to *Amazonian*, place this focus at the centre of what they hope to promote as New Travel Writing:

> The writer’s inner journey is the most important part - and certainly the most interesting part - of any travel book. It doesn’t make any difference where you go; it’s your interpretation of it that matters [...] Now that writers have been everywhere, this feature - the inward-looking eye - is more important than ever. More important than anything else. The journeys writers make are slip roads to the private colonies of the imagination [...] It is the psychological journey that is paramount. ‘The most foreign country’, Alice Walker wrote, ‘is within” (Birkett and Wheeler, 1998: ix).

But inevitably, if this is the case, then the travel book stands or falls on the quality of the mind of the writer being explored; and the old image of the ‘armchair traveller’ becomes obsolete as we can no longer turn to travel writing to inform us about parts of the world we cannot all visit. As Nicola Walker (1998: 27) puts it in a review of *Amazonian*: “But isn’t it just as important that the reader learns about wherever it is that the writer has chosen to go?” She points out that “redrawing the boundaries of travel writing” as the book’s blurb claims actually means little more than “co-opting, among some astute descriptions of place, the kind of personal detail and introspection that have traditionally belonged in autobiography and fiction.” We should also remember that the presumed boundaries referred to are actually far more complex and flexible than the editors of the “New” travel writing wish to admit. As we have seen in travel writing throughout the last century, there is a strong tradition of mixing fiction, autobiography, philosophical reflection and spiritual enquiry, with descriptions of journeys undertaken. Each individual author works within a rhetorical and discursive field allowing them to place themselves on the continuum between travel-writing-as-guidebook and travel-writing-as-poetic-fiction.

Many of the discursive concerns we have found in earlier travel writing can be identified in Wheeler’s rhetoric in *Terra Incognita*. These in turn are structured around contrasts and oppositions that are also familiar: silent, unspoilt, pristine nature contrasted with dirty, noisy, depressing city life; the romance and escape of travel contrasted with the ‘real world’ of humdrum daily home existence; the saintly, martyred Heroic Age of travel exploration contrasted with the professional pragmatism of scientific research or the trivial hedonism of tourism; imperialism and nationalism contrasted with a kind of ideal postcolonial supra-national sharing of an unowned wilderness; and the millennium sense of first and last - the last great journey on earth, the first person to see the landscape. There is also the inevitable opposition between men and women; between science and art; the relationship to the country is represented as an unrequited love-affair; the journey is a quest for a spiritual goal, not for material gain.

One aspect of the rhetoric that is not so common in travel accounts is Wheeler’s use of literary and cultural referents (books, poems, art, music) to fill out the white expanse of emptiness: the book contains over seventy bibliographical references, ranging from poetry to science to history to fiction, as well as reference to detailed research of unpublished material such as letters and diaries belonging to past explorers. The very fact of Antarctica being a vast empty space means that all meaning invested in it during the century in which humans have explored it comes from written, constructed, rhetorical accounts of personal struggles, rather than events or sightings of natural phenomena or descriptions of societies and cultures. Antarctica offers the writer an earthly space outside the normal world, and for Sara Wheeler the way to fill this space is through the imagination.

She refers to the imagination directly at least thirteen times in the book, and “the response of the spirit” is used as a synonym for this Coleridgean concept. Incidentally, Coleridge himself is discussed in some detail; in writing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Wheeler points out that he had never been abroad, but “saw the ice with his inner eye” (219) in the same way as she comments on George Eliot’s ability to hear the famous ‘roar which lies on the other side of silence’: “She had never been south, of course. She didn’t need to go” (67). Travel is seen almost as a superfluity, necessary only for those who lack the imagination to create their own inner journeys. The chapter with the title "The Response of the Spirit" is placed at the centre of the book, and this idea is more clearly foregrounded in the text than any other - certainly more than descriptions of penguins, cold or snow.

> Antarctica was my love-affair, and in the south I learnt another way of looking at the world. What I want to do now is take you there. As Shackleton says, 'We all have our own White South', and I believe that the reach of the imagination extends far beyond the snowfields (Wheeler 1997: 8).

And similarly, among many examples:

> I heard the still small voice. I had never known certainty like it. I felt certain that a higher power exists, and every soul constitutes part of a harmonious universe, and that the human imagination can raise itself beyond poverty, social condemnation and the crushing inevitability of death (Wheeler 1997: 94).

Her choice of destination has respectable ancestry in Alexandra David-Neel's literary celebration of the idea of global mobility in *My Journey to Lhasa*, of the irrelevance of national boundaries and concepts of ownership of land: David-Neel travelled to Tibet in 1927 precisely because it was forbidden; Wheeler chooses Antarctica because it seems forbidden to any but male scientists and explorers and because it is not owned or colonised by a single nation ("Geopolitics dwelt in the north; on the ice there was only one enemy - the cold": Wheeler 1997: 243). The lack of an indigenous population in Antarctica means the only cultural problem she has to deal with is a largely male-dominated scientific culture. As Lucretia Stewart (1996: 41) writes in a review of *Terra Incognita*:

> Seen through Wheeler's eyes, the Antarctic comes across as one huge research camp, in which everyone is a scientist or a researcher of some kind, including, however much she may wish it were not so, Wheeler herself. As a result, *Terra Incognita* is less about Antarctica than about a strange parallel universe, where men are 'beards' and women token 'beards'.

Colonialism is dealt with as a historical phenomenon spurring earlier explorations, especially those by the British, and the way heroes were created on the ice at a time when Britain needed to compensate for its losses in other areas of the Empire is illustrated in the way the history of Scott is analysed in some detail, especially the way his story was promoted through books, films and photographs during the First World War to inspire soldiers to keep on fighting and value self-sacrifice in a greater cause.

Tourism is hardly present as a discourse in the sense that Antarctica is practically off-limits to the normal tourist, and there is no-one living on the ice to be described, photographed, exploited or affected by visitors (except the wildlife). The book represents a kind of anti-tourism discourse, in that Wheeler has deliberately chosen a destination that is the ultimate in ‘off the beaten track’ originality, and with its many deliberate echoes of the early explorers, the Antarctica she constructs is seen as the last great frontier, with herself as the last in a long line of heroic individuals who ‘penetrate’ the wilderness, rather than as the well-cared-for guest of rich and powerful scientific bases.

One rhetorical aspect which features heavily in *Terra Incognita*, and is not common in other recent travel writing, is the series of transcendental epiphanies experienced by the writer: if nothing else, Wheeler at least enjoys her travels, and presents them as a positive experience in which she learns not only about a new region and its unique beauty, but also learns to appreciate her ‘inner voice’ which she clearly represents as a spiritual experience. She claims to be a religious believer before heading south, and what she finds there confirms her faith and provides her with much happiness. In this sense the contrast with Davidson’s experiences in the desert with the Rabari could not be more marked, as is the case with other post-war travellers such as Mary Morris (1993) or Dervla Murphy (1995), who are far more attuned to the negative aspects of travel, and seem to expect sympathy from the reader for their sufferings and endorsement of the implicit message that travel has to involve pain for it to be ‘authentic’ - otherwise it becomes tourism.

However it is salutary to bear in mind that Wheeler is able to experience transcendental spiritual moments precisely because she is in a very privileged position: the cost and the logistics of travel in Antarctica, and the nature of the uninhabited terrain, are the very reasons why it is such heaven for the lucky individual who gets to visit. We are forced to the uncomfortable conclusion that it is, in fact, the presence of other people - of the native populations of foreign countries in particular - that make the travel experiences of so many recent writers into a kind of Calvary of suffering: they are robbed, cheated, threatened, lost, confused, stared at, unable to communicate, have to deal with strange food and customs, and are frequently forced to retreat to safe havens of First World comfort when the going gets tough. It is not Wheeler’s special relationship with the Higher Powers that makes her time in Antarctica so enjoyable; it is the lack of natives and foreign culture.

As Said suspected, modern Orientalism may have taken new forms, “a personal twist”, a more refined presentation of the Other arising from personal encounter rather than scientific study, but beneath the surface impression of a post-colonialist interest in other cultures, what we find repeatedly in the work of Western women travel writers in the latter part of the twentieth century is an obsession with self which has found ideological justification in the contemporary discourse of feminism, and less actual interest in the Other than we have seen in travel writing throughout the century.

In the desire to concentrate on the 'inner journey' and gain status and credibility by focusing on the writer's unique status as a sensitive individual, somewhere along the line the foreign country is reduced to an exotic or hostile backdrop to the drama of the personal life of the author. Changes in social experience of travel, of media access to foreign places, the enormous growth of tourism and the growing market for products aimed at a female readership have all combined to produce a style of travel writing which is unsure of its role alongside guidebooks, documentary television, journalism, and even amateur holiday videos and photographs. If tourism, one of the largest industries in the world, has blurred forever the distinction between traveller and tourist, broken down class barriers and brought the foreign into the domestic (and brought the domestic to the foreign) then the role of the travel writer as a special envoy who travels into the unknown is a threatened one. It is salutary to end with a reminder of Edward Said's prophetic analysis of the nature of modern Orientalism: "a vision of the contemporary Orient, not as narrative, but as all complexity, problematics, betrayed hope - with the White Orientalist author as its prophetic, articulate definition" (Said 1978: 239).

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CARMEL BIRD'S *THE WHITE GARDEN:* SYMBOLS AND IMAGES IN A SPACE OF THEIR OWN

M.ª DEL CARMEN RODRÍGUEZ FERNÁNDEZ
Universidad de Oviedo

ABSTRACT. *The White Garden shows the most worked, formal and contained use of the language existing in the chasm between the conscious and the unconscious. This is the territory that the novel explores because the female characters adopt different personifications and they subvert the personalities of the women they stand for enjoying the status of deluded women. The boundary between the conscious, the symbolic order superimposed by Goddard, and the unconscious, the pre-Oedipal phase in which the dreams strive to appear from the subconscious in the privacy of the cell becomes the mainstay of the novel. The outcome of all this is a rich and profuse web of influences and cross-referencing; a transposition of systems of signs that results in a dense and complex relationship whose imagery is achieved by means of the white garden, a representation of female freedom and triumph.*

There has been a resurgence of women's writing in Australia since the 1960s and we can account for it in a number of ways since there was, first of all, the rise of feminism and an accompanying appreciation of women's writing, then a proliferation of publishers and the appearance of women's studies courses in universities that helped to promote their writing. This coincides with the stage termed "female" by Showalter which, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), she defines as a stage of self-discovery as women free themselves from reacting to patriarchal values and turn inward, searching for their own independent female identity. The articulation of subjectivity is one of the fields that women have felt the need to explore in their works since their thoughts and most intimate feelings had been silenced and inarticulated for so long a time. Their awareness of the complexity of relationships in the modern world and the nuances of power in all relationships distinguishes them skilfully in the use of experimental techniques to convey their insights in these matters.

Postmodernism and metafiction, as experimental narrative strategies, serve the purpose of allowing the plurality of new voices and heterogeneities to be subject writers that command over their own existences and experiences. These have favoured all the minorities and since feminism had always been marginal with respect to the literary canon, the new trends have helped women's writing to gain a solid position in the literary studies of the last third of the 20th. century.

One of the main difficulties women had to face in their struggle to be subjects of their lives and not the objects of male definitions was precisely this: to assert their own right to be mistresses of their existences and of their experiences, to be able to see through their own eyes/ I's and to reject being the outcome of the male gaze. The wordplay that these two terms create enrichens the meaning of "seeing through". The identification of the subject "I" and "eyes" enables women to articulate and construct their identities by codifying what they have seen and how they have assimilated it.

Claiming authority over one's own life has not been an easy task either in literature or in life. Along the 20th. century women had to face constantly the risk of becoming trapped by the engendered social construct of "the angel in the house" and the desire to be sympathetic, tender and deceitful, so as not to show a mind of one's own and to conciliate men's ideas. It is only when women writers kill that fictitious ghost[1] -the centered understanding that patronising writing has been inflicting on women and on women's writing- that women have been able to exert authority over their own experiences.

Postmodernism theory has played a decisive role as regards women's studies. One to one have favoured and enrichened their scopes: the difference and excentricity that epitomise postmodernism have replaced homogeneity and centrality, that the canonical literature had as its mainstay, and has allowed women to have the command of their own lives and of their life-stories. As Hutcheon says:

> Feminisms have transformed art practice: through new forms, new self-consciousness about representation, and new awareness of both contexts and particularities of gendered experience. They have made women artists more aware of themselves as women and as artists (…) feminisms have also refocused attention on the politics of representation and knowledge- and therefore also on power. (Hutcheon 1989: 143)

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[1] V. Woolf in "Professions for Women", *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*. Pp. 237-238.

Carmel Bird (*The White Garden*, 1994), Elizabeth Jolley (*Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, 1983) and Drusilla Modjeska's (*The Orchard*, 1995) are some of the contemporary Australian writers whose novels deal with the unfulfilled and lonely lives of women. Their works offer a wide range of possibilities by decentralising the strict notion of novel as the piece of narrative with a central and unique plot, one story line and the hierarchisation of main and secondary characters. These writers, however differently, stretch to the utmost the possibilities of their texts and of their protagonists and stories. They are at times self-reflective and provide their narrative structures with a meaningful figurative language and a richness that postmodernism and feminism exploit successfully.

The French school of Psychoanalysis is one of the mainstays for the study of Bird's novel, since the proposed analysis of symbols and images has its basis on the estrangement produced on the girl child when the acquisition of language marks her entry into the social world. Professor Walker (1996: 17) referring to the French feminists, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva says that: "[they] all consider that this entry into the social world, the World of the Father, involves some crippling effect on the female psyche". Psychoanalysis has produced some powerful and original ways of thinking about language -the symbolic order- and has studied how it has imposed its grid of meaning in the form of a system of binary oppositions: masculine and feminine, self and other, good and evil. By this means language continually reproduces "reality" as a hierarchy of values which sustains the interests of dominant power whereas the unconscious disrupts, then, any attempts to control social meaning, being condensed and displaced in language in what Kristeva calls "the semiotic modality", or rhythmic semiotic traces that provide and remain the foundation of all language. A psychoanalytical approach is of much help if we want to analyse the importance of the internalisation of religious education in the characters and if we wish to interpret the *white garden* as that space in the novel in which characters free themselves from the symbolic order to outpour their unfulfilled desires.

Carmel Bird published *Cherry Ripe* (1985) and *The Blackbird Café* (1990) before writing her ambitious novel *The White Garden* (1994); this has Mandala Psychiatric Clinic as the backdrop of the hidden desires, frustrations and the internalised religious anxieties that women need to release after centuries of patriarchal discourse. The surface of the story tells us the investigation that Vickie's sister, Laura, reconstructs in order to find out the circumstances of her sister's death, but as Sharkey (1995: 8) said: "you can enter through various doors ... [the novel] is an exposé of a monomaniacal doctor's deep-sleep clinic; a critique of psychiatric institutions in the 1960s; a detective fiction; a study in religious mania; a lyrical celebration of the power of sibling affection." What lies behind the murder mystery is the rich world of the female with a profuse use of symbols and images that tells us how women survive in a world of men by creating and tendering their own *gardens* and developing a worldwide web of sisterhood that expands through history. This is a story where the semiotic outgrows the symbolic order by letting the subconscious of the characters arise out of the urgency of their drives in the privacy of their cell. Bird gives the female characters provenance, voices and personalities that enable them to struggle for the articulation of their selves in the small and contained world of the hospital, in a hostile environment that puts into practice with the patients the most inappropriate psychiatric methods.

Carmel Bird wrote *The White Garden* out of a series of events that happened in Australia and shocked Australian society in 1991.[2] She wrote the stories of some women at Mandala Psychiatric Clinic, in what she called "Faction", that is fiction which is closely based on fact. As Bird (1993: 10) has commented in her article "Fact or Fiction," "Life is a crude invention; fiction will only be convincing if it is more artful than life."[3] For Walker (1996: 95) *The White Garden* is considered as:

> [a] more interesting example in that it is a fictional and poetic construction based not on one story, as is autobiography, but on a number, from Australia, medieval Spain, nineteenth century France and the bohemian world of Bloomsbury set in aristocratic England. All these sources are interwoven and interconnected in a complex and dramatic world.

By means of adopting the surrogate selves of Catholic saints in some examples, or the persona of a well-known girl actress and a modernist writer in others, the characters in *The White Garden* subvert the personalities of the women they stand for and enjoy the status of deluded women; this enables them to develop the possibility of articulating their selves in the shadowlands of delusion, in the privacy of the cell and in the open-air white garden, without showing any overt signs of assertiveness. The outcome of all this is a rich and profuse web of influences and cross-referencing; a transposition of systems of signs that together with hagiography and its religious exaltation and the modernist sexual freedom, that the referential characters convey, results in a dense and complex relationship whose imagery is well achieved by the skillful embroidery of lacemaking, as an exhibition of the importance of creativity and of sisterhood in a deprived female world.

Mandala Psychiatric Clinic is the place where the women considered insane by their husbands or by their parents are brought in order to receive the therapy that Ambrose

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2. In that year Brian Bromberger and Janet Fife-Yeoman published *Deep Sleep: Harry Bailey and the Scandal of Chelmsford*. The research is based upon the psychiatrist Harry Bailey and the medical treatments he tested on his patients. As a result it had several judicial enquiries and a Royal Commission.

3. Faction is often applied to autobiography which, it is generally acknowledged, is an imaginative and slanted reconstruction of the writer's life-story. No matter how straightforward autobiography seems to be, it invariably contains an element of selection, of rearrangement and omission of facts which might conflict with the writer's self-image. (Walker 1996: 94-95).

[God]dard, the medical controller provides for them. This is achieved by means of pills, drugs and all sort of harmful deeds. The not so innocent husbands and the victimised mothers rely on him and on his methods and Goddard commits himself to bringing them back to the world as "right as rain" since, in his own words, they only need "a good fuck" (Bird 1995: 24). Wives driven half-mad and young girls with a strange behaviour will find in Mandala a place where they are put aside for a time. From the patriarchal point of view they are protected in that contained world; they will recover and give up the suspicious attitudes they had shown in front of parents and husbands, and after the treatment they will go back to the outer world submitted and humiliated by Goddard's therapy, ready to behave according to the hierarchical patterns.

The overcharged symbolism of the mental house as place of seclusion, where a lot of women are tied to their beds in their own urine and defecations, and where the power is enforced by the jargon of psychiatry and the mystery surrounding the medical practices, is embodied and carried out by Goddard who controls their lives. This symbolic order which tries to structure all their "thoughts, intellect and visions to conform with patriarchal values and power" (Walker 1996: 91) opposes to the limitless possibilities that the female characters show, once they construct their own defiant language system and feel free from the patriarch's clutches in their *white garden*. The deluded embodiments allow them to develop their own creative worlds in the privacy that the cell convey or in the white garden, built on the premises of the clinic. In addition to these meaningful settings, there also exists a kinship of sorority developed by all the characters throughout the novel that constitutes the main thread on which to link the filigree that finely knitted and webbed provides the backdrop for an immense tissue of siblings, friends and internalised models, all of them part of the fragmented history of women. The main ideas on which the interpretation of the *white garden* as the metaphorical space for creativity and sisterhood is grounded arise from approaching this novel from, the already mentioned, psychoanalytical perspectives, since there exists in the novel a double plane, that of the semiotics referring to the actual organisation or disposition within the body of instinctual drives under the domain of position and judgement, that of the symbolic.

Julia Kristeva read Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* when it was first published, the year she arrived in Paris and together with Marxism and linguistics, psychoanalysis was to have a determining influence in the development of her theories (Roudiez in Introduction to Kristeva 1980: 4). Lacan and Kristeva agreed in their linking of language to the unconscious. Lacan referred to the dual planes on which language operates to the possibility we have "of using it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says" (Lacan in Kristeva 1980: 4). According to Kristeva's theory of language and to the construction of subject identity, there exists a language in the pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and child which provides and remains the foundation of all language. In this preverbal semiotic phase, "the child has acquired no sense of separate identity; its physical experience is part of a continuum with the maternal body" (Kristeva in Morris 1995: 144). Once the language is acquired the child enters the symbolic order, which is the aspect of language that the child directs towards the object world of other people and things. Morris (1995: 145) continues saying: "however the symbolic disposition is also driven by an urge to master and control, through the act of defining, what is other and potentially threatening to the self."

Kristeva's theory offers then the clue for this reading as there exists a confrontation between Goddard and the female characters. The symbolic order is imposed by Goddard through the different therapies and myriads of different pills, all of them encoded with letters and colours,

> Ambrose fished into the pocket of his jacket and brought out a handful of capsules. They lay in his open palm like the eggs of sinister and exotic spiders. Their shiny skins were marked with small letters and numbers- F63 on the ones that were half orange half blue. LOL5 on the pink and green, F33 on the blue. R365C on the violet and fawn- their colours and symbols part of a secret, powerful and deadly language. (Bird 1995 : 28)

or when he is making his own mind on Therese's behaviour and goes on developing his particular encoded language: "makes bad sense. Won't eat, won't talk, won't anything. Fading away. Needs to be taken in hand. Needs thrashing. Needs ECT (Electro- Convulsive Therapy), DST (Deep Sleep Therapy). Needs fuck." (Bird 1995: 51). Goddard's discourse identifies openly with the symbolic, with the urge to master and control the lives of women; consequently this imposed order fractures even more the already fragmented selves of the women under his care: "After a while, behind the tall doors of Mandala, behind the windows locked and barred, within the mist, beyond the veil, beyond the light, beyond the darkness, the women ceased to exist in any ordinary way." (Bird 1995: 21)

The female world in the novel identifies with the semiotic modality, in so far as it shows to what extent the women characters need to bind and nurture on the link that they, as girls, had established with their mothers and elder sisters in the premises of the house; these ties of complete and uninhibited pleasures clash with the order imposed in the next field of influence, the school, and turn into a psychological struggle between the unbound physical experience that they had enjoyed in the pre-Oedipal phase and the models that they internalised after years of a repressive and hierarchichal education. The struggle between the scopes of wishes and impulses and that of rules and control gives as a result the profuse and meaningful outpourings of the characters. The subjects arriving at Mandala find a superimposed order to which some of them submit and are defeated, whereas other characters overcome the urge for fixity that Goddard tries to exert upon them and become embodiments of the female triumph that the novel inspires.

Bird builds up her novel around a white garden following the real one made by Vita Sackville- West in England fifty years before. The narrator explains what a White Garden is at the beginning of the novel, one of the few times that Ambrose Goddard's wife, Abigail, articulates her voice:

> 'A White Garden doesn't mean you just go mad with the white flowers,' she said. 'It's all a matter of light and shade and dark greens and light greens and silvers and greys. The overall impression is a sort of shimmering whiteness (...) The white ones seem to linger and hover - even when you think there was no light at all to reflect. It is almost as if they store up light. And because they depend on insects that come out in the early evening they have strong fragances that haunt the night air. I realise you won't be seeing all this, but it is good to know about it.' (Bird 1995: 18)

This quotation is of paramount importance for the understanding of the symbolism and imagery implied; it catches the attention of the alert readers at the time that it gives the explanation and semiotic connotations that the images and metaphors of the garden convey.

Vita Sackville-West had created a White Garden in Sissinghurst after the II World War out of an aesthetic principle and as a response to a series of events, and had related them all to her situation as a woman in a masculine world. Some years before, in 1929, her friend and writer, Virginia Woolf had written the paradigmatic essay in the field of Women's Studies *A Room of One's Own*: an encouragement to all the women to have, not just, the physical room, but the space in life to develop the authority of the self and the articulation of the voice by means of one's creation, distinctive and different from the hierarchical voice heard and proclaimed for centuries. What Woolf explained clearly in her essay, Vita did literally and metaphorically at Sissinghurst. She found her space in the physical premises of the garden, outside the constrained limits of the house, although in a world considered feminine. When speaking of her source, Bird lets us know that Vita enjoyed going out in the moonlight and planting until midnight sometimes. She enjoyed the evenings and the nights, mostly. The combination that the moon and the garden exerted upon the socially controverted spirit of Vita fulfills the meaning that the use of these words imply as metaphors. By means of the effect of the moonlight over her garden, she found her identity as a woman in that space. The result of the shadows at twilight reflected her hazardous and socially unaccepted bisexuality, and the upshot of whiteness at night showed her own inarticulated position in a male dominant society.

Bird did the same in her novel following and achieving the same aim: she made the female characters partake of the creation and the tendering of the White Garden, that physical area where the characters tendered their flowers and that metaphorical space where they solaced, took refuge, or made themselves strong and assertive by delusion: a representation of female freedom and triumph. The White Garden becomes then the ruling metaphor on which the novel is articulated. Goddard agrees to its construction because from a patriarchal approach it is closely related to the social construction of the feminine: he considers it a metaphorical extension of the cultural engenderment of values and virtues that society must foster in women; the whiteness being the reference to purity and to the internalised model of the Virgin Mary, whereas the garden, still in the premises of the house, is the extension of the house where women can authorise as a complement or a substitute to motherhood.

From feminist views and according to postmodernist principles this backdrop is a self-referential setting of freedom, an epitome of what Kristeva calls "jouissance": "[it] is sexual, spiritual, conceptual at one and the same time ... In Kristeva's vocabulary, sensual, sexual pleasure is convered by plaisir, jouissance is total joy or ecstasy" (Roudiez in Kristeva 1980: 16). This place of female freedom and triumph holds plural connotations. What Goddard cannot imagine is that the garden does not symbolise the feminine but the female world meaningfully. For these characters it becomes a representation of the semiotics, a space beyond the symbolic. It is the place where the women subjects disport themselves, far from the male gaze, and where they try to find their articulation and identity, away from the gender construction the patriarchal world provides.

Bird (1995: 18) gives us hints for the understanding of the *white garden* as the place of female disinhibition when Goddard's wife, Abigail, says: "It's all a matter of light and shade and dark greens and light greens and silvers and greys." According to Kristeva's interpretations of the colours (1980: 220-221): "colour might therefore be the space where the prohibition foresees and gives rise to its own immediate transgression ... it is through colour -colours- that the subject escapes its alienation within a code." The writer insists on the importance of the pre-Oedipal phase when, giving the voice to Abigail, she says: "even when you think there was no light at all to reflect. It is almost as if they store up light" (Bird 1995: 18), meaning the importance of the first thoughts in a child's mind. The associative references between the *white garden* and the attitudes shown by the characters continue throughout the novel when Therese Gillis outpours her thoughts and refers to the sexual rapes that occur in the deep sleep chamber: "I was pierced by a sharp and terrible point, slashed between the legs" Bird (1995: 82) and when Abigail says that "they depend on insects that come out in the early evening" (Bird 1995: 18). The dialectic interaction of the symbolic and the semiotic modalities appears in the text by means of the drives of the protagonists and the superimposed order fixed by Goddard.

Therefore the *white garden* offers the female characters a space of their own at the patronising world of Mandala. The clinic is full of patients, in the strictest sense of the word, and the outstanding characters have all embodied the personalities of women that struggled in their real or fictitious lives for an articulation of the self and were victims of their times, of the internalised Catholic models and of the gender construction. Teresa of Ávila, the Spanish mystic, the writer Vita Sackville-West, the fictitious Molly Bloom, Therese de Lissieux, the French saint, and Shirley Temple, the actress from Hollywood, surrogate selves of some characters, appear victimised and are examples of the internalisation of models that the patriarchy has inflicted upon women through their education after centuries of domination.

The strong kinship that the characters establish among themselves and in the relations with their sisters and surrogate selves makes the reader think that there exists an attachment that goes beyond the physical and psychological relationship and refers to the different levels of the conscious and the unconscious. As Paulina Palmer explains in *Sisterhoods* "other representations are also possible ... a character living in the present is represented forming a close involvement with a woman from an earlier age-group or era.." (Cartmell et al. eds. 1998: 81)

The study of sisterly devotion in *The White Garden,* as part of the semiotic modality, implies the analysis of the multiple meanings and interpretations that the concept of sorority or sisterhood poses from a feminist approach. The sisterly affection relates to a literal and a metaphorical bound among women; that fondness goes from the blood-relation to the internalisation of patterns that the characters have incorporated as to become part of their attitudes, and this kinship appears as the network that Carmel Bird has webbed in time and in place by means of intertextuality.

According to Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, which she defines "[as] the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position" (Kristeva 1980: 14) and to the afore-mentioned concept of the semiotic modality acquired in the pre-Oedipal phase, the characters outpour their own experiences as dreams, visions and delusions. Cultural influences and unconscious desires mingle in their imagination in what Kristeva calls "the boundary between the conscious and unconscious. It is on this threshold site that the social and the psychic interact in a dialogue or dialectic which produces communicative utterance." (quoted by Morris 1995: 145)

The White Garden, with its highly defiant system of metaphors and imagery epitomises the devotion and the commitment that all the women in the novel feel to one another and conforms the dialectic interaction of the symbolic and semiotic modalities. There are three central images that explain the notion of sisterhood and the multiplicity of connotations that this concept brings forth. The idea of sorority is presented as the image of the sisters swimming in the sea:

> I swam in the sea with my sisters; there was Bridie and Frankie and Loulou And Margaret and Rosie-Posie and they took me by the hands, by the legs, by the love and by the waves that broke on the edge of the shining sand. (Bird 1995: 59).

It is also embodied as the pattern composition in a broad piece of lace and represented by the design of a honeycomb that appears as an icon of the book to divide sections and discourses. In any of these images the idea of a strong attachment among women appears fully developed and it is reinforced by the continuous flux between the conscious and the unconscious that the characters utter in their drives:

> Time and tone and tense and significance flatten out, and an event in one century lies side by side with an event in another, and another and another until something resembling a design in a broad piece of lace is formed. A cloth on a table, thread by thread, knot by knot, loop by loop. The centrepiece is not the body of the woman in the garden, but the image of two honey-bees. (Bird 1995: 3).

As Kristeva maintains in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the semiotics must always retain the ordering presence of the symbolic. Without this control such language is completely overwhelmed by the force of unconscious drives and becomes psychotic utterances. Bird creates the necessary equilibrium between the symbolic and the semiotic, since the different experiences and outpourings of the characters appear always framed by an imposed order. When Therese Gillis enters Mandala suffering from depression and starts her treatment, she outpours utterances from her memories and interacts her dialectic with that of her internalised model Therese Martin. These remembrances from their early childhoods appear as dreams of the pre-Oedipal phase that Therese Gillis evokes in the manner of a playful enjoyment when she is with her sisters or out of heart-breaking drives when she remembers by means of her surrogate self the painful separation from her mother when she died: "At that moment her naturally happy disposition deserted her, the sun in her spirit was blotted out by a terrible darkness which came and went throughout her life" (Bird 1995: 56). She feels the same violent severance when she recalls the saddening estrangement from Violetta, Therese Martin's beloved friend:

> Me and You makes Double-you, Double-Me. Trouble me. This was friendship, but this was trouble, big trouble. Double Trouble. We gave each other small mirrors, and when we were apart and lonely, we could look into the mirrors and know that the Double-You was there. (Bird 1995: 78-79)

The uninhibited impulses of Therese Gillis/ Therese Martin are in both cases framed by the social construct of the house and the family, as a nuclear group. Throughout history patriarchy has established and constrained the importance of women to that of reproduction as opposed to the creative one that men have owned as theirs. Within that cultural engenderment of roles, men and also women, subordinated and resilient to the acquired patterns, have fostered sensitivity and love as important values to enrichen the virtues of young girls in the families. This, on the one hand, and the sympathy that is always found among groups that endure the same experiences on the other, has webbed a network of devotion among women that was, at the same time, accepted and supporting.

All the women subjects in this novel hold strong family ties, understood as part of the education that the restricted, and at times unfriendly, space of the house offered and also as their longings and unfulfilled desires in the hostile setting of Mandala. The mental house relates clearly to the representation of patriarchal dominance: from its iconicity either as the symbol of Mandala representing man as its centrepiece, or as the Christian iconography of Mandorla that has the Pantocrator centrally positioned, the setting of this novel shows the power that patriarchy, science and religion have inflicted on women and subsequently on their lack of construction.

The commitment to sisterhood is very well woven in the novel: starting with Laura –a teenager when Vickie died- who is trying to find a meaning to her sister's death and will provide the readers with the final explanation that gives sense to the novel; following with Therese Gillis and Therese Martin, who figure as main protagonist and corresponding alter-ego, both of them belonging to big families and whose relationships with their sisters appear soundly developed; continuing with Dorothy Gillis, Marjorie Bartlett and other minor characters, and ending with Rosamund Pryce-Jones and her surrogate self, Teresa of Ávila, the notion of sisterhood appears solidly grounded. The characters constantly recall their memories and longings as part of a heritage they do not want to lose. The only exception to the whole group of women subjects is Abigail: uprooted out of her marriage to Ambrose Goddard, her links with the past are lost, but like the rest of the characters, looks forward to building up a White Garden and enjoying it. Her share in the novel is short but interesting, since from her voiceless part she confirms that all women need to construct their own space to give way to the suppressed creativity that patriarchy has exercised for centuries.

The importance of "water" and "swimming" for Therese Gillis is meaningfully emphasised. Water, an element closely related to women and to the pre-Oedipal phase, appears as the reverse of the male-dominated world, which is earth-bound. The use of the word "swam" increases the disporting and playful notion of the activity that the Gillis sisters enjoyed together in their early childhood, still far from the symbolic modality. The devotion they felt may be taken, then, literally or metaphorically; as it appears in the sentences: "they took me by the hands, by the legs" (Bird 1995: 59), implying the role of the older sisters that lead and teach Therese, and how the relationship they held was of a complete freedom and playfulness. At the same time the commitment they felt was also nourished by the impulses of love, that is by the affection of blood fostered by the women in the female world of uninhibited desires. Nothing is mentioned about the men in that family group; however, the feeling of love and devotion was not stimulated in boys and girls likewise and the classical dyad mind/body that applied to man and woman, worked similarly when referring to the intelligible/ sensitive dichotomy, as Cixous traces in *Sorties*. The reference to "the waves" in this passage accomplishes the role that the semiotic modality offers. The rhythmical waves with their movement provide the blurring frontier between those first unbound feelings and the symbolic world, acquired, as soon as they trespass the female circle, in their second scope of influence: the education and imitation models that the characters internalise in their childhood. Consequently these images of water and waves strengthen the importance and the manner in which the semiotic level of Therese Gillis works and offer the clue to understanding the dialogue between unconscious desire and the social.

A very important aspect of the sisterly devotion that all the subjects are prone to feel is the meanings associated to the word "sister," not just referring to the blood link of women born of the same mother, but also as references to its enunciative meaning of "nun in the convent life" and to its connotative notion of sister as a "soul mate" or as "model to imitate." The three denominations describe the sort of attachment that appears in *The White Garden* and they are all important to understand the fragmentation and displacement of women since, as part of the male dominance throughout history, they were not subjects of their lives and could not develop their discourses. Religion played a decisive role in this fracture and, as Anderson and Zinser have studied in *A History of Their Own,* patriarchy insisted on presenting The Virgin Mary as an example to be followed by all the women and urged into cultivating the virtue that had distinguished The Virgin Mary as unique among all the women: virginity. The concept of uniqueness made the model impossible to imitate and this is exactly what Bird rejects when she presents the pluralised subjects with their permutability, multiplicity and mobility in the historical tissue of the novel.

Out of an earnestness and fervour in trying to imitate the utopian model that the engenderment fixed, many girls abandoned their homes and entered the religious life that was offered by the Church. The difficulty of embodying a similar model to The Virgin's as presented by Christianity, made girls impose serious renunciations and punish their bodies as part of that eagerness. After periods of abnegation these young women developed psychosomatic symptoms that are currently recognised as hysteria, following the definition that Evans gave to this illness: "A pathological personality structure resulting from inner psychic conflicts" (Evans in Showalter 1997: 44). In agreement with this definition Rosamund Pryce-Jones and Therese Gillis suffer from hysteria. The former displays the psychosomatic conflict out of the education she received and the influence she internalised by the proximity to the carmelite convent in Wales. The latter has internalised as her own the exemplification of the French saint, Therese Martin. The values she received as part of her education at home and at the school of the Immaculate Heart caused a clash within her inner self. The friendship she and/or her surrogate self enjoyed with Violetta is to be taken as another example of sisterhood: so similar were they and such an understanding existed among them that when they were so severely estranged Therese Gillis turned her positioning from being a joyful girl, who played with her sisters and enjoyed the company of Violetta, into a criptic girl who punished her body and ate the pages of *The Imitation of Christ* at the peak of her anxiety to assume a Christian model:

> I am Violetta, she inhabits me, she is my habit, I am her heart. When I smile I smile with Violetta's glossy eyes. I touch her cheeks with my fingerips and I feel the bloom of peaches, the flutter of the butterflies of her lashes. Into my butterfly, her butterfly, fly her swift sweet fingers. My little soldier fingers march ten thousand men up and then march them down again. Our bodies in and out of each other are joined in a long long kiss, a shivering kiss so hot on the cold of the gravestone, a kiss from the twining twins of our toes, this little piggie, from our toes to the blood red blobs of blood of our blood-silk lips. (Bird 1995: 61-62)

Related to the idea of sisterhood as an internalisation and imitation of patterns, Bird draws the readers' attention to the image of the honeycomb, the bees and the composition of the swarm. The bees, as part of the novel, constitute another illustration of the same embodiment: that of sisterly attachment. All the terms related to this collective intensify the notion of commitment. The design of the honeycomb finds its equal on the floor tiles of the veranda, close to the cells where both nuns live. In this way Bird shows how solidly grounded the notion of sisterhood must be considered in the "contained" and "uncontained" world of Mandala. Even the active Sister Therese and Sister Teresa build up the composition of their White Garden by following patterns, and the notion of mimesis is also pointed out through their behaviour: they appear as industrious and active bees, that know what their different missions in the swarm are according to the genetically internalised codes.

The third reference to sisterly devotion referring to "soul mate" implies intertextuality as another connotation of sisterhood; its corresponding image in the novel makes clear reference to the craftmanship of writing a novel of this sort. The quotation speaks of a skillful design on a cloth in which "thread by thread, knot by knot, loop by loop" (Bird 1995: 3) everything is finely knitted. According to Morris (1995: 138): "No writer comes to words or literary forms that are newly minted; multiple previous uses and meanings remain active to some extent within each new arrangement." The stories that build up the plot are finely knitted as lace-making and filigree. All of them are part of that fragmented and biased history of women. The metaphors evoke how carefully and subtly the artificer of the novel has moved the different threads so as to compound a fine piece of lace. Multiple meanings and intentions appear in the novel, unconscious desires speak through the words of all the characters. All their outpourings are preciously and carefully intertwined in order to shape plots or knots; in the end the outcome will be a piece of tapestry or novel. Its artisan is Carmel Bird and the thread that articulates the plot will be Vickie who, together with her sister Laura reconstructing the circumstances of her sister's death, will mark the textual frame. Within and part of that piece of cloth there are the lives and discourses of the women who out of a patriarchal attitude have tried to adapt to already made models; the internal conflicts suffered make them look for that site between the conscious and unconscious boundary that allows them to have a place of their own, their *white gardens*, where they can accomplish the notion of "jouissance," and reach female triumph by articulating their own discourses and constructing their heterogeneous identities, a result from the clash of two different phases in their lives.

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VIKRAM CHANDRA'S CONSTANT JOURNEY: SWALLOWING THE WORLD[1]

DORA SALES SALVADOR
Universidad Jaume I de Castellón

ABSTRACT. *The purpose of this paper is to account for the challenging hybridity and in-betweenness that derives from the presence of non-Western traces in contemporary fiction written in a global language. Among the huge and ever-growing group of the so-called "new literatures in English", the focus will be placed on Vikram Chandra's novel* Red Earth and Pouring Rain *(1995). This Indian author, who lives between Bombay and Washington, is a real master when it comes to fictionalized oral storytelling, echoing the traditional Indian epics –the* Ramayana *and the* Mahabharata. *It is no wonder, then, that Chandra would define himself as a storyteller. The generic shaping of a text tends to voice the ontological conception of literature that an author has, as it is the case with Chandra's transcultural narrative. His work, delineated on the borders between oral rite and written fiction, displays an intersystemic dialogue in which literature becomes a space of intercultural communication, an endless journey.*

> What a mean economy of love and belonging it must be,
> in which one love is always traded in for another, in which
> a heart is so small that it can only contain one *jannat*, one heaven.
> How fearsome must be this empty land where each new
> connection must inevitably mean the loss of all roots, all family,
> each song you may have ever sung in the past.
> *Vikram Chandra*

> ... how can the human world live its difference;
> how can a human being live Other-wise?
> *Homi Bhabha*

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[1] I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Vikram Chandra for his generous friendship, affection and support. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the Generalitat Valenciana, Spain. FPI00-07-210.

Much of the most innovative writing in English today comes from outside the Western world, from places such as Africa, Asia or the Caribbean, where many creative authors have adopted the former colonizing language as a *lingua franca* for communication. Centres and peripheries have been redefined, and these voices are strong contributions to the present revision of the literary canon, certainly problematized by emerging and ever-growing fields of (cross)cultural analysis, namely post-colonial theory and criticism, cultural studies or minority discourse theory, among others. Such writings are new not only in that the nation-states from which they have come are new but also in the sense that they show fresh styles and themes, revitalized creative forces coming from their native cultures. If a canon, usually related to power, is regarded as a list of authors or works which are considered to be valid and honoured to be studied, then one of the most important points about the so-called "new writings in English" is that they call into question the traditional hegemony of Western literature. Though largely marginalized or considered as "exotic", their demonstrable interest and quality challenge conventional ways of thinking about ourselves, the others and the world around us all. Regarding literary prizes as a way of legitimating and revealing how "newness" comes into the world, it seems undeniable that for the last decades some of the most prestigious awards for literature written in English have gone to voices coming from outside Great Britain. If we look at the national British literature honor, the Booker Prize, we will notice that in recent years it has been granted to authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Keneally, J. M. Coetzee, Keri Hulme, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy. The 1999 Booker Prize has gone to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, enabling this author to be the first one to win this Prize twice, while Anita Desai has been shortlisted once more, this time for *Fasting, Feasting.* In the United States, the 2000 Pulitzer Prize has been awarded to Jhumpa Lahiri, for her *Interpreter of Maladies.* All in all, clearly something beyond marketplace is working here.

It is widely agreed that India was the first of the "new" or newly-independent nations to have a large and really established literature in English (Birch *et al* 1996: 11). The first novels –according to the Western conception of the genre– that appeared in India in the late nineteenth century were written in the vernacular languages, and the first novelists to write originally in English emerged during the thirties, a time of political struggle marked by the rise of the nationalist movement and Gandhian ideals, as Rachel Dwyer (2000: 45) notes. Regarding the beginnings of the English-written novel in India, three major writers should be named: Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. After them, many voices have contributed to the international acknowledgement of Indian literature written in the English language. In India, however, there is an open debate dealing with the linguistic question, within the anxious walls of modern nationalism and politics. All in all, recently, Indian writers who have chosen to live in the United States –like Vikram Seth, Pico Iyer, Bharati Mukherjee, Sashi Tharoor and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni– have launched the Indian literatures in English into fresh and emergent territories. Within this growing intercultural group of writers, Vikram Chandra is an enticing talent that proposes "yarns of yarns" to entertain audiences all over the world. Chiefly, Chandra's fiction accounts for a transcultural project. In his works one can consider that writing is understood as a way of recovering and intercommunicating cultures, but also as an open proposal that suggests another sort of creation that goes beyond fetish dichotomies between native and foreign traces, local and universal, past and present. The past comes back in order to actualize its relevance for contemporary happenings. But the future is always a treasure that has to be taken care of and constructed day by day. The task at hand would seem to consist in striving for a "beyond", to go beyond fossilized discoursive positions, travelling from one space to another, from one temporality to another, making all of them simultaneous: to be here and there at the same time. What remains clear is that there is no return to a pristine origin, that all we have is the present, the future and our memory of the past.

In more than one sense, nowadays we could consider the existence or formation of a "post-colonial narrative paradigm", which could be mainly identified with these three features: a) the silencing and marginalizing of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre; b) the abrogation of this imperial centre within the text; and c) the active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre (Ashcroft *et al* 1994: 83).[2] From this vantage point, language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourses, because the colonial process involves language as a mechanism of oppression. There are several responses to the dominance of the imperial language, but clearly we could think about two main paths: rejection or subversion. For the most part, Ngugi (1981) could be an instance of the first alternative. After a period writing in English about his native Kenya, he has refused to submit to the political dominance English usage implies, fostering translation as a necessary communicative bridge among the different languages of the world. In the Indian context, Kachru (1983; 1990) shows how English has provided a neutral vehicle for communication between contesting language groups, while the writer Raja Rao voices, in a piece written in 1938 as a foreword to his novel *Kanthapura*, the challenge of the post-colonial writer to adapt the colonial language to local needs and realities: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (Rao 1989: v). Perhaps, the appropriation of a tongue is essentially a subversive strategy, for the adaptation of the standard language to the demands and requirements of the place and culture into which it has been appropriated amounts to a far more subtle rejection of the political power of the colonizing language. In Salman Rushdie's words, "to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (Rushdie 1982: 17). As Vikram Chandra (2000a) states, writing in English is an advantage because this is the *lingua franca* of power, business, cultural exchange, politics. And, using this language in creative writing, he has forgotten nothing, he has given up nothing.

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[2] On post-colonial literatures see also the helpful studies of Boehmer (1995), Loomba (1998) and Walder (1998).

The rewriting and rescue of the "other" History, the silenced one, which does not appear in the official historical accounts created by monolithical discourses, is a main topic in post-colonial literature criticism, sometimes related to post-modern historiographic metafiction.[3] The colonized were usually the objects of someone else's story. In the aftermath of colonization, many voices felt an irresistible need to retell, to write the counterhistory, showing that the centre cannot –and should not– hold, fighting for the reinscription of their memory, silenced for too long.

Lately, however, the term and concept of "postcolonialism" is itself being sharply interrogated. In any case, I prefer to speak about *transcultural narratives*, using a terminology and conceptualization taken from Latin American criticism (Ortiz 1973; Rama 1987). The transcultural identity is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions, but rather on their continual and mutual development. Some features are lost, and some others are gained, producing new forms even as older ones continue to exist. Transculturation is a hybrid process that is constantly reshaping and replenishing itself. I would associate it with Bhabha's (1994) concept of in-betweenness, the powerful reassessment of the creative potentialities of the liminal spaces.

If we should define and describe Vikram Chandra's narrative in just one word, it would be *storytelling*. In the two books he has published hitherto, the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), and the collection of stories *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997a), Chandra displays an everlasting ability as storyteller, showing his particular tribute to the Indian tradition of oral storytelling he appreciates so much. At the same time, his narrative development subsumes a deep understanding of the multiple socio-cultural life of India, past and present. He loves complicated characters that live on the borders, torn between worlds apart. Above all, though he beat Booker-Prize winner Arundhati Roy to win the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, he detaches himself from success or defeat, assuming that he does not write for competition, market and Prize-winning. Anyway, step by step Vikram is being recognized as one of the main voices of Indian literatures in English. In June 1997, he was featured in *The New Yorker* photograph of "India's leading novelists". Favourable reviews and international awards praise his creation, which is beginning to be included within undergraduate and postgraduate literature programs at different universities around the world.

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[3] On the relationship between history and fiction in the postmodernist era, see Onega (ed.) (1995).

Born in New Delhi, on July 23rd, 1961, Chandra completed most of his secondary education at Mayo College, a boarding school located in Ajmer, Rajasthan, which is a desert state in the north-west of India, and the traditional home of the Rajput warrior clans. After a short stay at St. Xavier's College in Bombay, Vikram went to the United States. There, he graduated from Pomona College, in Claremont (near Los Angeles), in 1984 with a *magna cum laude* BA in English, specializing in creative writing. Then, Chandra attended the Film School at Columbia University in New York. In the Columbia library he chanced upon the autobiography of Colonel James "Sikander" Skinner, a legendary nineteenth-century soldier, half-Indian and half-British. When he read the translated version of Sikander's autobiography, originally written in Persian –the sophisticated court language of the time–, he began to consider "the large interpolations and excisions made by the translator" (personal communication, 17th September 1999). A presence that, in translation studies, has been especially noted by the so-called "Manipulation School".[4] All in all, the deep and reflexive reading of this book became the true inspiration for Vikram's first novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995). He left film school halfway to begin work on the novel. But art was not unknown to Vikram, who was deeply influenced by his mother's passion for writing. Of her, Kamna Chandra, a successful screenplay writer in the Indian film industry, Vikram would state that he could not remember a time when she was not writing.

Red Earth and Pouring Rain was written over six years. During that time, Vikram supported himself on the writing programs at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Houston, working with well-known North-American contemporary writers: John Barth at Johns Hopkins, where Vikram obtained an MA, and Donald Barthelme at the University of Houston, where he received an MFA. While writing his novel, Vikram taught literature and writing, and also worked independently as a computer programmer and software and hardware consultant. His diverse clients included oil companies, non-profit organizations and the Houston Zoo. Finally, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* was published in 1995 by Penguin/India in India; Faber and Faber in the United Kingdom, and Little, Brown in the United States. Vikram Chandra's *opera prima* was received with outstanding critical acclaim. It was awarded the *David Higham Prize for Fiction* and the *Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Published Book* in 1996. In his novel, Chandra takes the reader across multiple times and places, from the battle paths in nineteenth-century India to contemporary roads in the States. Sanjay, one of the main narrative voices, reincarnated as a monkey, represents the traditional *storyteller*, recovering the vital strenght of oral narration. Abhay, a young Indian contemporary student, is his counterpart, the one who will finally assume the relevance of a cultural heritage that belongs to him as much as to his ancestors. Vikram's words regarding his impulse to create this novel show the project underlying its composition, meditating on the narrative manipulation carried out by the translator of Sikander's autobiography:

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[4] As an introduction, it can be useful to consult Lefevere (1992) and Hermans (1999).

> I thought, then, about language, about speaking in alien tongues, and being made to speak in someone's else's voice, and about history and memory and the preservation of the past. (personal communication, 17th September 1999)

Vikram's second delivery, a collection of short-stories, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, was released in 1997, edited by the same publishing houses that have previously published the novel, in India, the United Kingdom and the United States. Two of these stories had formerly appeared in the *Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*.[5] Indeed, the story "Dharma" was awarded the Discovery Prize by the *Paris Review* in 1994. The book won the *Commonwealth Prize for the Best Book for the Eurasian Region* in 1998. This brilliant collection is a tribute to the multilayered beauty of Bombay, old and new, its peoples, its stories. As in Vikram's first work, the five stories gathered here are linked by a powerful oral storytelling frame. In a smoky Bombay bar, Subramaniam, the storyteller, a retired civil servant, is able to captivate the book's main narrator, Ranjit. This young man, as Abhay in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, evolves from his initial skepticism towards a deep appreciation of the storytelling rite. In *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Chandra leaves behind the anticolonial core and intercultural encounters of his novel and centers on present-day Indian reality and underworlds, starring Bombay, his own city, India's financial and commercial centre, depicted as the cosmopolitan and polyglot city it is, being home for him and a sort of microcosm of the whole country. As in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Chandra aims to tell out of silence, being conscious that historical –written– accounts are constructed by those who hold the power to tell and decide what is going to be the "truth". Evolving a gleaming narrative versatility, in the five stories gathered in the collection Chandra is able to delve into the depth that exists in ordinary lives, due to his profound sensitivity to the assumption that any account has its counterpoint, one which is not usually told or known. Thus, his discourse here gives voice to ghosts, mysteries, power politics in social relations, passions, crimes, hidden sexualities, anguishes, desires, nostalgias; above all, emotions. Unfolding his richly textured and elegant gaze, the author can make us perceive and share the wide range of sentiments felt by the diverse characters in the stories, because in *Love and Longing in Bombay* Vikram Chandra displays generous, powerful and deep insights into the diversified human nature. He explores how personal problems intersperse with social life, searching into the inner worlds of his characters.

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[5] "Dharma" in *The Paris Review* (1994: 258-282), and "Shakti" in *The New Yorker* (December 24, 1994/January 2, 1995: 108-129).

At the moment, Vikram Chandra spends his time shuttling between Bombay, his home, where he writes, and Washington, DC, where he teaches creative writing at George Washington University. He is working on his third book, a new novel, a detective story on cops and gangsters, initially set in Bombay. As a sort of foretaste, in a special issue of *The New Yorker* (June 23 & 30, 1997) he has already published "Eternal Don" (1997b), that will be the first chapter of this forthcoming work. Furthermore, he does not forget one of his most beloved projects: writing a film script, because cinema is a very well-known world for him, coming from a filmmaking family of producers, directors and script-writers. Filmy background is a starting point one should never forget in looking at Vikram's work.[6]

Vikram Chandra's prose praises traditional oral storytelling in the era of electronic communication, without denying the advantages the web may provide. In his works, we can really notice how oral forms of literature operate as distinct pre-texts in written works that have adopted the English language with a main communicative purpose. As our immediate reality becomes increasingly intertwined with global technology, this intercultural fiction seeks other ways of communication, in the art of oral storytelling, the voices of popular culture, deeply human. Storytelling survives in modern India, but the narrative also shows itself to be flexible, able to assimilate new elements and change accordingly, interacting with the Western art. Thus, by far, Indian oral tradition of storytelling is the matrix of Chandra's narrative project, both living and fictional. Stylistically charming, Vikram is a virtuoso creator of vivid descriptions that enliven smells, tastes, thoughts, feelings, how voices sound, how silences appear.... In spite of the technical complexity of framing interconnected stories, his prose carefully introduces the reader into a calm, flashing, yet ever-changing narrative flow, constantly showing an ongoing dialogue between old and new forms. Hopefully, certain traditions survive in our paradoxical (post)modern times, and Vikram's fiction helps memory to be restored to its true abode.

Regarding the diverse literary influences that Vikram Chandra acknowledges as being relevant for his fiction and his aesthetic conceptions, we will perceive a clear multicultural hue. Being asked about his "literary parents", he named, first and above all, the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata*, compiled by Vyasa, and the *Ramayana*, compiled by Valmiki. Then he mentioned Indian writers such as R.K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie. Victorian writers, including Anthony Trollope and William Makepeace Thackeray; North-Americans, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and the "noir writers", Dashiel Hammett, Elmore Leonard and Jim Thompson, among others (personal comunication, 4th October 1997). A diversified and heterogeneous group meeting in the author's literary imagination, showing an approach between tradition and modernity, which are not contradictory terms for Vikram. Although his literature belongs to the contemporary period, and indeed he employs certain present-day narrative resources, the seed of his prose lies in oral popular transmission, the texture of the Indian epics, past memories reshaped and replenished in present times. For him, "tradition survives in odd and unexpected ways" (personal comunication, 4th October 1997).

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[6] Rachel Dwyer (2000: 105) enhances the fact that Vikram Chandra belongs to a new generation of Indian writers who has a great affection for Hindi cinema, considering it as a cultural expression of emotion rather than as object of parody. For Dwyer, this younger crop holds a more complex understanding and acceptance of popular culture.

Apart from writing, teaching and lecturing, Vikram Chandra carries out many other activities that also echo his ideas about the creative process. In 1998, together with the literary agent Jenny Bent, he set up a living forum in Washington DC, named *Adda*. This Hindi word could be translated in many different ways, mainly as "stand" or "base", "meeting place", or "resort". Local writers, published or unpublished, gather at this literary space, located at U Street's Chi-Cha Lounge. However, the origins of *Adda* should be traced back to Bombay. There, in July 1997, Vikram created a first *Adda* with his filmmaker friend Anuradha Tandon, who runs it now. Indian *Adda* includes literary readings, dancing, music and theatre. These forums chiefly intend to foster interaction and conversation between artists and audience, something that Vikram enhances himself.

Not in vain, the accessibility that Vikram Chandra shows to his readers-listeners, through the e-mail channel, is intimately and transculturally related to his attachment to the oral tradition. For Vikram, audience has a very high relevance, being an active participant in the storytelling process, as Sanjay's audience in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and Subramaniam's in *Love and Longing in Bombay*. Vikram also has his own. As he works, as he writes, he shows the pages he produces to a small group of people, his close audience: his mother, his sisters, a couple of friends. Out there, readers over the world, unknown, but extremely important for the storyteller, who would like to listen to their responses. With some of them, Vikram maintains an open conversation, a real interaction that becomes a "turn of the screw" regarding what author-reader relationships have been up until now in the "Gutenberg Galaxy". Distinctively, Vikram Chandra entwines his cosmopolitan side with his Indian essence, rooted into oral culture. He is critical regarding the lack of contact between author and reader and finds it particularly annoying when the modern writer is thought of as a distant mysterious figure. No wonder then he fosters the concept of storytelling, where one can listen to the author's voice, short-circuiting distances. Not many writers and publishers encourage such direct interaction, but Vikram finds it stimulating to communicate with his readers. So, if the current technology lets him speak more personally to the listeners, he takes the chance.

Talking with Vikram about the complex question of identity, in relation to the acculturation and transculturation processes, I suggested that his use of English as literary language and of the novel genre as body of creation was carried out from an interactional and resistant Indian identity, enhanced in his fiction. His own response is highly clarifying:

> Enhancing the identity, exactly. If you don't assume a unified, singular self in the first place, then there is no question of acculturation. There is an old cliche in India, which describes the Indian self like an onion, that is made up of layers and layers. If you are an investigative type, and insist that you will take apart this construction to find the "core", you can peel and peel away, but you will never find the centre, only emptiness. *One might argue that this is like a knot of stories; it is in their knotiness that they become something*. If you add something to this tangle, yes, you change the tangle, but you don't make it something "other". That is impossible. It remains the same knot. Only different.... (personal communication, 7th November 1997) (emphasis added)

This being so, according to Vikram, multiple knotting and entwining is the identity core of India, that has always been multicultural. In this sense, Salman Rushdie also states that what defines Indian cultural tradition is eclecticism, mixture, interacting, in front of the fantasy of purity: "[...] the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American" (Rushdie 1983: 67). Indeed, the comparison that Vikram draws between Indian identity and a knot of stories is highly relevant regarding the narrative structure of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, as we shall see. Identity lies in knottiness. Culture, after all, could be considered as a huge tangle to which one can add threads and threads, to make it grow and multiply. And it is precisely in its multiple roots where we find the constant possibility to open change and interaction, because, mainly, the adding of new threads enriches the bond. Chandra takes inspiration from everywhere, and believes that what results is Indian in its very eclecticism. With affection, he quotes the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1932) in order to state that the acceptance of external influences –named as "pollution" by some critics– does not imply the loss of one's own flavour. One is not "less Indian" for looking at the whole world in search of inspiration; the local and the global are not a real dichotomy and can dwell in the same place.[7] So, Vikram defines himself as an Indian cosmopolitan writer, regional as well, considering that part of the western suburbs of Bombay is his region, his locality. As Borges, Vikram Chandra (2000a) speaks against ideological restrictions imposed on writers. Art, above all, should breath in free air. To illustrate this point, if there is a clear voice that speaks about the necessary freedom of identity for the transcultural subjects, that voice belongs to Frantz Fanon,[8] far too aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities:

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[7] Even a strong defender of ethnic cultural values such as Ngugi (1993: 25-29) echoes this unease about the tendency to see the universal and the local in absolute opposition to each other.

> I do not have the duty to be this or that... One duty only: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices. [...] There are in every part of the world men who search. I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. [...] *In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.* (Fanon 1986: 229) (emphasis added)

In what follows, I will concentrate on Vikram Chandra's first work, the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), which is composed of hundreds of interwoven told, retold, copied, translated, interspersed stories. Its several characters and narrators (storytellers) are representative of a huge range of times, spaces, races, nationalities, religions, age and gender. Moreover, they come from the animal, human and divine orders. The essence of this big tapestry can be already observed in the novel's title, which is taken from a Tamil poem dating back to the third century A.D., translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan; a poem that appears in the text itself, disguised as a song:

What could my mother be
to yours? What kin is my father
to yours anyway? And how
did you and I meet ever?
But in love
our hearts have mingled
like red earth and pouring rain.
(Chandra 1995: 233) (emphasis added)

Through the force of these simple, deep and emotional words, Chandra speaks about the possibility of coming together by means of the power of love, assuming that culture is not only red earth or pouring rain, but the *and* between them, their knotting, their mixture, the clay we are all made of. This feeling is not naïve, taking into account that the master theory of aesthetics in Hindu thought is the emotional and creative theory of *rasa*[9]. Art is a cultural expression of emotion, considering that emotion is also a discourse practice. Thus, emotional discourses are pragmatic acts and communicative performances. All in all, I believe that Vikram Chandra's narrative project as a whole could be considered as an enquiry into *rasa* configuration, exploring the very boundaries and conditions of life itself.

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[8] Greatly admired by cultural critics such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1993).

[9] Elusive concept that could be widely translated as "emotion, sentiment". For an account of the classical *rasa* theory, particularly as formulated by the eleventh-century Kashmiri theorist Abhinavagupta, see Gerow (1974). We can find a recent and comparative account in Sharma (1996).

Storytelling defines *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, where fiction intermingles with both history and myth, embracing diverse interpretations of the past history of India, as well as a contemporary road trip criss-crossing the United States. Abhay, home in India after attending college in California, is the link between these separate worlds. Disturbed and alienated, he shoots and seriously wounds an old white-faced monkey that has been stealing food and clothes from his parent's garden for years. As a result of the wound, the monkey recovers his human consciousness, and reveals to be the heart and mind reincarnation of a nineteenth-century brahmin poet named Sanjay. Deprived of his human voice, the monkey, Sanjay, actually typewrites in order to communicate. Three praised Hindu deities arrive on the scene, Yama (king of the dead), Hanuman (ape-god protector of poets) and Ganesha (elephant-god of wisdom), and a vital contract is signed: Sanjay will stay alive only if he is able to entertain an audience with his storytelling, interwoven with that of Abhay and his parents, Ashok and Mrinalini Misra, retired teachers. All their voices, together with those of the many characters that walk about the book, shape Chandra's multifaceted story of stories, spiralling across centuries, countries, cultures, feelings. As a sort of literary zapping, the slipping interrelation between tellings is used as both a creative and critical practice, a strategy for communicating meaning across cultural boundaries. The interaction of the two main oral-framed narrative branches, Sanjay's epic past and Abhay's postmodern road-movie present, subsume a meeting of languages, styles, values, identities. Chandra's book cultural ethos and worldview show overtly his disgust in front of Western logic, with its tribute to self-interest and reason. This attitude is epitomized at one point by the criticism to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and, more specifically, to its insistence on emotional sameness, its clean and straight stipulations, so different from Indian discoursivization, where "narratives entwine and break into each other" (Chandra 1995: 335). Indeed, this constant debate is a deep subtext within the story: the interactional contrast between Aristotle's poetics and Indian aesthetics, Cartesian clarity and Indian curlicues, British rationalism and Indian mythological beliefs, Western discipline and Indian meditation.

All in all, Sanjay is the one who returns from the past, reincarnated as a monkey, in order to tell the history of India through the story of his own life and his brother's, Sikander, a soldier, at the tail-end of the Moghul Empire (1526-1857) and the Indian Mutiny (1857-59). Being conscious of the power of narrative in order to shape historical discourses, his voice, one among many others, will mainly entwine with that of Abhay, and Abhay's parents, Ashok and Mrinalini. Paradoxically, Sanjay returns to restore precisely what he lacks: voice. Devoid of his human speech, he actually typewrites his story, in English, the tongue he paid so much to master. Each time Sanjay gives birth to a story he scores a victory against time. Thus, symbolically, Chandra's text is a vehicle of timelessness by reconstructing the past through the present and pointing to the future. Moreover, Sanjay represents the tragic and painful learning of a foreign language, the colonizer's tongue and its written transmission. For him typewriting means, in fact, transcribing voice, with all its hues, tones, accents. For him storytelling is life itself.

Abhay's narrative accounts for his experiences as an Indian student in the States, introducing the contemporary view of a cosmopolitan migrant, torn between Indian and American cultural values. Noticing that his memory is fragmentary, feeling as if he were in a film and were expected to react somehow (Chandra 1995: 57), perhaps Abhay also feels that his life is a sort of broken mirror, "some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 1982: 11). Coming back home from abroad, Abhay becomes aware of the cultural features of his homeland, those traces that shape himself. He (re)learns to know his own culture, essentially multiple. Above all, he rediscovers the importance of storytelling as a daily ritual, part of life. In Abhay's confusing existence, Sanjay's return and lesson is a legacy of endurance and coherence.

In spite of the fact that his life and work straddle East and West, Chandra knows where his roots are, in the substratum of the ritual tradition of oral storytelling, stories being written only in order to be preserved, forever passed on from one generation to the next. Full of cultural and historical references, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* comes out to be an endless tale, an intertextual matrix, a whole circle, a quest, a homecoming. It is actually a symbolic knot of stories, voices, places and times woven together, a big tapestry where each story, each stitch, has its value. It frontally resists the possibility of being summarized in just a few lines. It demands to be disentangled, slowly, carefully, thread by thread.

All in all, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is, in many respects, a book of and about storytelling. Structurally it is divided into five books.[10] As in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), oral narration is a vital activity that contains the real meaning of existence. Somehow, in Rushdie's novel, Saleem tries to delay his death –though he is conscious of his inevitable desintegration– by accumulating a great number of stories, revealing a fragmentary reality and history. In Chandra's text, however, what really matters is the interweaving of stories and voices, the interlaced whole they finally create. The importance of the narrative frame is enhanced by Hanuman at the beginning: "Be wily, be twisty, be elaborate" (Chandra 1995: 24). According to this advice, Sanjay creates a fictional stage where Sandeep is the storyteller that tells the story of Sanjay and Sikander to a group of *sadhus*, holy men. At the same time, Sandeep states that this story was passed on him by an old woman he met on the Himalayas. Thus, what we have is narrative embedding down to many levels, the rich story-within-a-story device: Sanjay's voice is "heard" within the frame created by Sandeep (created by Sanjay). Moreover, there is a constant zapping between Sanjay's past story and Abhay's present account. What all the voices in the text want to convey is storytelling's survival. In this sense, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* could be considered as one of the "narratives of transmission" described by Bernard Duyfhuizen (1992: 19-20): "The narrative of transmission is both a metaphor for processes of continuance in literature and life, and a metonymy– a constituent part of that process." Above all, telling stories is also the art of keeping on telling them.

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[10] At this point, we should remember the main referents for Chandra's writing: the *Ramayana*, composed of seven books, and the *Mahabharata*, which includes eighteen books. See Dimock *et al.* (1974).

Chandra defines his book as one long story made up by many open-ended strands. Its form, the way in which stories change and dive into each other, comes out from the flux of the traditional Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the first stories he remembers absorbing, which his mother and aunts used to tell him when he was a child. This type of spiralling narrative, full of juxtapositions and unexpected meetings, is an ancient traditional Indian form. There, storytelling displays a circling structure that consciously avoids linearity, and refuses any notion of straightforwardness. Usually, storytellers do not create out of nothing. Somehow, they begin from familiar forms, genres, patterns, structures, narrative schemata. So, Chandra, emotionally attached to the Indian epics, follows this traditional form to tell modern versions of everyday life, to reflect the possibility of its survival in a translational sphere, in spite of the spread of the individualistic Westernized way of life. His literary movement is centrifugal, going from the inside towards the outside, from his own cultural forms to the internationalized ones. As I have already stated, the whole text is a symbol of the entanglement and knotting of cultures in our contemporary world. Its entwined texture may be confusing, dizzy, like jet-lag, like zapping, as puzzling as the experience of crossing cultures may be. The only way to get over it is learning to acknowledge, translate and understand our multicultural and multilingual reality.

The novel also reflects the hard tension between the vernacular and English voices during colonial times, together with the clash between oral and written transmission. Literacy already existed in India before the Europeans' arrival. What the West brought to India was printing technology. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain,* Sanjay and Sikander are sent to Calcutta to become apprentices on the Markline Orient Press. There, by chance, Sanjay has to work on the printing of a book written by an English missionary,[11] who gives a false account of the death by immolation of Janvi, Sikander's mother. Facing this manipulation, Sanjay feels insulted and gets a slightly modified duplication of the font used to print the book. So, he inserts a subversive message, in Hindi, into the alien field of the English book: "This book destroys completely. This book is the true murderer" (Chandra 1995: 354). When Markline tries to find the font, Sanjay literally swallows all the metal letters, which later on, will be dropped out of his body, against oppression. Step by step, in the course of his life Sanjay learns the power of transmission, and the real value of speaking, thus: "As the years passed, Sanjay wrote less and less; the act of putting words on paper became more and more a lie, an oppressive betrayal of life itself, and therefore one day he found himself unable to write at all" (Chandra 1995: 454). In his human life, Sanjay acknowledges that although English is a necessary vehicle for communicating, it cannot contain his most beloved words, it is not his own:

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[11] The book, written by Reverend Francis M.A. Sarthey, is descriptively entitled *The Manners, Customs, and Rituals of the Natives of Hindostan: Being Chiefly an Account of the Journeys of a Christian Through the Lands of the Hindoo, and his Appeal to all Concerned Believers*. The significance of travel writing as a subjective production of empire has been wisely put forward by Mary Louise Pratt (1992).

> Sanjay moved his head, shut his eye, tried to speak, but found his throat blocked tightly by something as hard as metal; he did not know what it was he wanted to say but knew he couldn't say it, what was possible to say he couldn't say in English, how in English can one say roses, doomed love, chaste passion, my father my mother, their love which never spoke, pride, honour, what a man can live for and what a woman should die for, how in English can one say the cows' slow distant tinkle at sunset, the green weight of the trees after monsoon, dust of winnowing and women's songs, elegant shadow of a minar creeping across white marble, the patient goodness of people met at wayside, the enfolding trust of aunts and uncles and cousins, winter bonfires and fresh chapattis, in English all this, the true shape and contour of a nation's heart, all this is left unsaid and unspeakable and invisible, and so all Sanjay could say after all was: "Not". (Chandra 1995: 344)

After a hard fight against the British in the wake of the Mutiny, Sanjay is on the verge of dying. But he needs to hold on to life, to gain immortality, mainly because he still has to fulfill his *dharma*. Yama asks him for what is most holy and precious to him. Then, Sanjay opens his mouth, tears his tongue out by the roots and offers it to Yama. In this way, literally and symbolically, Sanjay sacrifices his mother tongue in order to speak English, to be able to communicate with the colonizers on an equal basis. So, when afterwards he travels to London, he speaks English *without tongue*, painfully acknowledging that: "Vernacular is not a matter of tongue alone, a man had to die and leave behind his native earth to speak a new language" (Chandra 1995: 553).

In my view, in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* one could consider that Sanjay and Abhay both exemplify and redefine the notion of "twice born", that has been critically used to describe the dualistic heritage that holds the discursive framework of the Indian writer in English.[12] Taken from Hinduism, the concept of "twice born" has explicit class and caste meanings. The males from the top three castes in the Hindu system (*Brahman* –ritual mediator between the divine and the human–; *Kshatriya* –warrior– and *Vaishya* –merchant–) are considered "twice born", that is, are eligible to experience the "second birth", when they are ceremonially initiated into their responsibilities as Hindus, mainly into learning the Veda. After his "first death", confronted with Yama, Sanjay is "born again", being able to speak English. Somehow, his identity is created anew through his journey to London. There, he shows both a split subjectivity and a renewed self. He migrates across cultures, languages, spaces, times, even from the human to the animal order, by virtue of his later reincarnation. Nonetheless, though his self seems to be fragmented, divided and inherently unstable, his true inner nature, and his *dharma*, remain the same. Mainly because his travel to London is indeed a journey into himself. Regarding Abhay, at one point we learn that, indeed, as Sanjay, he also belongs to a Hindu family. His grandfather wants him to have his *upnayana* ceremony and become one of the twice born. But being at school he is resistant to the caste system, and later he leaves for the States. Then his grandfather dies, and his existential dizziness begins to grow up. Thus, in more than one sense, his return to India and his encounter with Sanjay and his storytelling involve the dissipation of that confusion, implying his absolute re-attachment to his culture, his meaning, his place in the world, his own *dharma*. All in all, symbolically, after his homecoming and learning, one could argue that Abhay is also a "twice born".

Altogether, I see the whole novel as a constant journey, a quest, a rite of passage, for both Sanjay and Abhay. During his human life, Sanjay travelled endlessly in search of his ultimate cultural and personal identity. He even had to fulfill his *karma* and returned as a monkey to end his trip at home, in India, after all. Abhay represents the contemporary hybrid and migrant experience, shuttling between the United States and India. Finally, at home, he learns to assume his legacy: "I will tell you a story that will grow up like a lotus vine, that will twist in on itself and expand ceaselessly, till all of you are a part of it, and the gods come to listen, till we are all talking in a musical hubbub that contains the past, every moment of the present, and all the future" (Chandra 1995: 617). Both voyages are journeys of (re)discovering, learning and return. Looking back at the main influences that Chandra himself assumes regarding the writing of his novel, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, we notice that the quest motif is the undercurrent of many stories included in both Indian epics, where indeed the chief event is a journey and a quest, the sum of successive encounters and mixings.

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[12] On that score, it would be worth revising Mukherjee's (1971) study of "twice-born" Indian novel in English.

Red Earth and Pouring Rain is a novel about migrancy, foreigners in India, Indians abroad. And it is also much more. Indeed, it is much more than a novel, in the sense of the literary genre.[13] In this cultural narrative knot, Chandra unifies and unravels the threads that tell the (hi)story of India, past, present and future. He witnesses the plurality that exists in the world and transcribes that polyphony into his writing. According to Salman Rushdie (1982: 19), the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's "double vision", which is clearly depicted in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain.* Another transcultural writer, Michael Ondaatje, opens his novel *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) with a quote by John Berger, a statement I would apply to Chandra's novel: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one". Because there are not unique truths, worldviews and tellings. Because there is always an "other".

In *Midnight's Children,* Saleem Sinai, Rushdie's paradigmatic narrator, declares that "to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (Rushdie 1981: 109). Vikram Chandra (2000a) assumes this statement, and he recommends that Indian contemporary writers should give up nothing, and swallow everything, going beyond post-colonial rage, beyond any myth of pure identity, though this does not mean to forget the past, to forget who you are. Living as he does in the United States for some months each year, Chandra has access to another tradition, the cultural and political history of the phenomenon of migration,[14] displacement and emotional remembering. He uses the language of the mainstream to redefine and describe the nature of the reality he lives day after day. Travelling back and forth, his writing reveals, through India, either colonial or independent, the transcendence of human values and their universal significance. A sort of distance from his homeland seems to be essential for him. Sometimes, being too close to what one loves, the place that constitutes the focus of one's life and work, there is no perspective. Thus, retreating, one may actually find a broad viewpoint, richer, comprehensive, acute. Though it seems paradoxical, distance can make the heart fonder and the gaze closer.

Anywhere, anyhow, anytime, Vikram Chandra will be spinning out a yarn, imagining stories and exploring ways of telling them, through his sensuous style, through his multiple voices, bridging the home and the world, in his constant journey. The incessant negotiation of difference is complex, but it is time to celebrate cultural diversity and human intercultural communication, without fear. Identity is interaction, meeting, dialogue, exchange. Identity is an endless travel in which one should "be free.

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[13] As Vikram Chandra himself has debated in his (yet unpublished) paper "Finding a Form" (2000b), delivered in his lectures at different Spanish Universities (Zaragoza, Lleida, Autónoma de Barcelona and Castellón), during his visit to Spain, promoted by The British Council in Spain, 18th-26th November 2000.

[14] Indeed, Gayatri Spivak's (1993) substantive concern has been largely with the difference between the postcolonial and the migrant.

Give up nothing, and swallow everything" (Chandra 2000a; 197). This opinion may be utopian, as much as Ngugi's following words. But, sometimes, utopia, as dream, may come true:

> The wealth of a common global culture will then be expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers. The "flowerness" of the different flowers is expressed in their very diversity. But there is cross-fertilisation between them. And what is more, they all contain in themselves the seeds of a new tomorrow. (Ngugi 1993: 24)

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"MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER": DEBORAH MILTON'S BIOGRAPHY OF SILENCE

CAROLINA SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA
MANUEL ALMAGRO
Universidad de Sevilla

ABSTRACT. *In* The Tree of Knowledge *(1990) Eva Figes re-creates the life of John Milton's daughter, Deborah, who, due to the poet's blindness, became the actual "hand" of the author. At the end of her life she gives us an alternative vision of the poet both as father and writer in a narrative which, as opposed to the centrality of Milton's narratives, concentrates upon the marginal aspects of everyday life. Thus, in Figes's novel the "grand narrative" constituted by Milton and his work is displaced by Deborah's "petite histoire", which paradigmatically exemplifies the role women have been assigned in History. That displacement of one narrative by another is in itself an occasion to re-consider the validity and the culturality of our notions of historical relevance.*

On a cold winter night in London, a restless father, unable to sleep, wakes his daughter up and makes her sit by the chimney and open a book written in some strange language, Latin or perhaps Greek, which the girl is able to read with absolute perfection but cannot, however, comprehend. She is Deborah Milton, John Milton's youngest daughter. Because of his blindness, the poet would have his daughter read aloud the texts neccesary for him to create his own work in his imagination. After this process of creation, Deborah is again needed to take down on paper the poems or the political or philosophical treatises which sometimes she is totally unable to understand because they were written in one of those languages. Many years later, now an old lady, she arouses the curiosity of scholars interested in her father's work: they just cannot believe that Deborah has such skills and want to find out whether all this is true.

In *The Tree of Knowledge* Eva Figes, literary critic as well as novelist,[1] makes use of these biographical data in order to narrate the story of Deborah Milton from a double perspective: materialistic –as it reflects the way in which education is conditioned by economic circumstances–, and linguistic –because woman can have only a partial access to culture since she is not allowed to integrate the signifier and the signified–. Figes's novel organizes itself also as a series of reflections on the lesser known aspects of this paterno-filial relationship,[2] thus producing both a re-writing of Milton's historical image and a re-consideration of the process by means of which History is created through writing.[3]

Echoing Arachne in her weaving of stories about women who rebelled and were punished, Eva Figes articulates a narrative where the main thread is an oppositional discourse which vindicates the female figure and in the texture of which one can see the confluence of the political and the domestic, the universal and the personal.[4] This fusion may, however, turn into confusion as Deborah herself suggests in her monologue:

> I often confused his bitterness concerning all that had gone amiss in the great world with his domestic discontents, being more familiar. Was it my mother who had brought about the Fall and troubled times? Was my childish failure to obey his every wish the reason for the turmoil in the streets and his displeasure? (65)

The interaction between these different realms is made patent in the way in which the daughter's *petit histoire* changes the father's *grand histoire* –at least, as far as our perception and recognition of Milton as a historical figure is concerned– in the same way that Eve's simple gesture of accepting the apple brings about complex consequences to the whole of humankind. Within the novel a special emphasis is placed on the difference between the stories which the old servant used to tell Deborah, when she was a child, and the stories her father had her read to him. Talking about the Civil War, she remembers how "[o]ur old servant would speak of those times….I liked to help her in the kitchen, more than to do my father's bidding, for she would gossip of old times in such a manner as made them live for me" (55).

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[1] Her novels, which have been awarded or shortlisted for some olf the most prestigious literary prices in Britain, include *Winter Journey* (1967), *Days* (1974), *Nelly's Version* (1977), *Light* (1983), *The Seven Ages* (1986), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), *The Tenancy* (1993), and *The Knot* (1997). As a critic she has written pioneering work on feminist issues: *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970), *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Novelists to 1850* (1982), and *Women Letters in Wartime: 1940-1945* (1994).

[2] Figes' text is not the first one to put that relationship under critical scrutiny: Robert Graves' *Wife to Mr Milton* (1944) and William Empson's *Milton's God* (1961) also deal with the poet's patriarchal attitudes. However, Figes herself has stated (Figes 2000) that her direct source of inspiration was Joseph Addison's interview of Deborah Milton, and this is reflected by the very narrative structure of the novel in which the protagonist recollects memories of her father for a nameless interviewer.

[3] The specular relationship seems to be obvious: one must bear in mind that Milton's emblematic text, *Paradise Lost*, is itself a re-writing of Adam and Eve's fall.

[4] Although Arachne is always identified with a spider, this identification usually ignores that this is only the result of a metamorphosis. The origin is the weaver's challenge to Athena by featuring in her tapestry images of rebellion an disobedience. That is why the myth is often taken as the emblem of an anti-hierarchical poetics, as in "Aracnologías: Reflexiones sobre el espacio estético femenino", by Teresa Gómez Reus and Africa Vidal.

Similarly, Milton's daughter adopts a relativistic position which greatly contrast with her father's clear-cut moral definitions also derived from the works which he advocated and re-created as a poet and where the notions of good and evil were always clearly demarcated. Deborah's relativism becomes skepticism when the issue at stake is one of Milton's personal and political great endevours –that is, the confrontation between monarchy and parliament which culminated in the English Civil War– and its quality as "grand narrative" of liberation. Through her monologue she questions the outcome of this historical event inasmuch as it meant no liberation whatsoever to the oppressed sectors of the age, among them, in particular, women. Against the background of other narratives of liberation, such as the ideological revolution of Puritanism a century before, and even Christ and the Church's discourse of liberation, revolution –as a libertarian theory which must be put into practice– is here regarded with suspicion, which in itself is an example of how History and its fetishes can be re-written from the position of the marginalized and the dispossessed.

In revising Milton's figure and the ideas which he advocated, Figes' text tries to show the other side of the artist; in other words, what being a genius involves and demands. As the novelist stated, "obviously, artists are not perfect human beings" (2000: 179), and indeed Milton is now presented to the reader as a signifier to which a new signified can be attached, this time from the perspective of his daughter.[5] This would make up for the fact that she had been always deprived of meanings of her own since for her both signifiers and signifieds had their source in the paternal figure.

In clear contrast with the official History, we find in the novel a silenced or apocriphal version which places itself on the margins of a strongly hierarchical system that pervades the economic, the social, the political, the sexual and the religious. This ideological context both originates and explains the narrative, in which, however, we find an alternative view of that context: an inquiry into its darker side in the guise of an unknown version of Milton both as a father and as an author. One must also emphasize the contrast between the History narrated by Milton in *Paradise Lost* and the story narrated by his daughter in this novel; in other words, the contrast between, on the one hand, the grandiosity of a story affecting the whole of humankind, and on the other, the everyday-life quality of a story which affects apparently one single person, but implicitly all women. In doing this, Figes seems to be in line with recent trends in historiography which focus more on the private and the everyday life than on the public and extraordinary, examples of which can be found in P. Ariès and G. Duby's *Historia de la vida privada*, G. Duby and M. Perrot's *Historia de las mujeres*, B. S. Anderson and J.P. Zinsser's *Historia de las mujeres: Una historia propia*, A. Briggs' *A Social History of England*, and R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz's *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*.

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[5] This inquiry into the unknown side of the artist –in this case the French painter Claude Monet–is also the subject matter of her novel *Light* (1983).

Figes uses Deborah Milton's story as a case study to discuss and reveal the way in which history becomes precisely that, "History": who writes it; how do certain events become historical facts; how do specific individuals achieve historical notoriety; or ultimately who decides that the stories (the truths?) of certain people are more relevant that the stories (the lies, perhaps?) of other people.[6] But more specifically, Figes is interested in exposing how History constitutes itself not only as a set of "grand narratives" about men, but particularly a set of narratives about "great men" –such as Milton, God, or some king– in a closed system which has traditionally excluded women because of their alleged unworthiness in historical terms. Woman is thus alienated from written culture and from the canon, which therefore renders her unable to re-create , re-write, or appropriate a literary tradition and denies her the very possibility of becoming and remaining a part of History: that is to say, the possibility of positioning herself as historical subject, a maker of History, a maker of historical meanings. That is why the oblivion of women's historical existence entails for Figes a larger epistemological issue, in the sense that a re-vision of women's role in History necessarily implies a re-consideration of the subject matter of historical discourse: "History…, because of women, has to be re-angled….because, you know, half the population is never mentioned in official History" (2000: 180).

These ideas manifest themselves in Deborah's great interest in the educational quality of History. That the purpose of History is educational is already present at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, but it is also found in the archangel's narratives about the chain of events leading up to the creation of Eden and also in the "histories of the world", a recurrent *topos* in the epic tradition. In a fashion that clearly defines her own position, Deborah re-writes such an erudite and refined discourse when she gives her own version of the English Revolution: she turns the chronicle of the disintegration of Cromwell's regime into a fable, which, as a school mistress, she tells her pupils. Thus she manages to show, on the one hand, that any historical event can be narrativized and therefore be given a sense of ineluctability; and on the other, that the narrative frame that is used already implies a number of connotations, in this case the moralizing dimension of History, and therefore, its potential to teach future generations.

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[6] Milton's daughters, incidentally, have been accused of being the source of Milton's bad reputation both as man and as father. See for example Christopher Hill, 141-45.

But this re-writing requires the existence of intertexts which provide meaning and allow the reader to appreciate the quality of the new text. In the case of Figes' novel we not only find the aforementioned historical intertext, but there are also allusions to a biographical intertext that is necessary to contextualize Milton's views on women in historical terms: it has been frequently argued that his misogyny may have its source in his personal experience in marriage in strong contrast with his theoretical views, particularly in relation to the question of divorce. Christopher Hill tries to close this gap between private opinions and public claims, by stressing that Milton's views are bound by the historical context in which they were produced and received:

> The only people in the seventeenth century who came anywhere near making women equal with men were Diggers, Ranters and Quakers, who believed that men and women were perfectible on earth, could get back behind the Fall....[T]o criticize Milton because he stated a theory of male superiority is like criticizing him because he did not advocate votes or equal pay for women. No one, to my knowledge, in the seventeenth century claimed that women were wholly equal to men, just as no one, not even Levellers, seriously proposed to give them the vote. [Thomas] Edwards asked, as the height of irony, whether women should have political power, together with servants and paupers. (118)[7]

The very fact that Deborah establishes a parallel between the poet's family conflicts and the political tensions of his time; that she presents us with details of her father's everyday life; or that she tells us about the economic, and above all, affective consequences that his marriage failure had on his daughters, undoubtedly imply a new vision of a man blessed with fame.

In this sense, the blindness of the father is an important aspect due to the effects it generates: blindness not only exists at the level of the real, but also at the level of the symbolic. In the novel there is a recurrent leit-motif which can be basically summarized as "reading is bad for your eyes", and against this background blindness is given different meanings: it can be a gift, and in this sense the novel creates a contrast between the inability to see (physically) and the visionary character which Deborah perceives in her father –"None had dreams more fanciful, more glowing, than my father" (28)– linking Milton's epic work with that of his famous and blind predecessor, Homer. But at the same time blindness is God's punishment for his support of Cromwell's cause, drawing a parallel between Cromwell's rebellion against the sovereign and that of Lucifer against God.[8] Within this Christian frame of reference where the sins of the parents also bring consequences to the children, Deborah laments her father's blindness and how had he not been blind and had been able to see his daughters he might have been able to love them more for their beauty and their personal qualities: "…we might have given him cause for pride had he looked upon us differently" (137). But the reader of the twentieth century, reading a twentieth-century novel against the frame of contemporary literary criticism and psychoanalysis, cannot avoid taking into consideration the idea of the male gaze with its phallic connotations, and perceive in all this an ironic twist, since the fact that the father is blind means that, within an oculocentric tradition, he is symbolically castrated.

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[7] Hill also points out the autobiographical elements in *Paradise Lost*, specially in the relationship between Adam and Eve (128-30).

Both the question of knowledge and the question of rebellion come together in the literary intertexts, thus creating other parallels. Among those intertexts the most important is undoubtedly *Paradise Lost*, a narrative about the origins of humankind and the Fall caused by a woman. To taste the fruit and to possess the knowledge of Good and Evil offered by the forbidden tree is for Deborah a useless achievement because of our inability to distinguish between one and the other. When recollecting the last moments of Cromwell's regime, she points out:

> This I chiefly now remember, not the cheering crowds, the bonfires, and the like, but my perplexity, at such division, that light was dark, dark light, and grown men living under God were so divided. It was the earliest inkling to my childish mind that eating from the tree by our first parents, though bringing to us knowledge of both good and evil, brought us not sufficient insight to tell us which was which on all occasions. (122-123)

Even more than that, Good and Evil are presented not as absolutes but as categories with a strong historical component. This moral and historical relativism can be seen within the limits of the novel in the related debate concerning the opposition between law and conscience, between society and individual, which has as its ultimate reference the puritan debate between free will and predestination, a very relevant issue in Milton's time. The protagonist of the novel recalls what her uncle, a lawyer, thought about this:

> The law is yet the law, and must be obeyed. He thought it wrong for any man to put himself above it for conscience merely. Else each becomes a law unto

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[8] The case of Lucifer is also interesting in the sense that, being initially "the bearer of light", he turns into "the prince of darkness", which again reveals the connotations of the term "light": centrality and subjection to the conventions created by the father.

> himself and chaos follows. These are nice points of philosophy, not easily resolved....What if the law be wrong, must we obey it? Yet, if each man takes his conscience as his guide he is like to become a law unto himself, and conscience often tells us that which we would hear. (69)

For Deborah, as she states further on, the problem of Good and Evil is ultimately a question of personal choice: "...Lord, when Thou didst vouchsafe us freedom, Thou didst give it not to us so we should plunder, but to choose betwixt good and evil. This was the freedom Thou didst see fit to give us, and I fear we choose but evil" (97).

In a similar vein, the myths that help us understand the world are revealed as historically constructed. The Bible, for example, is not only a literary intertext for Figes' novel, but also works as a personal guide which allows characters to explain their own everyday life: "We knew our Bible…and saw in it a map for past and future, that should guide us on a way that none had trod before" (118). Even so, Deborah can perceive its time-bound quality and, thus, see the story of Adam and Eve as a legitimizing narrative which eventually loses its power to provide explanation and has to be substituted by other narratives: "This is another age, and men live now by other certainties. The Bible now is like some ancient tale, told to divert the childhood of our race, but put aside since then" (123). This social construction of myths and truths is closely related to the ideas of secularization, to the contrast between the myths of Milton's time and those of the eighteenth century, and in political or philosophical terms, to the growing anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment.

At times myths are inscribed with new meanings. Deborah, for example, interprets the idea of paradise in terms of the idea of freedom, and *Paradise Regained* in terms of what later generations would call the materialization of socialist utopia:

> And though it seems not so, it is self-interest to think not just on self: not to gain reward in Heaven, but here upon this earth. For we must dwell upon this earth together, and whilst my brother and my sister want for food and shelter, we shall not undo the sin of Adam, nor shall there be a Paradise regained upon this earth, nor Second Coming. (58)

At a later stage, Deborah remarks that "[t]o taste the heady fruit and then to be deprived, it wounds the spirit", and sees herself as "a wild and unschooled spirit which, having tasted freedom, craved for it" (148).

The quality of the myth comes also under scrutiny: is the tree of knowledge really a symbol of knowledge or is it rather a symbol of obedience? For God, it is totally a matter of testing man's obedience, but Satan sees it in terms of an intellectual temptation.[9]

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[9] For a detailed analysis of this issue see B. Willey, 197-236.

Milton's text contains a further contradiction, also present in Figes' novel, in its treatment of that Promethean myth. If associated with women, in contrast to the male figure which is given heroic qualities, this myth always connotes sin, when in both cases the question amounts to the same thing: the desire to obtain knowledge. Like Eve taking the fruit and passing it on to Adam, Deborah transmits the knowledge to her father (by reading to him). This creates an apparent paradox, since, theoretically, it should be the other way round, that is, the father should be the source of knowledge, of meaning, of language. But that is how it really is, since Deborah does not choose knowledge, she simply reproduces what others create, select and impose, remaining, like Eve, a mere mediator.[10]

This play of intertexts generates an interesting web of implicit correspondences and identifications. When Deborah points out that "my father was like a king whithin his household" (42), she simply transforms her narrative into an act of rebellion, which in turn is an echo of Lucifer's rebellion against God, of Eve's against God's prohibition, and Cromwell's against an absolutist monarchic order. Thus, Milton ends up being identified with God, while Deborah identifies herself with Eve, and the tree of knowledge becomes the appropriate knowledge –that is, signifier plus signified– of Greek, Latin or Hebrew. In this set of comparisons the common denominator is the idea of the Father and the identification of man with God while humankind is represented by a woman. But even more important is the awareness that the knowledge which will make women equal with gods (or perhaps with men?) is nothing but the full knowledge of language, that is, with a capacity to create their own meanings.

That is why, Milton's instrumental relationship with his daughter forces the reader to consider women's relationship with language and culture. Deborah can recite and write by heart but does not know what the text means. In that way, she can only repeat the text but never re-create it, or create another text from it, as his father does with the Bible or with classical epic.[11] In Figes' novel a frequent allusion is made to the difference between reading and knowledge. Milton seemed to have very clear ideas about it: "One tongue, he would say, was enough for any woman" (4); and Deborah summarizes the situation: "I was taught...to read a little in my mother's tongue with understanding, but my father's many tongues without due comprehension" (125). But she is also aware that this lack is gender-based: "I think my father used my cousins, though his pupils, as his eyes, much as he used my sister and myself. But on account of their sex, and being paid for his services, he did teach them to understand that which they read aloud" (4).

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[10] Many interpretations of Genesis stress the linguistic dimension of temptation in the sense that Eve simply transmits and reproduces the words of the serpent.

[11] For a detailed study of Milton's use of classical epic see F.C. Blessington.

Deprived of access to the signified she can only inhabit the realm of the signifier, unable to transcend its material quality in order to develop the potentiality of the sign, and even less able to combine different signifiers and signifieds to construct alternative representations of the world. Languages can be read and transcribed but cannot be understood, books can be used as wood for the fire, or to stand upon, or to be sold in order to buy some food: in all of these instances what is emphasized is the basic material aspect of language and of the cultural products derived from it. We should not be surprised at this utilitarian quality which Deborah assigns to language if we consider that she has always thought of its use "in the service of" the paternal figure.

In the novel, indeed, Figes makes use of the Lacanian metaphor of the "Law of the Father" in a literal sense, by showing Milton as a father who monopolizes control over language –as well as the knowledge of the sources and of the classics– and allows her daughter to have access only to a fragmented and incomplete version of it. By doing so, Figes seems to subscribe to the tenets of feminist discourse which suggest that women's marginalization in the symbolic order can greatly explain their later alienation from language and culture. After all, the possession of language implies the possession of the canon, of a written culture, of a literary tradition which woman is deprived of and with which, therefore, she cannot identify.[12]

Ironically enough, many years after his death the father-author becomes present through the remaining relics that used to legitimize his authority: his books, pamphlets, seal and autographs thus become the testimony of his fame for scholars and editors who claim some further sign of his genius from an old Deborah,[13] when the actual "hand of the author," the real material maker of the texts, is his daughter, who will die anonymous and poor.

In contrast with the canonical and well-known story told by Deborah's famous father, the issue of anonymity presides in Figes' novel, since Deborah's presence is only visible through the interstices of an authorless narrative: no one gives the reader the name of the protagonist of this story. We only know her name indirectly through the very act of telling her own story, and not even then do we know who is speaking: her name can only be known through other narratives (biographical, for example). After all she is still defined in relation to the father –"My father's daughter"– which keeps her from signing her own creation since she does not even have the copyright on her own name, or, in other words, she cannot legitimize the origin of the text. It is through her own

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[12] Feminist criticism has drawn attention to female alienation from a canon formed and transmitted in a patrilinear order. The best known representative of that kind of genealogical theory is Harold Bloom and his famous *The Anxiety of Influence*.

[13] It is not difficult to see here an echo of Henry James' *The Aspern Papers* which explores the issue of fetishistic necrophilia in the figure of an unscrupulous scholar in search of documents by a deceased author. A modern treatment of this topic can be found in Antonia Byatt's *Possession*.

"little" story that she comes to exist as an individual and that her identity, denied by her father's grand narrative, is finally acknowledged.

Unlike other historiographic writings which try to recover the voices of exceptional women –in what feminist criticism calls compensatory strategies–, Figes avoids labels such as "major women writers" or "great women writers" because as socialist feminist she is aware that such distinctions imply a bourgeois and patriarchal hierarchy. Therefore, she keeps Deborah anonymous and silenced, but paradoxically enough her narrative is very eloquent about the place of ordinary women in the economic and legal discourses of her time.

As we have been arguing up to this point, the sign is manipulated through the exercise of patriarchal and canonical power, but it is also true that in Figes' novel this process is inserted within a materialist metanarrative: throughout the novel Milton's daughters are depicted as active part of a productive system, and yet they are excluded from its benefits and likewise alienated from the wealth generated by their work not only in material terms but also, implicitly, in cultural terms.[14]

The structural motif of the female dispossession of the sign, and ultimately of language, has to be understood as part of a more global concept which includes other more material aspects of existence, such as knowledge, culture and wealth. A specific example of this dispossession refers to the question of how inheritance can establish a difference between sons and daughters. Actually, inheritance –like the canon or the literary tradition– is transmitted patrilinearly, and Milton, having no sons, benefitted other male members of his family, and left his daughters only a box full of somewhat revolutionary pamphlets and the non-existent dowry of their mother: "For you must know –my cousin wrote of it– that though I am my father's daughter, he made me not his heir. I speak, sir, not of the dowry denied me, but of the learning in which he was so rich. Had I been his son, that died in infancy the year that I was born, it might have been otherwise" (3). Milton's legacy does not even have an intellectual quality as might be expected from such a learned author. The education which he so "generously" gave her daughters does not allow them to re-create culture, since it is rather of an instrumental kind insofar as it turns them into a mere appendage of himself.

By linking education and economic circumstances Figes aligns herself with other materialist theories which maintain that education gives access to higher levels of welfare and justice. In fact, the feminist interpretation of the materialist analysis is based on the premise that the difference between male and female is strongly rooted in social and economic inequalities. That generic difference is thus not naturally given but historically constructed, as Deborah herself, making significant use of popular culture, points out: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" (49); and it has been systematically reinforced by biological, theological and anthropological arguments which have perpetuated male supremacy at the expense of women –"...now our gentlemen have given over digging, being sent to college, and Eve yet sits and spins" (49)–. Because of her sex, Deborah is denied a knowledge which her father does enjoy from a position of power.[15] But here Deborah is clearly allowed to be only a daughter and cheap labour, the victim of a patriarchal authority which is excercised both in the domestic/private and professional/public spheres.

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[14] In connection with this, notice the recurrence of the word "profit" in the novel and its relationship with the word "fruit", already in the opening line of *Paradise Lost*.

Deborah distrusts narratives of liberation –also patriarchal products– because they contain an implicit social and generic double standard:

> Men such as my father, who would have those set above them not their betters, would keep those born below them still inferior, to do their will. To feed their purpose, not our bellies, this is their intent. And so it is that men cry liberty, to which we must submit, slavish to their authority….I am born free, they say, but thou, being born to serve me, that is, born a woman, are not so. (42-44)

As a woman she has experienced that discrimination which has its source in the purely biological –"Our sex made us unworthy" (8)–. That is why for Deborah the only possibility to compensate that disadvantage is through education, that is, by appropriating the standard knowledge of a society and, rather than through faith or revolution (as the one advocated by her father), by fighting against the alienation created by the lack of such knowledge. In fact, Deborah substitutes those libertarian narratives by a reverie which anticipates later socialist utopias and which culminates in an image of the protagonist taking her own daughter by the hand to make her a full participant in the knowledge her father denied her.

Milton's fame yields before the unorthodox language of his daughter, as it challenges the monologic position of the paternal figure. Similarly, Figes defies the received ideas in Milton's canonical criticism, since she does not only write an unknown version of the poet's life but she also offers an alternative to the academic canon which enthroned him as a totemic figure within literary tradition.

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[15] Throughout the novel paternal authority is made to identify with that of other male figures such as the King and God. After all, the post-Revolution crisis of legitimation, experienced by patriarchal institutions (family, Church and State) evidences also a crisis in the male subjectivity that informs and supports them. In connection with this, Mark Breitenberg analyses how Restoration literature displays examples of masculine unease in a wide range of sites, including jealousy, cuckoldry anxiety, cross-dressing, homoerotic desire, humoural psychology, or the very ideas of honour and reputation. It is not difficult to see how in the seventeenth-century literature the domestic order seems to mirror the religious and political order, being the husband's unstable position at home somehow analogous to that of God's or the King's in their respective realms.

Figes, as a literary critic, is aware that this alternative discourse is another strategy to impose a particular *Weltansschauung*. Thus, in the novel we discern a process of estrangement (in the formalist sense of the term) from specific critical paradigms –poststructuralism, feminism, marxism– and their respective icons –"Law of the Father," "male gaze," "literary paternity," "alienated labour"–, which throughout the novel are considered from an unusual perspective. Insofar as Figes employs a work of fiction to implicitly re-consider the discourses of literary criticism, her text also becomes a crossroads of different genres or modes of writing the borders of which become blurred, thus turning the novel into a critical contribution to the figure of Milton.

As we have seen, from what we might call a postmodern frame of reference, Figes re-writes History, challenges canonical critical discourses, rejects monological positions, recovers silenced voices, integrates apparently hostile discourses, allowing for a dialogic relationship between center and margins. At an early stage in the novel, Deborah says: "… we durst not argue. Women and servants must obey, not speak their minds" (8), an idea that recurs at the end: "Though I am my father's daughter, I must keep silent" (154): daughter, woman, poor, anonymous and in a sense illiterate, Deborah embodies all aspects of marginality, but her silence is paradoxically much more revealing than other great voices.

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MICHAEL ONDAATJE´S *RAT JELLY* AND THE POETICS OF AMBIVALENCE

SAM Z. SOLECKI
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT. Michael Ondaatje's second collection of poems, Rat Jelly *(1973), is a crucial transitional work that simultaneously consolidates the early promise and achievement of* The Dainty Monsters *(1967) and* The Collected Works of Billy the Kid *(1969), articulates Ondaatje's early poetics in a handful of ambitious, sometimes almost allegorical lyrics, and in two of its poems,'Letters & Other Worlds' and 'Burning Hills,' anticipates Ondaatje's turn in the late 1970s and early 1980s towards his Sri Lankan past as a central concern in his poetry and prose. Though the collection contains some of Ondaatje's finest lyrics, it also marks the end of what might be called the modernist phase of his development as a poet, the phase in which one might still hear echoes of Edwin Muir or Wallace Stevens.*

> Only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.
> Friedrich Nietzsche (1969: 58)

If *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1969) established Ondaatje as a writer to watch, *Rat Jelly* (1973) confirmed the promise he had shown in *Dainty Monsters* (1967) as a lyric poet. Its finest lyrics show not only the figurative flair, wit and surreal imagination of his early work but an ambition in theme as well as a poise and maturity only hinted at a decade earlier. The first two sections of this closely organized collection –'Families' and 'Live Bait'– develop situations and concerns similar to those in the earlier lyrics but often display a range and control of mood and tone that suggest how much Ondaatje developed in the intervening years. This is particularly evident in 'Billboards' (a poem about his wife, Kim) and 'Letters & Other Worlds' (an elegy for his father, Philip Mervyn Ondaatje). But the most surprising and accomplished poems are gathered in 'White Dwarfs,' the third section. Individually these constitute some of Ondaatje´s best work in the genre; as a group they develop some of the hints –and that's all they are– in 'Peter' and in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* about the relationship between destroying and making, between wounds and creativity, into a poetics. 'Burning Hills,' 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' '"the gate in his head,"' 'Spider Blues,' and 'White Dwarfs' consolidate and develop in lyrical form the critical hunches and ideas of the thesis on Edwin Muir, the short study of Leonard Cohen (1970) and the lessons Ondaatje learned during the writing of the postmodern *Billy the Kid*, his most ambitious work to date.

Though we couldn´t have known it in 1973, the book´s dedication to his parents, brother and sisters and the elegy for his father represent the first step toward the writing of *Running in the Family* (1982) where he finally comes to terms with his Ceylonese / Sri Lankan past. His continuing reluctance to do so is hinted at in the book´s three epigraphs. In the first, from Richard Stark´s *The Sour Lemon Score,* the female speaker berates the male for his failure to be more communicative: 'She waited and then said, "Say something, Parker. God to get you to gossip it´s like pulling teeth.' 'Handy retired.' Parker said. 'I *know* he retired! Tell me about it. Tell me why he retired, tell me where he is, how he´s doing. Talk to me, Parker, goddammit.' (Ondaatje 1973: 8).[1] The second and third, from Howard O´Hagan´s *Tay John* and Herman Melville´s *The Confidence Man*, raise roughly similar concerns about lying, silence and self-revelation. Not unexpectedly the book´s first and last poems –'War Machine' and 'White Dwarfs'– show a speaker, probably the poet, paradoxically attracted to silence. In the former he brags about the stories and gossip he could tell–'30 jayne mansfield stories'– but concludes with the following ambivalent comment: 'Perhaps / wd like to live mute / all day long / not talk // just listen to the loathing' (11). There´s nothing in the poem to explain the 'loathing' nor the desire, surprising in a writer, 'to live mute.' And the title metaphor is too strong and too vague a figure for the poem that follows. Whether the title refers to the poet or to poetry, it doesn´t quite come off. If the poem remains in the reader´s mind, it does so primarily as a thematic prologue to the more tough-minded and focussed concern with silence in 'Letters & Other Worlds' and 'White Dwarfs,' both of which will be dealt with in some detail below.

Most of the remaining poems in the first section offer various domestic perspectives on the poet´s wife, marriage and his dogs. Only on finishing the section does one realize that these sometimes playful and affectionate poems are framed, even shadowed by the more menacing ‘War Machine’ and ‘Letters & Other Worlds.’ With the exception of ‘White Room,’ however, each presents a situation in which there is a division or a sense of separation. ‘Notes for the Legend of Salad Woman’ begins with a playfully exaggerated image of the speaker´s wife:

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[1] All future references to *Rat Jelly* will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the essay in a parenthesis following the quotation mark.

> Since my wife was born
> she must have eaten
> the equivalent of two-thirds
> of the original garden of Eden.
> Not the dripping lush fruit
> or the meat in the ribs of animals
> but the green salad garden of that place. (18)

The ‘meat in the ribs of animals’ momentarily recalls ‘Peter’ but the remainder of the verse combines burlesque and comic book fantasy (Salad Woman, Wonder Woman). The catalogue continues through the second stanza, but while the tone and images remain comic the reader begins to sense a more sombre note in the references to the destruction ‘Salad Woman’ leaves in her wake:

> She is never in fields
> but is sucking the pith out of grass.
> I have noticed the very leaves from flower decorations
> grow sparse in their week long performance in our house.
> The garden is a dust bowl.

The third stanza opens by recalling the ‘garden of Eden’ mentioned in the first and implying a connection between her compulsive eating and their expulsion from Eden: ‘On our last day in Eden as we walked out / she nibbled the leaves at her breasts and crotch.’ And though the speaker ends by reassuring us and himself that ‘there´s none to touch / none to equal / the Chlorophyll Kiss,’ the assertion comes in the same stanza as the expulsion from Eden and is inseparable from the earlier images of destruction. If the wife is a life force, she is simultaneously capable of destruction; if life with her is paradisal, the paradise is dependent on her. She isn´t quite La Belle Dame Sans Merci, but the poem is tensed about the speaker´s ambivalent response to her–admiration and anxiety.

‘Billboards,’ a domestic poem about his wife and her children from a previous marriage, shows Ondaatje in a relaxed, reflective mood writing with affection, humour and some perplexity about his situation. The poem begins by contrasting ‘my virgin past’ to the domestic complexity, even confusion of his present which is filled with ‘Reunions for Easter egg hunts / kite flying, Christmases’ with his wife´s children who ‘descend on my shoulders every holiday.' The poem then shifts into the past, to the time when 'she lay beginning / this anthology of kids' and he

> moved–blind but senses
> jutting faux pas, terrible humour,
> shifted with a sea of persons,
> breaking when necessary
> into smaller self sufficient bits of mercury.
> My mind a carefully empty diary
> till I hit the barrier reef
> that was my wife–
> there
> the right bright fish
> among the coral. (14)

The shift to a highly figurative style allows Ondaatje to swerve away from dealing with the painful particulars of his past, though: 'sea of persons,' 'breaking' and 'smaller self sufficient bits of mercury' as well as the attempt to keep the 'mind a carefully empty diary' hint strongly at traumatic events that the speaker wants to avoid making explicit.

The suggestive tension is maintained in the third stanza in his comment that before meeting her, he 'was ... trying to live / with a neutrality so great / I´d have nothing to think of.' Whereas 'Nowadays I somehow get the feeling / I´m in a complex situation, / one of several billboard posters / blending in the rain' (15). The withheld or implied image here is of his wife as a driver looking at various aspects of her past represented by 'several billboard posters.' The image of the billboard probably comes from a passage in *Beautiful Losers* that Ondaatje quotes in *Leonard Cohen*: 'Truth was, I felt that F was using me like an advertisement for his own body. I was the tattered billboard for his reality' (1970: 50). But why 'in the rain,' unless the landscape is an objective correlative for his feelings about the situation?

Although the poem begins with a note of domestic comedy and ends with an affectionate evocation of his wife, each of the first three stanzas contains one or more images that suggest anxiety, menace and unhappiness. In the first, the speaker wonders in a parenthesis about when his wife´s children will 'produce a gun and shoot me / at Union Station by Gate 4?' In the second, in addition to the already quoted references to 'terrible humour,' 'breaking' and the 'carefully empty diary' we also find the speaker describing his first meeting with his wife in terms of a fish hitting 'the barrier reef.' And the third, which ends with 'in the rain,' begins with a reference to 'the locusts of [his wife´s] history.' The cumulative effect of these is to leave one with the impression that the 'complex situation' the speaker refers to is even more complicated than one expected on the basis of the first stanza. As a portrait of a marriage, the poem reminds us that each partner brings his or her own burdens from the past, whether obvious or concealed.

The final stanza, however, also points to the relationship between the poet´s life and his writing. As in 'Burning Hills,' we see the poet writing or finishing the poem we have just read: 'I am writing this with a pen my wife has used / to write a letter to her first husband.' But he doesn´t stop at this scene which is charged with ambivalence. He brings his wife more sensuously to the reader´s attention by mentioning that on the pen

> is the smell of her hair.
> She must have placed it down between sentences
> and thought, and driven her fingers round her skull
> gathered the slightest smell of her head
> and brought it back to the pen.

The run-on lines and the sibilants followed by the assertive plosives evoke the scene of writing by means of rhythm and sound. The imagined scene sums up the complexity of the relationship: the current husband writes a poem about his wife writing to her first husband, and he does so with the pen she used. But I wonder whether there isn´t also a suggestion that his writing is in some mysterious sense dependent on her, and that his book or collection of poems is his answer to her 'anthology of kids'? That this poem, in other words, wouldn´t or couldn´t exist without her and her complex past. Though the closing stanza doesn´t make this explicit, there is a hint of doubling and merging in it: not only does the speaker use the same pen as his wife, but the wife´s gestures during the writing implicitly evoke the gestures that he might be making while writing this poem.

'Dates,' a poem later in the first section, switches the focus from Canada to Ceylon, from himself and his wife to himself and his mother. From the perspective of the section as a unit, it can also be seen as preparing the way for the elegy for his father. Read in the context of the volume´s concern with poetry and poetics, it shows Ondaatje acknowledging some of his literary debts at a point in his development when he has already left his past masters behind. Though the poem alludes to Auden´s 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' and though Stevens is a central figure in it, its style owes nothing to the great moderns. The date in question is the date of the poet´s birth. As he remarks sardonically in the opening stanza,

> My birth was heralded by nothing
> but the anniversary of Winston Churchill´s marriage.
> No monuments bled, no instruments
> agreed on a specific weather.
> It was a seasonal insignificance. (21)

The third and fourth lines draw our attention to more significant anniversaries and occasions, the deaths of a poet (Yeats) and a god (see the stigmata in ‘No monuments bled’). The second and third stanzas juxtapose, each in a single, long flowing sentence, two acts of creation: his mother´s pregnancy and Wallace Stevens´s writing of ‘The Well Dressed Man with a Beard’ (1955: 247). If the poet´s birth is first mentioned in relationship to “Winston Churchill´s marriage” and under the shadow of two deaths, in the poem´s final movement he exists as a foetus whose evolution and birth are counterpointed to the development and completion of a poem celebrating creativity and the imagination.

> Stevens put words together
> that grew to sentences
> and shaved them clean and
> shaped them, the page suddenly
> becoming thought where nothing had been,
> his head making his hand
> move where he wanted
> and he saw his hand was saying
> the mind is never finished, no, never
> and I in my mother´s stomach was growing
> as were the flowers outside the Connecticut windows.

Although the syntax, the enjambed lineation and the idea of organic creation link the poet´s mother, Stevens and the poet, the key verbs suggest a difference between the gestation of a child and the creation of a poem. The words may *grow* into sentences but they are initially ‘put together’ and need to be ‘shaved’ and ‘shaped’ by the ‘head . . . making his hand / move where he wanted.’

It is worth noting that Ondaatje doesn´t italicize or put into quotation marks the words that Stevens´s ‘hand was saying.’ A simple reason for this may be that his line doesn´t quote from Stevens´s poem, it paraphrases it. The last line of ‘The Well Dressed Man with a Beard’ is ‘It can never be satisfied, the mind, never’ which is not quite synonymous with ‘the mind is never finished, no, never.’ I´m tempted to suggest that Ondaatje´s rewriting of Stevens, like his casual appropriation of an image from the first stanza of ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats,’ is both an example of a strong or original young poet flexing his creative muscles against the major figures in the tradition as well as an illustration of Stevens´s assertion that ‘It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.’ The misquoted borrowed line also implies that for the poet *as* poet, the significant dates and filiations are not necessarily the conventional ones. Michael Ondaatje may have been born on 12 September, 1943, but an equally important ‘birth’ occurred when he discovered Yeats, Auden, Stevens and the other poets who helped make him into a poet.

The 'Families' section ends with two poems, 'Griffin of the night' and 'Letters & Other Worlds' whose relationship to each other becomes evident only after we have read the second. In fact, it´s possible that the full implications of 'Griffin of the night' can only be felt if one has also read *Running in the Family* (1982) and the 'Claude Glass' section of *Secular Love* (1984). This isn´t to suggest that 'Griffin of the night' is a difficult poem. Its only interpretive crux occurs between the title and the first line where the reader needs to shift from thinking that 'Griffin' denotes a mythical beast to understanding that the substantive refers to Ondaatje´s son. Since the poem will be about 'nightmares,' which are, after all, figurative monsters, it is a felicitous, ironic confusion. In the end, one understands its intensity, its complex quality of emotion and the full implications of its last line –'sweating after nightmares'– only when one sees the relationship between the speaker and his son in the context of the speaker´s here unspoken relationship to his father, the source of the poet´s own nightmares.

'Griffin of the night' is a simple poem and one of Ondaatje´s shortest.

> I´m holding my son in my arms
> sweating after nightmares
> small me
> fingers in his mouth
> his other fist clenched in my hair
> small me
> sweating after nightmares (23)

The style is spare, almost minimalist: simple diction, an almost monotoned or uninflected voice, no punctuation, no affective adverbs or adjectives and a palette without colours. By contrast, the subject matter or the story is emotionally charged –a father comforting a son 'sweating after nightmares'– and threatens line by line to overwhelm the speaker´s poise and seeming detachment. The tension between the scene and its treatment is intensified by the chiasmic repetition of the second and third lines as the sixth and seventh. The chiasmus allows a syntactic ambiguity in which the final 'sweating after nightmares' is allowed to modify both the father and the son since each is potentially the 'small me' of the sixth line. The ambiguity intensifies the poem´s pathos while simultaneously implicating the speaker and the reader in the withheld temporally earlier scene in which the father was himself a son 'sweating after nightmares.' Whether someone comforted him is the implicit question with which the poem closes. Three decades after the its first publication it is difficult not to think of the poem as carrying the subtitle 'Running in the Family.'

If we remember how often Ondaatje has commented on the care with which he arranges his poems, we won´t be surprised that a poem about himself and his son introduces, in a manner of speaking, his first attempt to deal directly with his father.

‘Letters & Other Worlds’ frames the unnamed father´s life with two figurative though stylistically different accounts of his death, a structure Ondaatje also uses in ‘Burning Hills’ and ‘Light,’ two other autobiographical poems that look back to his family and Ceylon. Though the poem is an elegy and begins and ends with an appropriately sombre tone, its long middle section of six verses is lighter and shows a deft control in the presentation of the ‘terrifying comedy’ of his father´s life and his parents´ marriage.

The epigraph is taken from Alfred Jarry´s ‘Descendit ad infernos,’ and its description of the hero´s approaching death is also an anticipatory summary of the father´s: *‘for there was no more darkness for him and, no doubt like Adam before the fall, he could see in the dark´* (24) Worth noting is Ondaatje´s omission of Jarry´s first clause, ‘*But soon he could drink no more*.’ The letters of the title recur in the two verses that open the poem. Written in a style that combines a series of grammatically simple and direct unpunctuated sentences and a highly figurative language, the verses both amplify the implications of the title and the epigraph and serve as a prologue to the poem.

> My father´s body was a globe of fear
> His body was a town we never knew
> He hid that he had been where we were going
> His letters were a room he seldom lived in
> In them the logic of his love could grow
>
> My father´s body was a town of fear
> He was the only witness to its fear dance
> He hid where he had been that we might lose him
> His letters were a room his body scared

The several repetitions suggest the effort involved in the speaker´s attempt to address the subject of his father´s life and death. The second stanza´s near recapitulation of the first suggests that he wants or needs to try again because the first stanza doesn´t quite express what he is trying to say. Similarly the simple diction and style and the succession of short sentences hint at the difficulty and tension involved in dealing with a complex subject towards which the speaker´s feelings may be not only ambivalent but conflicted. The figurative progression in the two stanzas from globe to town to room suggests a gradual shrinking of the father´s world as he edges towards death. An affective and thematic countermovement is established, however, in the momentarily enigmatic references to his letters –the title has prepared us for their significance– and in the darkly monitory comment that ‘He hid that he had been where we were going.’ The surrounding lines suggest that he had been in a place of suffering and pain and that his letters with ‘the logic of love’ attempt to shield his family from, in a manner of speaking, ‘coming through slaughter.’ The last line of the second verse also contains the ambiguous intimation–created by the ambiguous syntax and the lack of punctuation–that he tries to avoid the family to shield them from the 'town of fear' in which he spent much of his adult life.

As I mentioned, the third stanza repeats and amplifies the prologue´s solemn concern with the father´s death before giving way to the slightly more relaxed lines, marked by extensive enjambment, dealing with scenes from his life and his marriage. These anticipate similar though less unsettling scenes of eccentric family behaviour in 'Light.' And both poems look forward to Ondaatje´s full treatment of the family in *Running in the Family*. Here, the humour and 'comedy' are described as 'terrifying,' and are enacted in the shadow of the opening descriptions of the father´s death –'He came to death with his mind drowning.' The events described almost without emotional inflection are reports from the valley of the shadow of death, each suggesting others that we are left to imagine.

The last two stanzas return to the father´s last years and death with words and images that call to mind Pat Garrett´s alcoholism, the creative but deadly spiders of 'Spider Blues,' the silent imploded figures of 'White Dwarfs' and Buddy Bolden. The father is shown as withdrawing to drink 'until he was drunk / and until he was sober.' And in the hard-earned sobriety he produces 'speeches, head dreams, apologies, / the gentle letters.' The last are written

> in a clear hand of the most complete empathy
> his heart widening and widening and widening
> to all manner of change in his children and friends
> while he himself edged
> into the terrible acute hatred
> of his own privacy

Though the overall tone in the last two stanzas is melancholy and rueful, there is also a note of admiration for the desperate and frangible creativity of Mervyn Ondaatje´s last phase. Like Bolden´s cornet playing, the father´s creativity is made possible by pain, guilt and 'acute hatred.' His writing, like Bolden´s music, 'was immediately on top of his own life' (Ondaatje 1976: 32). It´s as if the clarity, delicacy and empathy of his vision are only possible because of the suffering; there is even a note of melancholy and menace in the subjects he chooses to write about: 'blue flowers,' 'electricity,' and the sleeping snake disturbed by the speaker´s half-sister. The first long sentence of the closing stanza celebrates the flood of grace that occurs during his moments of desperate lucidity; the second continues this motif, but, then, as can be seen in the last line of the above quotation, it shifts attention back to the father´s collapse and death. The lines become shorter, the clauses more terse until the last line whose expansive length and lack of closing punctuation mimic ‘the blood searching in his head without metaphor.’ I assume that ‘his head’ is ‘without metaphor’ because he is dying and, to use the imagery of ‘White Dwarfs,’ has gone into ‘the white’ where he is beyond language. Though we won´t know this until we read the final poem in the collection, he is one of those ‘people who disappear / . . . who descend into the code’ or ‘who implode into silence / after parading in the sky’ (71). It is arguable that the answer to that poem´s poignant and ambivalent question –‘Why do I love most / among my heroes those / who sail to that perfect edge / where there is no social fuel’– is because they are surrogates of his father and, as we shall see in ‘Claude Glass’ and ‘Tin Roof,’ himself. Had Ondaatje written ‘Why do I *admire*’ instead of ‘Why do I love,’ I would be less confident in making this suggestion.[2]

There is very little in Ondaatje´s earlier lyrics to prepare one for the complexity, poise and maturity of ‘Letters & Other Worlds.’ It is recognizably by the poet who wrote ‘Dragon,’ ‘The Time around Scars’ and ‘Peter.’ But in comparison with it the earlier poems are clearly apprentice work in which the poet was perfecting his style and voice –his ‘tricks with a knife’– in anticipation of a subject more worthy of his talent. From the perspective of the later work, it is obvious that this pivotal poem is as much about his tragic view of creativity as often inseparable from suffering as it is an elegy for a father. As a poem about poetics it looks back to poems as different as ‘Peter’ and ‘Dates’ while simultaneously anticipating the five major lyrics of the collection´s final section in which various aspects of the creative act are a central concern. Together with these it also points forward to Ondaatje´s most profound and extended treatment of his own creativity in *Coming Through Slaughter*.

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[2] Ondaatje returns to the father-son theme in ‘Fabulous Shadow’ (60), though this isn´t as obvious as it was when the poem was first published in *Quarry* as the last poem in a sequence of six short lyrics. The first poem, ‘Photosynthesis,’ names the central figure as ‘Icarus.’ But it is the fourth poem, ‘Daddy,’ that establishes a perhaps too obvious link between Crete and Ceylon, Daedalus and Mervyn Ondaatje.

Daddy dancing took my skin
and poured his body into it
threw me responsibility
and drank his way from sight
We fell like sycamores in the sky
his hair stood up and looked like trees
his crooked legs caught in a wind
but the sea thumped up to me (my emphasis)

In this version of the myth, Icarus is abandoned by a Dedalus who ‘drank his way from sight’ before the ‘sea thumped up’ to the son. ‘Fabulous Shadow’ names neither the father nor the son. All we have is an anonymous voice describing how his (or her) body was ‘fished from this Quebec river.’ The slightly ambiguous title may refer either to the shadow cast from above by a figure from myth or it may touch closer to home by suggesting that the son is a “shadow” of the father or lives in his shadow.

After the tense and tortured autobiographical intensities of 'Letters & Other Worlds,' the thirteen poems of the 'Live Bait' section seem, for the most part, anticlimactic. They are a disparate, often wryly humorous collection of poems in various voices. With the exception of 'Leo,' each one either focuses on an animal or refers to one. And as so often in Ondaatje´s early work, the animals intimate or symbolize as "live bait" the world of instinct, energy and chaos on which poetry and art depend for their material and which they transform, often with violence, into artifacts. I almost have the impression that before confronting the reader with the book´s other major poems, Ondaatje felt he needed a section lighter in tone and less intensely focussed on poetics. This is not to say that these concerns are completely absent from the second section. They aren´t, but they appear in a different form.

The epigraph, as mentioned earlier, alerts readers obliquely to the truth status of the poems they are about to read. Where the first epigraph hinted that the poet´s reticence might prevent the poems from offering a sufficiently sincere or honest account of reality, the epigraph from *Tay John* ends with the comment, '"After See!' She said, 'he was a great liar, and the word has choked him!"' Almost as if to contradict the implications of this, the section´s first poem is 'Rat Jelly' in which, as in the misanthropic 'War Machine,' the speaker, sardonic and jaundiced, seems to tell us the worst about himself using an image associated in his previous book with Billy the Kid (Billy´s head, for example, is 'smaller than a rat' [1969: 109]).

See the rat in the jelly
steaming dirty hair
frozen, bring it out on a glass tray
split the pie four ways and eat
I took great care cooking this treat for you
and tho it looks good to yuh
and tho it smells of the Westinghouse still
and tastes of exotic fish or
maybe the expensive arse of a cow
I want you to know it´s rat
steamy dirty hair and still alive

(Caught him last Sunday
thinking of the fridge, thinking of you.) (31)

Though the slightly cryptic references to the Westinghouse and the fridge seem to indicate that the speaker has a particular 'you' in mind, I have the impression that he is also addressing the reader. The fact that this is the title poem of the collection and that some of its concerns are more explicit in 'A Bad Taste' (42) leads me to assume that 'rat jelly' is a metaphor for poems and poetry. Like the pies in the stained glass window reproduced on the cover of the first edition, the poem ('rat jelly') 'looks good,' and seems to taste of 'exotic fish' or 'the expensive arse of a cow,' but in origin and essence it remains 'rat / steamy dirty hair and still alive.' Though I can´t quite articulate what I think is being intimated by the references to the 'Westinghouse' and the 'fridge,' I have a hunch that it´s connected to the fridge in 'White Dwarfs.' There it is mentioned twice. First in the opening lines: 'This is for people who disappear / for those who descend into the code / and make their room a fridge for Superman' (71). It then reappears later in the final stanza: 'This white that can grow / is fridge, bed, / is an egg–most beautiful / when unbroken, where / what we cannot see is growing / in all the colours we cannot see.' Though the speaker admires the white and the silence, he simultaneously realizes that his fate *as a poet* lies with language and what John Crowe Ransom 'the rich contingent materiality of things' (Preminger 1974: 149). The poem´s existence confirms that as a poet he has no choice.

Like colour, energy and speech, the 'rat' cannot be kept in the 'fridge' nor can it be completely baked or cooked if the poem is to be alive. 'A Bad Taste' seems to confirm this reading. It begins with the speaker attempting to renounce his vocation as an artist.

> Moving to the forefronts of honesty
> he comes to them with rat blood in his mouth.
> He would turn them into ladies
> place his brain at their hip.
> Love his friends so completely
> they would admit no artist in him to be found,
> save eating an ice cream cone while reading Ezra Pound.
> This friendship fat as God. (42)

As in 'Burning Hills,' the speaker suggests that the writer cannot be attentive to or love his friends completely simply because as a writer he´s always conscious of the possibility of turning life into art. The London 'rats' of the University of Western Ontario–where Ondaatje taught in the late 1960s–are compared to surgeons feeding off their patients: 'They travel so sly / you do not see the teeth / till in the operating room.' Like the spiders in 'Spider Blues,' they may promise salvation or to turn life into art but they do so by preferring the latter to the former. A reference to 'the Paradise Lost Motel' implies a contrast between the fallen, because self-conscious rat/artist´s way of being in the world and ours.

The poem ends, however, by suggesting that the speaker´s condition is incurable. Although he indicates in the first stanza that he wants to separate himself from them and to move 'to the forefronts of honesty,' he ends with an admiring reminder about the informing value of the rat to writing.

But it was the rat in Ezra who wrote best,
that dirt thought we want as guest
travelling mad within the poem
eating up pronunciation, who farts
heat into the line. You see
them shaved in the anthology.
You will be frozen and glib when
they aim for the sponge under the rib.

God being made fat
by eating the rat in us. (43)

In the next couplet, it´s not obvious to me who is being referred to by the 'you' and why he or she is 'glib' and has a 'sponge under the rib.' The 'sponge' and the 'rib' call to mind the crucifixion, an association that becomes less irrelevant than it first seems when the line is followed by the couplet 'God being made fat / by eating the rat in us.' Though the image is repulsive, it seems to say no more than that by dying on the cross, God redeems us by taking our sins upon himself. What that has to do with the poem´s central theme is beyond me, unless Ondaatje is suggesting, as he does in 'White Dwarfs,' that the poet sacrifices himself by acknowledging our full humanity in his poems.

It´s worth noting at this point that the crucifixion is alluded to twice more in the book; in 'White Dwarfs,' as was just mentioned, and in 'King Kong.' In the latter, Kong is presented in a way that combines both his image in the film and a surreal scene in which he is 'Last seen in Chicago with helicopters / cutting into his head like thorns' (44). The Christological hint is prepared by an earlier suggestive reference to 'our lady in his fingers.' But if Kong is a Christ figure, he is a parodic and apocalyptic one who 'perishes magnanimous / tearing the world apart.' Instead of loving humanity, 'he must swallow what he loves / caressing with wounds / the ones who reach for him.' And though we know that he will die, still, as the poem´s final couplet tells us, 'we renew him / capable in the zoo of night.' As in 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' discussed below, Kong represents a problematically constitutive aspect of ourselves that links us through the unconscious or through our dreams with non-human life. Both poems also suggest, the second more explicitly than the first, that what Kong represents is an essential component of the poetic act. Seen this way, he is indeed a savage redeemer if we believe that poetry has redemptive value. The poet, and this is made explicit in 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' is the 'connoisseur of chaos' whose creativity is inseparable from his dark side. Ondaatje´s artists, from Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden to the poet-novelist in *Secular Love* occasionally resemble Kong who 'must swallow what he loves / caressing wounds / the ones who reach for him.'

The fascination with violence, wounds, scars and creativity –the four are cognate for Ondaatje– is pervasive in this section, and I want to turn now to three very different poems each of which deals with some aspect of them: ‘Loop’, ‘The Ceremony: A Dragon, a Hero, and a Lady, by Uccello,’ and ‘Philoctetes on the Island.’ At the centre of each is a figure who is in some sense a social outcast who also happens to be wounded.

‘Loop’ is one of those animal poems in which we understand Stevens´s comment that ‘The bare image and the image as symbol are the contrast: the image without meaning and the image as meaning. When the image is used to suggest something else, it is secondary. Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface’ (1982: 161). In the pull between ‘Loop’ as dog and ‘Loop’ as symbol, we sense that the second is stronger. The issue will be clearer if we compare the poem to the earlier ‘Flirt and Wallace,’ Ondaatje´s poem about the two hounds to whom he dedicated his study of *Leonard Cohen*.

> The dog almost
> *tore* my son´s left eye out
> *with love*, left a *welt* of passion
> across his cheek
>
> The other dog licks
> the armpits of my shirt
> for the salt
> the smell and taste
> that identifies me from others
>
> With teeth they carry broken birds
> with wet fur jaws that eat snow
> suck the juice from branches
> swallowing them all down
> leaving their mouths tasteless, extroverted,
> they *graze* our bodies with their love (My emphases, 36)

The focus here is on the dogs as animals, as something other than human, even though their names make an anthropomorphic gesture: one is named after a playful and self-conscious human attitude, the other after Wallace Stevens, a poet Ondaatje has always admired and from whom he will borrow a particularly important image in ‘White Dwarfs,’ the collection´s last poem. The poem may begin and end ‘with love,’ but each stanza reminds us that this love is as unpredictable as it is unconditional. In the first stanza, the perfect placing of ‘tore’ and ‘with love’ startles us into this awareness; and the third ends with a deft verbal ambiguity: ‘they graze our bodies with their love.’ Throughout the poem we feel the claims of word and image on reality.

'Loop,' however, opens with a contrast between, on the one hand, the speaker´s dogs and 'all social animals' and, on the other, these dogs and

> the one
> who appears again on roads
> one eye torn out and chasing.
>
> He is only a space filled
> and blurred with passing,
> transient as shit–will fade
> to reappear somewhere else. (46)

The metaphor and simile of the second stanza develop what has been suggested by 'roads' and 'chasing' while simultaneously nudging the dog from realism to romance. He becomes less a particular dog than the embodiment and personification of a way of being in the world. The paratactic syntax and sentences give a compressed but comprehensive summary of his life. The effect is to leave the reader with the impression of a life force that transcends not only social categories –'I leave behind all social animals'– but perhaps even language itself. While the poem says nothing about language or poetry, it is difficult not to read it with '"the gate in his head"' in mind. In the famous closing lines of that poem, the speaker suggests

> that is all this writing should be then.
> The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
> so they are shapeless, awkward
> moving to the clear. (62)

The animal 'caught at the wrong moment' in that poem is a 'stunning white bird / an unclear stir.' The dog 'Loop' seems to me an early trying out without the metaphysical baggage and the burden of poetics of the final movement of '"the gate in his head"'. But instead of developing the epistemological implications of his existence, Ondaatje offers a self-sufficient portrait that culminates in a surreal resolution. While 'Loop' tears into the garbage at a drive-in, the bird carrying the 'one eye torn out' 'lopes into the rectangle nest of images / / and parts of him move on.' The poem ends with two suggestively ambiguous lines: 'the rectangle nest of images' is both the film on the screen into which the bird 'lopes' and that other 'nest of images,' the poem. And the plural 'parts' looks back to the eye in the bird´s mouth and to the remaining 'parts' of the dog disappearing or dissolving in the metrically regular last line.

In 'Philoctetes on the Island,' Ondaatje returns to the Greek archer who in 'The Goodnight' (in *The Dainty Monsters*) is shown shooting Paris after his rescue from the island. The poem´s presence in this collection is surprising simply because of the lack of interest elsewhere in his work, after *The Dainty Monsters*, in the classical myths that were so important in his early work and in his thesis on Muir. That Philoctetes was on his mind during this period –the poem was published in 1969– is also indicated by Ondaatje´s comment in *Leonard Cohen* (1972: 43) that 'Cohen is making heroes out of these people not because they, like Philoctetes, have brilliant bows, but because they have magnificent wounds.' The Greek archer, of course, has both. In the present poem, Philoctetes describes his lonely existence on the island in a style compressed and figurative: 'Sun moves broken in the trees / drops like a paw / turns sea to red leopard. (34)' The omission of articles, conjunctions and punctuation continues through the poem. There is the possibility that the images here owe something to Ondaatje´s early interest in Henri Rousseau. In the 1908 painting 'Exotic Landscape,' for instance, the orange-red sun is broken up by the dense green foliage that we see it through. And the 'paw' and the 'leopard' may recall several of the jungle paintings in which a lion or jaguar is shown attacking its prey (see 'Surprise' [1891], 'The Hungry Lion' [1905], 'Combat of a Tiger and a Buffalo' [1908], 'Forest Landscape with Setting Sun' [1910]).

The poem is filled with images of violence, including the emotional violence of what 'Letters & Other Worlds' calls 'the terrible acute hatred / of his own privacy.' In words and images that occasionally recall *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and anticipate 'White Dwarfs' and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the archer articulates his divided impulses –to survive or to die?– and the longing for oblivion that simultaneously produces an acute awareness of self. Though reduced to an animal-like existence, he is nevertheless aware of his radical separation from the animals that he must kill in order to continue to survive.

> To slow an animal
> you break its foot with a stone
> so two run wounded
> reel in the bush, flap
> bodies at each other
> till free of forest
> it gallops broken in the sand,
> then use a bow
> and pin the tongue back down its throat. (35)

The unexpected iambic beat of the last three lines lends a ritual quality to the closing horrific and violent image that is unsettling. We have already seen it in 'Peter' ('After the first year they cut out his tongue') and there is a variant of it in 'White Dwarfs' ('The Gurkhas in Malaya / cut the tongues of mules'). Though extreme, the violent image is psychologically right, reflecting as it does Philoctetes´s rage at his abandonment and isolation. In Sophocles´s play, he pleads with Neoptolemus to talk to him:

Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,
speak if you come as friends.
No–answer me.
If this is all
that we can have from one another, speech,
this, at least, we should have. (1957: ll. 228-233)

In the poem, he aims his arrow at the tongue that is mute to human ears. But it´s also tempting to speculate that Ondaatje´s attachment to or fascination with Philoctetes has its origins in his continuing fascination with the figure of the silent or silenced poet tempted or compelled to renounce his art. In this poem, however, it is difficult once again not to sense behind the figure of Philoctetes abandoned on an island the withheld presence of the silent father, left behind in Ceylon and writing alone in a room. Philoctetes´s isolation is reiterated in the closing couplet whose lack of terminal punctuation reminds us that his solitude and pain will continue: 'then they smell me, / the beautiful animals.'

Perhaps the most surprising poem in *Rat Jelly* is 'The Ceremony: A Dragon, a Hero, and a Lady, by Paolo Uccello,' a traditional three stanza lyric, with four lines in each stanza, the second and fourth lines rhyming, and an iambic tetrameter metre. Uccello painted two versions of 'St. George and the Dragon,' the first in 1439-40 (the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris), the second between 1455-60 (the National Gallery, London). Ondaatje describes the second.[3]

The clouds burn blue, hang like sweat.
The green fields bounce the horse´s paws.
A boy-knight shafts the dragon´s eye
–the animal with a spine of claws.

In the foreground linked to dragon
with a leash of golden chain
dressed in silk there leans a lady
calmly holding to his pain.

From the mood I think it´s Sunday
the monster´s eye and throat blood strangled.
The horse´s legs are bent like lightning.
The boy is perfect in his angle. (39)

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[3] See Franco and Stefano Borsi, *Paolo Uccello*, tr. Elfreda Powell, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, 256-59.

On first reading, it is tempting to treat this simply as an ekphrastic poem in which the poet transposes a visual image into a verbal one. But Ondaatje isn´t Ralph Gustafson, and this is the only poem of this kind in his early work. Interesting to note is the fact that six of the details in his account of the painting are wrong. In the painting, the clouds do not ‘burn blue,’ the fields aren´t ‘green,’ the dragon doesn´t have ‘a spine of claws,’ and the ‘lady’ holds what looks like a green rope not a ‘golden chain,’ and she doesn´t lean. If this suggests that Ondaatje isn´t paying close attention to the tones, textures, details and composition of the painting, then it is worth pausing to speculate on what drew his attention to it. ‘Dragon’ provides the most obvious and relevant clue. If I´m right in reading that poem as a symbolic and displaced account of a confrontation between the poet and his father, it´s possible that ‘A Ceremony’ recapitulates the same scene and complex set of feelings in a different form. Read symbolically or allegorically, Uccello´s painting offered the young poet another version of the one story and one story only that mattered to him at the time and that, ironically, he couldn´t deal with directly. It is also the one story that he would go on telling throughout his career.

Here the story becomes an Oedipal one of the ‘boy-knight’ rescuing the ‘lady’ by slaying the dragon-father. But, in fact, as in Uccello´s painting, the dragon doesn´t seem to pose a threat either to the town or to the woman who seems to be holding him by the leash. When St. George ‘shafts the dragon´s eye,’ the lady leans solicitously ‘calmly holding to his pain.’ ‘The boy’ may be ‘perfect in his angle,’ but as much as in *Running in the Family* he is excluded from the drama´s central couple which is paradoxically joined by the masculine figure´s ‘pain.’ Pertinent here is George Whalley´s (1953: 140) suggestion that the poet´s ‘transmutation’ of his feelings to the words and images with which they have associated in his memory and imagination ‘is probably never complete; there is always an untranslatable residue. This no doubt explains how poems and even novels tend to be written in families, as a series of approximations to a recurrent complex of feeling.’ Ondaatje´s next stop in this particular autobiographical pilgrimage will be ‘White Dwarfs.’

But before turning to the book´s final section, I want to look at a couple of very small verbal details that further complicate any reading of ‘The Ceremony.’ Some of the poem´s images relate it to poems dealing with Doris Gratiaen as well as Ondaatje´s first wife, Kim. A slim connection exists between ‘Dates’ and the Uccello poem on the basis of variants of the verb ‘sweat.’ In ‘Dates’ we are told that the mother ‘sweated out her pregnancy in Ceylon,’ while ‘The Ceremony’ has a sky with clouds that ‘hang like sweat.’ The relationship with ‘White Room,’ the poem about the poet and his wife, is more interesting because it introduces the possibility that ‘The Ceremony’ is simultaneously about a second triangle, the poet, his wife, and her first husband. As was mentioned, the lady in ‘The Ceremony’ is described as leaning; the ‘dear thin lady’ in ‘White Room’ is described as ‘bending over your stomach.’ Similarly, the ‘boy is perfect in his angle' in the ekphrastic poem, whereas the couple are described as collapsing 'as flesh / within the angles of the room' (22). This isn´t much, but in the work of a poet as elusive as Ondaatje, a hint is often all that we will get at this stage. To go back to our original question about what it was that attracted him to 'St. George and the Dragon,' we might venture the answer that writing about it, allowed him to deal with two triangular relationships about which he had ambivalent feelings. These and other triangles in Ondaatje´s work–Buddy-Robin-Jaelin; Patrick-Ambrose-Clara; Almasy-Katherine Clifton-her husband–testify to an inescapable autobiographical given for which he has had to find various structural and aesthetic strategies that have helped him to understand and cope with it.

The best poems of the third section of *Rat Jelly* –and they are among the finest in Ondaatje´s body of work– are magnificent lyrical footnotes to many of the existential and poetic issues implicit in 'Letters & Other Worlds': fathers and sons, wounds and creativity, chaos and form, and the temptation of silence in the face of suffering. Read as a group the poems leave me with the impression of a complex emotional and intellectual pattern painfully and slowly shaped out of difficult and disparate materials. Particularly fascinating is the felt often tacit interaction between autobiographical concerns and pressures and creative ones. These are most evident in the seven poems about creativity that, as a group, constitute an early poetics: 'We´re at the Graveyard,' 'Taking,' 'Burning Hills,' 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens,' 'the gate in his head', 'Spider Blues,' 'White Dwarfs.' These poems have roughly the same relationship to Ondaatje´s body of work of his first decade as Stevens´s 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' does to his oeuvre. They are a theoretical stock-taking that is a confluence of the various lessons he learned writing the thesis on Muir, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and his monograph on Cohen. But if they are a summary they are simultaneously a preparation for the writing of *Coming Through Slaughter* in which Ondaatje pushes the theory to the limit. In the novel he explores the same situations and issues in the story of an artist-hero, with some autobiographical roots, whose cornet playing incarnates and enacts the aesthetic assumptions of *Rat Jelly*.

Of the section´s thirteen poems, all but three touch on death (accident, murder, suicide). Even the gentle first lyric, 'We´re at the Graveyard,' juxtaposes death to the pregnancy of one of Ondaatje´s friends. Its form depends on an antithesis between the clarity, imperceptible movement and seeming permanence of the stars and earthly transience and mortality.

> Up there the clear charts
> the systems´ intricate branches
> which change with hours and solstices,
> the bone geometry of moving from there, to there.

And down here–friends
whose minds and bodies
shift like acrobats to each other.
When we leave, they move
to an altitude of silence. (51)

The complex dependance of our relationships is finely caught in the simile of the acrobats (an image that will return both in *Running in the Family* and *Secular Love*) which also introduces the unavoidable suggestion of falling and danger. And the idea that we live out our lives in the shadow of death, that, in a sense, we are always ‘at the graveyard,’ is gently reiterated in the poem´s two closing images: ‘Sally is like grey snow in the grass. / Sally of the beautiful bones / pregnant below stars.’ The quietly foregrounded ‘g’ reminds us of ‘graveyard’ which is the eventual resting place of all bones. Unlike the sempiternal ‘bone geometry’ of the stars, ours is short-lived. A small compensation is offered, however, in the third stanza´s paradoxical first sentence:

So our minds shape
and lock the transient,
parallel these bats
who organize the air
with thick blinks of travel.

Our lives may be marked by the various griefs of living, but the mind attempts to compensate by shaping/making something permanent of our transient existence. I assume that we “parallel these bats” in being unable to see what is to come and not fully understanding our situation. Though the general sense of the last two lines is clear, I´m as puzzled by ‘thick blinks of travel’ as I was in 1973.

‘We´re at the Graveyard,’ a fine achievement in itself, is also an effective introduction to the section as a whole and an anticipation, though in an emotionally antithetical mode, to its closing poem, ‘White Dwarfs.’ The latter will develop in another direction its concern with ‘sliding stars,’ ‘an altitude of silence,’ and the implied image of Sally´s white, convex stomach concealing and containing a colourful growth. More generally, the poem also introduces the question of the sources of poetry and of the poet´s creative relationship with reality. ‘Taking,’ for instance, presents the poet as someone willing to appropriate whatever he thinks can be turned into a poem.

It is the formal need
to suck blossoms out of the flesh

in those we admire
planting them private in the brain
and cause fruit in lonely gardens. (55)

The anonymous voice and the third person copula together with the closing image of 'fruit in lonely gardens' lend this an unearned momentary general force. It takes a moment to realize that the speaker, whose pronominal mask slips in the second stanza, is describing the relationship between a parasite and its admired host. The relationship may produce something as positive as a poem but it is nevertheless based on exploitation. The second stanza offers a comic variant on this before undermining the tone and complicating the theme.

> I have stroked the mood and tone
> of hundred year dead men and women
> Emily Dickinson´s large dog, Conrad´s beard
> and, for myself,
> removed them from historical traffic.
> Having tasted their brain. Or heard
> the wet sound of a death cough.

In other words, everything from a 'large dog' to 'the wet sound of a death cough' is of potential use to the artist whose justification for his attitude is that he can transform transient, labile and perishable life into the 'immaculate moment' of the work of art. The various organic images scavenged by the jackal poet are 'rumours' that 'pass on / are planted / till they become a spine.' Like the gossip and the stories in 'War Machine,' they are turned into a poem. Ondaatje´s tone may be more bizarre and light-hearted than Horace´s, but this is his version of the Latin poet´s 'Exegi monumentum aere perennius' (Odes III, 30). It is worth noting in passing that the opening lines of the second stanza, slightly out of place in 'Taking,' reappear as the thematically clinching image in 'the gate in his head.'

The troubling question of the poet´s relationship to his material is brought closer to home in the next poem, 'Burning Hills.' The narrative situation here is sketched in the first few lines.

> So he came to write again
> in the burnt hill region
> north of Kingston. A cabin
> with mildew spreading down walls.
> Bullfrogs on either side of him.
>
> Hanging his lantern of Shell Vapona Strip
> on a hook in the centre of the room
> he waited a long time. Opened
> the Hilroy writing pad, yellow Bic pen.
> Every summer he believed would be his last. (56)

The burnt hills, mildew, and the Vapona Strip suggest death and decay, while the last line transfers this suggestion to his anxieties about his creativity (as well as, perhaps, his own life). The bullfrogs remind us of a simpler, less ambivalent or conflicted music. Like several other poems, this one frames images from the past with opening and closing sections set in the poem´s present. The poem is about its own writing, and the poet´s realization of the price he pays for being a writer. The three works mentioned implicitly comment on this: ‘A copy of *Strangelove*, / of *The Intervals*, a postcard of Rousseau´s *The Dream*.’ The first prepares us for the poet´s ‘strange love’ for those he simultaneously loves and uses in his work. The second reinforces this by describing Stuart Mackinnon´s poems, and by implication Ondaatje´s, with violent images in which the poem is ‘strict as lightning / unclothing the bark of a tree, a shaved hook.’ And the third, Rousseau´s ‘The Dream,’ reminds us that the artist´s imagined reality will often be different from ours and the reality with which he began: ‘The postcard was a test pattern by the window / through which he saw growing scenery.’

Among the memories that constitute the poem´s long central section, the most telling is a remembered photograph.

> There is one picture that fuses the 5 summers.
> Eight of them are leaning against a wall
> arms around each other
> looking into the camera and the sun
> trying to smile at the unseen adult photographer
> trying against the glare to look 21 and confident.
> The summer and friendship will last forever.
> Except one who was eating an apple. That was him
> oblivious to the significance of the moment.
> Now he hungers to have that arm around the next shoulder.
> The wretched apple is fresh and white.

The wretched apple, like most apples in the Western canon, needs no commentary. In the context of the poem as a whole, it is one of several images of separation and alienation like the third person narrative voice.

The poem might have ended here, but Ondaatje´s shifts it back to the present and changes the original reference of the title from the ‘burnt hill region / north of Kingston to the act of writing: ‘Since he began burning hills.’ The suggestion that writing and destruction are in some deep sense coextensive is immediately reinforced with the mention that ‘the Shell strip has taken effect. / A wasp is crawling on the floor / tumbling over, its motor fanatic.’ And the slowly paced closing four lines look back to ‘*Strangelove*,’ ‘*The Intervals*,’ and ‘*The Dream*.’

He has written slowly and carefully
with great love and great coldness.
When he finishes he will go back
hunting for the lies that are obvious. (58)

To love with 'great love and great coldness' is to offer the 'strange love' of the artist who is never completely involved with life because as an artist he simultaneously stands apart and observes. Equally interesting is the teasing closing confession that the revised poem will have only lies that are not obvious. In what sounds like a line from Cohen, but isn´t, Ondaatje is indicating that, despite his attempts at objectivity, his poem may be a misrepresentation or lie.[4] And if the lies to be sought out are the 'obvious ones', there is the disturbing implication that the not obvious lies will remain. In either case, the reader has been warned about the poem and the poet´s limitations in getting 'all the truth down.' Like 'The Dream,' whatever its debt to the real, the poem will enact its own version of reality.

The poet´s relationship to his subject matter is dramatized again in 'Spider Blues' where in the central symbolic fable, the poet is seen as an admirable, because dextrous and ruthless, spider. Though Ondaatje may know Emily Dickinson´s 'The Spider as an Artist,' his is simultaneously more anthropomorphic, comic and calculating.

I admire the spider, his control classic,
his eight legs finicky,
making lines out of the juice in his abdomen.
A kind of writer I suppose.
He thinks a path and travels
the emptiness that was there
leaves his bridge behind
looking back saying Jeez
did I do that?
and uses his ending
to swivel to new regions
where the raw of feelings exist. (63-64)

The spider as creative artist is a cartographer of the unknown, and, as the image in the last line reveals, he brings back a message about some essential or primal reality. But, like the speaker in 'Four Eyes,' he can only do this by separating himself from that reality. The spider may be more talented than the fly; yet, in terms of the allegory of the poem, the fly, because it is closer to life, is the necessary subject matter of art:

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[4] There is, however, an indirect link with Cohen. In *Leonard Cohen*, Ondaatje summarizes *The Favourite Game* as follows: 'The book is an autobiography of Breavman told in the third person, like one of those group photographs with a white circle drawn around the central character. Breavman, then, is studying his own portrait while making it, and the stress is on the fact that the portrait is unfinished' (1972: 24).

> And spider comes to fly, says
> Love me I can kill you, love me
> my intelligence has run rings about you
> love me, I kill you for that clarity that
> comes when roads I make are being made
> love me, antisocial, lovely
> . . . . .
> And the spider in his loathing
> crucifies his victims in his spit
> making them the art he cannot be.

Mind distinguishes Wallace Stevens from King Kong, and ‘intelligence’ the spider from the fly; but the cost of the distinction is registered by the title of the poem, ‘Spider Blues’: it is sung by Ray Charles, not Céline Dion. But the poem is also a blues song because in the relationship between the spider and the fly; the former creates beauty by ‘crucifying’ the latter. It is not clear what alternative modes of creation are possible, but the suggestion is nevertheless felt that this is not an ideal relationship between art and life.

But the fable of the spider and the fly is also about the spiders and the poet´s wife, as we learn from the surreal opening stanza and as we are reminded by the equally surreal or oneiric last one. In the first, the spiders´ attraction to the wife is described by the poet who also admits to having his ‘own devious nightmares.’ In the closing movement, however, he refers to a

> Nightmare for my wife and me:
>
> It was a large white room
> and the spiders had thrown
> their scaffolds off the floor
> onto four walls and the ceiling.
> . . . . .
> they carried her up–her whole body
> into the dreaming air so gently
> she did not wake or scream.
> What a scene. So many trails
> the room was a shattered pane of glass.
> Everybody clapped, all the flies.
> They came and gasped, all
> everybody cried at the beauty

ALL
except the working black architects
and the lady locked in their dream   their theme (65)

The metaphor and the homophonic pun (pane/pain) of the 'shattered pane of glass' look back to the cobwebs earlier in poem and forward to one of the most memorable images in *Coming Through Slaughter*, a novel whose hero-spider is unable to escape from Webb the detective. Ironically, the creative act gives no pleasure to either of its participants. Only the flies, themselves sometime victims, applaud.

It is clear why this is a 'nightmare' for his wife. But to understand why it is also one for him we need to recall that spiders and poets were compared in the brief third stanza.

Spiders like poets are obsessed with power.
They write their murderous art which sleeps
like stars in the corner of rooms,
a mouth to catch audiences
weak   broken sick

While there is a slight syntactical ambiguity in the last line (is it the audience or the spider/poet who is 'weak broken sick' or is it both?) the context implies that the adjectives refer to the artist. The poem suggests that whatever we may think of the work of art, its origins are troubling and suspect. Ondaatje´s poet isn´t quite Stevens´s 'The Weeping Burgher,' but he would have to agree with the latter that 'It is with a strange malice / That I distort the world' (1955: 61).

'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens' presents this troubling situation in the form of a psychodrama in which the two figures of the title represent two aspects or faculties of the poet. The poem, the situation suggests, is the product of their tense interaction.

Take two photographs–
Wallace Stevens and King Kong
(Is it significant that I eat bananas as I write this?)

Stevens is portly, benign, a white brush cut
striped tie. Businessman but
for the dark thick hands, the naked brain
the thought in him.

Kong is staggering
lost in New York streets again
a spawn of annoyed cars at his toes.

> The mind is nowhere.
> Fingers are plastic, electric under the skin.
> He´s at the call of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
>
> Meanwhile W.S. in his suit
> is thinking chaos is thinking fences.
> In his head the seeds of fresh pain his exorcising,
> the bellow of locked blood.
>
> The hands drain from his jacket,
> pose in the murderer´s shadow. (61)

The poem is structured upon a series of antitheses; the primary contrast is between Stevens, the businessman whose 'thought is in him' and Kong, whose 'mind is nowhere.' But, as so often in Ondaatje´s poetry, the opposed terms are ultimately related. Kong, after all, is more than just a suggestive photographer´s image of directable energy; he is also, as the poem´s structure and imagery suggest, an aspect of Stevens himself, and the meeting between them occurs not only in the juxtaposing of their photographs but also within Stevens´s mind. This is established by the presentation of analogous situations in the third and fourth stanzas: MGM directs Kong; Stevens fences the chaos and blood within himself. No comma or conjunction appears between the two clauses of 'is thinking chaos is thinking fences' because the poem is suggesting the problematic simultaneity of both the 'chaos' and the 'fences' in Stevens´s 'thinking.' If, as I have suggested, Kong and chaos or blood are synonymous, then the entire fourth stanza points to Kong´s simultaneous presence within Stevens himself : both the containing form and the contained energy are within the mind of the businessman who is also a poet. This connection between the two is also present in the image of Stevens´s 'dark thick hands' which, at the poem's end, 'drain from his jacket, / pose in the murderer´s shadow.' The poem closes on the alarming association between Stevens and 'the murderer´s shadow' which can only be his own. He is a murderer because he has subdued his chaos/blood, his unconscious self.

But the poem also suggests playfully that Stevens is not the only poet with a shadow self. After all, the writer-speaker of the poem asks humorously in the opening stanza, 'Is it significant that I eat bananas as I write this?' In view of the almost symbiotic relationship between Stevens and Kong, there can only be one answer. Despite the parenthetical nature of the question, the 'bananas' allude comically to the speaker´s Kong-like aspect. Thus the poem indicates that both of the poets within it are in creative contact with everything that the ostensibly antithetical Kong represents; but they are able to transform, control, and shape this 'chaos' within the self into an aesthetic construct, into 'King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens.' There is also a lingering suggestion, however, that some of the 'chaos' will resist and even escape the poet´s act of transformation. Both 'the *bellow* of locked blood' and 'hands *drain* from his jacket' (my italics) raise this possibility. Ondaatje and Stevens are also linked by the younger poets use of his subject´s imagery. The 'dark thick hands' hinting at violence may owe something to 'My hands such sharp imagined things' ('The Weeping Burgher'), though there is also the possibility that Ondaatje is recalling Margaret Atwood´s 'The Green Man' ('They did not look / in his green pockets, where he kept / his hands changing their shape') from *The Animals in that Country* (1968: 13). Similarly the tell-tale 'bananas' may owe as much to Stevens´s 'Floral Decorations for Bananas' (1955: 53) as to King Kong´s diet.

The interest, even fascination with chaos and the irrational is already present, as was mentioned earlier, in *The Dainty Monsters*, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* as well as in some key pages of the thesis on Muir and the study of Cohen. In *Rat Jelly*, 'Taking' and 'the gate in his head' point to the problem the poet faces in trying to depict or represent the irrational or the chaotic in poetry. Having examined the writer´s questionable intentions –the why– towards his material, he now turns to the issue of whether such representation –the how– is possible without significant distortion or falsification. Helen Vendler (1995: 106), with characteristic acumen, points to the heart of the dilemma in her discussion of the poetry of Jorie Graham. 'To allow the primacy of the material over the spiritual, to admit into art the unexpected detour, the chance event, whimsy even, is to be forced to abandon the neat stanzas of a 'classical' poem. It is to allow an equal role to the sensual, to make form mirror the unstoppable avalanche of sensations and the equal avalanche of units of verbal consciousness responding to those sensations.' The dilemma the artist faces in such a situation is that if he or she transfigures 'chaos' or 'the unstoppable avalanche of sensations' into aesthetic form, the result might misrepresent that chaos and create an unintended and misleading meaning. In this respect, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Running in the Family* and *Secular Love* may be closer to the poetic ideal of these poems in *Rat Jelly* than the poems themselves.

As we have seen, the key term or image for Ondaatje, whether his concern is with the self or external reality, is chaos, a concept also important to Muir and especially Stevens. Though there is an anticipation of this issue in 'Taking,' 'The gate in his head' is Ondaatje´s most explicit indication of how he thinks a poem should mirror or enact or express reality:

> My mind is pouring chaos
> in nets onto the page.
> A blind lover, dont know
> what I love till I write it out.
> And then from Gibson´s your letter

with a blurred photograph of a gull.
Caught vision. The stunning white bird
an unclear stir.

And that is all this writing should be then.
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear. (62)

As I wrote, there is an anticipation of this in ‘Taking’ where the ideal is ‘To learn to pour the exact arc / of steel still soft and crazy / before it hits the page.’ In the later poem, ‘chaos’ is synonymous with whatever reality the poet has chosen to describe. It is the basic life stuff or substance, human and non-human, out of which he shapes a poem. The poem´s central tension is between this ‘chaos’ and the ‘mental nets’ of imagination, language and poetic form. The ‘nets’ recall the ‘fences’ in ‘King Kong meets Wallace Stevens’ and the ‘webs’ in ‘Spider Blues’ and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*; they are the medium –film or words– in which the vision is enacted or caught. Although ‘caught’ is Ondaatje´s word, it does not really do justice to either his essentially heuristic assumptions about poetic creativity –‘A blind lover, dont know / what I love till I write it out’– or his concern with registering as sensitively as possible the dynamic quality of an image or an event. His concern is that the poem describe or enact ‘the unclear stir’ made by ‘a beautiful formed thing’ perceived ‘at the wrong moment.’ This last detail is particularly important if the poetic perception is also to yield a new, unexpected awareness or perception. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, the poem must deal with motion, flux and formlessness within the confines of poetic form. Ondaatje´s poem achieves this by hinting at forms–the page, the photograph–and then subtly recreating through oxymoron and an interweaving of sounds–n´s and r´s–the reality. The ideal sought is ‘not clarity but the sense of shift.’

The photograph that is the metaphor for Ondaatje´s ideal poem is by Victor Coleman, and the entire poem is an *hommage* to a writer whose difficult poems reveal ‘the faint scars / coloured strata of the brain, / not clarity but the sense of shift.’ The ‘faint scars’ are metaphors for Coleman´s poems (*One-Eye Love*, *Stranger*) that, in a mode much more radical than Ondaatje´s, attempt to give the reader a sense of life as pure process, as ‘shift’ or ‘chaos.’ But the ‘scars’ are also literally scars. Here, as elsewhere in Ondaatje´s work, a physical scar represents caught motion, just as a mental scar or an emotional scar is caught memory. In other words, the scar literally incorporates and records an emotion, an act, or an experience. In terms of the imagery of ‘The Time Around Scars,’ a scar is a ‘medallion’ or ‘watch’ which records a violent and revealing event. One could even say that a scar is finally analogous to an ideal, because nonverbal, poem in which the distinction between word and thing or event has disappeared.

Ondaatje´s most radical gesture in the direction of suggesting that there are time when 'all the truth' cannot and sometimes *should not* be stated is the collection´s ambitious and powerfully ambivalent poem 'White Dwarfs.' The last of the poems about poetry, it builds on the others´ insights and questions but reexamines these through lenses coloured by 'Letters & Other Worlds.' As a result, it interweaves two concerns: poetry´s potential inability to deal with certain kinds of experience, and the poet´s paradoxical attraction to silence.

In 'White Dwarfs' the poet confronts not just the unconscious or chaos but events that in their full human significance seem to demand a response of awed silence from humanity and art. It´s as if the poet simply throws his pen down in despair when he realizes that he will be unable to deal with certain aspects of life. There is also a hint that to attempt to describe these might also entail betrayal. Individuals involved in such events are the 'white dwarfs' of the title, stars of small volume but high density that have imploded into darkness and silence. The poem is a tribute to those who, for whatever reason, have gone beyond 'social fuel,' language and creativity.

> This is for those people who disappear
> for those who descend into the code
> and make their room a fridge for Superman
> –who exhaust costume and bones that could perform flight,
> who shave their moral so raw
> they can tear themselves through the eye of a needle
> this is for those people
> that hover and hover
> and die in the ether peripheries (7)

The key word here is 'moral' which, although slightly ambiguous, seems to be synonymous with life-meaning or way of being in the world. Those who 'shave their moral so raw' live in a condition in which their self exists without a social persona, 'where there is no social fuel'; consequently they come in touch with the very ground of their being, subtly associated here with heaven ('through the eye of a needle'). Like Ondaatje´s outlaws (Billy), alienated loners (Pat Garrett and Charlie Wilson), and sufferers (Philoctetes, his father), they are the ones who can provide a disturbing but necessary glimpse of what the elegy for his father calls the 'other worlds' lying beyond or beneath consciousness or social forms. In 'White Dwarfs' the speaker admires, without explaining why, those whose achievement or experience is beyond him as man and poet.

> Why do I love most
> among my heroes those

who sail to that perfect edge
where there is no social fuel
Release of sandbags
to understand their altitude–
    that silence of the third cross
    3rd man hung so high and lonely
    we dont hear him say
    say his pain, say his unbrotherhood
    What has he to do with the smell of ladies
    can they eat off his skeleton of pain?

Himself afraid of 'no words of / falling without words,' he loves (why not the more expected 'admires') those whose language is an expressive and deafening silence: for them the experience and their expression of it are one. Silence is here, as later in *Coming Through Slaughter* where Buddy Bolden is described as 'crucified and drunk' (1976: 76), a final poetry that cannot be improved by the poet´s facility with words.[5] Incidentally, the image of the crucified figure probably owes less to the New Testament than to Kafka´s 'The Hunger Artist,' a story Ondaatje doubtless read when working on his thesis. Kafka (1970: 270) doesn´t refer to the crucifixion, but he does limit the hunger artist´s fast to forty days. He describes its end as follows.

> Experience had proved that for about forty days the interest of the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest. So on the fortieth day the flower-bedecked cage was opened, enthusiastic spectators filled the hall, a military band played, two doctors entered the cage to measure the results of the fast, which were announced through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies appeared, blissful at having been selected for the honour, to help the hunger artist down the few steps leading to a small table on which was spread a carefully chosen invalid repast. And at this very moment the artist always turned stubborn. (. . .) And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies who were apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel, and shook his head, which felt too heavy on its strengthless neck.

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[5] The image of the crucified figure may also owe something to Edwin Muir´s 'The Annunciation' which is discussed in Ondaatje´s thesis: 'Muir also captures the immediacy of the crucifixion by concentrating on the physical aspect of Christs´s death and avoiding the social comment. By seeing Christ without the cloak of Christian theorizing around him, Muir gives him an even greater timelessness. Christ becomes an archetype akin to Prometheus or Theseus' (86). Since the thesis also mentions Francis Bacon´s work, there´s a strong possibility that the image also owes something to 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion' (1944) and 'Crucifixion' (1965).

I also have a hunch, based on the image of 'the smell of ladies' that Ondaatje may have remembered Kafka´s 'In the Penal Colony' which he would have read in the Edwin and Willa Muir translation when working on his thesis. In this story, the self literally becomes the site of writing on the death machine. At one point, the officer supervising the execution says to the condemned man, 'Here are your handkerchiefs' . . . and threw them to [him]. And to the explorer he said in explanation: 'A gift from the ladies.' (1971: 162).

The hunger artist´s supreme work of art will be silence and death. This is a supreme fiction in which the dualities of nets and chaos, Stevens and Kong, Michael and Mervyn, language and reality, and art and life have finally been dissolved but only at a price that the poet as poet cannot afford to pay. Even as he suggests that poetry in such a situation might be superfluous and perhaps blasphemous –whatever that word means in Ondaatje´s secular world– he is nevertheless writing a poem. Like other poets who interrogate the validity of language –Paul Celan, Tadeusz Rozewicz, and Ingeborg Bachmann, for instance– Ondaatje inevitably uses language. This dialectic of language and silence leads finally not to despair about poetry but to an affirmation that in the terms the poem sets out is simultaneously a betrayal of the very things admired. The confrontation with a reality that at first seemed resistant to the 'nets' of verbal representation has not silenced the poet; rather it has provoked him into an even more ambitious poetry in which language and silence struggle to coexist.

The poem´s final movement attempts to evoke silence and the unknown.

And Dashiell Hammett in success
suffered conversation and moved
to the perfect while between words

This white that can grow
is fridge, bed,
is an egg–most beautiful
when unbroken, where,
what we cannot see is growing
in all the colours we cannot see

there are those burned out stars
who implode into silence
after parading in the sky
after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway

The poem ends by pointing hauntingly to a beauty ('an egg') and a human profundity (the personified 'star') beyond more explicit description and discussion. The tentative metaphoric gestures are all that can be expected of poetry in such a situation. Yet Ondaatje´s willingness to risk these inevitably anti-climactic lines ('after such choreography') to explore the 'the perfect white between the words' and 'the colours we cannot see' is a paradoxical attestation of his belief in poetry. It seems appropriate that the image of the egg is borrowed from Stevens´s 'Things of August' (1955: 490):

We make, although inside an egg,
Variations on the words spread sail.
The morning glories grow in an egg.
It is full of myrrh and camphor of summer
And Adirondack glittering. The cat hawks it
And the hawk cats and we say spread sail.

Spread sail. We say spread white, spread away.
The shell is a shore. The egg of the sea

And the egg of the sky are in shell, in wall, in skins
And the egg of the earth lies deep within an egg.

Spread outward. Crack the round dome. Break through.
Have liberty not as air within a grave

Or down a well. Breathe freedom, oh, my native,
In the space of horizons that neither love nor hate.

Stevens´s ‘The Poems of Our Climate,’ another poem about the insufficiency of white and harmony, may also have been in Ondaatje´s mind here since he commented on it and quoted from it in the Muir thesis (1967b: 118).

Three decades after publication, *Rat Jelly* can be seen both as a summing up and reexamination of some of the constitutive personal and aesthetic issues raised implicitly in *The Dainty Monsters* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* while simultaneously preparing the ground for *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family*. In the novel, Ondaatje imagines the worst case scenario for the kind of lacerating self-expressive creativity that punctuates his early work. In the often fictional memoir, he comes to terms with the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan past that he felt he deserted and that abandoned him. Though the new poems in *There´s a Trick with a Knife I´m Learning to Do* (1979) were written before his return to Sri Lanka in 1978 and before the writing of the memoir, they seem, for the most part, to be written in a style less tense, heated and figuratively and allegorically inflected and to be free of the obsessive concerns that are the signature of the early work. ‘Light,’ the loving elegy for his mother seems to be the key transitional work mediating between the poet´s past and present, his ‘lost’ Ceylonese family and his present Canadian one. Whatever the reason, the *post-Rat* Jelly poems reveal Ondaatje, on the one hand treating his past like a burden or source of inevitable anxiety and remorse, and, on the other, moving in new directions in style and content.

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UNRELIABLE SELVES IN AN UNRELIABLE WORLD: THE MULTIPLE PROJECTIONS OF THE HERO IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE UNCONSOLED*

CARLOS VILLAR FLOR
Universidad de La Rioja

ABSTRACT. The Unconsoled *(1995), Ishiguro's fourth novel, was received with some perplexity by critics who formerly praised the author's controlled "Jamesian" realism. However dissimilar this "Kafkaesque" novel may seem in comparison with the previous three, it can be regarded as a further step in the development of one of Ishiguro's major fictional interests: the way an unreliable first-person narrator introduces characters who might be understood as extensions or projections of himself. While Ishiguro's first three novels could be said to deploy unreliable narrators who try to revisit their past and overlook their mistakes by using self-deceiving rhetoric, a sort of oneiric unreliability constitutes the general framework of* The Unconsoled. *This article comments on the implications of such a fictional technique and analyses those characters that may work as projections of the narrator's persona, embodying his anxieties and traumas with special emphasis on those stemming from lack of communication and parental neglect.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro (Nagasaki, 1954) has published five novels up to date, most of which have received prestigious literary awards: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), a story of repressed sense of guilt told by a mature Japanese woman, was awarded the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize; *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), which explores the self-deception of an old painter who supported the imperialistic cause during the Second World War, received the Whitbread Book of the Year Prize; the well-known *The Remains of the Day* (1989) was given the Booker Prize (and Hollywood's blessing by way of James Ivory); and the fourth one, *The Unconsoled* (1995), which overtly represents a significant change from the previous ones in tone, method and context, won the Cheltenham Prize.

It seems at first sight that in his fourth novel Ishiguro felt the need to break away with his former psychological realism and take a further step in the representation of consciousness. Expressed in terms of admitted literary influences, Ishiguro has turned away from the precise and controlled narrative modelled on Chekhov into the chaotic and undisciplined spirit of Dostoevsky (cf. Swift 1989: 23); or rather from the neat Jamesian design to the uncanniness and absurdity of Kafka or Beckett. Indeed, *The Unconsoled* has inspired disparate reactions among the critics that hitherto had praised Ishiguro for his disciplined control over the narrative. Thus, Amit Chaudhuri considers the novel "a failure", Roz Kaveney a "talented mess", Richard Rorty is not sure "what exactly has been attempted (...) nor what has been achieved" and for Ned Rorem it is a boring and undramatic work "heading nowhere except back into itself" (in Shaffer 1998: 119). Other reviewers, however, maintain that the book is praiseworthy for its originality and neat accomplishment of its intentions, and credit Ishiguro with producing an innovative tone and structure while remaining faithful to his earlier vision. Such is the case of Rachel Cusk, Vince Passaro (quoted in Shaffer 1998: 120), or the Spanish novelist and critic Miguel Sánchez-Ostiz, for whom the novel is "*una auténtica proeza literaria*", "*a medio camino entre el cultivo cuidadoso del misterio y la extravagancia radical*", "*un alarde de ingenio y de pericia narrativa*", "*resultado del afinado talento para la invención narrativa de su autor y de su ambición literaria*" (Sánchez-Ostiz 1997: 12).

Ryder, the protagonist of *The Unconsoled*, is a prestigious pianist who arrives in an anonymous European town[1] where he is due to perform in an extraordinary concert as well as to give an influential speech. He cannot remember what his schedule is or what events he is meant to take part in, but he partly feels he must have agreed to the programme even if he cannot remember any details of it. From the very moment of his arrival he is assaulted by several characters who take him into their confidence, expose their existential problems and humbly but insistently demand of him an urgent solution. Thus, Ryder is not only meant to provide a sort of spiritual and material renaissance to the whole town through his concert, but he is also required to heal the bleeding wounds of some locals by performing some apparently minor favours such as taking a message to the hotel porter's daughter, having a look at a woman's album of press cuttings, listening to a young pianist play, etc. As the narrative goes along, Ryder seems to understand that he is regarded as the messianic remedy that will save the citizens from their emotional lethargy. Regarding himself as an honest, well-meaning person, he tries to be kind to everyone and to do his best to help, but as the different demands overlap he painfully finds he cannot cope with them all. In fact, as it turns out, with none of them.

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[1] 1. Wood (1998) interprets that the town is set in Germany, perhaps taking into account the origin of most characters' proper names. Shaffer (1998), more cautious, locates it in Central Europe.

The Unconsoled pervades a constant fear of the small daily duties or various commitments that might divert the person from his true vocation or from the great task he might have done[2]. The many absorbing little favours Ryder is demanded from all quarters prevent him from finding his true self, from giving and receiving enduring love and affection. As he is progressively carried away by the circumstances, we witness how he is not immune to the same evils affecting the strange characters he is trying to help, most of whom suffer from lovelessness and non-communication in its various kinds: between parents and children, between husbands and wives, among friends or colleagues.

2. UNRELIABILITY AS FRAMEWORK

Narrative unreliability constitutes the general framework of the book. Broadly speaking, Ishiguro's first three novels could be said to deploy *unreliable narrators*[3] who try to reconstruct their past and overlook their mistakes by using self-deceiving rhetoric. But *The Unconsoled* shows a significant change in this respect: from the very start of the novel the occurrence of highly unlikely elements gives a sense of global unreliability. Thus, when the novel opens the narrator is arriving at the hotel where he is going to stay, and as he enters the elevator the porter starts telling him about his life and his concept of dignity within his profession. But the conversation seems too long for an ordinary ascent (it takes five pages, silences included), and suddenly Ryder realises they are not alone in the elevator, there is a woman "standing pressed into the corner behind" him (5-9). The elevator keeps ascending, and two pages later it stops and the doors slide open. But immediately afterwards, Ryder begins to perceive nonchalantly that he knows what goes on inside the porter's mind and what has been troubling him over the last weeks

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[2] For a further explanation of this idea by the author himself, see Villar Flor (1997).

[3] In his traditional categorisation Wayne Booth calls "a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not." Booth also admits that "difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. (...) It is most often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him." (Booth 1961, reproduced in Onega & García Landa 1996: 152).

(13-15). This initial chapter ends with Ryder's realisation that "the room I was now in (...) was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales. (...) It was unmistakably the same ceiling I had so often stared up at from my narrow creaking bed of those days" (16).

Preceded by such examples, the subsequent episodes of *The Unconsoled* continue offering the texture of a "strange territory" defined by three major features (cf. Wood 1998: 172-3): first, characters appear at the moment Ryder thinks of them or are mentioned by somebody else. Secondly, almost everyone who comes upon Ryder launches into the narrative of his or her life, and whenever the pianist meets new people or enters strange rooms he is often invaded by the thought that he ought to know them well. Thirdly, there is a basic incoherence marking every scene in the book. Thus, certain pieces of Ryder's past seem to have been transposed to this unknown town: old schoolfriends, a girl from his village in Worcestershire, and old car that used to belong to his parents in England... Strangers are never complete strangers, but they don't have a real history for him. And such inconsequentiality extends until the very conclusion of the novel: Ryder sobs with distress when Sophie finally rejects him on the tram, but immediately afterwards he cheers up when he discovers that a splendid breakfast is being served on the tram itself (cf. 532-5).

Soon the presence of such improbable facts acquire the consistency of a dream, and the whole context of the novel becomes oneiric or surrealistic: newly met characters behave like old acquaintances or even lovers, old acquaintances turn up unaccountably in such a foreign country, the protagonist hears conversations out of earshot, the setting changes without a logic, the spaces grow or dwindle for no apparent reason. In short, nothing seems reliable. The narrative technique employed still rests on the narrator's unreliability, as it happened in the first three novels by Ishiguro.[4] But in *The Unconsoled* it is not a question of revisiting the past through a biased filter; what is unreliable now is not only the accuracy of memory: it is the whole world that cannot be trusted. For Wood (1998:

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[4] Without contradicting our initial view about the distinctiveness of Ishiguro's fourth novel, there is certainly some continuity between *The Unconsoled* and the previous novels regarding narrative technique. As Shaffer puts it, "Ishiguro's four novels share enough similarieties -unreliable first-person narrators, protagonists who remake themselves by 'mixing memory and desire' and emotional and psychological emphases- to suggest a coherence and integrity to the author's aesthetic vision" (Shaffer 1998, 120). More specifically, we find echoes of *Pale View* in the way the narrator creates characters -or endows them with attributes- who are mainly understood as extensions, versions or variations of Ryder himself. The novel is also close to *An Artist of the Floating World* in the role played by art (now music instead of painting) to justify a workaholism that accounts for much of Ryder's frustration. Similarly, the ending of *The Unconsoled* resembles that of *The Remains* in one significant sense: the protagonist turns his public and private failures into successes and persuades himself to continue down the same path he has been on (cf. Shaffer 1998, 118).

174-5), the story is “a long metaphor for deferred and displaced anxiety” rather than the straightforward representation of a dream, since “the point about anxiety is that it doesn’t occur only in dreams”. According to this critic, the apparent absurdity of events and setting ultimately shows that “the novel takes the opportunity that fiction so often resists and pursues the darker logic of a world governed by our needs and worries rather than the laws of physics” (175). And, as pointed out above, a link uniting the different characters Ryder meets in his frantic roaming around the unknown city is that all of them are victims of non-communication. This is the ultimate reality that lies under an unreal texture of strange scenes, under an unusual story of lovelessness, moral decay and lack of understanding.

3. “UNHAPPY FAMILIES”

All the previous elements are significant in order to understand a basic strategy giving *The Unconsoled* its peculiar shape, and illustrating one of the major thematic issues: the neglect of family relationships, with special emphasis on the plight of children deprived of the love of one or both parents, and the aftermath in adult life of such emotional injuries. As regards narrative unreliability it seems that Ryder is telling a story in which he might be transplanting characters and episodes from his own past into the oneiric present of his narration. An alert reader might realise that many characters appearing in the novel, though basically “real” (fictionally real, perhaps), are likely to be projections or variations of the narrator himself. Since Ryder doesn’t question the obvious absurdity of some events he relates, we are not fully entitled to doubt about the fictional existence of these characters: they are not necessarily his fabrication, but clearly many of them embody what must have been or indeed are Ryder’s own traumas and injuries. If the whole story should be interpreted as an extended dream, this rarefied process could be considered a peculiarly dreamlike metamorphosis in which the dreamer is the centre.

On the other hand, the broader theme of lack of communication pervading the novel gets further specified when analysed in relation to children. Indeed, images of the plight of neglected children abound within each of the five basic “families” into which the main characters can be divided, namely:

Mr Hoffman
Stephan
Mrs Hoffman

Brodsky
Bruno
Miss Collins

Gustav
Sophie
Boris

Ryder
Boris
Sophie

Mr Ryder
Ryder
Mrs Ryder

The least unconventional of these is perhaps the Hoffman family. Hoffman is the mysterious manager of the hotel where Ryder is staying, one of the most earnest promoters of the event that will restore the town to its former glory, for which purpose he insists that Ryder must help Brodsky to climb back to a pre-eminent position in the town's cultural life. But on a more personal level he wants the pianist to inspect the album of press cuttings that his wife, Christine, who seems an enthusiastic fan of Ryder, has been collecting for years. Ryder agrees to grant such a small favour, but in fact he never actually manages to carry it out.

Behind Hoffman's insistence lies a desperate effort on his part to revive a relationship with his wife that seems to have gone wrong over the last twenty years. When they got engaged Christine mistakenly believed he was a composer, and the misunderstanding went on for a time until the inevitable moment of truth arrived, which triggered off a process of deterioration of their mutual love. Finally Hoffman is certain that "sooner or later she'll leave me for someone like the man she thought I was before she realised" (353). But Hoffman's effort to regain her is counterbalanced by his own self-destructive desires: at some points in the novel he is carried away by a fatalistic wish to end his pursuit tragically, a "wish to fail". And he does fail, since after the fiasco of Brodsky's performance he takes on all the blame and urges Christine to leave him once and for all (506).

Caught in the middle of this storm stands their son Stephan, a young pianist who demands an opportunity to show his talent. But the main reason behind his search for appreciation is that by means of a successful piano performance he will be able to regain his parents' affection. The distressing notion that a child has to *earn* his parents' love by means of achieving success and thus overcoming their own frustrated expectations in life will reappear in connection with other characters, working as a sort of overwhelming *leitmotiv*. Stephan indeed feels neglected and excluded from his parents' love, and somehow senses that the conflict afflicting them will remedy if they come to feel proud of him. So in this case the child's frustration not only derives from the fact that his parents have no time or no energy to care for him, but also from the belief that their happiness depends on his blameless piano performance, a belief that has been eating him since he was "thirteen of fourteen" (76). His one request to Ryder is that he agrees to hear him play, which he finally does. On doing so Ryder realises that Stephan is a talented and promising artist, and he says so to Mr Hoffman. But the hotel manager, perhaps following his self-destructive instinct, refuses to believe him. He prefers the sour taste of failure:

> "There was this one, single hope. I refer, of course, to our son, Stephan. If he'd been different, if he'd been blessed with at least some of the gifts her side of the family possess in such abundance! We sent him to piano lessons, we watched

> him carefully, we hoped against hope. (...) Then in the last few years it became useless to pretend any more. Stephan is now twenty-three years of age. I can no longer tell myself he will suddenly blossom tomorrow or the next day. I've had to face it. He takes after me. (...) Each time she looks at him, she sees the great mistake she made in marrying me..." (353-4).

The second family is still less conventional: Leo Brodsky was once a prestigious conductor but now is a degenerated neurotic given to drunkenness. He is the one who is meant to be rehabilitated before the most distinguished citizens of the town at the concert, but such attempt ends up in a fiasco. Miss Collins remains his wife, but she uses her maiden name because she has been estranged from him for two decades. There are two important similarities between Brodsky and Hoffman: one is that both intend to recover their wives' affection by means of building up an external prestige for themselves, which would make them worthy of admiration and love. Another is their utilisation of the child figure for their own purposes of self-restoration. Bruno is Brodsky's beloved dog, functioning as a child substitute for his "father": "We could keep an animal," Brodsky would say to Miss Collins, in a hopeless attempt to win her back. "We could love and care for it together. Perhaps that was what we didn't have before. (...) We never had children. So let's do this instead" (274). Brodsky is thinking of the surrogate child as a way of keeping himself and Miss Collins together, which shows a sardonic parallelism with Hoffman's instrumentalisation of his son: Stephan doesn't seem to have a value in himself, but only as long as he can be instrumental in joining his parents together again.

The next family is made up of three single members, each from a different generation: Gustav the hotel porter, his daughter Sophie and his grandson Boris. Though initially we know nothing of Boris's father, later in the novel Ryder will enigmatically acquire that status. The family conflict between Gustav and her daughter is the first of the many troubles that the unconsoled characters in the novel want Ryder to solve: it is basically a lack of understanding between father and daughter, the reasons for which are never too clear but whose ultimate consequence is that Gustav is no longer on speaking terms with his daughter. Once more, as it happened with Mr and Mrs Hoffman, the reader senses that both characters still love and care about each other, but something in their way of expressing themselves hinders them from achieving a fruitful communication. And, once more, the child is the victim of adult misunderstanding: "There were, furthermore, clear signs that the trouble, whatever it was, had started to make its mark on Boris. (...) The porter had noticed how every now and then, particularly at any mention of his home life, a cloud would pass over the little boy's expression" (14).

The implications of the preceding stories become clearer when seen in the light of Ryder's personal conflict with his parents. As we have already mentioned, the characters in *The Unconsoled* “should be understood as conduits for Ryder to remember and forget, judge and censor his own past” (Shaffer 1998: 94-5) which doesn’t necessarily mean a denial of their fictional existence. From certain references that Ryder slips into his narrative we learn that he, like Stephan or Boris, must have been severely hurt in his childhood by being a witness of constant parental fighting and by suffering a subsequent neglect. Some hints of how young Ryder has learned to cope with this situation are given in the text. In the very first chapter, for instance, he recalls an episode of his childhood,

> [...] one afternoon when I had been lost within my world of plastic soldiers and a furious row had broken out downstairs. The ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realised this to be no ordinary row.

And then Ryder suggests a feature that may provide the key for the interpretation of the whole novel: in order not to think about the row downstairs he concentrates on how to take advantage of a torn patch on the green mat that had always irritated him:

> [...] that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery - that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it - had been one of some excitement to me, and that ‘bush’ was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated (16-17).

Indeed, this image can be symbolically applied to the whole narrative process carried out through *The Unconsoled*, and accounts for the peculiar unreliability referred to above: Ryder as a narrator is trying to incorporate his own scars into his imaginary world. As well as he develops from his early childhood several defence mechanisms to cope with his family conflict (“denial, fantasy, sublimation, and, later, music-making” according to Shaffer 1998: 105), the narrating Ryder projects his own traumas into other characters that are more explicitly analysed than himself. While the respective plights of Stephan or Boris, Hoffman or Brodsky are extensively reported, his own is just glimpsed at in a few references dispersed along the story. One significant instance of such is his recollection of a conversation at the age of nine with his friend Fiona, in which he is telling her how he has trained himself to enjoy being alone, and to fight against the need for the company of his parents. The girl replies that he feels that way because of his sad experience: “when *you* get married, it needn’t be like it is with your mum and dad. It won’t be like that at all. Husbands and wives don’t always argue all the time. They only argue like that when... when special things happen.” The boy presses on, “What special things?” But unfortunately the conversation ends abruptly, and he is left without an answer (171-73).

Furthermore, young Ryder has not only developed coping skills to deal with the family quarrels and the insufficient love received, but from an early age he also seems to have turned to music as a refuge against loneliness. And, closely resembling Stephan, his prestige as an acclaimed pianist is a way of attracting his parents' attention towards his own worthiness and of winning over their affection. Significantly, one of the running obsessions haunting Ryder is the imminent arrival of his parents in the town in order to attend his piano performance, so much so that he decides that his priority is "to ensure that my performance was the richest, the most overwhelming of which I was capable" (420). Thus, in a suspiciously similar attitude to Stephan's, Ryder fears not to be up to the expectations his parents are supposed to have on him. The peculiarly unreliable atmosphere of the novel prepares us for contradictory versions regarding whether they have attended their son's concerts before or, as Ryder says at some point, they are "coming all this way to hear me perform for the very first time" (272). But, not surprisingly for a reader who is already much on his guard, despite Ryder's morbid concern for their welfare they never turn up. When he realises once more that they are just too busy to care about him he collapses and sobs in distress.

A final example of the mysterious projections of the unconscious can be found in the presentation of the fifth family outlined here, the triangle comprising Ryder, Sophie and Boris. Perhaps one of the most disquieting effects of the oneiric context pervading the novel is seen through the strange relationships between these three characters: at first Ryder has never seen Sophie before (cf. 32), but progressively it turns out that he might have met her in the past, been on intimate terms with her, or even been Boris's father. In fact, Ryder is referred to as such by passing characters (cf. 45, 50, 155, 286) and his subsequent role with respect to Boris suggests that of the returned father starting to take care of his child again.

But, in case readers were wondering whether Fiona was right when she said to nine-year-old Ryder "when *you* get married, it needn't be like it is with your mum and dad", in his paternal role Ryder fails as much as his own parents did. In the words of Brooke Allen, he "repeats the cycle of familial sickness that has blighted his own life" by taking "out his rage toward his parents on Sophie and little Boris" (Allen 1995: A12). Such neglect of his "family" (no matter how strangely he has acquired it) derives mainly from his vanity and "workaholism": Ryder subordinates his family duties to any kind of minor errand he is required to perform, since in those cases he feels his prestige is at stake. So his vanity and his devotion to professional duty are mutually related, and might be some of the reasons ("the special things") behind Ryder's inability to act like a good husband and father. He gives false assurances to Boris and Sophie that the future will be better (157, 446), but abandons Boris at several points when otherwise required, and even blames both mother and child for bringing chaos to his life (179, 289).

In some moments of tenderness, however, Ryder is on the verge of showing concern and warmth to his family, as when he apologises to Boris for his frequent absences:

> "I know you must be wondering. I mean, why is it we can't just settle down and live quietly, the three of us. You must, I know you do, you must wonder why I have to go away all the time, even though your mother gets upset about it. Well, you have to understand, the reason why I keep going on these trips, it's not because I don't love you and dearly want to be with you" (217-8).

The vague reason Ryder gives to account for his constant absences has to do with professional duty and personal self-realisation. But the feeling remains that such a reason is not convincing, and though he seems not to admit it, he is being carried away by impulses that will eventually make all kind of family life impossible. Thus, when he says "as my breath came harder, I could feel returning to me an intense sense of irritation with Sophie for the confusion she had brought into my affairs" (179), he is adopting the discourse of the egoist who has been diverted from his own concerns. And similarly, on an occasion when he cannot suppress his rage, he deliberately destroys Boris's enjoyment of a book he's been presented with by shouting at him unfairly: "Look, why do you keep reading this thing? What did your mother tell about it? She told you it was a marvellous present, I suppose. Well, it wasn't. Is that what she told you? (...) That I chose it for you with great care? Look at it (...) It is just a useless old manual someone wanted to throw away" (471). So Ryder is indeed repeating the same mistakes he detected in his parents and lacks the inner integrity to stop inflicting a similar suffering on Boris.

His failure as father and husband is so evident that the novel ends with Sophie telling Ryder to go away: "Leave us. You were always on the outside of our love". She is tired of being let down by him, and, although Boris tries to ask for his forgiveness in a last desperate attempt to keep his family together, Sophie insists: "Leave him be, Boris. Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom. He needs to do it" (532). After this scene Ryder loses sight of both, and remains momentarily sad and lonely. But with the characteristic incoherence of the novel, he cheers up when he learns that a substantial breakfast is being served on the tram.

4. CONCLUSION

In his fourth novel Ishiguro has chosen a disturbing oneiric technique, reminiscent of Kafka and Beckett, to suggest images of non-communication and familial anxiety. Special emphasis is made on the plight of neglected children, represented by several characters who, though maintaining their own separate identities within the novel, can be easily identified as projections of the narrator's persona. They all, like Ryder, are early in their lives conscious of the existence of serious tensions between their parents, as a consequence of which they grow up with a distressing sense of guilt and have to develop coping techniques. They know their parents don't have the time or the interest to look after them properly, so they learn to get used to loneliness. They need to regain their parents' affections by means of achieving a certain prestige or success. They try to build up fantasies of family harmony or of parental concern, fantasies that get shattered as reality intrudes.

Whether Ishiguro was devising this peculiar projection of the character-narrator into several others as an individual portrait of failure and repressed guilt, or his novel is a sad comment on the situation of many western families in the turn of the century, each reader must judge. What cannot be denied is Ishiguro's dismal but thought-provoking presentation of a world of brotherless children, condemned to isolation from their early lives and whose closest game partners are grandparents and plastic soldiers. A world in desperate need of understanding, of human warmth, of communication. Perhaps of generosity too.

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EUROCENTRISM IN HYBRIDITY: A CRITIQUE OF CHARLES VAN ONSELEN'S *THE SEED IS MINE: THE LIFE OF KAS MAINE, A SOUTH AFRICAN SHARECROPPER 1894-1985*[1]

BRIAN WORSFOLD
Universitat de Lleida

ABSTRACT. *For decades, contributors to the literary discourses of South Africa, writers, critics and commentators alike, worked to end apartheid. Now that apartheid is over, new discourses must evolve. For this reason, at this critical time of transition, all literary works coming out of South Africa are crucial to the continuity of South African literatures. Charles van Onselen's work would be a remarkable social history at any time but, coming as it does in the immediate post-apartheid period, it takes on a special relevance. This fictionalised social history which records the survival of a MaSotho peasant farmer in the western Transvaal during the pre-apartheid and apartheid periods gives a unique insight into an area of human existence that remains virtually unrecorded and only touched on in Sol T. Plaatje's* Native Life in South Africa*, written in 1910. This minutely-documented account of Kas Maine's story reflects the human condition of the Black population in rural South Africa as the screws of proxy European colonisation are tightened by South Africa's neo-colonialists. More significantly, van Onselen reconstructs the rural Black South African man whom apartheid not only degraded but also concealed from view. To what extent, however, is this reconstruction that of a White South African and what are his reasons for producing a model at this moment in South Africa's history?*

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[1] A shorter version of this article was presented as a paper at the African Literature Association Conference: "Multiculturalism and Hybridity," Austin, Texas, 25th.- 29th. March 1998.

Critical reviews of Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1895-1985* (1996)[2] acknowledge the significance of this social history. Writing in the *Southern African Review of Books* Bill Nasson, Associate Professor of History at the University of Cape Town, predicted that "this monumental book bids fair to become in its own way a classic of South African historiography." (Nasson 1996: 3) *The Economist*'s unnamed critic praised the work, saying, "[t]he recording of oral history does not get much better than this." (*Economist Review* 1997: 6) Moreover, this biography by the Director of the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of the Witwatersrand also attracted the attention of literary critics, among them Brian Willan, who wrote in *The Spectator* "here is a biography which in its subtle, evocative portrayal of the lives of black and white alike has more to say of South Africa's 20th.-century experience than anything I have read" (Willan 1997: 36), Christopher Hope, who wrote in *The New Statesman*, "Van Onselen has done South Africans a favour by addressing the essential question: how did we get to be like this?" (Hope 1997: 45), and David Anderson, who declared in the *Times Literary Supplement* that the work is "a remarkable, possibly unique historical record." (Anderson 1997: 27) Social historians and literary critics recognised at once that here was a work of great sociological and literary importance, especially because, as Bill Nasson goes on to say, "[i]ts stature is further enhanced by the timing of its appearance." (Nasson 1996: 3)

The appearance of van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* in 1996 came two years after Nelson Mandela took power in South Africa as its President, that is, at a time when the post-apartheid period was getting under way. By 1994 the time had come for all South Africans to re-invent themselves and their cultural base –their histories, their world-views, their mindsets, their morality, their perceptions. Universalised expectations of post-apartheid South Africa require that renewal to be multi-ethnic in essence and, for all White South Africans, part of the inter-racialisation process involves coming to terms with the past. This is the era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created in part to help dissipate White angst. For the Commission, coming to terms with the past means talking about it; for creative writers, it means writing about it.

If we accept Jacques Derrida's contention that "[t]he point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word" (Derrida 1985: 292), then it must follow that apartheid existed thanks in part to its textualisation in the form of the Nationalist Party's apartheid legislation and discursive works by White South Africans, amongst others. Indeed, up to the time of the dismantling of institutionalised racism in South Africa, contributors to White South African literary discourse had been partly responsible for textualising the apartheid construct. Some White South African writers continue the process even today, presumably inadvertently. Nadine Gordimer, for example, has written about the breakdown of White South African family life in *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and in *The House Gun* (1998), both works reinforcing underlying differences -the mutual Otherness- between members of different racial groups. Van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* is a contribution to the same discourse.

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[2] All references to Van Onselen (1996) are to the James Currey paperback edition, 1997. References to this text will give year and page number(s) only.

Although presented as what might be termed fictionalised social history or social orature, van Onselen's presentation of the story of Kas Maine has obvious literary resonances. David Anderson writes, "[i]t is in the sensitive portrayal of family life in Kas Maine's later years -'the swaying and lifting and sinking of human hearts,' in Du Bois's words- that the power and humanity of van Onselen's writing shines most brightly." (Anderson 1997: 27) What sets *The Seed is Mine* apart from other literary contributions, however, is the fact that this is a narrative written by an Afrikaner in praise of a Sotho man. Is van Onselen, then, laying the foundations for a new all-race discourse for the new South Africa? Is *The Seed is Mine* an early contribution to the textualisation of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, post-apartheid construct?

The point about van Onselen's biography is that it is a hybrid text. Based on years of research into oral histories carried out in the field by a team from the University of the Witwatersrand, *The Seed is Mine* is a report on their findings. At the same time, *The Seed is Mine* is a creative work, filled with characterisations, evocative descriptions of setting, moods and feelings. Moreover, like any other literary text, *The Seed is Mine* derives its dynamics from empowered constructs. Kas Maine, the central figure in the study, is empowered by the author who places his Black protagonist at the very centre of his broad narrational canvas. In turn, van Onselen, skilled field sociologist and Kas's creator, empowers himself by observing Kas's every move from a distance, controlling the reader's perception of his Black character down to the smallest detail of his behaviour.

The life history of Kas Maine, beginning in 1894 and ending in 1985, stretches from the Anglo-Boer war to almost the end of apartheid and parallels the grim history of White-on-Black racism in South Africa. But the story is of a man and his family who remained on the very edges of the vision of all other South Africans, out of sight, out of mind, and almost beyond the power of White domination. Kas Maine's entrepreneurial expertise and innate management skills enable him to position himself between the Black farm labourer and the White, Afrikaner land-owner. Van Onselen writes, "[t]he gods delighted in confining him [Kas Maine] to the middle ground –too skilled and too wealthy to be a mere subsistence farmer, and too black and too poor to become a capitalist– no one knew exactly where the boundaries lay." (1997: 459)

Ever imaginative, creative and resourceful, an arch-bricoleur with a strong gift for negotiating a deal, Kas Maine steers his household from property to property, first in the Bloemhof – Schweizer-Reneke – Wolmaransstad Triangle, then in the Klerksdorp district, later on Catherine Monnakgotla's location at the western end of the Witwatersrand hills near Boons and finally further north at Ledig, a resettlement camp, on the plains skirting the southern rim of the Pilanesberg hills, next to Sun City, where he dies. Known as "*Ou Koop en Verkoop*" –Afrikaans for "Old Mr. Buy and Sell"– Kas buys and sells his way through life, always keeping something in reserve but always prepared to take risks whenever he feels it necessary or expedient. In his early and middle years he buys stock and draft animals for his ploughs; with the coming of motorised transport, he buys a car and a lorry and, to his wife's despair, seemingly mesmerized by machinery, he buys his fifth tractor at the age of eighty-six, having taken a Mobil Oil course on tractor maintenance at the age of seventy-one, although he never learned to drive one!

Wily and irascible, Kas Maine lives on his wits. As he grows older, Kas looks on helplessly and disapprovingly as his children are drawn away from the family shack to jobs in the mines and in domestic service for White families. But unlike his children's and grand-children's destinies, Kas Maine's own is not linked to the iniquities of White racist society. Kas is a man of Nature who lives out of reach of the vindictiveness and sadism of inhuman oppression and White control. As the narrator observes, Kas Maine "*knew* how to farm grain,"[3] (1997: 506) and the author can scarcely conceal his unwavering admiration for Kas when he writes:

> For anyone to have reaped such a large harvest on the depleted soils of a Pilanesberg labour reserve in the 1980s was an achievement. For an octogenarian with faltering eyesight and declining physical powers to have done so without the assistance of male offspring was extraordinary. (1997: 509)

In *The Seed is Mine*, authorial admiration is one facet of authorial power and one instrument of authorial control. Van Onselen's power and control over his central character is absolute; he fetishises Kas Maine. Bill Nasson calls van Onselen's Kas Maine "Old Kas [...] the prehistory of South Africa's black working class." (Nasson 1996: 4) Indeed, there is something primeval, eternal, stereotypical even, about the image van Onselen creates and leaves us with. Reminiscent of J.M. Coetzee's futuristic Michael K,[4] Kas Maine is at one with the South African world, a dot on the landscape, indistinguishable from the brownness of the soil he is tilling and dwarfed by the clouds that billow above him. If one were to paint a portrait of Kas Maine, it would be of a man ploughing, drawn through the highveld breeze by a span of oxen, striding over the deep furrows of a vast field, with cumulus clouds, the bringers of life-giving rains, towering over the distant hills. In "Racism's Last Word", Jacques Derrida warns about such images. Writing for the catalogue of the *Art contre/against Apartheid* exhibition,[5] Derrida observed ominously that,

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[3] Van Onselen's emphasis.

[4] See J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983).

> Here the single work is multiple, it crosses all national, cultural, and political frontiers. It neither commemorates nor represents an event. Rather, it casts a continuous gaze (paintings are always gazing) at what I propose to name a continent. [...]
>
> Beyond a continent whose limits they point to, the limits surrounding it or crossing through it, the paintings gaze and call out in silence.
>
> And their silence is just. A discourse would once again compel us to reckon with the present state of force and law. It would draw up contracts, dialecticize itself, let itself be reappropriated again.
>
> This silence calls out unconditionally; it keeps watch on that which is not, on that which is not yet, and on the chance of still remembering some faithful day. (Derrida 1985: 299)

In post-apartheid South Africa today, there is just such a silence. The danger of such a silence, according to Derrida, is that it can be broken; that once the current distribution of power is assessed and quantified, a new discourse can be articulated and will fall under the domination of the previous articulators. The danger in van Onselen's creation is that it might herald a new White, European, neo-colonialist discourse. Derrida stated that "racism is a Western thing," (Derrida 1985: 293) and later, that "the name of apartheid has managed to become a sinister swelling on the body of the world only in that place where *homo politicus europaeus* first put his signature on its tattoo." (Derrida 1985: 294) The question today is: Is *homo politicus europaeus* now trying to put his signature on the post-apartheid tattoo?

Perceived with authorial magnanimity, presented with the expansiveness of a Tolstoyan prose landscape and paced by the seasons themselves, van Onselen's image of Kas Maine takes on the attributes of an icon. The problem with this is that the act of writing textualises constructs, providing them with their essence. Apartheid was a construct textualised by White South Africans to achieve White supremacy in South Africa. In his essay "White Racism and Black Consciousness", Steve Biko complained about White liberals and asked: "Since they are aware that the problem in this country is white racism, why do they not address themselves to a white world? Why do they insist on talking to Blacks?" (Biko 1979: 65) In his complaint, Biko sensed the power and pitfalls of textualising constructs; the apartheid construct was oxygenised through texts on racial segregation and integration, or even simply through narratives about relationships between members of different ethnic groups in South Africa. To what extent, then, is Charles van Onselen's textualisation of Kas Maine not only a well-documented and beautifully-narrated Black South African sharecropper's history but also a construct of racialism? To what extent is van Onselen's presentation of Kas Maine, Black South African sharecropper, a eurocentric act?

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[5] The *Art contre/against Apartheid* exhibition opened in Paris in November 1983.

This is not to cast aspersions on van Onselen's intentions. However, the fact remains that written text has a power of its own and can work in realms beyond the domain of the author. Just as the texts of White liberal anti-apartheid writers like Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, J.M. Coetzee and Alan Paton, among many others, must bear some responsibility for the textualisation of apartheid, so it might be argued that *The Seed is Mine* perpetuates the textualisation of racial differentiation in post-apartheid South Africa. If we follow Biko, White South Africans would do well to restrict themselves to writing to White South Africans. However, according to the current dispensation, any new strategy should strive for a construct based on racial *integration*, not racial segregation. But in this there is an inherent contradiction, namely, how can multi-racialism or inter-racialism as discursive constructs in any "rainbow society" be contributed to by textualisations of topics which are not themselves multi-racial or inter-racial, that is, integrationist? An integrationist textualisation has already begun with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996: 3) which makes "Non-racialism and non-sexism" one of its Founding Provisions. What concerns us here is whether van Onselen's account of Kas Maine's story textualises segregation or integration.

It is significant that the Founding Provisions of the new South African Constitution place non-racialism and non-sexism side by side, on a par. The link between racialism and sexism, and by extension racial and sexual discrimination, is a fundamental one. In his *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, Ronald Hyam argues convincingly that "[s]ex is at the very heart of racism," (Hyam 1992: 203) that sexuality is the basis of the colonial impulse and of the White man's desire for supremacy in South Africa. By textualising inter-racial relationships in South Africa, contributions to the White South African literary discourse have given rise to race-differentiated sexualities. For this reason, any contribution to the White South African literary discourse, such as *The Seed is Mine*, is especially significant; an analysis of such texts will reveal whether the textualisation of the post-apartheid enhances racial and supremacist constructs in South Africa by revealing differences in White and Black sexualities. In short, does van Onselen control Kas Maine's sexuality?

Van Onselen's presentation of Kas Maine's sexuality is important. To a certain extent, *The Seed is Mine* is a White South African male's presentation of a Black South African male's sexuality. Van Onselen presents Kas Maine as a traditionalist, who adheres strictly to and seeks to uphold his male rights as patriarch and *ngaka* (a traditional herbalist). Kas manipulates his daughters into marriage contracts in order to safeguard family unity. When his younger son Bodule marries Dikeledi Teeu without his approval, Kas is distraught because Bodule is using bridewealth before his eldest son has married. "How could a father dispose of bridewealth for a younger son when he had not yet secured a wife for his oldest?" (1997: 345) As Kas rides to the Teeu homestead at Vlakfontein, van Onselen reasons narrationally on Kas's behalf:

> If Abner Teeu [Dikeledi's father] would accept eight cattle as half the amount due to him as bridewealth for Dikeledi, then Kas would offer him an additional sum of fifty pounds in cash as *bohadi* for the younger sister, Disebo, who could then marry Mmusetsi. Dikeledi must then return home for the birth of her child and be taken care of by her family until the Maines had the eight outstanding cattle. When Dikeledi was ready to rejoin her husband, Kas would make the final payment on the *bohadi* and both sisters could join the Maine homestead. (1997: 346)

In this way, van Onselen allows his authorial power to dominate his creation by taking over Kas's gender responsibilities and giving him 'thoughts' as an archetypal Black South African patriarch in the throes of managing the bride-price game. Such authorial control is evident again in the description of Kas's activities at his brother Phitise's funeral wake. Van Onselen describes in graphic terms how the eighty-nine-year-old Kas, as patriarch and *ngaka*, takes control of the proceedings:

> On Sunday Kas was up long before the rest. Shortly after 6 a.m. he supervised the slaughtering of the beast. The heifer was slit open and the partially digested grass removed from the first of its stomachs and blended with the contents of the gall bladder and some herbs and water to produce a thick dark-green liquid, *moshwang*. At Kas's request, the animal's head was put to one side to be taken back to Ledig while the carcass was removed and butchered into more manageable portions. Shortly thereafter, a long wooden pole was produced, a few of the men commenced roasting selected cuts of meat, while others propped up the pole as a makeshift seat for those who were about to be 'washed'.
>
> Kas, Sellwane and her son by a first marriage, Michael Abrams, stripped down to their undergarments, re-entered the yard, and took up positions on the pole. Two nephews, Kgofu and Hwai, both practising *ngakas*, appeared with bowls of *moshwang*, which they poured on the heads of the three on the pole and rubbed it into their hair; more *moshwang* was used to wash their feet. The *ngakas* then produced a bottle containing a mixture of animal fat and herbs, which they rubbed

> into their torsos. The three family representatives were then taken aside and offered smoked liver; this completed the ritual and signalled everyone present to partake of the meat, sour porridge, samp, vegetables and sorghum beer that the women had prepared. (1997: 517-518)

However, at this point in the so-far objective description of the ritual in which Kas Maine expresses his masculine power as patriarch and *ngaka*, van Onselen reveals his own power over Kas's social obligations by providing him with thoughts for the reader to interpret:

> On the way home, Kas thought approvingly about these rituals, which not only propitiated the ancestors and protected the children, but drew together those who followed, and heightened the family's kinship and solidarity in a world intent on dissolving their bonds. (1997: 518)

The distinction between factual narrative and fictionalised narrative is a fine one and a dangerous one in such texts where they become so closely interrelated as to be virtually indistinguishable.

In "Racism's Last Word", Derrida warns of the dangers inherent in such narratives. He perceives the belief that "[t]he white must not let itself be touched by black, be it even at the remove of language or symbol" as a mark of "the obsessiveness of (…) racism" and "the compulsive terror [of the racist] which (…) forbids contact." (Derrida 1985: 294) However, by intertwining factual and fictional narrative, van Onselen shows himself to be sufficiently enlightened to shrug off 'the compulsive terror which forbids all contact' and to allow himself to touch a black 'at the remove of language'. But the author also reveals himself to be incapable of suppressing his narrational dominance over his subject / creation, exceeding himself by hijacking Kas's gender and social roles. Yet this control manifests itself only at a cerebral level; van Onselen limits himself to getting inside Kas's head and reading his mind. Ironically and revealingly, the only time the author presents himself in potential physical contact with Kas is as he stands, like an angel, at Kas's graveside, when all contact is pointless. Without naming himself, van Onselen describes how,

> A tall white man, one of Kas's friends, slipped into the back of the gathering, and he, too, spoke [...]
>
> But not everybody left. The tall white man stayed behind and waited until the cemetery emptied. A slight breeze had sprung up; it was an October day. He reached down, picked up a handful of earth and walked across to the grave. With the wind gently spraying the grains of sand that trickled from his hand, he looked down, made a silent promise and then turned to leave. (1997: 532)

The promise made by Charles van Onselen to Kas Maine was no doubt that he would see to it that his story was told. The question arises, then, whether or not van Onselen's account of the Black South African sharecropper is what Jonathan Culler has termed a "critique of conscience"?[6] By writing about a Black Sotho sharecropper, van Onselen allows himself to be 'touched by black at the remove of language', to paraphrase Derrida, a violation of deeply-held and preeminently moral principles of the former apartheid society, to paraphrase Culler. By presenting himself at Kas's graveside, is van Onselen confronting his own 'guilt' just as Mark Twain made Huckleberry Finn confront his by helping Jim to escape? In the case of *The Seed is Mine*, is authorial 'conscience' the focus of the 'critique'?

Jacques Derrida writes, "it is necessary to appeal unconditionally to the future of another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present."(Derrida 1985: 298) Derrida is right –'another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present' needs to be textualised to replace the textualisation of apartheid, but what should that construct be? Derrida also contends correctly that "there's no racism without a language."(Derrida 1985: 294) But one might add with the same reasoning that there can be no anti-racism or multi-culturalism 'without a language.' Yet, *The Seed is Mine*, characterised by overt authorial power manifested through total control over both narrative and characterisation, features of literary discourse firmly rooted in South Africa's past, does not, to my mind, contribute to any post-apartheid force.

What, then, does the textualisation of Kas Maine tell us, if anything, about the shifts in power in White South African discourse? Van Onselen is still textualising race differentiation; by writing about a Black sharecropper, he is underlining racial difference. Van Onselen writes about Kas Maine because he is a Black South African, not because he is a sharecropper –there are still millions of sharecroppers all over the world– and not because he is a victim of apartheid –again there are millions of apartheid victims all over the world. Van Onselen writes about Kas Maine because of his skin-colour. What is really worrisome, however, is the very brief epilogue to this 535-page text. Kas Maine died on 25th. September 1985. In the "Epilogue," van Onselen describes in moving terms the situation of the late patriarch's offspring in 1994, the year Mandela became President of South Africa:

> Mosala Maine along with his wife and children lives in a tumble-down mud shack in Ledig on the stand his father bought for him, eking out a living from occasional construction work in and around the township. [...]

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[6] See Jonathan Culler, "The Authority of the Classics", Inaugural lecture, *Canon Literari: Ordre i Subversió*, University of Lleida, Catalunya, Spain, March 1996. Citing Huckleberry Finn's struggle to resist his society's racial assumptions and deeply-held, preeminently moral principles such as slave ownership, the violation of which Huck believes to be morally wrong, that is, his "conscience," Jonathan Culler refers to Huck's confrontation with his "guilt" at helping Jim to escape and labels it Mark Twain's "critique of conscience".

> Of Kas and Leetwane Maine's tin shack on the conical hill at Ledig there is now no outward sign. The yard has long since been cleared of rusting ploughs, scraps of metal, bits of fencing and broken-down carts, and where the shack once stood, there is a modest two-roomed breeze-block cottage which Ntholeng –with Mosala's help– is gradually adding to on her occasional visits to Ledig. It is hard to open and shut the back door, its metal frame having been badly bent during careless building operations. At present the cottage lacks a ceiling and the roof, fashioned from the very corrugated-iron sheets that once framed Kas and Leetwane's home, has rusted through. As the sun pours in through scores of tiny holes, it leaves an irregular mottled pattern on the grey concrete floor. Shades amongst the shades. (1997: 534-535)

What is disturbing is not the strong *déjà-vu* feel of these images but the terrible realisation on the part of the reader that these images might contribute to the textualisation of a post-apartheid construct. The immense danger is that, as they did for apartheid, contributors to the new South Africa's literary discourse will help perpetuate a construct only slightly transformed from what Derrida has called "the most racist of racisms."(Derrida 1985: 291) Van Onselen's last sentence before the "Epilogue" gives Kas's creator away,

> On the way back to the Witwatersrand he [the author himself] noticed the first heavy clouds of the new season rolling in from the south, and in a small field beside the Tlhabane road, there was a man planting beans. (1997: 532)

Van Onselen does not mention the skin-colour of the man planting beans, but there is no need –we know he is Black, one of Kas Maine's long line of Black South African descendants who need to go on planting beans into the future because the species has been textualised as such. In short, as a literary text, van Onselen's narration of Kas Maine's story prolongs the apartheid construct into the post-apartheid era. In this sense, as literature, *The Seed is Mine* is a devious text; indeed, South Africa's painful history, while not to be forgotten, must not be allowed to obfuscate new projections and obstruct strategies for their emplacement.

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