Synergies

A Journal of English Literatures and Cultures

II, 2021

Periodico annuale

già Anglistica Pisana

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Pisa n. 31 del 1 dicembre 2004

Gli articoli pubblicati sono sottoposti a referaggio 'cieco'.
Double-blind peer-reviewed annual journal.

Synergies

A Journal of English Literatures and Cultures

II, 2021

Edizioni ETS

www.edizioniets.com

Abbonamenti, comprese spese di spedizione / *Subscription (incl. shipping charges)*
print, individual: Italy € 30,00 / Abroad € 40,00
print, institutional: Italy € 40,00 / Abroad € 50,00
digital edition: individual € 25,00 / institutional € 35,00
single article PDF: € 6,00

EDIZIONI ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com

Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN 978-884676336-5
ISSN 2785-1850

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Miscellaneous Articles

9 The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", and "The Canterville Ghost": Laws of Desire, Counter-Fictions, and Counter-Fantasies
Michael F. Davis

25 'Weak' Encounters: Walcott's Refiguring of Crusoe in "The Castaway", "Crusoe's Island", and "Crusoe's Journal"
Fausto Ciompi

35 Dystopia Revisited: Environmental Issues in Kirsty Logan's *The Gracekeepers*
Roberta Ferrari

45 The All-Female Revolution in Seamus Heaney's *North*
Lia Pacini

Notes & Reviews

65 Review of Elisa Segnini, *Fragments, Genius and Madness: Masks and Mask-Making in the fin-de-siècle Imagination*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2021
Giulio Milone

MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES

Michael F. Davis*

The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", and "The Canterville Ghost": Laws of Desire, Counter-Fictions, and Counter-Fantasies

Abstract: This essay argues that Oscar Wilde's story "The Canterville Ghost", written in 1886 and published in February and March of 1887, was a response to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 (to which was appended the now famous Labouchère Amendment outlawing 'gross indecency' between men) and more particularly to W.T. Stead's scandalous newspaper story, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", written in support of the bill and published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July of 1885. Wilde takes the central plot of Stead's sensational story of older men pursuing young virgins into secret chambers in order to victimise them and radically inverts it. In doing so he inverts not only a patriarchal ideology and an associated psychology, but also one of their major corollaries, the prohibition of same-sex desire. In its place he proposes a counter-fiction that authorises a counter-fantasy.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. "The Canterville Ghost". Criminal Law Amendment Act. Sexuality.

> The originality which we ask of the artist is originality of treatment, not of subject […] it is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything.
>
> O. Wilde, "*Olivia* at the Lyceum" (1885)

It is by now a commonplace of Oscar Wilde studies that it was under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and its now notorious Labouchère Amendment, which criminalised 'gross indecency' between men, that, following his unsuccessful libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry in 1895, Wilde was prosecuted by the Crown, found guilty, and imprisoned for two years, an experience that would lead, just a few years after his release, to his ignominious death in Paris in 1900. Shortly before his death, Wilde singled out the law by name and noted its significance: "the road is long and red with monstrous martyrdoms. Nothing but the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act would do any good".[1] Even when the Act was originally passed a good decade earlier in 1885, it must have had a major effect on Wilde's mind and life. As Nicholas Frankel has recently put it, "Section II of the Criminal Law Amendment Act had the profoundest impact on the subsequent course of Wilde's life and career".[2] Although Wilde had married Constance Lloyd in the previous

* Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY. Email: davismf@lemoyne.edu

[1] O. Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds M. Holland and R. Hart-Davis, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 2000, p. 1044.

[2] N. Frankel, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard U.P., 2020, p. 18.

 DOI: 10.4454/syn.v2.392

year, 1884, and promptly sired two sons in 1885 and 1886 respectively, he was also at this same time beginning to take up a new, minority, and dissident sexual position, if not a new sexual subjectivity. He fell in love with Cambridge undergraduate Harry Marillier in 1885 and began his first significant relationship with a man, Robbie Ross, in 1886.[3] Again, as Frankel writes, "What seems indisputable […] is that Wilde's affair with Ross brought him into conflict with a harsh new law criminalizing 'gross indecency' between men that came into effect in 1885".[4] How Wilde responded to that conflict, however, seems to be more disputable. On the one hand, Richard Ellmann thought that Wilde's coming into his same-sex sexuality at this time actually galvanised him: "homosexual love roused him from pasteboard conformity to the expression of latent desires. After 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent".[5] On the other hand, Frankel sees a more timorous Wilde in retreat from the new law and victimised by it, noting that "[i]nsofar as Wilde's short fiction was concerned, in concert with his affair with Ross, the statute activated a newfound sense that love must be pursued in secret, illicitly, because it conflicted with the strictures of the state", and then proposing in direct rejoinder to Ellmann, "It seems just as likely that, in light of his affairs with Ross and other men, the new criminal statute exacerbated in Wilde a sense of himself as one of society's victims, precipitating a fisherman-like conflict between his desires and his 'soul'".[6] Wilde was himself a contradictory figure, delighting in contradiction, and so it is perhaps even more likely that he was *both* galvanised by his new sexuality in the face of this new law, as Ellmann suggests, *and* at the same time more secretive and circumspect about it, as Frankel does.

While Wilde does not appear to have registered a spontaneous and explicit reaction to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, either in his correspondence or in any other personal writings, I would like to propose here that he did respond to it in a considered and implicit way, at once directly and indirectly, forcefully and obliquely, in the writing of his most substantial piece of prose fiction to date, "The Canterville Ghost", which he very likely began in 1886 and published in early 1887. Specifically, I would like to suggest that he responded to the main section of the Act, officially "Section I", which regulated sexual relations between older men and younger girls, rather than the Labouchère Amendment, officially "Section II", which regulated sexual relations between men, though in responding to Section I he was also responding indirectly to Section II. In engaging with the head of the beast he was also engaging with the tail.[7]

Still more specifically, I want to argue that Wilde was responding to W.T. Stead's sensational newspaper story published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1885, an early if not the first instance of scandal journalism, written to generate support for and spur the passage of the bill, well before the Labouchère Amendment/Section II was proposed. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* splashed over the pages of his newspaper a week-long exposé on the

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 4. See also *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 266-74.

[4] N. FRANKEL, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, p. 17.

[5] R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, New York, Random House, 1987, p. 278.

[6] N. FRANKEL, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, p. 18.

[7] In his recent biography of Wilde, Matthew Sturgis has suggested that the death of architect-designer E.W. Godwin might have prompted Wilde to write his gothic story as "an *hommage*" to his friend. See M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018, p. 346. This seems to me a rather simplistic account of literary inspiration in general and of Wilde's motivations in particular. It underestimates how Wilde responded to the world around him and what he undertook to do in his work.

London traffic in young girls, aged eleven to fifteen, with a particular and even fetishistic focus on the traffic in hapless young virgins and with the aim of garnering support for the bill that proposed to raise the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen. The exposé, titled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", runs to about one hundred and fifty pages in a modern book reprint and describes, in sundry and sordid detail, the whole scurrilous operation in which young girls were procured, assignations with older men arranged, and violations carried out, often in secret chambers. Stead even procured a virgin himself in order to show how easy it was, something for which he was subsequently tried. More than anything else, it was the Stead story that animated the bill and brought its issues into public discourse and the public imagination.

While the bill and the supporting Stead story might appear to have been progressive efforts to protect against the victimisation of vulnerable young girls, the bill itself was the result of the work of the growing middle-class social purity movement of the 1860s and 1870s, while the complementary story was the ardent intervention of a notorious middle-class 'Puritan'.[8] If Wilde took a literary or imaginative interest in these two, legal and journalistic stories respectively, and their shared motif and narrative trope of the victimisation of young girls, it was in part, no doubt, because he recognised them as clear and problematic signs of an emergent Victorian middle-class ideology exercising its new-found power as a part of the regulatory apparatus to legislate and otherwise control moral and sexual life, signs only confirmed by the later addition of the Labouchère Amendment, which of course would legislate and thus regulate sex between men.[9] But if Wilde took a literary and imaginative interest in these stories, it was in larger part, I think, because he recognised in them the operation of not merely the juridical (regulatory) law of desire but also, and more significantly, the psychoanalytic and anthropological (structuring) law of desire, namely, the *law of the father's* desire. These stories retold and thus reinscribed in the cultural imagination the old plot of predatory men and victimised virgins, the plot essentially of patriarchy, while the Labouchère Amendment reasserted and reinscribed one of patriarchy's most fundamental corollaries, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss at least—the prohibition of same-sex desire.[10] Thus, when Wilde radically inverts or controverts that plot, as I think he does in "The Canterville Ghost", he inverts and controverts not only the one, juridical plot but also the other, deeper anthropological and psychoanalytic plot, and with it, theoretically at least, that fundamental corollary. Further, Wilde gives us in its place both a counter-fiction and a counter-fantasy, of a phallic virgin subduing and even castrating a three-hundred-year-old ghost, an alternative fiction and alternative fantasy that, in turn, authorise the same-sex fantasy.

[8] See A.E. SIMPSON, "Organized Prostitution in 19th Century England: Legal Campaigns and the Origins of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885", Introduction to W.T. STEAD, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, originally published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4-10, 1885, ed. A.E. SIMPSON, Lambertville (NJ), The True Bill Press, 2007, pp. 9-49. Havelock Ellis wrote of Stead: "In his life and actions he was undoubtedly a rigid moral Puritan and his strong self-control kept him in the narrow path" (quoted in F. WHYTE, *The Life of W.T. Stead*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1925, Vol. II, pp. 341-42). Wilde will take up the theme of puritanism explicitly in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

[9] This was not the first or last time that the sex lives of children have been invoked to regulate the sex lives of adults.

[10] As the great twentieth-century anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would show, patriarchal systems are constructed and perpetuated by the exchange of women between men.

Wilde had begun his professional career about five years earlier as something of a critic. Although he had published a volume of poetry in 1881 – in which, incidentally, he had indicated an early interest in the topic of same-sex desire, perhaps most notably in the long poem *Charmides* – he set out in that same year on his now famous tour of America in which he took up the persona of a public intellectual and positioned himself as an aesthetic and cultural critic. While touring America, he not only gave public talks upon a variety of prepared subjects on art and aesthetics, but also made a number of astute observations about American culture. Not unlike de Tocqueville earlier in the century, he was able to perceive and identify many of the most salient characteristics of American experience, which he encapsulated in witty aphorisms and often deployed and redeployed in his works, including, of course, "The Canterville Ghost", which includes sharp observations about American materialism and American pragmatism, in which he anticipates by a few years the pragmatic philosophy of William James. Of course, in this story, Wilde is also noting and responding to the demographic phenomenon of rich American girls coming to England to marry into the English aristocracy in the mid-1880s, in which he parallels the fiction of Henry James. Following his return from America, Wilde took his tour through the UK before settling down as a so-called 'journalist' in London. There he was a regular reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Dramatic Review*, for which he wrote theatre reviews, as well as an occasional contributor to other journals like *The Court and Society Review*, in which he would first publish "The Canterville Ghost" in two parts in February and March of 1887. He would become the editor of the *Woman's World* magazine in that same year, 1887. Both during his tours and later as a journalist Wilde was very much a public figure actively engaged with the world around him, keenly aware of contemporary cultural issues and sharply attuned to ideological structures. By the end of the decade, with the publication of *Intentions* in 1891, he would become a major critical theorist, not only deftly handling some very large ideas, from the Greeks to the present, but also and more often than not turning them on their heads. There can be little question that if Wilde was a critical theorist, he was more particularly a contrarian theorist. While there are many examples of Wilde's witty reversals, perhaps the largest was his reversal of the most fundamental principle of western aesthetics, Aristotle's idea, advanced in *The Poetics,* that art imitates life, Wilde counter-proposing in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) that life might imitate art. Notably, in that novel, Wilde was also concerned to overturn the psychological structure of the Ego, the Id, and the Superego, well before Freud even described them. Wilde had art do the work of sublimating not the Id (as perhaps it had throughout much of history) but the Superego, thus permitting him to conceptualise an Ego founded upon the principles of the Id and to work out a notion of the subject of desire, or a subjectivity organised around its desire.[11]

Just at the time that Wilde set out to America in 1881, the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was introduced into Parliament. As indicated above, the bill was the result of the growing social purity movement of the 1860s and 1870s, and it proposed several legal reforms to protect young girls from the predation of older men, including raising the age of consent

[11] It was actually Walter Pater who first conceptualised such a subjectivity in his review essay "Poems by William Morris". See my "Walter Pater's Dialectical History of (Same-Sex) Desire: Queer Conclusions", in A.-F. GILLARD-ESTRADA, M. LAMBERT-CHARBONNIER and C. RIBEYROL (eds), *Testing New Opinions and Courting New Impressions: New Perspectives on Walter Pater*, New York, Routledge, 2017, pp. 148-65.

for girls from thirteen – to which it had only recently been raised from the age of twelve, set by the Common Law of the eighteenth century – to sixteen, and providing for the prosecution of brothel keepers. The course of Wilde's early professional life was paralleled by the course of the bill's parliamentary life. Just as Wilde's career might be said to have languished, so did the bill's, finding little or no traction for four years. Then in July 1885, W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to which Wilde was a contributor at the time, published his sensational story aimed at rescuing the flailing bill and pressuring a reluctant Parliament to pass it into law. The story dominated the paper for a week, fixed a set of narrative tropes in the public imagination, and actually succeeded in spurring the eventual passage of the bill, together with the eleventh-hour Labouchère Amendment.

Wilde was poised to notice, register the significance of, and react to the bill and the supporting Stead story. At the time he was not only living and working in London but also, as indicated above, working as a regular contributor to the *Pall Mall Gazette*.[12] Even if Wilde had not been contributing to the paper at the time, he could hardly have missed the biggest story in London that week and perhaps the whole summer, especially as a first and no doubt shocking instance of scandal journalism. Further, the bill and the story would have had special interest for Wilde: a juridical interest, insofar as they concerned the government's regulation of male desire, which might lead to the regulation of other kinds of such a desire – as of course the bill eventually did with the later addition of the Labouchère Amendment, just at a time when Wilde was coming into his own same-sex subjectivity – but also, and moreover, a literary and psychological interest. First, Wilde would have recognised the story of old men pursuing young maidens as the fundamental, structuring story of patriarchy, and so have seen an opportunity to overturn it and the ideology it reinscribed. Of course, insofar as the story of patriarchy, or the law of the father, is also the narrative of compulsory heterosexuality, he would have seen a chance to overturn it, in a gesture that would have had not only public and social, but also personal and psychological value. He could rewrite the major cultural narrative and at the same time (re)write a personal narrative and give imaginative expression to an alternative narrative and structure of desire. Indeed, while Wilde might be responding most directly to a public story, it was surely in large part because it resonated so deeply with his own personal story. And I think there can be little question that Wilde is working out here his personal relations both to his virgin sister Isola – who died at nine years old when Wilde himself was just twelve and in whom he had a fundamental psycho-sexual investment ("all my life's buried here", he wrote upon her death) and whose death, more than anything it seems, helped to shape his psycho-sexual subjectivity – and to their father, William Wilde.[13] Wilde would represent a string of adolescent virgin girls entering into sexuality from "The Canterville Ghost" (1887) and "The Birthday of the Infanta" (1889) to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) and *Salome* (1892) in an effort to work through issues of fe/male sexuality, an effort that is, to be sure, more oblique in the first two texts but certainly more obvious in the last two. Further, he surely would have recognised the story of old men pursuing young vir-

[12] "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" ran in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4-10, 1885; Wilde wrote a letter from his Tite Street home, postmarked 8 July 1885 (see *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 263), putting him in London at the time.

[13] See Richard Ellmann's account of Wilde's experience of his sister Isola's death. Also, see my "Oscar Wilde's *Las Meninas*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl", in M.F. Davis and P. Dierkes-Thrun (eds), *Wilde's Other Worlds*, New York and London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 110-33.

gins into dark spaces and secret chambers where they victimised them as the primary plot device of Gothic literature from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* on.[14] Stead, who was himself an occultist who was said to have predicted his own death, a theme Wilde takes up in his next story, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" (1887), recounts the sensational plot of the procurement of and subsequent pursuit of virgins in the recurring hallmark language and distinctive imagery of the gothic mode.[15] He repeatedly describes these scenes in the sensational terms of 'horror'. Stead's newspaper story reads much like a gothic novel. To what extent, we might ask, were the Bill and the Stead story, the Act and its now notorious Amendment, themselves 'gothic fictions', with the new sensational horror stories being told by the rising middle class as it assumed its new role as a part of the regulatory apparatus, of policing and controlling moral and sexual life?[16]

Wilde's taking up of the mock-gothic mode in "The Canterville Ghost" was in many ways overdetermined. Although above I described Wilde's early development as a critic in order to establish his fundamental critical temperament, he was of course also an artist, and as his 1890 essay "The Critic as Artist" makes clear, often both at once. The criticism is often artistic and the art often critical. In the period from 1881 to 1885 and beyond, Wilde experimented in a number of different literary genres and modes, including a variety of poetries, dramas and fictions, in part, as the criticism has had it, because he was a fledgling artist trying and failing to find his stride, but in larger part I think because from an early age, just as he perceived the structures of ideology, he also perceived the structures and conventions of genres and understood that the structures and conventions of one were often implicated in the structures and conventions of the other and, moreover, that a strong enough mind might intervene in and contravene them. If the bill and the Stead story especially presented a kind of gothic fiction that reinscribed the plot of patriarchy, then the mock gothic might well be the most 'appropriate form', to recall Coleridge, to redress them. Further, while the gothic might have often reproduced the plot of patriarchy, it often did so precisely in order to expose, resist, and thwart that plot, the female victims often seen fleeing from and struggling against their pursuers. We might read Wilde's taking up of the mock-gothic mode, then, as both participating in and, of course, in true Wildean fashion, revising or even radicalising that tradition. In addition, the gothic was from its inception a privileged mode for the exploration of the unconscious and of desire. In the words of George E. Haggerty, "Gothic impulses are connected to the secrecies of private desire", and, as Haggerty goes on to suggest, to the exploration of queer desire.[17] When Wilde's story takes its medial turn from the mockery of the ghost to the elopement of the ghost and Virginia behind the wainscoting, it shifts in tone from the comic to the serious, as it tries to address the deeper, more serious issues of what I think is a fundamentally psycho-

[14] As George E. Haggerty puts it, "Walpole establishes this image of the victimized female – very much the object of sexual victimization – as a central Gothic trope" (G.E. HAGGERTY, "Gothic Fiction and Queer Theory", in J.E. HOGLE and R. MILES [eds], *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2019, p. 151).

[15] Stead would die on the *Titanic* in 1912.

[16] This could well be an instance of what Sue Chaplin describes as the gothic "inhabit[ing] or possess[ing] the rule of law". For more on the relation between the Gothic and the law, see S. CHAPLIN, *The Gothic and the Rule of Law, 1764-1820*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. For more on the relation between the Gothic, the law, and the queer in *fin-de-siècle* Britain, see J. MUSTAFA, "Strange Cases of the Queer Fin de Siècle", in A. HAEFELE-THOMAS (ed.), *The Queer Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P. [forthcoming].

[17] See G.E. HAGGERTY, "Gothic Fiction and Queer Theory".

analytic (genital and familial) rather than social (discursively constructed) understanding of sexuality. Indeed, the gothic is, as David Punter has observed, a domestic genre concerned with the family drama, just as Freud and psychoanalysis will be. Finally, as a mode or genre concerned with the family drama, it was also fundamentally theatrical, as Walpole himself points out in his preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*: "The rules of drama are almost always observed throughout the conduct of the piece".[18] Thus Wilde could exploit the dramatic and even melodramatic potential of the gothic while also trying his hand again (after *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*) at the theatrical and exploring the question of performativity, calling out the theatricality of the ghost and the essential performativity of the law of the father.

It should come as no surprise to find that Wilde should have responded to this new law and the discourse surrounding it in the experimental way of an *inverse* story and in the *mock* gothic mode, which permitted him to overturn not only the new ideological structure but also, and moreover, a well-established (patriarchal) psychological structure. While Stead had inscribed the one cultural plot and scurrilous story of older men pursuing much younger, hapless virgins into secret chambers where the men victimised them and robbed them of their virginity, all in the interest of provoking Parliament to pass the bill and raise the age of consent to sixteen, Wilde of course constructs the *inverse* plot, taking a fifteen-year-old, empowered virgin as his protagonist, who ultimately accompanies not just an older man but a three-hundred-year-old Renaissance ghost into a secret chamber, where, it is strongly insinuated, she has some sort of intimate intercourse with him. In this intercourse Virginia appears to be the active agent and partner 'ministering' to his needs – she is herself the daughter of a minister of state – and she emerges with her virginity seemingly intact, while the Renaissance ghost 'dies', perhaps in the full Renaissance sense of that word.

There is a lot to unpack here. To begin, given the recent cultural context of Stead's scandalous "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" and the Act that followed fast upon it, Wilde's decision to make his protagonist a fifteen-year-old-virgin is significant.[19] It appears to be a reference to Stead and the Act that is at once ironic and subversive, the Act having passed into law in the autumn of 1885 and gone into effect in January 1886, officially raising the age of consent to sixteen, only months before Wilde sat down to write the story in late 1886. In a way, then, Wilde is pulling a 'character' out from Stead and out from under the law in order to illicitly reimagine and redeploy her. Here is a place where we can appreciate Ellmann's observation about Wilde, that "[a]fter 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent".[20] Wilde not only takes a fifteen-year-old virgin as his protagonist but wrily and blatantly points to her virginity by naming her, in a symbolic and perhaps even allegorical vein, 'Virginia', a name he astonishingly reiterates fifty-one times over the course of the story.[21] Wilde is not only pointing to her virginity here but also marking it out, not as the sort of hapless virginity we see in

[18] H. WALPOLE, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W.S. LEWIS, Oxford, OUP, (1764) 1982, p. 4.

[19] Maureen O'Connor notes the "text's frequent references to Virginia's youth—she is barely an adolescent, merely a 'little child'" (M. O'CONNOR, "The Spectre of Genre in 'The Canterville Ghost'", *Irish Studies Review*, 12 [3], 2004, p. 335).

[20] R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 278.

[21] Wilde often uses and foregrounds blatantly symbolic names, including of course both 'Dorian Gray' and 'Ernest Worthing', calling explicit attention to and even dramatising the idea or practice of naming in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Stead, but as a potent, or what we might call 'phallic' virginity. For the name 'Virginia' originated, of course, as a moniker for Elizabeth I, the so-called 'Virgin Queen', a potentate who wielded her virginity like a phallus.[22] Wilde introduces that very moniker into the text as if to underscore the allusion when he says that the ghost "had worn [his suit of armour] with great success at the Kenilworth tournament, and had been highly complimented on it by no less a person than the Virgin Queen herself".[23] And he further reinforces this notion of a phallic virginity when he calls Virginia 'a wonderful Amazon', identifying her with that mythic race of self-sufficient warrior women.

But it is Virginia's connection to Elizabeth I that is more significant in the story and has more conceptual value in and for it. For Wilde develops the reference into a full analogy in which Virginia functions as a kind of modern-day Elizabeth. Of course, while Wilde makes Virginia a phallic virgin, he also makes her an (English-born) American and thus in his characteristic contrarian fashion sets into motion a series of inversions and reversals. Notably, it was Elizabeth I who had initiated the English colonisation of America in the sixteenth century, with the exploration of the "Outer Banks" in 1584, which were promptly called 'Virginia' (now North Carolina) after the Virgin Queen herself, and with the view towards establishing a colony. Wilde appears to point to this colonial event by stipulating that it was precisely the year 1584 in which the Canterville ghost first appeared, as if he were the ghost of Elizabethan England's original colonial crime and Virginia the avenger of that crime, something perhaps like 'Hamlet's sister', a point of psychology I will return to later. In mobilising his own phallic virgin, 'Virginia', and having her travel (back) across the Atlantic to England, Wilde effectively activates the reverse colonial plot of a counter-colonisation. If the sixteenth-century English colonial story was of a well-known Virgin, who wielded her virginity like a phallus and penetrated America – a sexual trope Virginia Woolf would deploy not long after in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, there to lesbian effect – then the nineteenth-century story that Wilde tells some three hundred years later is the inverse story of an unknown American virgin and a 'wonderful Amazon', similarly possessed of the 'phallus' and penetrating both the English landscape and the private spaces of an Elizabethan ghost. Unlike Stead's series of hapless virgins, Wilde's virgin has agency over her sexuality and, far from being victimised by a much older predatory man, is indifferent to his hauntings and, moreover, appears to subdue him.

While Wilde makes his protagonist a fifteen-year-old phallic virgin, he is also keen to sexualise her and to position her at the point of entrance into sexuality. In the very first instance in which Wilde introduces "Miss Virginia E. Otis", he eroticises her as "a little girl of fifteen, lithe and lovely as a fawn", calling attention to her appealing body and identifying her with a young deer, which in the tradition of the Renaissance sonnet was a common figure for the female love object. Further, Wilde's deployment of the early, major image of the blood-stain on the carpet seems to be, among other things, a symbolic suggestion of Virginia's having begun to menstruate and thus to have entered into her sexuality as well as a suggestion of the imminent loss of her virginity. Just after the Otis family arrives, Mrs

[22] Wilde may also have been inspired here by the name 'Eliza Armstrong', which was the real name of the thirteen-year-old virgin whom Stead arranged to procure and abduct himself in his investigation, a name that became public in Stead's trial in September of 1885.

[23] O. WILDE, "The Canterville Ghost", in ID., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, HarperCollins, 2003, p. 190. All further references to the tale are cited from this edition.

Umney escorts them through "a fine Tudor hall into the library" and sits them down to tea before a "large stained-glass window". The setting before the stained-glass window is significant insofar as it establishes both a context for and a clear correspondence with the stain on the floor. That correspondence is both linguistic, Wilde repeating the word 'stain' in very close proximity, and visual, Wilde working in the theatrical terms of dramatic setting and scene design. The stained-glass window is in a perpendicular spatial relation with the blood-stain on the floor, and the family seemingly seated in between. Any avid reader of John Keats – and Wilde was not just any avid reader, but a dedicated acolyte and a brilliant reader – would have noted Keats's own connection in his long gothic poem "The Eve of St Agnes" – set on the eve of the patron saint of virgins and concerned with the sexual initiation of a virgin – between the stained glass in the room and Porphyro's sexual induction (and subsequent abduction) of the virgin Madeline. Keats describes a casement that is elaborately carved "And diamonded with panes of quaint device, / Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes".[24] In describing the stained-glass window, he employs the phrase "quaint device", using the evocative and provocative word 'quaint', which any avid reader of Shakespeare's sonnets would recognise. Once again, Wilde was no average reader, and possibly meant it as an indication of the female genitalia, as if the thin jeweled glass were an image of, or a figure for, both the delicacy and the fragility of female sexuality and a suggestion of its imminent shattering. It is in this context, spatial and symbolic, that the Otises discover the blood-stain on the floor.

Of course, the blood-stain comes and goes, appears and disappears, and so even further suggests menstrual blood or menstruation, though it comes and goes, to be sure, not naturally or biologically: it comes, it is thought, supernaturally, and it goes, we might say, 'practically' or 'materially', when Virginia's older brother, Washington Otis, removes the irremovable stain with "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent". Here Wilde wittily develops the major theme expressed in his subtitle of "a hylo-idealistic romance" – itself a variation on Walpole's attempt to blend "the two kinds of romance: the ancient and the modern"[25] – concerning the encounter between American materialism and English spiritualism, American pragmatism and English idealism. But in having the older brother rub out the stain, Wilde also appears to be developing a major, though less obvious, psychoanalytic theme, the older brother perhaps trying to prevent or at least forestall the younger sister's entrance into sexuality, female castration, gender difference, and, to the extent that Wilde has in mind his own younger sister Isola here, even death.[26] While the older brother's practical efforts seem at first to succeed, they ultimately fail, as the stain soon 'magically' reappears. And so are the complementary psychological efforts destined to fail as well, Wilde himself having to move off of the simple, wry solution of an easy 'scrubbing out' of this psychological stain and undertake the much more involved and serious solution of a deeper 'working out', which he does later in the major, covert action of the story in the private chambers of the ghost. Here, however, Wilde continues to press his irony a step further in carrying out another reversal, now exposing the supernatural

[24] J. KEATS, "The Eve of St Agnes", XXIV, lines 4-5, 1820, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44470/the-eve-of-st-agnes (last accessed on 29 November 2021).

[25] In Walpole's Preface to the Second Edition.

[26] It is perhaps worth noting that the brother-sister trope occurs in *The Castle of Otranto*. It is also important to outline that the trope of the blood-stain and its removal recur in *Salome.*

recurrence of the blood-stain as the practical and material work of the ghost, who comes into the library late at night in order to engage in the art/artifice of repainting the stain. But this too has psychological or psychoanalytic implications. While the figure of the brother tries to scrub out the stain, the figure of the father – the specter of a castrating patriarchal authority, not unlike Hamlet's father, we might say – artificially reestablishes it and, with it, the law of the father, or the law of the father's desire.

Wilde goes on to further suggest that the blood-stain is the sign of Virginia's entrance into sexuality when he indicates that the ghost has actually dipped his paint brush in Virginia's own paint box in order to refurbish the stain. While on the one, literal level, this indicates that the blood-stain was actually made with paint from Virginia's own paint box and thus confirms the connection between the two, on the other, metaphorical or symbolical level – and the sexual innuendo seems clear enough – it strongly suggests that that blood-stain is made from the fluid of her own, new adolescent sexuality, the box being an old symbol of the female genitalia that George Eliot had deployed about fifteen years earlier (in 1872) and that Freud would invoke about fifteen years later (in 1901).[27] When, at one point, Wilde has the ghost dip his brush in Virginia's box and repaint the stain *green*, this horrifies Virginia precisely because the blood-stain is an image of her own bleeding. What fifteen-year-old girl would not be horrified at bleeding green? Of course, in having Virginia 'bleed green', Wilde also seems to be suggesting if not a literal Irishness – though this is possible too – then at least a symbolic Irishness. Although Wilde's Otis family is American – and here Wilde is very likely playing with the Otis name widely reproduced on American elevators in the nineteenth century, and thus with American materialism and even social ascendancy – some Otises had migrated from elsewhere in Europe to Ireland, and so might some of those, in turn, have migrated to America. Of course, Virginia could also be Irish through her mother: if not through the mother's paternal line, whose name is 'Tappen', then perhaps through the maternal line. But whether or not Wilde is indicating Virginia's literal Irishness does not really matter. Far more significant is the suggestion of a symbolic Irishness, which functions in two ways. First, it suggests that this American virgin might also be a stand-in or a proxy for an Irish virgin, Ireland of course having also and earlier been colonised by old England.[28] Second, and perhaps more significantly, it further corroborates the hypothesis that she might be a stand-in for Wilde's own (Anglo-Irish) sister Isola. Wilde is working through here not only the one (double) trauma of her entrance into sexuality and death, but also the other trauma of his own adolescent entrance into sexuality, traumatic insofar as that entrance was linked to hers and was also a kind of castration.

While this plot detail of the ghost's dipping his paint brush in Virginia's paint box further marks the stain as Virginia's, it also implicates the old ghost, of course, in the illicit penetration of Virginia's private possessions, her private 'property' or private 'parts'. This appears to be a riff on Stead's repeated plot of older men penetrating young virgins, and the implicit conflation in Stead between the first blood of menstruation and the first blood of penetration/devirgination becomes a more explicit conflation in Wilde. While,

[27] In *Middlemarch* and *Dora*, respectively.

[28] James Joyce's story "After the Race", written in 1904, makes an implicit comparison between the colonisation of America and the colonisation of Ireland, to the favor of the former, America having won its independence, unlike Ireland, and become a major player in world capitalism. Wilde seems to be making a similar point here: the independent American virgin is more empowered to carry out the counter-colonial plot.

like the stain on the floor, the blood of menstruation comes and goes, the blood of devirgination, one might think, does not. But there is a very curious 'motif' in the Stead story that provides for such a recurrence and that Wilde may have in mind here. In a few different places, Stead describes the ostensibly common practice, in the London industry of supplying maidens to the marketplace of older men, of procuresses' *repairing* the virginity of already 'fallen' girls so as to re-present them as virgins. These procuresses would resew an ersatz hymen and then doctors would recertify the girls' virginity. Wilde seems to allude to this practice when he has Virginia return from a ride and tear her dress when passing through a hedge. Section V begins,

> A few days after this, Virginia and her curly-haired cavalier went out riding on Brockley meadows, where she tore her habit so badly in getting through a hedge that, on their return home, she made up her mind to go up by the back staircase so as not to be seen. As she was running past the Tapestry Chamber, the door of which happened to be open, she fancied she saw someone inside, and thinking it was her mother's maid, who sometimes used to bring her work there, looked in to ask her to mend her habit. (p. 196)

The passing through the hedge and the tear in the dress both read like sexual violations, especially in the coming light of Virginia Woolf, and the mending of the dress similarly reads like a sexual repair, just as Clarissa's mending of her dress in *Mrs Dalloway* does. Here in Wilde, as later in Woolf, the mending is interrupted, however, by the unexpected and abrupt encounter with an intrusive male, here the ghost himself, which seems to suggest the Stead scenario of an older man about to devirginise a revirginised girl.

In addition to the largely symbolic action of the ghost's dipping his brush in Virginia's paint box, there is one other less symbolic and more literal action that implies a sexual, even lecherous relation between the ghost and the girl. It occurs before the moment of Virginia's return from her ride and her imminent 'elopement' behind the wainscoting and into the private chambers of the ghost. The ghost would come late at night and finger her counterpane, an episode that is eerily predictive of a scene Woolf describes in her memoir *Moments of Being* when her half-brother came to her bedroom when she was thirteen, hoisted her onto the counterpane and, well, 'fingered' her. But far from being frightened, much less traumatised by this experience, Virginia Otis merely shrugs it off and dismisses the ghost's attentions.

Indeed, while Wilde might be suggesting a sexual relation between the old ghost and the young virgin, often in the same idiom as the Stead story, it is not to imitate the 'horror' of that story with sincerity and earnestness or to reproduce its moral outrage, but rather to *mimic* it to ironic and parodic effect. Wilde carries out that irony/parody on two fronts simultaneously. On the one front he utterly disempowers the figure of the old ghost, while on the other he thoroughly empowers the figure of the young virgin girl.

Wilde disempowers the figure of the ghost by systematically exposing the gothic conventions that support him as mere conventions and laying bare his supernatural powers as all artifice, theatrical trickery and, moreover, old-fashioned contrivances that are no match for the new real-world practices of American materialism. He 'dismantles' the ghost in the two senses of that word. While in the one, more recent sense, he takes apart, piece by piece, his whole gothic/ghostly apparatus and the machinery by which he creates the illusions of supernatural power – thus deploying as author a materialist and pragmatic strategy – he also, in the other, older etymological sense of the word, takes away the 'mantle' of the

ghost's authority. Wilde's deft dismantling of the ghost, carried out with levity and light humor, operates at both an ideological and a psychological level. At the ideological level, it represents the comic undoing of an old figure of patriarchal history and its patrilinear legacy and the comic exposure, writ large, of the threat of the father through which the law of the father itself is maintained. At the psychological level, it represents the playful dismissal of the Oedipal demands of the internalised figure of the father. Wilde seems to have *Hamlet* in mind here, which features the most famous Elizabethan ghost of all (from which the gothic might be said to have derived and descended): the ghost of Hamlet's father, who initiates the play by issuing the patriarchal/Oedipal demand *par excellence* upon the son, namely that the son avenge the death of the father.[29] Instead of taking that ghostly demand seriously, as Hamlet does, and carrying out a serious and arduous male revenge plot that would uphold and perpetuate the law of the father's desire, Wilde uses humor effectively to simply unmask the ghost as something of a Polonius, a doddering old fool who struggles to wield any authority at all.

Further, instead of having the figure of the son (Washington Otis, for example) carry out a male revenge plot, Wilde has the figure of the daughter, Virginia Otis – whom I have called 'Hamlet's sister' with reference to and anticipation of Virginia Woolf's 'Shakespeare's sister' – carry out an Oedipal/Electra plot (not in the modern regulatory Freudian sense as above, but in the ancient mythical sense). In this plot, Virginia, already eroticised in the ways previously described, enters his private chambers where she both conducts a secret tryst with and simultaneously lays to rest the ghost of the dead father.[30]

Just after she has returned from her ride, during which she tore her dress while passing through a hedge, and just after she has gone into the Tapestry Chamber to ask her mother's maid "to mend her habit", Virginia finds instead the ghost himself, who promptly whisks her through the wainscoting into the deeper recesses of the house and into his more secretive, private spaces, where the story comes to its climax. On the one hand, the ghost's abduction of Virginia and the absconding into a private chamber recalls the repeated plot of Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", with men carrying virgins off into what he sensationally calls the 'fatal chamber'. Here Virginia might be thought of as such "maiden tribute", a kind of Iphigenia, who herself represented a sacrifice of 'maiden blood', though of course revived, re-empowered, and repurposed. On the other hand, Wilde's having Mr Otis and the young Duke search for her first at the railway station recalls a curious detail of the Stead story in which Stead identifies the railway station as one of the primary sites for the procurement/abduction of virgins. According to one of his sources, a girl who had escaped abduction, "[it] is almost invariably the rule that the seller must deliver the girl at some railway station. She is brought to you, placed in your cab or your railway carriage, and it is then your business, and an easy one, to see that she does not escape you".[31] But, once again, while Wilde might have a sustained topical interest in that cultural story and an enduring ideological investment in satirising it, he has a deeper interest, I think, in his own personal story and a pressing psychological commitment to exploring it.

[29] Walpole, in the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, discusses *Hamlet,* so that the connection between the gothic and *Hamlet* is perhaps fundamental.

[30] This might be said to be the primary concern of Wilde's next story, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", to throw off the demands of the law of the father, including the demand to enter into compulsory heterosexuality—the 'duty' to marry and procreate.

[31] W.T. STEAD, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, p. 74.

As some critics have observed,[32] the tone of the story shifts fairly abruptly from the satirical to the serious – and perhaps beneath satire there is always something serious – at this moment of the abduction of Virginia and the retreat into the recesses of the house and, indeed, the recesses of the text, for Wilde or Wilde's narrator does not (or cannot) follow the action into that space. While this shift in tone is partly due to the plot movement itself (particularly against the immediate backdrop of the Stead story and the more remote backdrop of the gothic tradition) and the very palpable threat of a behind-closed-doors sexual violation, it is also due to the sudden plunge into the space of the unknown and of the unconscious. It is the equivalent of the space of the hidden canvas of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* – which also features a young girl – facing away from the viewer, a pictorial trope that Wilde will take up shortly in "The Birthday of the Infanta". And here in this story, as there in that one, it is the secret space in which Wilde seems to be working out the linked psychological problems of the sister and the father. Although we do not know exactly what happens in this space, there is a strong suggestion of an erotic if not a sexual encounter, for all of the reasons given above. Further, we do know what happens as a result of that encounter. We know that Virginia has been instrumental (sexually or otherwise) in laying to rest the ghost of the dead father, and we know that Virginia emerges from this obscure space in which sex and death are mixed up, not only alive, but also in possession of jewels, another common figure for the female genitalia that we see in both George Eliot and Freud. Moreover, these jewels are given to her by the ghost, or, alternatively, are the inheritance/legacy of the ghost (of the dead father).[33]

It would appear that here Wilde is inverting the prevailing mytho-psychological structure of things and proposing an alternative structure. Instead of having the ghost carry out a violation of the young virgin and a theft of her virginity – what we might think of, as I think Wilde does, as a castration of the female phallus, which he often figures in physical, material, or plastic terms, like the cut rose in "The Birthday of the Infanta" or the fan in *Lady Windermere's Fan* – Wilde has Virginia carry out a symbolic, reverse, double castration of the ghost. While on the one hand, she is the instrument that cuts him off both from life as a ghost (death is castration writ large) and from his entailment to the estate (and thus from patrilinear history), on the other hand, she might be said to cut off and appropriate from him the material sign of the genitalia of the father—the family jewels. Wilde may well have two classical stories in mind here. First, he may have the story of Agamemnon in mind, as he often did, particularly Agamemnon's sacrifice of his young virgin daughter Iphigenia, inverting that structure now and having the young virgin sacrifice the figure of the father instead.[34] And he may also have the story of the birth of Venus in mind, as I think he does in both "The Birthday of the Infanta" and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in which Venus is born from the foam of the castrated genitalia of the father and might even be said to be the re-incarnation of the father's castrated phallus.

Whether or not Wilde is reimagining his own personal history and reconfiguring his own psychological story, in which he reanimates and remobilises the virgin sister to kill off

[32] Maureen O'Connor, for instance, who observes the presence of a "dramatic textual caesura" (M. O'Connor, "The Spectre of Genre in 'The Canterville Ghost'", p. 334).

[33] Of course, as in *The Castle of Otranto*, so here there is the strong suggestion of the possibility of a father-daughter incest. Further, as in *The Castle of Otranto*, there is the theme of righting a wrong, illegitimate legacy.

[34] The classical and the gothic story both share the central figure of the labyrinth, something that might have further connected them in Wilde's imagination.

in her place the figure of the father and of patriarchy itself ("Remember, dans la litérature il faut toujours tuer son père", Wilde wrote to Will Rothenstein),[35] he does seem to be suggesting that there is an intimate if not inextricable connection between the conceptualisation of female sexuality and the conceptualisation of 'same-sex' subjectivity, or a subjectivity organised around same-sex desire. In inverting the narrative structure of the Stead story and reimagining the hapless virgin subjected to the violation of patriarchy as the phallic virgin who carries out a successful – even bloodless – reverse castration of the patriarchy, Wilde might be said to be cutting off not only the entailment in which the ghost is attached like a tail to the estate, but also the other 'entailment' of the Labouchère Amendment, the eleventh-hour attachment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, all the while, of course, retaining the phallus for her/himself.[36]

Wilde concludes the story with a curious conversation between the young Duke and his new fifteen-year-old wife Virginia in which the Duke asks her what happened between her and the ghost, which seems to be Wilde's meta-textual way of calling attention to and emphasising that central narrative mystery and even baiting readers and critics to make inquiries themselves. Virginia demurs and insists on keeping her secret. While there are of course many kinds of secrets, there is a strong suggestion here of a sexual secret. When, in the closing dialogue of the whole story, the Duke asks her if she will tell her secret to their children, Virginia blushes, and this blush functions as the final image and punctuating end-stop for the story. While on the surface this might be read as an indication of Virginia's Victorian modesty at the prospect of having children, there is nothing in the text to suggest that Virginia is the least bit modest. Rather, Virginia's embarrassment seems to be a deeper one, not at the prospect of sex so much but perhaps at the (supernatural) experience of having had it. She keeps inside of her the secret of the ghost and, in the context of the Duke's question regarding future children, that internal secret begins to sound like a sort of impregnation. The subtitle of the story is, of course, a "hylo-idealistic romance", and while 'romance' is, to be sure, a narrative mode or genre, it is also one that, in its medieval form at least, often involved a love plot, and it is a term that has increasingly come to signify such plots. The hylo-idealistic romance identifies not only the genre of the story, but also the central relationship between the material Virginia and the spectral ghost. If Wilde is suggesting that Virginia might be pregnant in some way, then that would be a very interesting play on an old gothic theme in which an illegitimate, usurped line of inheritance was replaced by an alternative, more legitimate one, with the promise of a better progeny and perhaps a new law of desire. In addition to this, however, it seems to be, in the main psychoanalytic register in which I have been working here, an instance of Virginia's effort to preserve the lost object by way of a kind of *incorporation*. That is, if Virginia has carried out a castration of the ghost, then she has perhaps, as a way of compensating for that loss, internalised what she has cut off and, in a way, even 're-entailed' it, cut and resized it back into herself. This may also provide a psychoanalytic explanation and paradigm for the male subject of same-sex desire's fundamental relation to the castrated phallus.

[35] Quoted in R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 375.

[36] An entailment was, etymologically, a 'cutting in' or a 'cutting to shape'. It is perhaps important to point out that the ghost is himself queer in many ways. He is, after all, an "outlawed nobleman", a class that would be linked explicitly to "perverted telegraph boys" in The Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889, as Joe Bristow has discussed, and he is also of course a man who has eliminated his wife and is a bit of a "drama queen". See J. BRISTOW, "Introduction" to ID. (ed.), *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003.

References

BRISTOW, JOSEPH, "Introduction" to ID. (ed.), *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003.

CHAPLIN, SUSAN, *The Gothic and the Rule of Law, 1764-1820*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

DAVIS, MICHAEL F., "Walter Pater's Dialectical History of (Same-Sex) Desire: Queer Conclusions", in ANNE-FLORENCE GILLARD-ESTRADA, MARTINE LAMBERT-CHARBONNIER and CHARLOTTE RIBEYROL (eds), *Testing New Opinions and Courting New Impressions: New Perspectives on Walter Pater*, New York, Routledge, 2017, pp. 148-65.

—, "Oscar Wilde's *Las Meninas*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl", in MICHAEL F. DAVIS and PETRA DIERKES-THRUN (eds), *Wilde's Other Worlds*, New York and London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 110-33.

ELLMANN, RICHARD, *Oscar Wilde*, New York, Random House, 1987.

FRANKEL, NICHOLAS, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard U.P., 2020.

HAGGERTY, GEORGE E., "Gothic Fiction and Queer Theory", in JERROLD E. HOGLE and ROBERT MILES (eds), *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2019, pp. 147-62.

KEATS, JOHN, "The Eve of St Agnes", 1820, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44470/the-eve-of-st-agnes (last accessed on 29 Novenber 2021).

MUSTAFA, JAMIL, "Strange Cases of the Queer Fin de Siècle", in ARDEL HAEFELE-THOMAS (ed.), *The Queer Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P. [forthcoming].

O'CONNOR, MAUREEN, "The Spectre of Genre in 'The Canterville Ghost'", *Irish Studies Review*, 12 (3), 2004, pp. 329-38.

SIMPSON, ANTONY E., "Organized Prostitution in 19th Century England: Legal Campaigns and the Origins of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885", Introduction to W.T. STEAD, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, originally published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4-10, 1885, ed. ANTONY E. SIMPSON, Lambertville (NJ), The True Bill Press, 2007.

STEAD, W.T., *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, originally published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4-10, 1885, ed. ANTONY E. SIMPSON, Lambertville (NJ), The True Bill Press, 2007.

STURGIS, MATTHEW, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018.

WALPOLE, HORACE, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W.S. LEWIS, Oxford, OUP, (1764) 1982.

WHYTE, FREDERIC, *The Life of W.T. Stead*, 2 vols, London, Jonathan Cape, 1925.

WILDE, OSCAR, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds MERLIN HOLLAND and RUPERT HART-DAVIS, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 2000.

—, "The Canterville Ghost", in ID., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, HarperCollins, 2003, pp. 184-204.

Fausto Ciompi*

'Weak' Encounters: Walcott's Refiguring of Crusoe in "The Castaway", "Crusoe's Island", and "Crusoe's Journal"

Abstract: This article examines three poems by Derek Walcott on Robinson Crusoe: "The Castaway", "Crusoe's Island", and "Crusoe's Journal". The three texts are interpreted as an implicit sequence which, starting from the critique of the strong identitarianism of the white coloniser and of the black nativist poet, produces a 'weak' version of Caribbean identity based on the dialogic synthesis of nature and culture, matter and discourse, the beauty of Western poetry as finally represented by Dante's language and the physical splendour of Tobago's black girls.

Keywords: Derek Walcott. Daniel Defoe. Crusoe poems. Reactionary nativism. Intertextuality.

The Crusoe myth is re-elaborated by Derek Walcott in a lecture, "The Figure of Crusoe" (1965); a two-act play, *Pantomime* (1980); and in three poems: "The Castaway", "Crusoe's Island", and "Crusoe's Journal".[1] In all of these cases, the Crusoe figure functions for Walcott as an archive of archetypes, which may include, as he anticipates in his lecture, Adam, Christopher Columbus, Daniel Defoe, Prospero, Caliban, Luis Buñuel's surrealist Robinson, Proteus, a beachcomber, God and a missionary who converts Friday.[2] More interestingly, in *Pantomime* Walcott inverts the roles of the two protagonists: Jackson Phillip, the black man-servant, turns out as the master (Crusoe), while Harry Trewe, a white person, plays the servant (Friday). At the end of the story, the tension between the two is unsolved: "Jackson has demanded respect [but] Can colonialism be undone?".[3]

My point in this article is that, in his Crusoe poems, Walcott deploys a dialogic vision which does not fully emerge in *Pantomime*, where the us-them confrontation is more crudely displayed. In the three poems, he adopts multiple narrative perspectives and investigates diverse aspects of Crusoe as a colonial and postcolonial trope. "The Castaway" is a monologue in which ageing Crusoe reflects on his loneliness on the island on which he is shipwrecked. A different locutor is introduced in "Crusoe's Island", where it is the poet who recounts in the first person, singular or plural, his visit to Tobago, a place now populated by Friday's progeny. Crusoe is here referred to in the third person, a 'he' who,

* University of Pisa. Email: fausto.ciompi@unipi.it

[1] The three poems originally appeared, in book form, in *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965). References to page and line numbers, hereafter in the text, are from Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*, London, Faber & Faber, 1992, where they appear in this order: "The Castaway" (pp. 57-58), "Crusoe's Island" (pp. 68-72), "Crusoe's Journal" (pp. 92-94).

[2] D. Walcott, "The Figure of Crusoe", in R.D. Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, Washington, Three Continents Press, 1993, pp. 35-36.

[3] B. Jones, "With Crusoe the Slave and Friday the Boss: Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*", in L. Spaas and B. Stimpson (eds), *Robinson Crusoe: Myths and Metamorphoses*, London, Macmillan, 1996, p. 235.

 DOI: 10.4454/syn.v2.393

as linguist Émile Benveniste argued, must be regarded as a "non-person".[4] In "Crusoe's Journal", the enunciative modalities of the first two poems are eventually amalgamated. While in "The Castaway" a solipsistic 'I' is the speaker and in "Crusoe's Island" an 'I-he' (or 'we-he') enunciative mode is enacted, "Crusoe's Journal" has 'we' as the collective locutor of the text. Although each of the three poems presents ambivalences and complexities of its own, my claim is then that the third poem provides a synthesis between the egoic discourse of the first text and the 'non-person'-inflected discourse of the second. In terms of race discourse, the transition is from the white or black man's totalising perspective to a racially and culturally hybridised situation that is achieved through dialogic confrontation. In delineating this process, I do not contend that Walcott pursues a rigorous dialectic logic. His meditation does not produce a third strong position but a 'weak' axiology,[5] which subsumes the reasons of the subaltern and the marginal while at the same time re-evaluating some co-effects of the colonial practices it disproves. The Crusoe archetype is re-figured according to the poetics of cultural meshing, which also affects the Caribbean landscape. Nature is understood not as a function of mimeticism but as an 'agentic force', a mixture of matter and meaning: a significance that changes according to its materialisation by different perceptors/reconstructors.[6]

"The Castaway": Colonial Solipsism and Native Perplexity

The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel
Of a sail.

The horizon threads it infinitely.

Action breeds frenzy. I lie,
Sailing the ribbed shadow of a palm,
Afraid lest my own footprints multiply.

Blowing sand, thin as smoke,
Bored, shifts its dunes.
The surf tires of its castles like a child.

[4] "The 'third person' is not a 'person': it is really a verbal form whose function is to express the *non-person*" (É. BENVENISTE, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Miami, University of Miami Press, 1973, p. 198).

[5] On 'weak theory', whose scope ranges from Friedrich Nietzsche's dissolution of metaphysics to Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "reparative reading", see W.C. DIMOCK, "Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W.B. Yeats", *Critical Inquiry*, 39 (4), 2013, pp. 732-35, and P.K. SAINT-AMOUR, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism", *Modernism/Modernity*, 25 (3), 2018, pp. 437-59. What makes this theory workable in the reading of Walcott's Crusoe poems is that it asserts the advantages of theorising from positions of weakness, thus making dialogue between cultures possible. I assume that this is exactly Walcott's stance in the Crusoe poems: a plea for pliant, flexible, and non-normative forms of poeticising across borders.

[6] For an analogous approach to the refiguration of language and landscape in Walcott, see D.E. ST. JOHN, "Writing Agential Landscapes: Making History Through Materiality in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Audre Lorde", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 21 (7), 2019, pp. 1015-1029. Inspired by the theory of agential realism, and, among others, by Iovino and Oppermann, St. John studies the intersections between "matter" and "discourse": "As opposed to schools of ecocriticism that see culture as a mirror of nature, or vice versa, material ecocriticism takes a rhizomatic view of materiality as a 'combined mesh' of 'matter and meaning, body and identity, being and knowing'" (*ibidem*, p. 1020).

The salt green vine with yellow trumpet-flower,
A net, inches across nothing.
Nothing: the rage with which the sandfly's head is filled.

Pleasures of an old man:
Morning: contemplative evacuation, considering
The dried leaf, nature's plan.

In the sun, the dog's feces
Crusts, whitens like coral.
We end in earth, from earth began.
In our own entrails, genesis.

If I listen I can hear the polyp build,
The silence thwanged by two waves of the sea.
Cracking a sea-louse, I make thunder split.

Godlike, annihilating godhead, art
And self, I abandon
Dead metaphors: the almond's leaf-like heart,

The ripe brain rotting like a yellow nut
Hatching
Its babel of sea-lice, sandfly, and maggot,

That green wine bottle's gospel choked with sand,
Labelled, a wrecked ship,
Clenched sea-wood nailed and white as a man's hand. (pp. 57-58)

In this text, the landscape is refigured from two coexisting but alternative viewpoints: that of the white coloniser and the native poet. At an obvious level, "The Castaway" is the poem of the white coloniser's solipsism and sterility. Crusoe's actions are routinely ineffectual: while lying on the beach, he scans the horizons for a sail in the vain hope of being rescued. After many years, he still feels as a foreign body in the Caribbean and strongly desires to return where he belongs. The contrast between the infinite horizon and the invisible sail is rendered through the exaggerated difference in extension between the first and the second line: "The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel / Of a sail" (p. 57, 1-2).

Crusoe remains motionless because he is "afraid lest [his] own footprints multiply" (p. 57, 6). Like Defoe's Robinson, he fears that his footprints will reveal his presence to the visiting cannibals.[7] Besides, he has learned that action is a useless form of resistance to

[7] In Paul Breslin's words, Crusoe "fears the intrusion of some unknown other into his solitude" (P. BRESLIN, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 106). In *Pantomime*, instead, "Jackson teaches that the key for Crusoe/Trewe involves not fearing the footprint, but welcoming it; not subduing the native, but meeting him 'man to man'" (B.C. MCINELLY, "Remaking Crusoe in Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*", in D. TAYLOR BOURDEAU and E. KRAFT [eds], *On Second Thought: Updating the Eighteenth-Century Text*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2007, p. 169). But a different understanding of this line is also possible. One can read it in the light of Georges Didi-Huberman's interpretation of the imprint as a reminder of destruction: "The imprint forces us to think about destruction and its aftermath and thus renounce the purity of nothingness" (G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Génie du non-lieu. Air, poussière, empreinte, hantise*, Engl. trans. B. MACADRÉ-NGUYÊN, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2001, p. 55). For Crusoe, the contemplation of pure nothingness is a stupefying activity that saves him from coping with hostile reality and accustoms him to poetical sublimation. Conversely, to meditate on the consequences of destruction (Crusoe's ship has been destroyed as well as the lives of his fellow sailors) would revive the hermit's despair.

the nothingness he faces. For the European observer, the place is invaded by nothingness because it is devoid of history[8] and he has been unable to reshape it according to his own cultural coordinates. But Crusoe's real *hubris* is that he sees nothingness around him instead of natural beauty as symbolised by flowers: "A net, inches across nothing. / Nothing" (p. 57, 11-12). In the end, he further contributes to the triumph of nothingness by giving up his cultural paradigms, which have proved completely inadequate in the Caribbean context: "annihilating godhead, art / And self" (p. 58, 23-24).

He calls himself an "old man" (p. 57, 13). If we stick to Defoe's chronology, Crusoe was twenty-seven when he was shipwrecked on his Caribbean island, where he famously remained for twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days. If Walcott's Crusoe does the same, he is now probably in his fifties and has been on the island for quite a long time. But, of course, Walcott may have imagined for his own Crusoe a completely different chronology and his hero could be older than that. However, Walcott's Crusoe is anything but the hyper-reactive, hard-working, 'context-transforming' character Defoe describes in his novel. As philosopher Sergio Givone argues, Defoe's Robinson, "[a]fter losing the world, moves to its conquest […] Action, the dominion extended over the natural world, the submission of hostile forces to his own ends, enables him to humanise the world to the extent that man can recognise himself in it".[9] Even when he is about to leave the island with Friday, in fact, aged Robinson never skips his daily toil:

> having such additional Testimonies of the Care of Providence over me, and the great Hopes I had of being effectually and speedily deliver'd; for I had an invincible Impression upon my Thoughts that my Deliverance was at hand, and that I should not be another Year in this Place: However, I went on with my Husbandry; digging, planting, and fencing as usual. I gather'd and cur'd my Grapes, and did every necessary Thing as before.[10]

By contrast, Walcott's Crusoe is a lazy observer of and an inert listener to nature's manifestations. His acts are either scatological or of no practical consequence: he lies on the beach, defecates, contemplates a dried leaf or the feces of a dog, listens lazily to the sound of the sea and its creatures. Except for the green vine and trumpet flower, he is surrounded by signs of dryness and sterility: excrements, the wizened vegetation, the "bored" sand that blows on the beach. He has left no mark of civilisation in the environment. Rather, he has been visibly affected by tropical idleness. By indulging in the pleasures of contemplation, he activates a creative process of some sort and acts as a poet rather than as a tradesman, a sailor or a beachcomber. While his seventeenth-century model was a metonymical reasoner, who used practical reason and referential speech to organise the world, Walcott's Crusoe abandons "Dead metaphors" (p. 58, 25). He does try metaphor, i.e., poetry, but his imaginative efforts are those of a white man accustomed to metonymic language and they prove irrelevant in the context in which he is situated.

Here is an example of Robinson's metonymic discourse in Defoe's novel:

[8] On the West Indies as a place of 'nothingness', see V.S. Naipaul: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (V.S. NAIPAUL, *The Middle Passage*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, [1962] 1969, p. 29).

[9] S. GIVONE, "Dire le emozioni. La costruzione dell'identità nel romanzo moderno", in F. MORETTI (ed.), *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001, Vol. I, p. 380; my translation.

[10] D. DEFOE, *Robinson Crusoe*, Oxford, OUP, (1719) 2007, p. 193.

I first took a Piece of a *Leaf*, and chew'd it in my Mouth, which indeed at first almost stupify'd my *Brain*, the Tobacco being green and strong, and that I had not been much us'd to it; then I took some and steeped it an Hour or two in some Rum, and resolv'd to take a Dose of it when I lay down; and lastly, I burnt some upon a Pan of Coals, and held my Nose close over the Smoke of it as long as I could bear it, as well for the Heat as almost for Suffocation. In the Interval of this Operation, I took up the Bible and began to read, but my Head was too much disturb'd with the Tobacco to bear reading, at least that Time; only having open'd the Book casually, the first Words that occurr'd to me were these, Call on me in the Day of Trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify me.[11]

Robinson's speech is accurately chrono*logical*: "first", "then", "and lastly", "In the Interval". Defoe also resorts to metonymical quantifiers ("a Piece of", "some", "a Dose") to certify Robinson's rational use of available goods. Relying on hard work and Christian faith, Defoe's Crusoe strives to create the spatiotemporal continuity that will bring him from despair to salvation. Interestingly enough, in this passage the words 'leaf' and 'brain' serve a completely different purpose from Walcott's poem, in which they also appear at close range (p. 58, 25-26). While Defoe's Robinson accurately avoids the effects of brain stupefaction caused by tobacco leaves, the brain of Walcott's Crusoe is "rotting" because he has renounced rationality and surrendered to *tropical* (in both senses, climatic and rhetorical) conditioning. Despite his attempt at cultural acclimatisation, the Caribbean landscape remains 'inappropriable' for Walcott's Crusoe, whose metaphors are irremediably "Dead" (p. 58, 25) and devoid of cognitive power. While Defoe's Robinson excelled in "husbandry" (see first quote above) and subjugated the land for his own ends, Walcott's Crusoe proves a sterile husband, whose interaction with the land generates only his metaphorical excrements and a sort of decadent self-consumption.

However, the text is double-coded at least in another sense. "The Castaway" is also the poem of the black poet's perplexity and anxiety of influence. Crusoe is the mask[12] which the black poet (not Walcott, but Caliban: the nativist poet Walcott often criticises) wears to express his worries about the interference of the coloniser's language and culture with his own tradition. Accordingly, Crusoe's longing for a ship that should bring him away from a cultural desert represents the black poet's repressed attraction for the English language and his anxiety about being unable to fully express himself in the idiom of indigenous metaphors. In metadiscursive terms, this means that neither the white coloniser nor the nativist poet produce anything fertile in cultural or poetic terms. As a creator of artistic metaphors, Crusoe elaborates a fecopoetics that does not produce good fertilising dung but only such dead or calcified material as the dog's excrements ("crusts", "coral"), possibly with a recollection of T.S. Eliot's 1910 poem "First Debate between the Body and the Soul": "Imagination's / Defecations / The withered leaves / Of our sensations –".[13]

[11] *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81; emphasis added.

[12] See, on this point, P. ISMOND, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry*, Kingston, University of the West Indies Press, 2001, p. 46: "The purpose of abandoning dead metaphors is, accordingly, a radical new departure from his [Walcott's] quest for identity". But, as the analysis of the next two Crusoe poems shows, it is perhaps more accurate to say that "Walcott's definition of his West Indian identity determines how he relates to the literary traditions in a chronology of intertextualities" (E. BREITINGER, "Odysseus, Crusoe and the Making of the Caribbean Hero: Derek Walcott's Variations of Great Traditions", in P. NICKLAS and O. LINDNER [eds], *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, p. 225).

[13] T.S. ELIOT, "First Debate between the Body and the Soul", in ID., *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, eds C. RICKS and J. MCCUE, London, Faber & Faber, 2015, Vol. I, p. 241.

In both ways, Walcott's Crusoe is a failing hero. He represents the coloniser's failure to interact productively with Caribbean nature and the black poet's failure to voice and celebrate the beauty of that landscape when he passively adopts the words of monologic tradition. Crusoe the white man assumes he is a Prospero gifted with divine power, i.e., his supposed theological and cultural superiority, although he is unable to translate it into effective action. On his part, Crusoe the black poet wishes to go 'natural'. As a modern Caliban, he claims he is what he eats (the natural products of the land): "We end in earth, from earth began. / In our own entrails, genesis" (p. 57, 18-19). He theorises naturalist poetry as a form of cultural monogenesis (a term by which I mean the poet's aspiration to be his own creator and the pure product of his race), but cannot help being what he reads too. In fact, he finds out he is unable to mediate between language, nature and broader cultural structures. When he sticks to monogenetic purity, he understands that nature sends him messages, but lacks the words to put what he sees and hears into successful verse. If he uncritically adopts the vocabulary of monologic tradition, his efforts produce only "Dead metaphors" (p. 58, 25), the sad outcome of what Hogan terms "reactionary mimeticism".[14] I therefore suggest reading "The Castaway" as a poem that represents racial and cultural archives as indelible binaries when black or white cultural identitarianism prevails. An *impasse* that can be overcome only by deconventionalising the metaphors that describe the 'tropical' situation, thus allowing the white man to understand nature and the black man to re-use culture outside the normative modes of reactionary thinking. In Walcott's representation, the Crusoe figure is never a holotrope (the whole figuration): it is always dichotomous or incomplete, even when it comes across as a plural construct. In "The Castaway", for example, Crusoe is better described by the figure of antithesis, which uncomfortably contrasts two solitudes: the white with the black one. Only by acknowledging their different weaknesses and incompleteness, they may participate in a process of field-construction in a dialogic scheme.

"Crusoe's Island": The Humane 'Non-person' vs the Pure Tribesman

In "Crusoe's Island" the white man's culture is more amply ventriloquised by the black poet than in "The Castaway". In fact, the poet realises that a mature art can better express its own distinctiveness by blending with the language and culture of the other. Or, more simply, he accepts *ex post* the fact that the language he is using is replete with a semiotic history of its own: a sovereign autonomy that resists all efforts of cultural cleansing. Therefore, in this poem, Walcott quotes or alludes to authors and texts other than Defoe and *Robinson Crusoe*. The phrase "God's anvil" (p. 68, 2) recalls William Blake's "The Tyger". The chapel's cowbell that "Hammers ocean" (p. 68, 3) calls back to the gong's sound and the tormented sea in W.B. Yeats' "Byzantium" as well as the "hammered gold" of his "Sailing to Byzantium". The roofs by the sea, roaring in the sun, are probably reminiscent, by contrast, of Paul Valéry's "quiet roof" in the opening line of his "Cemetery by the Sea". While it echoes Arnold's

[14] "By 'reactionary nativism', I mean the general inversion of colonial and racist hierarchies such that members of the oppressed group affirm their racial and cultural authority in precisely the manner of the colonizers. This is a reactionary tendency in that it is a reaction to the physical and mental brutality of the oppressors, which it denies but does not overcome" (P.C. HOGAN, "Mimeticism, Reactionary Nativism, and the Possibility of Postcolonial Identity in Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*", *Research in African Literatures*, 25 [2], Special Issue: Caribbean Literature, 1994, p. 109).

"Dover Beach", the verse "O love, we die alone!" (p. 70, 72) is in the first place a *dictum* in pure Auden style.[15] Auden's misquotation of a *haiku* in "Thoughts of his Own Death" (*Marginalia*, 1965-1968) is also echoed by Walcott. While in Auden's poem death manifests itself as the sound of a distant thunder at a picnic, Walcott reflects on God's death while he lies on a "picnic plaid / Of Scarborough" (p. 68, 12-13). Walcott's fear "Of being swallowed by the blue" sky (p. 69, 22) instead reminds us of Stéphane Mallarmé's analogous lament for God's death or for his hiding in the mocking blue sky in "L'azur" ("My father, God, is dead", p. 68, 19). The black girls, "Friday's progeny" (p. 72, 103), walking "in their air of glory" (p. 72, 107), retain a tinge of Byron's "She Walks in Beauty". Vulcan's forging of "Achilles' shield" (p. 71, 97) is, despite Walcott's Latinisation of Hephaistos' name, a reference to Homer's *Iliad*. The poet's standing at his "life's noon" (p. 71, 91) harks back to the *incipit* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "In the middle of the journey of our life",[16] which the Italian poet wrote when he was thirty-five, about the same age as Walcott when he composed "Crusoe's Island". And, indeed, Walcott too has journeyed, not to paradise through hell and purgatory, but to Tobago, Crusoe's island. Although Tobago resembles Eden, the poet maintains he has "lost sight of hell, / Of heaven" (p. 71, 84-85). Like Dante, who got lost in a *selva oscura* (or "dark forest"), Walcott in fact goes astray "On parched, delirious sand" (p. 71, 92), but the two poets' moral and emotional situation is the same: one of uncertainty and confusion.[17]

It is also interesting to notice that Crusoe's name is never mentioned in this poem. Crusoe is referred to as 'he': the pronoun that, according to Benveniste, designates a "non-person". Crusoe is the "bearded hermit" (p. 69, 30) and "The second Adam" (p. 69, 43), a figure who has in large part emancipated himself from the egotistic preoccupations and irremediable homesickness that affected him in "The Castaway" and is now desperate for "human love" (p. 70, 51). It is this deep need of human contact that defines him as a "non-person", a defective subject who seeks a completion conceived along the lines of Friday's ethnic diversity and human richness.

While Crusoe strives after interracial contamination, the poet is the member of a party who came to the island "for the cure / Of quiet" (p. 70, 52-53), wishing "To be, like beast or natural object, pure" (p. 70, 60). On his arrival on the island, he is still the tribesman who anxiously debates his double heritage but has not abandoned his dream of purity. This situation persists until, in the poem's closure, he freely admits that the beauty of Friday's progeny is adequately blessed only by "the bell's / Transfiguring tongue" (p. 72, 117-18). The black girls' splendour surpasses the angels' beauty, but still needs the English language to make the girls' lower-pitched attractiveness visible. Interracial dialogue and genuine cultural amalgamation require the let go of strength and the hiving off of identitarian presuppositions. The poet is induced to renounce proud tribalism and go

[15] As Breslin acutely points out, "'Crusoe's Island' adopts a more formal, almost oratorical stance, and the trimeter of its third section recalls that of Yeats and Auden in such public poetry as *Easter, 1916* or *September 1, 1939*" (P. BRESLIN, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, p. 107).

[16] DANTE, *Inferno*, ed. and Engl. trans. R.M. DURLING, New York and Oxford, OUP, 1996, p. 27.

[17] While I subscribe to Laurence A. Breiner's claim that "[t]hroughout his career [Walcott] has had a particular affinity for writers of nonstandard English" (L.A. BREINER, "Postcolonial Caribbean Poetry", in J. RAMAZANI [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, Cambridge, CUP, 2017, p. 24), e.g., not just T.S. Eliot but also Dylan Thomas and G.M. Hopkins, I wish to draw attention to the universal character of Walcott's intertextualism, which expands beyond the borders of anglophone poetry and contemporary literatures.

beyond the positions of those who sustain that Western knowledge is necessarily tainted by methodological Occidentalism.[18]

"Crusoe's Journal": Between Appropriation and Amalgamation

The epigraph appended to "Crusoe's Journal", an extract from Defoe's novel, testifies to Crusoe's estrangement in the context of the Caribbean islands: "Between thee and me is a great gulf fixed" (p. 92). But, despite the expectations originated by the poem's title, this text is not a record of Crusoe's experiences as a lonesome castaway. It is told by a we-subject, the poet, who speaks in the collective voice of a party of visitors to Tobago: "Once we have driven past Mundo Nuevo" (p. 92, 1).[19] This strong differentiation from Crusoe's words and experience does not denounce Walcott's subjection to tribal separatism. Rather, he tries to take cultural identity back from self-centred sectarianism and reacquaint it with an interracial baseline. The tourists' ethnicity is unspecified and might as well be mixed. But the interracial turn may take place only through the black poet's appropriation of the language of the other: a gift that came with the imposition of colonial power.[20] In this sense, a significant change occurs from "Crusoe's Island": in "Crusoe's Journal" Walcott's intertextual strategy becomes almost entirely explicit. Here, he does not allude cryptically to the coloniser's culture, nor does he dissimulate his quotations as he did in the previous poem; he names some white authors and uses their words to describe the Caribbean context. But, intriguingly enough, he mentions only exotic and adventure writers – G.A. Henty, Marryat, Robert Louis Stevenson – and Ben Gunn, a character from Stevenson's exotic novel *The Treasure Island*. Walcott's issue is in fact the white man's imagology and obsolete epistemology, the stereotypical distortion of otherness as traditionally perpetrated by the Western gaze, which in the Caribbean sees Eden, happiness and adventure instead of a complex anthropology.

Through some heavy alliterations contained in his ludicrously heterogenous list of places and things Caribbean, Walcott also parodies the mnemonic English that Crusoe brought "to savages" (p. 93, 18) as a missionary: "Choiseul, Canaries, / crouched crocodile canoes" (p. 93, 34-35). Both strategies, explicit intertextuality and parody, are forms of cultural appropriation that prove instrumental in expanding Walcott's postcolonial poetry along lines

[18] On methodological Eurocentrism/Occidentalism, see I. KERNER, "Postcolonial Theories as Global Critical Theories," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 25 (4), 2018, pp. 614-28. On Walcott's amalgamation of competing cultures, John Thieme observes: "The use of the Robinson figure foregrounds the struggle to construct a tradition" (J. THIEME, *Derek Walcott*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1999, p. 78).

[19] As rightly observed by Erik Martiny, "these autochthones are not castaways; they reside on the terra ferma of home. Theirs is not the Castaway's rotting brain, but an 'intellect [which] appraises / objects surely' (4-5)" (E. MARTINY, "Multiplying Footprints: Alienation and Integration in Derek Walcott's Reworkings of the Robinson Crusoe Myth", *English Studies*, 87 [6], 2006, p. 676).

[20] In a stimulating essay, Alexander Irvine reads Walcott's appropriative operation in the light of the "Deleuzian idea of minor literature [which] is to a large extent dependent on the concept of 'deterritorialization'" (A. IRVINE, "'Betray Them Both, or Give Back What They Give?': Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth", *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 4 [1], 2005, p. 124). On the same wavelength is Fallon, who, in lieu of "deterritorialization", prefers the expression "extreme placelessness" (A.M. FALLON, "'The First True Creole': Creation Stories in Derek Walcott and Sam Selvon", in EAD., *Global Crusoe: Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Theory and Transnational Aesthetics*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 62).

as different as transnational, planetary, and post-historical linguistics.[21] Crusoe's 'prose', in which "even the bare necessities / of style are turned to use" (p. 92, 5-6), is poeticised and freed from utilitarian purpose. The first instrument of poeticisation is rhyme. With very few exceptions, all lines in the poem either rhyme in /s/ or /z/ or contain the sound /s/ before a final /t/, as in 'Christ' or 'cost'. What at first glance appears as prose – an impression that is reinforced by the vast number of enjambements – is thus tacitly adjusted to "the hermetic skill, that from earth's clays / shapes something without use" (p. 93, 42-43). Once re-appropriated by the black poet, Crusoe's prosaic idiolect can be used for giving poetic form to the Caribbean landscape: from Crusoe's journals, "we learn to shape […] where nothing was / the language of a race" (p. 94, 56-57). The Crusoe figure turns now into Proteus, the god of multiplicity and rapid change, whose 'weak' and unstable identity contributes to reprioritising the black poet's cultural agenda. While in "The Castaway" Crusoe feared multiplicity, in "Crusoe's Journal" he delights in plurality and diversification. On his part, Walcott dismisses the myth of an original primal word (we are always "second" Adams) and gives his poem a hypertextual, transnational ending. In fact, the poem's closing line – "God's loneliness moves in His smallest creatures" (p. 94, 70) – clearly intertextualises the *incipit* of Dante's *Paradiso*: "The glory of the One who moves all things".[22] In an audacious rhetorical move, Walcott makes postcolonial poetry end where Western poetry began, as if the two poetic trajectories were to be re-synchronised in view of a new, commonly shared origin of traditions. The weak dialogisation of opposing traditions is thus complete: Walcott's Robinson poems move from the cultural monologism of "The Castaway" to the anti-tribalism of "Crusoe's Island" through the re-appropriation of the other's language that culminates in "Crusoe's Journal".

It is under the aegis of transnational poetry, as evoked by Dante, that de-theologised Christianity can be appropriated by the Caribbean poet as a means of semi-profane celebration of indigenous beauty. Whether dead or unknown, the Christian God is alone, inaccessible in his self-contained strength. But the truly divine glory shines through the folk reinterpretation of theology by some weak subjects: those "smallest creatures" (p. 94, 70) who recall the black girls in communion dress of "Crusoe's Island". Their attractiveness is now embraceable through the Dantesque reclamation of their blackness and femaleness.

References

BENVENISTE, ÉMILE, *Problems in General Linguistics*, Miami, University of Miami Press, 1973.

BREINER, LAURENCE A., "Postcolonial Caribbean Poetry", in JAHAN RAMAZANI (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, Cambridge, CUP, 2017, pp. 19-30.

BREITINGER, ECKHARD, "Odysseus, Crusoe and the Making of the Caribbean Hero: Derek Walcott's Variations of Great Traditions", in PASCAL NICKLAS and OLIVER LINDNER (eds), *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 203-229.

[21] As Walcott observes, to lend your ear to the muse of history produces "a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters" (D. WALCOTT, "The Muse of History: An Essay", in ID., *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, [1974] 2014, p. 37).

[22] DANTE, *Paradiso*, I, 1, Engl. trans. A. MANDELBAUM, New York, Bantam Classics, 1986, p. 23.

BRESLIN, PAUL, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

DANTE, *Paradiso*, Engl. trans. ALLEN MANDELBAUM, New York, Bantam Classics, 1986.

—, *Inferno*, ed. and Engl. trans. ROBERT M. DURLING, New York and Oxford, OUP, 1996.

DEFOE, DANIEL, *Robinson Crusoe*, Oxford, OUP, (1719) 2007.

DIDI-HUBERMAN, GEORGES, *Génie du non-lieu. Air, poussière, empreinte, hantise*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2001.

DIMOCK, WAI CHEE, "Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W.B. Yeats", *Critical Inquiry*, 39 (4), 2013, pp. 732-53.

ELIOT, T.S., *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, eds CHRISTOPHER RICKS and JIM MCCUE, London, Faber & Faber, 2015, Vol. I.

FALLON, ANN MARIE, "'The First True Creole': Creation Stories in Derek Walcott and Sam Selvon", in EAD., *Global Crusoe: Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Theory and Transnational Aesthetics*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 53-76.

GIVONE, SERGIO, "Dire le emozioni. La costruzione dell'identità nel romanzo moderno", in FRANCO MORETTI (ed.), *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001, Vol. I, pp. 377-96.

HOGAN, PATRICK COLM, "Mimeticism, Reactionary Nativism, and the Possibility of Postcolonial Identity in Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*", *Research in African Literatures*, 25 (2), Special Issue: Caribbean Literature, 1994, pp. 103-119.

IRVINE, ALEXANDER, "'Betray Them Both, or Give Back What They Give?': Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth", *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 4 (1), 2005, pp. 123-32.

ISMOND, PATRICIA, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry*, Kingston, University of the West Indies Press, 2001.

JONES, BRIDGET, "With Crusoe the Slave and Friday the Boss: Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*", in LIEVE SPAAS and BRIAN STIMPSON (eds), *Robinson Crusoe: Myths and Metamorphoses*, London, Macmillan, 1996, pp. 225-38.

KERNER, INA, "Postcolonial Theories as Global Critical Theories", *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 25 (4), 2018, pp. 614-28.

MARTINY, ERIK, "Multiplying Footprints: Alienation and Integration in Derek Walcott's Reworkings of the Robinson Crusoe Myth", *English Studies*, 87 (6), 2006, pp. 669-78.

MCINELLY, BRETT C., "Remaking Crusoe in Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*", in DEBRA TAYLOR BOURDEAU and ELIZABETH KRAFT (eds), *On Second Thought: Updating the Eighteenth-Century Text*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2007, pp. 158-73.

NAIPAUL, V.S., *The Middle Passage*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, (1962) 1969.

SAINT-AMOUR, PAUL K., "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism", *Modernism/Modernity*, 25 (3), 2018, pp. 437-59.

ST. JOHN, D.E., "Writing Agential Landscapes: Making History Through Materiality in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Audre Lorde", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 21 (7), 2019, pp. 1015-1029.

THIEME, JOHN, *Derek Walcott*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1999.

WALCOTT, DEREK, *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*, London, Faber & Faber, 1992.

—, "The Figure of Crusoe", in ROBERT D. HAMNER (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, Washington, Three Continents Press, 1993, pp. 33-40.

—, "The Muse of History: An Essay", in ID., *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, (1974) 2014, pp. 36-64.

Roberta Ferrari*

Dystopia Revisited: Environmental Issues in Kirsty Logan's *The Gracekeepers*

Abstract: In the last few decades, dystopian narratives have been increasingly concerned with climate change and its cataclysmic effects, as witnessed by the emergence of a new narrative genre labelled 'climate fiction'. Within this context, the present paper offers an analysis of Kirsty Logan's fantasy novel *The Gracekeepers* (2015), a flooded dystopia in which environmental issues, though not programmatically announced, are nevertheless repeatedly foregrounded in the course of the story. Logan provides an original rethinking of the individual's relationship with nature and of human presence in the world, in a powerfully imaginative effort to 'reconfigure the possible' by overcoming traditional boundaries and privileging a new approach based on inclusiveness and hybridisation.

Keywords: Kirsty Logan. *The Gracekeepers.* Eco-dystopia. Critical dystopia. Climate fiction.

1. In the last decades, dystopian narratives have become increasingly involved in the discussion of cogent ecological issues connected with climate change and its cataclysmic effects. As Hughes and Wheeler put it, "climate change has made its way towards the mainstream in recent years, on both the screen and the page, and has now eclipsed nuclear terror as the prime mover of the apocalyptic and dystopian imagination".[1] The newly coined label 'climate fiction' or 'cli-fi' encompasses a whole range of narratives whose patent aim is that of "persuading [their] audience, not only of the devastation being wreaked upon global ecosystems, but of the human consequences of that devastation".[2] Hence, cli-fi is often set in post-apocalyptic worlds which are the nightmarish outcome of human violence to, and exploitation of, the environment. Kirsty Logan's debut novel *The Gracekeepers*, published in 2015,[3] may be inscribed within this kind of speculative fiction, being a post-apocalyptic fantasy in which environmental issues interlace with a highly imaginative inquiry into human nature. Logan's characters feature as individuals who, while daily struggling for survival, also engage in an obstinate search for their own identity and for their place in the world. The novel consistently plays with the idea of liminarity, in that it challenges trenchant distinctions at different levels by promoting hybridisation and boundary crossing while overtly heralding a new way of approaching reality based on the acceptation and valorisation of its complexity and diversity.

* University of Pisa. Email: roberta.ferrari@unipi.it

[1] R. Hughes and P. Wheeler, "Introduction. Eco-dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination", *Critical Survey*, 25 (2), 2013, p. 1.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

[3] Logan has authored another novel, *The Gloaming* (London, Harvill Secker, 2018) and three short story collections: *The Rental Heart and Other Fairytales* (Cromer, Salt Publishing, 2014), *A Portable Shelter* (Glasgow, The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), and *Things We Say in the Dark* (London, Harvill Secker, 2020). *The Psychology of Animals Swallowed Alive: Love Stories* (2016) is an ebook collection of flash fiction.

 DOI: 10.4454/syn.v2.394

The Gracekeepers describes "a historical collapse, a regression"[4] to a pre-technological world where human life is but a continuous fight for survival. The displacement to undefined time and estranged space allows Logan to turn her story into a cogent allegory of present times, and among the many issues she raises there is a clear concern for the environment and a problematisation of the way human beings interact with it. While urging the reader to reconsider and eventually reject any clear-cut opposition – be it between worlds, social groups, genders – the story also reflects on such polarisations as man vs. nature, human vs. animal, closing on the prospect of a possible escape from dystopia into a utopian condition that significantly involves a new relation with the environment. Hence, *The Gracekeepers* can be ascribed to the so-called 'eco-dystopia', a genre that "unlike dystopias characterised primarily by failed sociopolitical structures, imagine[s] near futures in which the environment has been damaged, perhaps irreparably – usually by human population growth, pollution, […] and the unchecked cycle of production and consumption";[5] at the same time, it is also a 'critical dystopia', a kind of fiction which, in Baccolini and Moylan's terms, allows "both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work".[6]

2. Though little is said about its origin, the watery world of *The Gracekeepers* is very likely to be the result of the rise of sea levels due to the increase of global temperature.[7] As a matter of fact, water covers the majority of the globe and only few archipelagos and some odd scattered islands survive. Therefore, land is extremely precious and the few people who are lucky enough to live on solid ground – the so-called 'landlockers' – try to protect their privileged life against the threat of the residual majority of the population, the damplings. The latter live on boats and pull through a precarious existence struggling against hunger and hardships; some of them survive by trading, others provide entertainment for the landlockers – whom they disparagingly call "clams"[8] – in return for food and exchangeable items. The damplings are not normally allowed to go ashore and when they do, they are forced to wear a small bell so that their presence on land can be immediately detected.

Power is no longer related to gold or money: the former bears the same value as "coal and quartz and copper" (p. 3), while the latter has lost all worth, with surviving banknotes serving as mere props for circus entertainment. Land is now power, because it means food; and the landlockers exercise their power not only by keeping the damplings away from their islands

[4] J. PFAELZER, *The Utopian Novel in America: 1886-1896. The Politics of Form*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh U.P., 1984, p. 62.

[5] D. GRIFFIN, "Visualizing Eco-Dystopia", *Design and Culture*, 10 (3), 2018, p. 273. On ecology and dystopia see also B. STABLEFORD, "Ecology and Dystopia", in G. CLAEYS (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010, pp. 259-281.

[6] R. BACCOLINI and T. MOYLAN (eds), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York and London, Routledge, 2003, p. 7.

[7] A cursory hint at human greed as the origin of catastrophe is introduced in the description of the so-called 'banker shows' at the circus. During these performances huge briefcases full of valueless paper money are dragged on stage, and banknotes violently thrown into the audience to provoke their anger against the bankers' rapacity: "Whatever the truth, over time the landlockers had learned to blame the banks, the relentless drive for more money, for the rising seas and the loss of their land" (K. LOGAN, *The Gracekeepers*, London, Harvill Secker, 2015, p. 126. Hereafter pages from this edition will be given parenthetically).

[8] "The crew called the landlockers 'clams' for their brainless need to cling to the shore" (pp. 15-16).

but also by controlling them on water. In line with the dystopian undertone of the story, military tankers sail the sea and occasionally board the damplings' boats to bribe them, often sentencing them to specious incarceration on prison boats. A further menace comes from the so-called 'Revival ships', big cruise liners where religious preachers proselytise damplings through mind-manipulating shows in which symbols of Christianity are variously revived.

On their islands, on the contrary, the haughty landlockers engage in a totally different religious practice. They consider themselves the guardians of traditions and, as a consequence, they enact a sort of "nostalgic Nature-worship",[9] sticking to 'roots' and privileging the contact with the earth as an evident counterpart to the itinerant life of the damplings, who are always on the move. The hierarchical structure of their territories, in which the value of land depends on its distance from water, says much about their attitude. Even the shape of buildings changes as one moves away from the seashore: close to water, houses are "tin-sided towers [looking] more ramshackle than ever, the waves slapping at their bases" (p. 15), with dirty and stinking soil all around; then, the houses become lower and larger on 'reclaimed land', symbolising the landlockers' desire to live as close to the ground as possible. Drawing even nearer to the centre, 'real land' provides space for crops and breeding farms, hence for food and life. At the very core of each island, a copse marks sacred territory, the 'old land' where the landlockers perform their religious ceremonies:

> The woods were old – some of the trees were prehistoric, people said – […] The ground was clear, but above the trees twisted together, interlocking black shapes too dense for them to see far. Scraps of coloured fabric were tied around some of the branches. There were little piles of things at the base of several trees: shiny objects, scraps of paper, soft-looking moss. A shrine? An offering? (p. 18)

Nevertheless, *old* does not bear any positive connotation here, since these traditions are imbued with superstition.[10] Despite their 'natural' religiosity, the landlockers do not enjoy any true contact with nature: they adore trees, but are not allowed to even touch them or their foliage, and only for their ceremonies are they authorised to gather *fallen* branches and leaves to make masks. Sometimes human bodies are accidentally hurt by tree branches and twigs: when this occurs, scars become the hurtful testimony that the harmony between the two spheres – the human and the natural – is painfully lost. Moreover, the landlockers' attachment to the earth symbolically points to their incapability of elevating themselves beyond mere materiality: at their sacred places at the heart of islands, the black shapes of interlocking trees prevent them from 'seeing far', from appreciating the sky and its guiding stars.

No religion actually favours a true communion with the environment, as the revivalists also patently witness. Comfortably settled on board of their gigantic cruise ships, they are "too high up to care" (p. 221) about the surrounding world, and although they are obsessed with cleanness – they employ new converts to rub "at already spotless walls", everything appearing "polished, polished, polished […] scrubbed-shining" (p. 225) – they do not hesitate to pollute the sea, leaving their filth in water:

> As they drew closer to the revival boat, the bumps and thocks against the side of the cutter increased […] frayed ends of rope, the hollow bones of birds, dirty sponges, scraps of fabric sewn with beads.

[9] B. STABLEFORD, "Ecology and Dystopia", p. 269.

[10] During their ceremonies, landlockers march in processions that necessarily follow a circular movement, symbolising their being imprisoned in superstition and prejudice: "Everyone must march in circles, around the island and spiralling in to link hands and surround the copse at the centre" (p. 183).

All the big boats left filth in their wake […] "Debris. Those revival boats are clean as fishbones, because they throw all their muck out behind them." "But what about everyone else? What about their boats?" […] The closer the cutter got to the revival ship, the denser the filth became. (p. 221)

In the passage, the ethical implications of pollution are highlighted through a simple question, "'But what about everyone else?'", which points to responsibility both to the environment and to the other creatures who inhabit it. A contemporary version of the biblical white sepulchres Jesus referred to as an emblem of hypocrisy (Matthew 23: 27), the revivalists become here the symbol of a humanity that has decided to selfishly detach itself from the present and to ignore environmental needs: their neglect of their surroundings is hypocritically consistent with their proclaimed belief in a transcendental future world where happiness will be accomplished.

The damplings obviously condemn the revivalists' despicable behaviour which threatens the health of their very home, the sea. Although their life is extremely hard due to a chronic scarcity of food and the uncontrollable power of the elements, especially during storms, when "the waves and the wind shriek and boom" (p. 67), their attitude towards the sea recalls the landlockers' attachment to earth and trees: the damplings love the "honest way" in which the sea moves and changes (p. 5), "her rhythm! Her passion! Her relentless, depthless wetness!" (p. 63), while the steadiness of the land makes them dizzy and uneasy.[11] Recycling is a necessary habit of theirs – "Everyone […] scavenges and reuses until their things fall apart" (p. 222) – so that waste is incessantly reprocessed. Circus folk, for instance, make hair dyes out of leftovers and seaweeds, while junk can be variously shaped into pretty objects to be bartered, such as "tiny animals made out of the skeletons of other animals" (p. 171). As one of the characters convincingly remarks: "Everything can be used for something" (p. 222).

3. Therefore, the flooded world of *The Gracekeepers* appears to be stiffly split into two separate spheres – earth and sea – with landlockers and damplings unremittingly opposed to each other, but equally struggling with a hostile environment. This is also true of the two female protagonists of the story, Callanish and North, who belong to antithetic poles.

Callanish is a landlocker who, after a traumatic experience involving her mother Veryan, has decided to abandon her island to go and live on a graceyard, one of the places lined up along the equator for the disposal of dead damplings. She welcomes the corpses and performs a ceremony during which bodies are first wrapped up in nets then buried under water. For each of them Callanish chooses a "grace", a caged bird that is intended to mark the spot of burial; the animal is left to starve there, its agony measuring the length of mourning for the bereaved. The girl has webbed hands and feet – the unwelcome gift of Veryan's intimacy with a silvery sea creature on the shore – but her 'otherness' must be hidden to protect her from the prejudices of a rigidly dichotomous world.

[11] The difficulty in the interaction between the humans, on the one hand, and nature, on the other, is experienced by the reader through the characters' point of view: as a matter of fact, the story is told by a third-person narrator that continuously shifts focalisation, in a sort of cinematic sequence of different standpoints, with each chapter bearing the name of its focaliser. On the one hand, this highlights the idea of partiality and one-sidedness but, on the other, it also allows the reader a thorough appreciation of the complexity of reality and of the multifarious relationships humans establish with it.

North, on the other hand, is a dampling who sails the sea with an itinerant circus, the Excalibur: she shares her small coracle with her bear, the animal that features in her much applauded dance number. Since the death of her parents, who were killed by another bear during a night show when she was only a child, the circus crew have been North's family, yet she cannot feel at home with them. She is expected to marry the ringmaster's son and horse tamer, Ainsel, and to go and live with him on a piece of reclaimed land his father – Jarrow Sterling, once a landlocker himself – has bought for them. However, neither Ainsel nor North intend to accomplish with the ringmaster's plan: the former is unrequitedly in love with his mother-in-law, Avalon, who is pregnant with his child, while North's thoughts are focused on her own pregnancy, which she tries to hide for fear of being banished from the circus. Therefore, also North keeps a secret which, in a sort of duplication of Callanish's mother's experience, she owes to the meeting with a mysterious marine being on the seashore.

When Callanish and North first meet (the occasion is the burial of one of the acrobat's body, Whitby, perished during a violent storm), they immediately empathise and decide to disclose their secrets to each other: Callanish takes off her gloves, showing her webbed hands, while North acknowledges her pregnancy and allows the gracekeeper to meet her bear.[12] However, although they reciprocally recognise their marginalised condition as a mark of closeness, they are not ready to accept it unconditionally yet, both being still enmeshed in prejudice. Only at the end of the novel will they be able to envisage a new present together, which, for both, will entail a new awareness of their surroundings: as a matter of fact, a considerable part of their *Bildung* lies in their coming to terms with the environment in its manifold components.

At the beginning of the novel, the two protagonists embody the paradox on which the story is built, that of human creatures and nature appearing fatally close yet irreparably apart. Callanish, for instance, lives on a graceyard that is completely surrounded by the sea, but never touches water, because she thinks it is contaminated by all the corpses she buries in it. Her refusal witnesses, on the one hand, that the landlockers' prejudices against water are hard to die, no matter how close to it they are obliged to live; on the other, in Callanish's case it also symbolises the girl's difficulty in accepting her 'amphibious' condition, one in which water should represent no threat, but rather a welcoming element. Land is no less menacing for Callanish, despite her origins: when she decides to go back to her home island to ask for Veryan's forgiveness – the girl feels guilty for abandoning her mother in the sacred wood where she had decided to give birth to her second daughter, thus causing the newborn's death – Callanish painfully reaches the centre of the island walking a path that is fraught with obstacles. The following passage overtly highlights the idea of estrangement that, throughout the story, undermines the relationship between humans and nature:

> The trees were dense, but Callanish barely slowed as she crossed from the fields to the woods. Beneath the oak canopy dead leaves carpeted the ground, hiding *sharp twigs* and *dents* in the earth. Within ten steps Callanish's bare feet were *scratched to bleeding*, her ankles jolted and throbbing.

[12] "Callanish's ungloved hand was in hers. Her skin was cool and smooth. Their hands were linked, but their palms did not align – North could feel a high ridge of skin linking Callanish's knuckles, soft and solid. Webbing, like a fish. Like a mermaid. North knew now why the gracekeeper had believed where her baby had come from – why the gracekeeper was the only person she'd ever met who would truly understand. She was suddenly sure that if there were light, she'd see the gracekeeper's skin gleam silver. She pressed their hands tighter, holding them close to the bear" (p. 97).

Branches *clawed* at her hair, *grabbing* fingerfuls from the roots; she glanced back, distracted by the blonde strands gleaming among the leaves. At least, she thought as she ran, she would be able to find her way out again: all she had to do was follow the *stolen* parts of her body. (p. 253, my emphases)

North's own experience represents no exception to this alienation: when forced to tread on firm ground, she always wears leather shoes because "she would not let her bare skin touch land" (p. 14), and she is simply disgusted by the smell of the earth ("Soil was dirty, and it smelled; North wanted nothing more than to be away from it […] North put her sleeve over her mouth. It stank here", p. 16). The sea is definitely more familiar to her, but the harshness of her nomadic life with the circus actually prevents her from thoroughly enjoying the 'embrace' of water.

A crucial part of the protagonists' experience lies in their relationship with animals, which adds further interest to the ecological dimension of the story. In the novel, various animals are mentioned, from the cattle raised on islands' farms for food to the horses that perform in the circus, but only some of them are granted specific attention, namely the gracekeepers' birds and the circus bear. Interestingly enough, both the 'graces' and the bear live in a condition of imprisonment of some kind. The birds used on graceyards are kept in cages, and they are purposely starved to death, so that human mourning can be accurately scheduled. As for the circus bear, he is obliged to sail the sea in the tiny space of a coracle and, at least while performing with North, he must be fettered in chains, so that he can be kept under control. Only Callanish and North seem to be able to establish a different relationship with the animal world, and to empathise with these creatures. The former pities the graces she uses for her ceremonies, and she often breaches the rules and feeds them only to make them live a bit longer. She somehow identifies with them, since she is also 'caged' within a traumatic past from which she must try to escape. For her part, North has grown up with her bear, therefore she is deeply attached to him and considers him her family. Theirs is a relationship made of reciprocal attention and support, as the following passages unmistakably show:

North fastened the canvas and slid under her bear's warm frontpaw. His heart beat a thud-a-thud against her back as she let the waves rock them both to sleep. She was good at looking after her bear, and she clung to that thought. Soon there would be another person on their boat, but it would be okay, because North already knew how to care for a creature that needed her. (p. 13)

It wasn't until she slid under the bear's sleeping paw that she felt her heart slow. (p. 22)

North led her bear back to their boat. She would wash the colours off their skins, and they would be themselves again. Alone in their coracle, they were not performers, not burdens, not dangers, not weapons, not food. They were family. (p. 44)

North climbed into her coracle long before dawn. The party was still going, but all she wanted was the comfort of her bear's heart beating against her back. She crawled in beside him […] There was only one creature alive that loved North unconditionally. She lived in a family of two – soon to be three. Her bear was safe. He loved her, and he would learn to love her baby too. She let the coracle rock her to sleep, with her bear's heartbeat at her back. (pp. 50-51)

Notice the insistence on the ideas of 'care' and 'love', which imply taking responsibility towards the 'other', and also the pregnant image of the coracle as a shared space where differences get blurred and the distinction between human and animal turns out to be deflated. When the girl's and the bear's bodies touch and give comfort to each other, they overtly challenge the hierarchical boundary separating the human sphere from the animal sphere,

sealing a bond that is impenetrable to those who cannot go beyond the surface appearance of things. It comes as no surprise, then, that North hides this intimacy with her bear from the rest of the crew, since she is perfectly aware that they would not understand its true meaning.

4. On close scrutiny, Callanish and North finally succeed in crossing, and thus obliterating boundaries, because they are liminal figures who, in North's own words, "don't belong anywhere" but, for this very reason, "can belong everywhere" (p. 293). In fact, it is around the concept of liminality that Logan patiently weaves the optimistic message of her apparently bleak story, articulating it at various levels and, in so doing, granting it specific relevance.

Sandor Klapcsik has convincingly argued that the concept of liminality is crucial to Postmodernist thought insofar as it challenges all monologic and/or hierarchical premises.[13] Moreover, as far as literature is concerned, liminality turns out to be a central issue in several genres such as the fantastic or science fiction, that is narratives dominated by an ontological urge, as Brian McHale has notoriously claimed.[14] At the thematic level, Klapcsik defines liminality as the inclination to blur "the boundaries of the self and the Other, organic and artificial, human and mechanical, and most of all, the real world and the fantastic-virtual".[15]

In *The Gracekeepers*, liminality turns out to be more widespread than it may at first appear. On the one hand, it is manifestly reified in the bodies of several characters, not only 'amphibious' Callanish, but also the circus folk, whose gender identity proves fluid:

> Callanish […] realised that the tattooed women were the tallest she'd ever seen – and then, with a shock, she realised that they weren't women at all. She looked more closely at the pink-haired men, and felt suddenly foolish for not seeing that they were women. Or was it the other way round? She dared another glance, but still couldn't be sure. (p. 77)[16]

On the other, it is an evident feature of space, with several liminal 'places' to mark porous ground on which interpenetration and hybridisation are possible: besides the seashore, where earth and water meet in a continuous reciprocal exchange, also the graceyard, the boat, and the circus are envisaged as evident symbols of liminality.

The graceyard is a borderline place at the crossroads of different dimensions: in the monochrome bluish endpaper of the hardback edition of the novel, it appears as a small hut with a long deck for the berthing of ships; thus, its shape seems to reify an effort to connect, to reduce the distance between here and there, firm ground and moving water. Moreover, because of its function, the graceyard also represents a bridge thrown between life and death, in the attempt to preserve the memory of the past through a proper handling of present bereavement. The choice of the graceyard as the very place in which Callanish

[13] See S. KLAPCSIK, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach*, Jackson (NC), McFarland, 2012.

[14] See B. MCHALE, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1987, pp. 10-11, 59-83.

[15] S. KLAPCSIK, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach*, p. 21.

[16] The narrator repeatedly insists on the idea of gender blurring while describing circus folk and their performances – "Out on stage, the rest of the circus folk were performing the maypole, everything wrapped in ribbons: the pole, their hair, their bodies, all wrapped tight so the crowd couldn't tell which were girls and which were boys, so they were all girlboysgirls" (p. 1); "All circus folk kept their hair long, dyed bright with whatever coloured things they could scavenge. It helped with the illusion of their performance; their tightrope-walk between the genders" (p. 12) – so that gender itself becomes yet another dichotomy the story aims at undermining.

and North eventually start their life together – hence the plural title of the novel – confirms that, far from being a mere symbol of death, the graceyard can turn into a space of new possibilities.

At the end of the novel, the two protagonists sail to Callanish's graceyard on board of the Excalibur, after the rest of the circus fleet has been destroyed by a fire Avalon has set to North's coracle, causing the bear's death.[17] As a consequence of the blaze, the ringmaster decides to stop all performances, retire on reclaimed land with the rest of the crew, and set North free, giving her the Excalibur as a compensation for her loss. The boat has always represented a privileged frontier in narrative topography, and also in *The Gracekeepers* its function is that of connecting places: a boat can "get you from one end of the world to the other" (p. 36) so that, as one of the characters noticeably contends, it appears as "a compromise" (p. 163). Even more importantly, the Excalibur is no ordinary boat: it can transform into a circus, into a place of imagination and illusion, of metamorphosis and gender blurring. In this sense, the experience of the circus is crucial in the evolution of the protagonists, because it highlights hybridity and metamorphosis, overtly challenging any dogmatic stance.

In fact, change is constantly lurking in the story, be it as a menace to the landlockers, who are afraid of losing their privileges, or as a longed for perspective for most of the damplings, who daily yearn for a better life. In neither case, however, it is actually envisaged as a way out of a rigid 'either-or' mindset, which prevents any true realisation of the complexity and richness of reality, as well as of the possibility of approaching it in a more inclusive and rewarding way. Interestingly enough, in the novel it is up to the fantastic dimension of the story to reveal such an opportunity.

Logan associates the fantastic with the most iconic liminal space in her story, the seashore, which, besides figuring as the very threshold separating – or should we say connecting? – land and sea, also functions as a sort of portal to the fantastic dimension. In fantasy, the portal usually gives access to a different world in which the laws of everyday reality are suspended and/or transgressed; here, on the contrary, the ontological breach is not due to a passage to a distinct world, but it rather consists in the interpenetration of different dimensions, in the same way as the sea and the earth meet and coalesce on the seashore. Thus, the porous space of the blackshore provides a most suitable background for the encounter with the fantastic: overtly alluding to Celtic folklore legends of mermaids and mermen, selkies and merrows, the author chooses a love making scene – the meeting of two bodies where limbs, angles, planes perfectly match – to portray this blending of reality and fantasy. Veryan's and North's parallel memories convey a sense of intimacy, while insisting on the blurring of boundaries:

> She [Veryan] fell into sleep. *Then: a slow pull out, reality seeping into her dreams. A mouth pressing against hers, cold as the sea*. Was this her husband, come back to love her again? She felt *the weight of a body on her own*. She raised her hips. *In the dim light of the stars, she saw the silvery gleam of scales*. (p. 189, my emphases)

> She [North] had lain along the blackshore, seaweed tangling in her hair […] *Then: a slow pull out of*

[17] Water and fire pinpoint two crucial moments in the protagonists' growth – their first meeting on the graceyard for Whitby's ceremony and their final choice to come back to it together –, each preluded by a violent event, respectively a fierce storm and an unquenchable blazing. Implicitly hinting at the mythical import of these cosmogonic elements, in both occasions Logan suggests that a 'rebirth' is possible and that nature cannot but be an integral part of it.

sleep, reality seeping into her dreams. A mouth pressing against hers, cold as the ocean. The weight of a body on her own. The limbs, the angles, the planes of the body matched her own – but not a man, not a woman. *In the dim light of the stars, she saw the silvery gleam of scales.* (p. 95, my emphases)

The quotations foreground the kaleidoscopic muddling of different dimensions – reality, sleep, dream, imagination – that obliterates all hierarchies between them, while the fact that the two distinct recollections are described in the very same terms suggests that the experience of the fantastic is far more pervasive than it may appear at first sight.

Callanish and North eventually accept the condition of in-betweenness the fantastic patently heralds and the story closes on an image of attained harmony catalysed by Ursa, North's newborn baby daughter, whose presence adds further symbolic meaning to an ending in which nature takes centre stage, with the sky acquiring a prominent role at last. The very name chosen for North's little girl, the Latin word for a female bear, hints at the sky, in that it recalls Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the two constellations of the boreal hemisphere.[18] Being circumpolar stars that orbit the celestial poles without ever dipping below the horizon, the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper are always visible throughout the year, and this is the reason why sailors have always used the North Star, shining at the end of the Little Dipper's handle, to guide them.[19] Hence, they become the very symbol of the protagonists' newly acquired awareness, of their now being able to orientate themselves and get their bearings.

Notice that Callanish finally slides into the water and swims around the graceyard, which implies she has overcome fear and disgust, and recovered a positive relationship with surrounding nature. As North tells her: "I've seen you swim, Callanish. You can dive deeper and longer than anyone else. You'll be able to find such wonderful things" (p. 293). What Callanish has always perceived as a hindrance, even a curse, that is her liminal condition, eventually turns into an opportunity.

Significantly, in the closing image of the novel a sort of new utopia is portrayed which, unlike the prospective promised land of the revivalists, is happily set in the here and now, and rooted in a fulfilling relationship with and enjoyment of the natural elements:

North and Callanish slid off the dock and into the water, tilting back their heads to let the sun warm their faces. Around them the sea stretched to the horizon, silver bright, busy with worlds. Between them Ursa swam, stretching out her webbed fingers, floating between earth and sky. (p. 293)

Ursa appears here as the very epitome of a newly achieved harmony: her webbed body reifies the encounter between earth and water, while her name reminds the reader of the stars and the sky. Hence, while throughout the story characters have been depicted as inexorably pulled downward, either by the powerful strength of the sea, or by a voluntary and superstitious attachment to the earth, the closing suggests a new thrust upward thanks to a renewed relationship with the environment that heralds a sympathetic connection of sea, land, sky, and the human body.

[18] According to classical mythology, the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor originated from the metamorphoses of Callisto, one of Artemis' beautiful followers, first into a bear, then into a star. Logan certainly had this myth in mind when she envisaged her story: Callisto, who had sworn to preserve her virginity to please Artemis, was possessed by Zeus and had to hide her pregnancy to avoid the goddess's anger, exactly like North, who fears the reaction of the circus folk.

[19] "The North Star is the most beautiful because it's always there. It can always show us the way" (p. 153).

In the dystopian world of *The Gracekeepers*, the result of some environmental catastrophe, humans seem to be destined to unhappiness: despite their being close to nature, their relationship with their surroundings testifies to a loss of harmony, both on islands, where the rich landlockers adore trees they cannot even touch, or among the howling waves of a stormy sea, constantly threatening the poor damplings' lives. In the circus and on the graceyards, animals are exploited and treated as inferior, non sentient beings. On close scrutiny, this dreary reality turns out to be a transposition of many despicable attitudes of our present world (for instance, the selfish indifference of the revivalists, who disgustingly pollute the sea around their immaculate cruise ships), as well as an admonition of what the future might be if the problem of climate change is not duly and instantly addressed. The two protagonists, Callanish and North, succeed in tearing the veil of indifference and violence, thus overcoming boundaries while undermining all kinds of oppositions and related hierarchies (earth vs. sea, landlockers vs. damplings, human vs. animal). They do so by painfully learning to recognise 'otherness' as a strong point on which to build a new existence based on acceptance and reciprocal respect. As we saw, the environment plays a key role in their process of self-recognition: after all, human beings should never forget that whatever life they are allowed, it cannot but be set on this earth, and a beautiful life it may be if only humans learn to value one another, as well as other creatures and the environment that nurtures and embraces them all.

References

BACCOLINI, RAFFAELLA and TOM MOYLAN (eds), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York and London, Routledge, 2003.

CLAEYS, GREGORY (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010.

GRIFFIN, DORI, "Visualizing Eco-Dystopia", *Design and Culture*, 10 (3), 2018, pp. 271-98.

HUGHES, ROWLAND and PAT WHEELER, "Introduction. Eco-dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination", *Critical Survey*, 25 (2), 2013, pp. 1-6.

KLAPCSIK, SANDOR, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach*, Jackson (NC), McFarland, 2012.

LOGAN, KIRSTY, *The Rental Heart and Other Fairytales*, Cromer, Salt Publishing, 2014.

—, *The Gracekeepers*, London, Harvill Secker, 2015.

—, *A Portable Shelter*, Glasgow, The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016.

—, *The Psychology of Animals Swallowed Alive: Love Stories*, Found Press Media, Kindle Edition, 2016.

—, *The Gloaming*, London, Harvill Secker, 2018.

—, *Things We Say in the Dark*, London, Harvill Secker, 2020.

MCHALE, BRIAN, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1987.

PFAELZER, JEAN, *The Utopian Novel in America: 1886-1896. The Politics of Form*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh U.P., 1984.

STABLEFORD, BRIAN, "Ecology and Dystopia", in GREGORY CLAEYS (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010, pp. 259-81.

Lia Pacini*

The All-Female Revolution in Seamus Heaney's *North*

Abstract: Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975) is generally considered as the most political collection among his works of poetry. Amidst the rebellious years of The Troubles, the Irish Laureate Poet subverted the traditional metaphor of 'Mother Ireland' through a poetic message strongly embedded in political and social issues. Starting from the *topos* of the subdued and frail woman of the *aisling* tradition, Heaney moulded a modern entity that spoke better to the years of war and instability afflicting Northern Ireland in the 1970s. After reading P.V. Glob's *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, he endorsed a vision of the land which built on a comparison with the ancient Germanic goddess Nerthus, thus providing *his* Ireland with a fierce and headstrong personality. This essay delves into the dynamics of Heaney's choices linked to the representation of the nation and femininity.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney. *North*. Ireland. Rebellion. Poetry. Femininity.

1. One only needs to think of Seamus Heaney's fear of the warlike "gross-bellied frogs" in *Death of a Naturalist* to realise how his world was hardly free from peril. Nevertheless, Mossbawn, Heaney's *omphalos*,[1] that "first place"[2] with "[a] bogland name",[3] remained for him a dear and unwavering centre, located halfway between a traditional rural lifestyle and modern urban society. As the reality around him was shifting from one made of "ploughing with horses, lit the fire in the morning, carry water from wells and so on",[4] to one of war and instability, so did his poetry, which gradually came to grips with such feelings of vulnerability and fear. The duality of Ireland's social division is clearly outlined in his collection of essays *Preoccupations*, where Heaney wrote that if "this was the country of community, it was also the realm of division […]. The lines of sectarian antagonism and affiliation followed the boundaries of the land […] like some script indelibly written into

* University of Pisa. Email: l.pacini7@studenti.unipi.it

[1] With the Greek word *omphalos* Heaney refers to the belly button, although in ancient Greece it was also a stone placed at the centre of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Heaney sees the *omphalos* as "the first place you come from, the first place you belong to, the place where the mother link is holding you" ("Seamus Heaney Interview", *YouTube*, uploaded by ThamesTv, 2 April 1980, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yt4m2Z4Pmw, last accessed on 6 June 2021). In this way, he somewhat assimilates the Grecian concept and transfers it into the context of Co. Derry: his stone is Mossbawn, the place that nourished and accompanied him into adult life.

[2] S. Heaney, "Mossbawn", in Id., *Preoccupations: Selected Prose from 1968-1978*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, p. 18. All further references will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *PR*.

[3] S. Heaney, *North*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 5. All further references will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *N*.

[4] S. Heaney, "Making Sense of a Life", Interview with T. Moura, *The NewsHouse*, 14 April 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7sskc1pi_k (last accessed on 23 May 2021). Mossbawn was also referred to as an untouched and unspoiled Middle Age.

 DOI: 10.4454/syn.v2.395

the nervous system" (*PR*, p. 20).[5] As the years passed and he grew up in an increasingly rebellious country, his poetry changed from the disillusioned but still idyllic descriptions of *Death of a Naturalist* to the warlike scenarios of *North*. This evolution was triggered by his moving from Co. Londonderry to Belfast, where he lived from 1957 to 1972. The socially and politically active world of the capital of Northern Ireland brought Heaney closer to the 'spirit of the fight' and made him discover what it meant to cope with the cruelties of war: "We survive explosions and funerals and live on among the families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart" (*PR*, p. 30). Despite his geographical displacement (which he always perceived as an "inner emigration"),[6] Heaney claimed that his poetry remained receptive to "the living speech of the landscape I was born into. If you like, I began as a poet when my roots were crossed with my reading" (*PR*, p. 37). Indeed, notwithstanding his travels, his works do show how he looked back at his home as the true source of inspiration and to Ireland as the muse for his poems.

"Digging", the opening poem of *Death of a Naturalist*, was conceived as an attempt to unearth and pin down memories and feelings from his childhood, namely the relationship with his family and with nature, as well as the sense of belonging to his land and his fellow citizens. Heaney's following collections of poems – *Door into the Dark* (1969) and *Wintering Out* (1972) – paved the way for the volume that marked his 'coming of age', i.e., *North* (1975). Although *Death of a Naturalist*, published in 1966, included historically themed poems,[7] they were not as critical towards the conflict between Great Britain and Ireland as others would sound in the author's later works. Rather, they concerned Heaney's positioning in relation to his surroundings[8] as opposed to the later interest in the Irish political struggle. Among them is "At a Potato Digging", a poem dealing with the strong relationship of a people to its own land, and which seems to announce a shift from Heaney's childhood memories to a more socially involved perspective.[9] It also looks to the trope of fertility rites (with the reference to a 'black Mother') which will be further investigated in *North*. On the other hand, it lacks the impact of social denunciation and "intimate revenge" (*N*, p. 31) that underpins a text like "Punishment" in *North*, where love, which in *Death of a Naturalist* was portrayed in a delicate, timid and intimate way, also becomes violent, sexual and vengeful. For example, the "great slime kings" (*DN*, p. 4) mentioned in "Death of a Naturalist" are replaced in "Kinship" by the cool pupils "dreaming of Neolithic wheat"

[5] By connecting toponyms to the nervous system (very much like a DNA inscription), Heaney strengthens the link between words and places as an innate propulsive thrust that men sense towards the land, which, in the poet's imaginary, is female. This may be the reason why Heaney feels so intensely pushed towards it, as if a gravitational force were working on him.

[6] Heaney refers to himself as an "inner *émigré*" who cut loose from his homeland, Northern Ireland, to pursue a career in the Republic of Ireland. In "Exposure" he writes: "Escaped from the massacre, / taking protective colouring / from bole and bark, feeling / every wind that blows" (*N*, p. 68).

[7] See, among others, "At a Potato Digging" and "Requiem for the Croppies".

[8] Several poem titles refer to the natural surroundings of Mossbawn or to farm animals with which Heaney got in contact daily: "The Barn", "Cow in Calf", "Blackberry Picking", "Trout", "Waterfall", and "Storm on the Island".

[9] See in particular the following passages from "At a Potato Digging", in S. HEANEY, *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Faber & Faber, 1966: "Centuries / of fear and homage to the famine god", lines 14-15; "Live skulls, blind-eyed, balanced on / wild higgledy skeletons / scoured the land in 'forty-five, / wolfed the blighted root and died", lines 31-34; "A people hungering from birth, / grubbing, like plants, in the bitch earth, / were grafted with a great sorrow. / Hope rotted like a marrow", lines 43-46. All further references to *Death of a Naturalist* will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *DN*.

and inhabiting the "slime kingdoms" (*N*, pp. 4, 34). Again, the pen/spade that the poet initially used as a vehicle to relieve himself from feelings and emotions ("Between my finger and my thumb / the squat pen rests; snug as a gun", *DN*, p. 1) becomes a real weapon to be employed in his silent involvement in the Ulster uprising.

Heaney's early poetry was infused with a fresh enthusiasm over the progressive acquisition of a deeper consciousness about himself as an artist, his mastery of the writing craft and ability to transpose his feelings into words. The narcissistic desire to voice his intimacy and explore his inner soul is powerfully expressed in the tellingly-titled poem "Personal Helicon",[10] where one reads: "I rhyme / to see myself" (*DN*, p. 44). By looking down into the wells, the poet hopes that the stretch of water at the bottom will allow him, as it did to Narcissus,[11] to fully admire the profound beauty of his poetry. A few years later, he will "stand at the edge of centuries / facing a goddess" (*N*, p. 36) and, in "Punishment", give espression to the "exact / and tribal, intimate revenge" (*N*, p. 31) of an entire nation, almost forgetful of those first desires for self-definition.

From *Wintering Out*'s "Tollund Man", Heaney (likely triggered by the 1969 political crisis in Northern Ireland) started to widen his vision of the land from the homely landscape of Co. Derry to the whole of Ireland, not only geographically, but socially too. Despite his initial disengagement from that uproarious reality,[12] as a citizen of Northern Ireland and victim of social unrest, Heaney could not but end up becoming a nationalist. As he had already written in "Feeling Into Words", the poet reinvents himself as the land's diviner, "nervous, but professionally // Unfussed" (*DN*, p. 23) in his ability to mediate "between the latent resource and the community", and "[t]he diviner resembles the poet in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised" (*PR*, pp. 47-48).

A link between Heaney the sharp observer of his own private life and Heaney the public poet is provided by the image of the 'unmovable stone', the centre that *does* hold[13] and sleeps in the recesses of Irish history, binding together whole generations and constituting the very heart of the country. As an unlimited repository of memory ("The wet centre is bottomless",[14] to quote from "Bogland", while "Bog Queen" tells us that the "gemstones

[10] Mount Helicon, a Boetian peak, is hailed as the site where Apollo and the Muses putatively dwelled. Two springs, the Aganippe and the Hippocrene, originate from the mountain. Hippocrene was reputed to grant artistic inspiration to those who drank its waters. In Heaney's scenario, the fount is substituted by his childhood's wells, whose darkness stands for both the obscurity of his subconscious and the gloomy history of his land. But Mount Helicon was also the site where Narcissus mirrored himself in a pond. In this connection, at the very end of the poem, Heaney appears to distance himself from the narcissistic allure of his poetry and send out his verse to the "darkness echoing" (*DN*, p. 44).

[11] "Adstupet ipse sibi, vultuque inmotus eodem / haeret ut e Pario formatum marmore signum. / Spectat humi positus geminum, sua lumina, sidus et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline crines / inpubesque genas et eburnea colla decusque / oris et in niveo mixtum candore ruborem, / cunctaque miratur, quibus est mirabilis ipse. / Se cupit inprudens et, qui probat, ipse probatur, / dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet" (PUBLIO OVIDIO NASONE, *Metamorfosi*, testo latino a fronte, a cura di P. BERNARDINI MARZOLLA, Torino, Einaudi, 1979, p. 112).

[12] See B. COSGROVE, "Inner Freedom and Political Obligation: Seamus Heaney and the Claims of Irish Nationalism", *Irish Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 79 (315), 1990, p. 269.

[13] "This centre holds / and spreads, / sump and seedbed, / a bag of waters // And a melting grave" ("Kinship", *N*, p. 36).

[14] S. HEANEY, *Door into the Dark*, London, Faber & Faber, 1969, p. 44. All further references to this volume will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *DD.* The perception of bogs as bottomless was a sort of

[that] dropped / in the peat floe / like the bearings of history", *N*, p. 26), the territory becomes a useful and tangible resource "to translate the present by viewing it from the perspective of the past".[15]

In the first four collections by Heaney the land is portrayed as dark.[16] *Door into the Dark* unfolds as a journey into the darkness of the land aiming to discover its secret powers,[17] or rather, to re-discover them after the disenchantment experienced in *Death of a Naturalist*. But Heaney's fascination with and curiosity for the "forbidden ground" (*PR*, p. 19) began when, together with a friend, he stripped naked and dived into the boggy soil in a cathartic 'betrothal' with the land, as attested in his memoir "Mossbawn" (1980). Heaney admits that, since his childhood years, he has heard voices calling to him: "I'm sitting as if just wakened from a winter sleep and gradually become aware of voices, coming closer, calling my name" (*PR*, p. 17). In "Belfast", he reveals having always "listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery" (*PR*, p. 34).

As an adult remembering plunging into moss-holes, Heaney is aware that bathing in the bogs was not just a ceremony (a baptism, a marriage, or a union with the Earth), but the first step towards his poetic achievement. The land being female, both for him and according to traditional knowledge, Heaney wished to share her powers through a sort of osmotic bath and thus acquire that kind of instinctively 'female' sensibility and emotions that would help him to become a true poet. The descent into the "underground side of things" (*PR*, p. 21), through Ireland's bogs (her 'vagina') and towards the land's primordial uterus, is recalled as follows:

> I believe my betrothal happened one summer evening, thirty years ago, when another boy and myself stripped to the white country skin and bathed in a moss-hole, treading the liver-thick mud, unsettling a smoky muck off the bottom and coming out smeared and weedy and darkened. We dressed again and went home in our wet clothes, smelling of the ground and the standing pool, somehow initiated. (*PR*, p. 19)

This is the first time the poet addresses Ireland as a mother figure, namely the 'Black Mother',[18] combining her femininity with the darkness of her bottomless and elusive self. The merging with the land is also an encounter, a first revelatory meeting between himself as a member of the male sex and his first woman, the Mother: "I think the process is a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotions" (*PR*, p. 34). Still bearing the signs of the Mother (he is "smeared", "weedy", "darkened" and "smelling of the ground"), Heaney is pervaded with the feminine powers of the land.

folklore belief passed on to children. Heaney too remembers that, as kids, they were told they "shouldn't go near the moss-holes because 'there was no bottom in them'" (*PR*, p. 35).

[15] C. GREEN, "The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 14 (3), 1983, p. 4.

[16] Darkness refers to both the colour of the turf of the Irish ground and what is unknown and hidden.

[17] See R.R. RUSSELL, "Burrowing and Bogs: Early Poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North*", in ID., *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2016, p. 31.

[18] The same words are used in "At a Potato Digging": "Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black / Mother. Processional stooping through the turf" (*DN*, p. 18). The resort to the enjambement contributes to stressing the sense of darkness pervading the land, its secret identity and unfathomability.

The concluding poem of *Door into the Dark*, "Bogland", officially introduces the trope of Mother Ireland and the importance of bogs as symbols of Irishness. It testifies to the poet's newly-found interest in the merging of historical and mystical matters and brings back the symbol of darkness, "but one raised to the level of signifying Ireland's entire occluded history, buried in the depths of the boggy Irish ground, yet 'bottomless', unknowable".[19] Indeed, the last line of "Bogland" identifies bottomlessness not only as a boundless archive of historical events, but also as a "potent generator of images and ideas"[20] for Heaney's verse:

Our pioneers keep striking
inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless. (*DD*, p. 44)

The closing line leaves the reader wondering, as if in front of a *door* open to future encounters with the bottomlessness of the ground objectified by the Mother and her mystic force.

As I said, the starting point of Heaney's poetry was marked by the action of digging as a metaphor for the intimacy being established between man and the land. He later moved on to the idea of digging into the darkness, with reference to the female entity and to Mother Ireland cherishing the "memory incubating the spilled blood" (*N*, p. 11).[21] In the course of this transition, darkness changes meaning and acquires features akin to the subconscious, to the obscure sides of human nature that are only reachable through the words of the poet intent on 'sowing' historical memories into the present.[22]

After reading Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob's *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* (1965),[23] Heaney was able to enhance the feeling of belonging to a 'tribe' by transposing Glob's bog discourse into the dimension of Mother Ireland and her vengeful bog-born daughters.[24] He did this "to discover the atavistic forces of fertility rites and ritual sacrifices that are on full, terrifying display in *North*" (*PR*, p. 31). Once again, this is not a new topic, having been in Heaney's mind since his sacred bathing into the "realm of bogeys" (*PR*, p. 18). Nevertheless, in *North*, the subject matter developed in a new and stronger way, so much so that it became the archetypal pattern of that 'crisis-talk' onto which the author poured the dissatisfactions and anxieties of the period. Heaney came to the conclusion that only the recovery of an ancestral relationship between a people and a place could put an end to the revolts disrupting the land, and that is why he resorted to

[19] R.R. RUSSELL, "Burrowing and Bogs: Early Poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North*", p. 51.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[21] "Our mother ground / is sour with the blood / of her faithful, // They lie gargling / in her sacred heart / as the legions stare / from the rampants" (*N*, p. 38).

[22] In "Belderg" the poet writes that the opening of the bogs allows for "The soft piled centuries / [to fall] open like a glib" (*N*, p. 17).

[23] "Some of these emblems I found in a book that was published in English translation, appositely, the year the killing started in 1969. And again appositely, it was entitled *The Bog People*. It was chiefly concerned with preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times" (*PR*, p. 57).

[24] These are the bodies uncovered from the bog-holes.

mythology.[25] Myth brings people together and helps them believe in something in the face of chaos and fear. Although Heaney's definition of the self drew lymph from a line of male ancestors (the "ur-makers"),[26] he metaphorically left the political and social matters of Ireland in the hands of a woman. He thus hoped that men, drawn to her by her feminine allure, would lead the nation to victory.

2. When the events in Ulster quickly escalated into the 1972 bombings, Heaney felt an ethical duty to dig deeper into the land's recesses not only because he had found a source of inspiration in that bottomless and boggy soil, but also because he wished to identify a suitable poetic instrument, capable of responding to the ongoing turmoil.

As Stephanie Alexander writes, "it is hard to read Seamus Heaney's *North* as something other than resistance writing".[27] Drafted in the turbulent 1970s, the book appears as the work to which the author's previous collections would lead: "I'm certain that up to *North*, that that was one book; in a way it grows together and goes together".[28] *North* is strongly rooted in political discourse and unleashes the uncanny feeling of "listening to the thing itself, the actual substance of historical agony and dissolution, the tragedy of a people in a place: the Catholics of Northern Ireland".[29] At the same time, as partially announced in *Door into the Dark* ("Rite of Spring" and "Belderg") and *Wintering Out* ("The Tollund Man" and "Nerthus"), political discourse is muffled through the bog speech channel and, more specifically, via a metaphorical depiction of Mother Ireland. What remains unchanged is the unmovable *stone*, the land evoked first through a 'poetry of the roots' (the soil where Heaney's ancestors dug up potatoes) and later on as a mystified Mother Earth whose womb generates hundred-year-old "leathery" bodies (*N*, p. 32). In Eugene O'Brien's view, in *Death of a Naturalist* the soil was already reverberating with "mythic resonance, and we get our first glimpse of the earth as a mother goddess, a trope which will echo throughout his bog poems".[30]

Through the metaphorical portrayal of the bog people and the personification of Ireland as a nationalistic Mother, Heaney sets about interpreting and exorcising the savage events of his time by looking at the cruelties perpetrated on women from northern Europe in the ancient past – as outlined in Glob's book – and devising an allegory for the killings of Ulster Catholics. In so doing, he also gives voice to a long-lost feeling of belonging. If "[n]either internee nor informant"[31] (*N*, p. 68), Heaney feels a strong bond with his people, for whom he tries to act as a 'voice of cohesion'.

Triggered by the reading of Glob's volume, Heaney was finally able to give shape to the formless picture that had harboured in his poetry since his first collections, and to hold

[25] See J. LENNON, "Man Writing: Gender in Late Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 29 (5), 2000, p. 632.

[26] P. COUGHLAN, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", in M. ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, p. 189.

[27] S. ALEXANDER, "The Violent Feminine Pastoral of Seamus Heaney's *North*", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 39 (2), 2016, p. 219.

[28] J. HAFFENDEN, "Meeting Seamus Heaney: An Interview" (1981), quoted in E. O'BRIEN, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2002, p. 11.

[29] C.C. O'BRIEN, "A Slow North-East Wind: Review of *North*", in M. ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, p. 25.

[30] E. O'BRIEN, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, p. 13.

[31] This double negation suggests how Heaney is caught in an inner conflict between epitomising a voice of the nation and carving out a space for himself.

on to an archetypal pattern including "the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon was Kathleen Ni Houlihan" (*PR*, p. 57).[32] At the beginning of his writing journey, the poet seemed to struggle to find a set of clear symbols capable of penetrating the chaos of contemporary Northern Ireland. Germanic fertility goddess Nerthus, first mentioned by Tacitus[33] and re-evoked in Glob's work with more detail, offered him a lens and a basis for merging his new archetype of Mother Ireland with traditional folklore and ancient religious practices.[34] Heaney dedicated an entire poem to Nerthus, a four-line composition in *Wintering Out* where he described the goddess in her fetish form, "an ash-fork staked in peat, / its long grains gathering to the gouged split".[35] Indeed, this Germanic goddess was originally celebrated as Mother Earth and therefore could provide Heaney's poetry with the link to the birth-death-rebirth cycle primarily associated with femininity.[36] In a Lacanian key, one can claim that, on the one hand, Heaney discovered elements of his own subjectivity by observing a 'feminised territory' (as he did as a child with wells and "the helmeted pump in the yard", *N*, p. IX),[37] and that on the other he envisioned a mythologised Ireland as a vessel capable of containing all the intolerable events that were ravaging the island. Thanks to the figure of Nerthus, Heaney interwove reality and myth within the frame of an ancestral pattern through which one might also decipher the sectarian violence of twentieth-century Ulster.[38]

As it happened, time and events had changed the nature of Ireland, which, from the virginal and subdued woman of the *aisling* tradition[39] would turn into a sexually connoted and "Insatiable bride. / Sword-swallower, / casket, midden, / floe of history" (*N*, p. 24). The characterisation Heaney invested Ireland with blended with the state of things relating

[32] In what I believe to be a very inclusive description of the femininity trope, Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes that the wild woman is sometimes called "the woman who lives at the end of time, or the woman who lives at the borders of the world. And this creature is always a witch-creator, or the Goddess of death, or a virgin in being, or a thousand other personifications" (C.P. ESTÉS, *Donne che corrono coi lupi*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 2009, p. XIX; my translation).

[33] Tacitus speaks of the goddess Nerthus in his *Germania* (98 AC). For her sake, men were said to perform ritual practices where criminals were hanged as sacrificial victims. Their corpses were laid into the bogs to ensure the divinity's fertility and, therefore, the renewal of the land. Many of them were found with a noose around their necks, remains of their hanging loop but also symbols of their belonging to Nerthus.

[34] See J. LENNON, "Man Writing: Gender in Late Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry", p. 634.

[35] S. HEANEY, *Wintering Out*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972, p. 38. All further references will be given in the text and associated with the acronym *WO*. Heaney projects feminine attributes onto the sacred object of cult, "the gouged split" referring to the opening between the legs, complemented by the "long grains", the "Venus bone" (*N*, p. 24).

[36] Elements concerning Nerthus and her regenerative powers can also be gathered from the title of Heaney's third collection: *Wintering Out*. Via this 'agricultural title' the author highlights the soil's ability to regenerate itself after a long winter season. At the same time, winter coincides with the difficult war period that Northern Ireland is going through, so that the seeds remind us of the people who are fighting in the hope of sowing a better future.

[37] Heaney claimed he had frequently appealed to the energy of the earth to write his poetry: "I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery" (*PR*, p. 24).

[38] See this pregnant comment: "I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity" (*PR*, pp. 56-57).

[39] This literary tradition is based on poems written in ancient Gaelic and dealing with love themes, feuds and questions of sovereignty. Ireland is here personified by a defenseless woman repeatedly raped by a foreign raider.

to the second half of the twentieth century and foregrounded a close relationship between the nationalistic discourse and the feminine paradigm. By appropriating the myth of Nerthus, Heaney twisted it as best suited him. In his view, like the pagan goddess, contemporary Ireland takes her strength from the roots of the earth ("her river-veins", *N*, p. 3), but, most of all, she increases her power by means of the sacrifice of human flesh – that of the Irishmen – because blood is the nourishment through which "the goddess might redeem herself from colonial violation".[40] In the Germanic tradition, to ensure the growing of new crops, sacrificial victims were required to lie with the goddess, so that their union might contribute to fertilising the land, along with other dead bodies. These ancient and generally violent sacrifices in honour of the goddess are evoked by Heaney to give a deeper and nobler sense to the deaths of Irish rebels. If the bodies found in northern bogs were seen as fulfilling their life purpose (and ensuring the following year's crops), the dying Irish soldiers were similarly shown to sow the hope for a peaceful nation.[41]

Nevertheless, such a violence is definitely devastating, with the land becoming wounded and torn apart just like the Irish rebels at war. These ruptures in the soil are represented by Heaney through the bogs, which, like cracks in the ground (and allusions to the shape of a vagina), hide the Mother's children until their ultimate liberation, in an analogy with the unearthing of corpses from a hibernation state.[42] After their death, the Irish rebels are buried underground, where the Mother may finally re-join her offspring. The burial of dead soldiers, as well as the sacrificial victims meant as an offer to Nerthus, could then be interpreted in terms of a return to the protective uterus of Mother Earth. The ground is "soft as pulp", similar to "kind, black butter // melting and opening underfoot"[43] (*DD*, pp. 44, 43). Heaney's Ireland has thus a Janus-like personality of 'provider and destroyer'. For Antaeus, the child of the earth in the eponymous poem, Ireland is a source of strength, "an elixir" (*N*, p. 3) working to heal him. He lives

> Down here in my cave,
>
> Girded with root and rock,
> I am cradled in the dark that wombed me
> and nurtured in every artery
> like a small hillock. (*N*, p. 3)

[40] S. VAKIL, "Our Mother Ground: Seamus Heaney's Use of Myth in *Wintering Out* and *North*", St. Andrew's College, 2019, p. 13, https://standrewscollege.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Our-Mother-ground-Seamus-Heaneys-use-of-Myth-in-Wintering-out-and-North.pdf (last accessed on 6 June 2021).

[41] One of the ancestral powers Heaney invests Ireland with is that of death and regeneration. It is useful to at least mention here T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922), namely a pregnant passage from "The Burial of the Dead": "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers" (T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*, lines 5-7, a cura di A. SERPIERI, Milano, BUR Rizzoli, 2018, p. 84). Similarly, in "Bog Queen", Heaney shows how Ireland is able to swallow bodies: "through my fabrics and skins / the seeps of winter / digested me" (*N*, p. 25).

[42] In "Bog Queen" the unearthing of a bog body is recorded in terms of an extraordinary physical violence: "I was barbed / and stripped / by a turfcutter's spade // Who veiled me again / and packed coomb softly / between the stone jambs / at my head and my feet" (*N*, p. 26).

[43] By these words Heaney alludes to the Irish soil's consistency, with a further connection with the female sexual apparatus. Like the soil, the internal parts of the vagina are also soft, buttery and malleable, opening and closing whenever bog bodies (or male genitalia) penetrate her.

Although the Mother's intention seems to shield her children from the atrocities of the world, to keep them *in* with her "dark juices working / [each of them] to a saint's kept body" (*WO*, p. 36), in other cases her character also reveals downsides. At the edge of bipolarism, the land's intention seems both to help her children to live (by keeping them warm and safe inside the "pillow of turf" of her uterus) and to phagocytise them, claiming them before and after their death, rapaciously killing them after their birth or stifling them through stillbirth.[44] In other terms, for Mother Ireland corpses are both meals and offspring.

While the nourishment should give Nerthus-Ireland the power to re-create life from the sacrifice of victims (be they convicted Iron-Age offenders or departed Irish rebels) and consequently ensure biological cycles, the land "open(s) her fen" (*WO*, p. 36) only to liberate dead children, i.e., the bog people. On the one hand, Heaney embraces an ecological approach by giving his goddess the circular power of regeneration and placing "human deaths into the larger context of nature's ineluctable, regenerative rhythm".[45] On the other hand, instead of enhancing the rhythms of life, the sick union between Ireland and England gives birth to crippled children, to dead people who are only remotely similar to humans.

The bitter fruits of revenge, the corpses coming out of Ireland's 'dark vagina' – the bog bodies uncovered through time – can also be seen as the signature of Ireland's new self as an empowered and independent woman. Here, a self-determined Ireland chooses the mother role she wants to assume. Differently from previous representations, Heaney's Ireland proceeds to make her own history by rejecting the roles imposed on her by tradition. Repeatedly raped and dispossessed, she finally decides to control the only thing over which she still has power: the outcome of her pregnancy. But her rage and thirst for *vendetta* give birth to misshapen creatures, fossilised people with "red slobland around the bones / […] skinned muscles" (*N*, p. 17) and "peat-brown head(s)" (*WO*, p. 36). Quite fittingly, Moynagh Sullivan interprets the failed delivery of Ireland's babies in light of the as-yet undelivered future of the nation.[46] It is as though Ireland were unwilling to welcome an heir until the rebellion is settled. Therefore, she continues to deliver dead bodies to paradoxically safeguard them from a world at war. Only in the context of a free Ulster will Ireland be ready to give the country a chance for change. With this in mind, it is hard to label Heaney's Ireland as a totally *un*loving mother: indeed, in a tragical plot, she loves her infants so much as to rather kill them than see them suffer.

The digestive process of which Heaney talks in "Bog Queen", once again associated with the ancient rite of feeding the goddess to ensure the renewal of the land and a full harvest,[47] also points to a sick and manipulative mother-child relationship. As with the process of digestion, where food is transferred from the mouth and pharynx to the stomach and intestine, the mother is seen as swallowing her children, be they interred bog bodies or

[44] It is important to remember that, although Heaney represents the bodies who come out of the bogs as dead entities, he always envisions them as a *living* proof of memory: "Who will say 'corpse' / to this vivid cast / who will say 'body' / to his opaque repose?" (*N*, p. 29).

[45] H. HART, "Seamus Heaney's Places of Writing", *Contemporary Literature*, 31 (3), 1990, p. 28.

[46] See M. SULLIVAN, "The Treachery of Wetness: Irish Studies, Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Parturition", *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (4), 2005, p. 451.

[47] One might here quote again a well-known passage from "The Burial of the Dead" in Eliot's 1922 poem: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*, p. 92).

buried Irish rebels, so as to bring them back to their original 'place of safety'. In this way, the children's craving to go back to the mother might also be read as a consequence of her own plans to prevent them from achieving independence, forcing them to feel a constant need for her presence.

Having become a *Medea furens*, Ireland, like the Greek sorceress, loses her *humanitas*,[48] reminding the reader that she is *not* human, but a figure hovering at the margins between the anthropic and the metaphysical worlds. She repays the wrongs done to her by depriving herself of the joy of motherhood and disseminating a dead offspring. In this way, the outcome of her nefarious pregnancy turns into a symbol of her vengeful nature, in line with Medea's infanticide, which was "*fratri patrique quod sat est, peperi duos*".[49] Like her, Ireland becomes the emblem of a corrupted motherhood. However, despite these ruthless features, Ireland's revenge is different from Medea's. While the latter disavows her motherly nature by murdering her babies with the purpose of striking back at her antagonists, Ireland embraces her parenthood and kills her children in order to *protect* them, eventually recovering an empathetic quality that had been lost throughout the previous centuries.

3. From *Death of a Naturalist* to *North*, Heaney's position on the man-woman relationship changed from, say, the canonical and marital to the potentially savage and ravenous. While engaged in voicing the sacred, circular, and eternal love between himself and his wife in "Poem", a text included in *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney was covertly attracted by the notion of incestuous relationships and started to associate the feminine element with the maternal one.

By portraying Ireland as a powerful, stern woman who sets out to rule over life and death, he arguably chose for himself the role of a child *vis-à-vis* a mother. Interestingly, in the poem dedicated to his wife Mary, he refers to himself as a child entrusted to the care of his spouse and who tries his best to please her, as a good child would: "Love, I shall perfect for you the child / who diligently potters in my brain", and again: "Love, you shall perfect for me this child / whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking" ("Poem", in *DN*, p. 35). With reference to the two chiastic expressions "I shall perfect for you" and "you shall perfect for me", we might contend that Heaney seems at first to be willing to try and be a good child; yet, he soon delegates such a task to his wife, who emerges as a sort of mother in charge of yet another baby.[50] While "Lovers on Aran", "Honeymoon Flight" and "Scaffolding" temporarily avoid the wife/mother juxtaposition in order to give space to a love relationship between peers, this is just a postponement of the sprouting of repressed stirrings that would become manifest in *North*. Indeed, the 1975 collection is interspersed with unresolved Oedipal compulsions that pivot on Heaney's envisioning of the Mother as a figure transcending the actual progenitor's features.

[48] See A. Maria Wasyl, "Le metamorfosi di Medea in Ovidio, *Metamorphoses* VII e Draconzio, *Romulea* X", *Eos*, 94 (1), 2007, p. 87.

[49] Lucio Anneo Seneca, *Medea*, in Id., *Seneca's Tragedies*, with an English Translation by F.J. Miller, London, William Heinemann, 1917, Vol. I, p. 306. No less than the two children's deaths are deemed necessary to avenge the killing of her father and brother.

[50] See this quotation: "Or in the sucking clabber I would splash / delightedly and dam the flowing drain, / […] Love, you shall perfect for me this child / whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking" (*DN*, p. 35).

By choosing to embed elements of maternity in the poetical archetype of Nerthus, Heaney possibly aimed at filling the void generated by his cutting ties with both his real mother and his homeland, namely Co. Derry in Northern Ireland, which he left when moving to Co. Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland, in 1972. The persistent allusions to sex and the erotically charged language referring to the goddess (Ireland) or to the bog bodies[51] might betray the presence of an unresolved Oedipal complex of attraction-repulsion.[52] Along these lines, one could approach *North* as a melancholy work by a poet committed to fighting against England – the 'evil abuser' of his Mother – but also expressing the anxieties of a child who has not yet overcome a sexualised attachment to his parent. The following excerpts speak volumes in this sense: "I estimate / for pleasure / her knuckles' paving" (*N*, p. 22); "the dark-bowered queen, / whom I unpin, / is waiting" (*N*, p. 24); "I unwrap skins and see" (*N*, p. 24); "I reach past / the riverbed's washed / dream of gold to the bullion / of her Venus bone" (*N*, p. 24); "the seeps of winter / digested me, / […] the vital hoard reducing / in the crock of the pelvis" (*N*, p. 25); "As I raised it / the soft lips of the growth / muttered and split" (*N*, p. 35); "Her entrance was wet, and she came" (*WO*, p. 15). These passages, together with many others scattered especially throughout *North*, reveal a wistful desire to return to the origins (the mother's uterus), to the primordial bond between mother and child at the dawn of life, which also works as a metaphor for an ancestral communion between people and places.

Differently from King Oedipus, who is stained with the blood of his father Laïus, Heaney is of course innocent of such hideous crimes, but he still seems convinced that the only way to save his beloved Island is to eliminate the 'encumbrance', i.e., England, his Mother's lover. As love quickly grows into jealousy owing to the erotic pleasures that England experiences with Ireland, Heaney reacts by drawing on the child's first stirrings of sexuality and the idea of lying with the mother. The *topos* of the discovery of the female body is indeed glaring and recurrent, as in "Bog Queen": "My body was braille / for the creeping influences / […] / Bruised berries under my nails, / the vital hoard reducing / in the crock of the pelvis" (*N*, p. 25). In "Come to the Bower", these feelings are strengthened by the eroticised manner of a voyeur: "where the dark-bowered queen, / whom I unpin, / lies waiting" (*N*, p. 24). In "Punishment", the poetic I even relishes the sinuous forms of the corpses, skulls and skeletons, and savours the idea of touching them:

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

[51] See this excerpt from "The Digging Skeleton. *After Baudelaire*": "Your skinned muscles like plaited sedge / and your spines hooped towards the sunk edge / of the spade, my patient ones, // Tell me, as you labour hard / to break this unrelenting soil, / What barns are there for you to fill? / What farmer dragged you from the boneyard?" (*N*, p. 17).

[52] This is also suggested by M. SULLIVAN, "The Treachery of Wetness: Irish Studies, Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Parturition", p. 459.

[…]
I am the artful voyeur

Of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones. (*N*, pp. 30-31)

This sexual discovery, made explicit by strong and direct words, is another staple of Heaney's poetry. Ever since *Death of a Naturalist*, he had looked at the land with hungry eyes. The already mentioned descriptions of the soil as a "soft pulp", a "kind, black butter // Melting and opening underfoot", with pioneers that keep striking "inwards and downwards" (*DD*, p. 44), cannot but be linked to images of female sexual organs and to the physicality of an intercourse, as suggested by the words "persistence", "interlacing", and "unrelenting" (*N*, pp. 4, 13, 17).

4. In the last part of *North*'s first section, Heaney intermingles sexual and Oedipal stirrings with the history of his country, in a series of politically engaged poems. As regards the troubled scenario of colonised Ireland, C.M. Hillnan observes:

> Irish destiny has been that which England has modelled and willed, and if that poor and angry land is imprisoned in time, it is by no choice of its own people. […] This transformation of Ireland from national independence and growing self-development to feudal subservience to masters, foreign in both language and culture, was no accident of history. While the process was anything but even, it represented a conscious set of decisions and policies employed by the colonizer in order to create a dependency relationship with the "mother" country that would ensure the helplessness of the colonized to the designs of the Anglo-Saxon Irish landlord and commercial classes.[53]

British colonisation reached its first peak in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period, the English managed to dispossess the Irish not only of their properties (seizing 85% of the land, particularly in Ulster)[54] but also of their language (replacing Irish Gaelic with English), culture and independence. And this is where the metaphor of Ireland as a woman expands into the rape-trope. The female is cast as the victim of an unreciprocated sexual act aiming to establish the male's dominion over the land. In this way, not only are the territory and culture subjugated by a foreign power, but also the woman's body is allegorically raped by the lustful coloniser.

The relationship of dominion and obedience between England and Ireland, then, calls to mind the well-known allegory which sees England as the male counterpart and Ireland as the female one, thus revamping the stereotypical gendering of the dominator-dominated hierarchy. But, as we have seen, Ireland is no longer the virginal woman of the past. She has become an Artemis outraged by Actaeon's contemplation of her nudity; she is like Old Norse Vigdis, seeking revenge for her rape; she is a double of Persephone, who brings

[53] C.M. Hillnan, "The Subjugation and Division of Ireland: Testing Ground for Colonial Policy", *Crime and Social Justice*, 8, 1977, p. 53.

[54] See J. Tosh, "'Rape Me, I'm Irish': An Analysis of the Intersecting Discourses of Anti-Irish Racism and Sexual Violence", *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity and Practice*, 4 (1), 2015, p. 61.

warm weather and scatters sprouting seeds when returning from the underworld; she is Nerthus herself, who demands sacrifices to ensure the continuity of life. Importantly, Heaney underlined that, during his earliest approaches to poetry writing, the feminine element was at one in his imagination with "the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain [was] drawn from the involvement with English literature" (*PR*, p. 34). Hence the paradigmatic image of Ireland's dispossession in terms of a 'virginal land' violated by the English.

Before touching on a few other poems, it is worth noticing how the rhetoric of rape finds a phenomenological connection with both the natural world and the century-long political dominion over Ireland, and how this violence has been scrutinised in Heaney's poetry since "The Tollund Man" in *Wintering Out*. Rape is blatantly linked to issues of violence and hegemonic power; most of the times, the victim is a woman, epitomising the 'weaker sex'. Although in a deviant key, self-perpetuation drives are also involved in this kind of brutal prevarication. As a result, in a context of violence and subjugation, Ireland and England did engender an offspring capable of conveying a feeling of hope for the Irish people.

Among Heaney's *North* poems which deal with the heinous dispossession of Ireland and with the 'new face' of the Isle is the sequence composed of "Ocean's Love to Ireland", "Aisling", and "Act of Union". All the three texts deconstruct the paradigms of the *aisling* tradition. As a contemporary bard singing of the past, Heaney draws on the historical timeline of the brutal and strenuous colonisation of Ireland ("The ground possessed and repossessed", *N*, p. 41) by "the tall kingdom" (*N*, p. 43), but reverses the land's (or maid's) reaction: Ireland is now a woman who both endures the pain inflicted on her and reacts to it as befits the Mother of a land enraged at such a persistent ravaging. It is here, in the final part of *North*, that Heaney's Ireland comes alive as a fierce and unyielding warrior. The three poems range from the sixteenth-century conquest by Elizabeth I's favourite corsair, Sir Walter Raleigh, to the political union between Great Britain and Ireland in 1801. Both "Ocean's Love to Ireland" and "Act of Union", with the interlude of "Aisling", describe such events in the lexicon of sexual violence and rape perpetrated by male characters.

"Ocean's Love to Ireland" (*N*, pp. 40-41) critically reflects on the historical circumstances of a plantation establishment on Irish grounds during Elizabeth I's reign, an estate which was to develop into the Ulster plantation.[55] The poem abruptly opens with the unsparing submission of Ireland by Raleigh, who,

> Speaking broad Devonshire
> […] has backed the maid to a tree
> as Ireland is backed to England
> and drives inland
> till all her strands are breathless […]. (*N*, p. 40)

The poem opens with an indictment of the brutality of colonisation, here brought about through a pitiless subjugation that robs the woman of her virginity, that is, of what she

[55] As underlined by Hillnan, Ulster was a particularly important settlement as well as the backdrop of the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants that, from then on, would tear Ireland apart. See C.M. HILLNAN, "The Subjugation and Division of Ireland: Testing Ground for Colonial Policy", p. 55.

values most. The act of violence is described in terms of a power play, with Raleigh behaving despicably towards the Irish girl while "his superb crest inclines to Cynthia" (line 10) and showing a total obsequiousness to his beloved Queen.[56] Heaney capitalises on the disconcerting connotations of rape as, in Jemma Tosh's words, "an adventure that would be rewarded".[57] In line with many other colonisation ventures, Ireland too is 'possessed' in order to be transformed from an allegedly barren land into a fruitful territory.

As the poem unfolds, Ireland continues to be represented through images of a maid or a servant girl who, finding herself alone in the countryside, becomes the receiving end of male uncontrollable desire. But while any other girl might have given in to her ruined condition and miserable future, Heaney's Island significantly "complains in Irish" (line 19). Language, and especially dialect, acquires a strength of its own and invigorates a girl who, despite the repeated violations and the failing of the Spanish Armada's rescue ("The Spanish prince has spilled his gold / and failed her", lines 21-22), does not feel compelled to act according to a foreigner's rules.[58] Relying on the strength of her Catholic ancestors, Ireland endorses a policy of silent rebellion that looks up to the authority and dignity of her forefathers.[59] Similarly, in "Bog Queen", the unearthed bog woman is finally able to master her voice, speak out and use language as a weapon.

Therefore, Heaney does not depict "an inward-looking country, obsessed with the past and with a sense of inferiority", but one that has begun "to take her place among the nations of the earth".[60] In "Ocean's Love to Ireland", Ireland ultimately goes back to her safe shelter into the ground: away from the "[r]ush-light, mushroom-flesh, / she fades from their somnolent clasp / into ringlet-breath and dew" (lines 24-26). Yet, the temporal shift from night to dawn in the last two stanzas seems to announce Ireland's transition from the dark times of possession to the dawn of rebellion. When the sun rises, she retreats into the recesses of the land, back to Nature and her own homeplace, where she can wait for the right time to start a revolution. Through this description of Ireland's coping with tragic events, Heaney reinforces the connection between the female agent and the land. Importantly, however, rape and subjugation now leave room for the more positive notions of resilience and of the capacity to gather strength from vulnerability.

"Aisling" testifies to Heaney's dialectic revisitation of the *aisling* dream poems. As Coughlan contends, given that the *aisling* form focuses on a "potentially amorous encounter with allegorical content",[61] Heaney's positioning of the short poem between two politically engaged stances adds a different semantic nuance. The eight-line composition is a revival of an event from Greek mythology, i.e., the killing of Actaeon by Diana:

[56] The character of Sir Walter Raleigh is described through the lens of a sea imagery connected with the metaphor of an implacable and unrelenting force.

[57] J. TOSH, "'Rape Me, I'm Irish': An Analysis of the Intersecting Discourses of Anti-Irish Racism and Sexual Violence", p. 61.

[58] See K.M. MOLONEY, *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope*, London, University of Missouri Press, 2007, p. 281.

[59] It is interesting to observe how Heaney himself seems to voice his own rage and need for vengeance through the words of the maid, who, again, serves as an instrument for the purposes of her 'puppet master', the poet.

[60] E. O'BRIEN, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, p. 5.

[61] P. COUGHLAN, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", in M. ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, p. 187.

He courted her
with a decadent sweet art
like the wind's vowel
blowing through the hazels:

'Are you Diana…?'
and was he Actaeon,
his high lament
the stag's exhausted belling? (*N*, p. 42)

The poem first describes a chivalric encounter where Actaeon flatters Diana by showing appreciation for her archery skills. However, the second stanza dampens any hope of a peaceful relationship between the two, as Diana does not allow him to finish his sentence but, rather, hastens to punish what she perceives as the man's insolence. If the goddess of the hunt harshly chastises those who pry into her intimacy, Heaney similarly shows no compassion for those who have perpetrated crimes against Ireland and abused of her divine pudency. Death turns out to be the obvious and sole consequence for all abusers of the island's modesty.

Taking a nearly two-century leap, Heaney's "Act of Union" plays on the word 'union', which in this poem refers both to the legislative agreement ratifying the union of the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland (*Acts of Union 1800*) and to the sexual intercourse involving the personifications of a female Ireland and a male England. With the union between the two countries being legitimised by an official Act of Parliament, Heaney switches from the metaphor of a violent rape to that of a forced and unbalanced marriage, wherein sexual intercourse is foregone and compulsory.

In this sonnet, the first-person speaker is the groom, who talks of the physical 'exploration' of his bride's body in a strongly gender-biased dramatic monologue. The choice of the sonnet form is manifestly ironic. While, traditionally, sonnets have conveyed meanings associated with love and romance, here love is replaced by the unrelenting violence of the "battering ram" (*N*, p. 43), in an atmosphere of sadistic lushness.

In a part of "Bone Dreams", another poem included in *North*, the I-speaker is similarly carried away by erotic fantasies concerning lying with the Mother and a skeleton made of "white bones" (*N*, p. 19). Here follow other passages:

IV
[…] I hold my lady's head
like a crystal
and ossify myself
by gazing: I am screes
on her escarpments,
a chalk giant
carved upon her downs.
Soon my hands, on the sunken
fosse of her spine
move towards the passes.

V
And we end up
cradling each other
between the lips
of an earthwork. […] (*N*, p. 21)

The similarity between "Bone Dreams" and "Act of Union" produces uncanny effects. While the speaker in "Bone Dreams" estimates "for pleasure / her knuckles' paving, / the turning stiles / of the elbows, / the vallum of her brow/ and the long wicket / of collarbone" (*N*, p. 22), the other, England, caresses "the heaving province where our past has grown" (*N*, p. 43). Quite significantly, the fruit of this union is a 'parasitical child' which, in the interpretation of Michael Parker, is to be related to "Protestant paramilitaries, [but], as some commentators have pointed out, the I.R.A. can equally be viewed as the offspring of the rape".[62] The child's 'obstinacy' might be associated with the rebellious Ulster Protestants or, more in general, with the problems caused by the religious communities in Northern Ireland.[63] The baby's parasitical presence and 'ignorant little fists' can be ironically read as just a nuisance to the mighty England, while, for Ireland, the child remains the only glimmer of hope.

The closing lines of "Act of Union" show an intermingling of the voices of England and of the poet himself as they both strive to draw a conclusion on the fate of Ireland: "No treaty / I foresee will salve completely your tracked / and stretchmarked body, the big pain / that leaves you raw, like opened ground, again" (*N*, p. 44). Almost forgetful of her ability to close ranks and bring her children together with her into the recesses of the earth, in the last line of the poem Ireland is compared to a ground ripped apart. Now she is wounded, defenceless and irrevocably damaged.

By merging old myths, personal experience and social reality within the metaphor of Mother Ireland, Heaney compellingly gives voice to the complexity of his land's political situation. By doing so, he also puts down on paper his own feelings relating to motherhood and childhood, thus strengthening the bond between his poetry and Irish history and electing 'womanhood' to one of the main themes in his works. While acknowledging Ireland's sacrifice of her children and of her virginity with a view to building a better future, the poet covertly reveals some of his intimate feelings concerning the sense of belonging to the mother/land. After cutting the umbilical cord that tied him to his family home (as he moved to Belfast) and to Northern Ireland (as he moved to Co. Wicklow), Heaney seems to have been overcompensating for this split by imbuing his poetry with female agents and entities. Mother Ireland, though still flawed and imperfect owing to her violent nature and excessive attachment to her children, is in fact referred to in loving terms, and this cannot but confirm Heaney's devotion to a land ever present in his mind and heart.

References

Primary Sources

ELIOT, T.S., *The Waste Land*, a cura di ALESSANDRO SERPIERI, Milano, BUR Rizzoli, (1922) 2018.

HEANEY, SEAMUS, *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Faber & Faber, 1966.

—, *Door into the Dark*, London, Faber & Faber, 1969.

—, *Wintering Out*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972.

[62] M. PARKER, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet,* Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1993, pp. 143-44.

[63] See J.M. ARMENGOL, "Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney's 'Act of Union' (1975)", *Atlantis*, 23 (1), 2001, p. 15.

—, *North*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975.

—, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose from 1968-1978*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.

OVIDIO NASONE, PUBLIO, *Metamorfosi*, testo latino a fronte, a cura di PIERO BERNARDINI MARZOLLA, Torino, Einaudi, 1979.

SENECA, LUCIO ANNEO, *Seneca's Tragedies*, with an English Translation by F.J. MILLER, London, William Heinemann, 1917, Vol. I.

Secondary Sources

ALEXANDER, STEPHANIE, "Femme Fatale: The Violent Feminine Pastoral of Seamus Heaney's *North*", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 39 (2), 2016, pp. 218-35.

ARMENGOL, JOSEPH M., "Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney's 'Act of Union' (1975)", *Atlantis*, 23 (1), 2001, pp. 7-26.

COSGROVE, BRIAN, "Inner Freedom and Political Obligation: Seamus Heaney and the Claims of Irish Nationalism", *Irish Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 79 (315), 1990, pp. 268-80.

COUGHLAN, PATRICIA, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", in MICHAEL ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, pp. 185-205.

DILLON, JOHNSTON, "Violence in Seamus Heaney's Poetry", in MATTHEW CAMPBELL (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Cambridge, CUP, 2003, pp. 113-32.

ESTÉS, CLARISSA PINKOLA, *Donne che corrono coi lupi*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 2009.

GLOB, PETER, *The Bog People*, Ithaca and New York, Cornell U.P., 1969.

GREEN, CARLANDA, "The Feminine Principle in Seamus Heaney's Poetry", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 3 (14), 1983, pp. 191-201.

HART, HENRY, "Seamus Heaney's Places of Writing", *Contemporary Literature*, 31 (3), 1990, pp. 383-91.

HICKEY, IAN, "The Haunted Bog and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney", *Nordic Irish Studies*, 17 (2), 2018, pp. 35-54.

HILLNAN, CONN MALACHI, "The Subjugation and Division of Ireland: Testing Ground for Colonial Policy", *Crime and Social Justice*, 8, 1977, pp. 53-57.

HOGAN, PATRICK COLM, "Colonialism and the Problem of Identity in Irish Literature", *College Literature*, 23 (3), 1996, pp. 163-70.

LENNON, JOSEPH, "Man Writing: Gender in Late Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 29 (5), 2000, pp. 619-49.

MOI, RUBEN, "'Ocean's Love to Ireland': Imagery of the Sea in Contemporary Irish Poetry", in ANNA-MARGARETHA HORATSCHEK, YVONNE ROSENBERG and DANIEL SCHÄBLER (eds), *Navigating Cultural Spaces: Maritime Places*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2014, pp. 289-301.

MOLONEY, KAREN MARGUERITE, *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope*, London, University of Missouri Press, 2007.

O'BRIEN, CONOR CRUISE, "A Slow North-East Wind: Review of *North*", in MICHAEL ALLEN (ed.), *Seamus Heaney*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, pp. 25-29.

O'BRIEN, EUGENE, *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2002.

O'DRISCOLL, DENNIS, *Stepping Stones*, London, Faber & Faber, 2008.

PARKER, MICHAEL, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1993.

RUSSELL, RICHARD RANKIN, "Burrowing and Bogs: Early Poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out*, *North*", in ID., *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2016, pp. 29-89.

SULLIVAN, MOYNAGH, "The Treachery of Wetness: Irish Studies, Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Parturition", *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (4), 2005, pp. 451-68.

TOSH, JEMMA, "'Rape Me, I'm Irish': An Analysis of the Intersecting Discourses of Anti-Irish Racism and Sexual Violence", *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity and Practice*, 4 (1), 2015, pp. 59-81.

VAKIL, SHIREEN, "Our Mother Ground: Seamus Heaney's Use of Myth in *Wintering Out* and *North*", St. Andrew's College, 2019, pp. 12-16, https://standrewscollege.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Our-Mother-ground-Seamus-Heaneys-use-of-Myth-in-Wintering-out-and-North.pdf (last accessed on 6 June 2021).

VENDLER, HELEN, *Seamus Heaney*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 2000.

WASYL, ANNA MARIA, "Le metamorfosi di Medea in Ovidio, *Metamorphoses* VII e Draconzio, *Romulea* X", *Eos*, 94 (1), 2007, pp. 81-99.

WHITE, TIMOTHY J., "The Impact of British Colonialism on Irish Catholicism and National Identity: Repression, Reemergence, and Divergence", *Études Irlandaises*, 1, 2014, pp. 1-35.

WRIGHT, PATRICK, "Emphasizing the Bog Bodies: Seamus Heaney and the Feminine Sublime", *Brief Encounters*, 1 (1), 2017, pp. 1-14.

Web Sources

HEANEY, SEAMUS, "Seamus Heaney Interview", *YouTube*, uploaded by ThamesTv, 2 April 1980, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yt4m2Z4Pmw (last accessed on 6 June 2021).

—, "Making Sense of a Life", Interview with TIAGO MOURA, *The NewsHouse*, 14 April 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7sskc1pi_k (last accessed on 23 May 2021).

NOTES & REVIEWS

Giulio Milone*

Elisa Segnini, *Fragments, Genius and Madness: Masks and Mask-Making in the fin-de-siècle Imagination* Cambridge, Legenda, 2021, pp. 194, ISBN 978-1-78188-854-4

Elisa Segnini's hot-off-the-press monograph does not aim at filling an insulated gap in scholarship on *fin-de-siècle* culture and literature, but rather at connecting pre-existing dots which ultimately gesture towards a broader picture. The book's *raison d'être* resides in a fascination with a curious happenstance of two seemingly unrelated events in the last decades of the nineteenth century: the rise of the paradigm of regression in the socio-cultural debate on the one hand, and the appearance of masks in sculpture, theatre and literature on the other.

Armed with notions drawn from medical, anthropological, sociological and aesthetic discourses, Segnini sets out to scrutinise several cultural artifacts from a vast and diverse roster of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, in which masks are featured as objects, tropes and even symbolic structures. Segnini is primarily interested in how, in these texts, the presence of masks may nod to manifold instances of regression such as "madness and the return of the repressed, genius as a form of atavism, sexual inversion as symptom of arrested development, and barbarism as a response to cultural exhaustion" (p. 2). The wide-ranging approach of the book, which also engages with recent debates in decadence and early modernist studies, openly challenges the "abrupt separation between authors associated with the 'half-mock interlude of decadence' and those considered exponents of symbolism, and thus part of early modernism" (p. 13).

Segnini's understanding of degeneration is drawn from the work of French psychiatrist Bénédict Morel, who described it as "a pathological deviation from the norm, a state that could be inherited and that was discernible through physical signs" (p. 2). By the same token, the author also engages with the theories of Cesare Lombroso, the Italian anthropologist who, by applying the Darwinian concept of atavism to his own study of criminality, pointed out a correlation between physical signs and mental issues in relation to regression and degeneracy, and further suggested that criminality, madness and genius were all closely related.

Max Nordau's influential *Degeneration* (1892) was indebted to Lombroso's own study of genius. Convinced that the level development of a society was documented by its artistic output, and that European city dwellers were exhausted by overpopulation and increased industrialisation, Nordau scoured the works of symbolists, aesthetes and decadents in search of their "pathological character" (p. 3), which frequently resulted in the blurring and effacement of gender categories through masks and costumes. In light of this, Segnini turns to contemporary psychiatrists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Valentin Magnan, in whose studies on sexuality any deviation from heterosexual genital intercourse was promptly classified as perversion and, as such, a form of "regression on the phylogenetic

* University of Pisa. Email: giulio.milone@phd.unipi.it

 DOI: 10.4454/syn.v2.396

ladder" (*ibidem*). Segnini shows how each of these sexologists stressed the importance that masks and costumes played for subjects suffering from sexual inversion, and how the paradigm of regression persisted even when psychoanalysis connected sexual deviance to childhood experiences, as happened with Sigmund Freud's theories on narcissism.

Masks, as Segnini notes, are crucial in the *fin-de-siècle* imagination because they served as perfect vessels to encapsulate both the excitement about a new age and anxieties about disintegration, thus "functioning at once as anachronistic objects and as icons of modernity" (p. 6). Their disturbing potential was not only sexual and temporal, but also geographical: at that time, many believed that Western culture was caught in an *impasse* and was in dire need of a renewal which might be enhanced through the contact with artifacts from the non-Western world. This explains both decadents and modernists' interest in, and fascination with, masks from North Africa and East Asia that challenged the Western subject and its statute.

Segnini further draws on Freud to argue that, in these texts, masks function as both uncanny and fetishistic objects, disturbing but ever so alluring. By invoking Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze as a practice conducive to the uncanny, Segnini stresses how the interaction with the mask always entails a confrontation with the Other where "the dichotomy between self and other is challenged by the recognition of Otherness as component of the very self" (p. 12). Since masks are essentially the reproduction of a face, and thus a single part of the whole body, Segnini also frames masks as fragments and links them to the *pars-pro-toto* debate which animated the decadent discourse and characterised its style.

After mapping out the theoretical groundwork, the first chapter proceeds to offer an overview of the discussions around masks in late nineteenth century. Building from Martin Heidegger's distinction between 'objects' and 'things', Segnini relates the multifarious shapes and functions taken by masks across disciplines and cultures. The author highlights how, in their early stages, anthropology, physiognomy and ethnography often overlapped and occasionally interpolated each other's advancements. As a result, the mask emerges as an item which is, in turn, a material artifact, a medical tool and an artistic object, its potentialities put to display in the popular panoptica which attracted mass audience. In relaying the mask's history and functional evolution, Segnini is acutely aware of the double force at work: whereas the death masks of famous men and artists celebrated the features of the 'genius', the same practice was used to reduce the facial characteristics of ill people and prisoners to icons of deviancy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the mask was no longer a funerary object as in Ancient Egypt and Greece, and neither the theatrical prop of Greek and Japanese theatre. As its function changed, so did its meaning: embedded into the discourses of contemporary art and philosophy, from Picasso to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, the mask developed its potential for liminality and acquired a newer function as "portrait for the inner self" (p. 30), turning from utilitarian artifact (that is, an object) into a trope for conveying the perplexing paradoxes of modernity (a thing).

Chapter 2 is perhaps the most daring and textually dense of the whole book. Here, Segnini engages with the gothic trope of the portrait as a masterpiece that gradually draws the life out of its subject. Through four transnational and transmedial case studies, the author argues that, as masks substitute paintings, this trope is now infused by a gendered practice, as well as a form of cultural appropriation. Segnini begins by reviewing the works of James Ensor, a Belgian painter enamoured with the folklore and the traditional car-

nival of his Flemish hometown. In one of his paintings, *Self Portrait with Masks* (1899), which also dons the cover of this monograph, the author is surrounded by a masked flock. Though coming from different places and traditions of the world, these masks all bear a striking similarity with the human skulls featured at the top of the painting. Ensor, as Segnini maintains, had begun deconstructing the dichotomy of mask and face, ultimately replacing it with one of masks and skulls. Influenced by the advancements of physiognomy and personal turmoil, carnival masks ultimately highlighted the inner features of the dreadful humanity and the enormity of deformations of the surrounding society (p. 44).

The fascination with the masks of the Flemish carnival is also present in the plays of Fernand Crommelynck, which have often been dubbed as theatrical transpositions of Ensor's paintings. In Crommelynck's work, masks and sculptures reflect the alterity of femininity as well as the otherness of death (p. 54). Though the Belgian dramatist focused on elements of the West, Segnini acknowledges that the same elements that fascinated his Parisian audiences can also be found in Japanese theatre and its masks. In keeping with this, the author reflects on the presence and function of masks in Nō theatre by referring to a play by Kido Okamoto, while also highlighting the influence of Japanophilia in Europe through a review of August Rodin's series of sculptures modelled on the Japanese actress Hanako. From this complex web of references, masks and mask-making emerge as the exemplification of an encounter with the Other in which the Western clashes with the non-Western, men confront themselves with women, and life is contrasted by death.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the articulation of modern sexuality in relation to the paradigm of regression via a retracing of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* as an intertext in two stories by Max Beerbohm and John Le Gallienne. In both texts, written after Wilde's trials, masks are featured as fetishistic objects tightly related to the protagonist's narcissism. Segnini develops her argument by sifting both authors' lives, highlighting how the two were initially attracted by – and subsequently critical of – Wilde's dandyism. Her detailed readings show how the two authors borrowed and ultimately inverted *Dorian Gray*'s structure and themes, supplanting the original homosocial context with heterosexual romances in which, however, traces and expressions of the non-normative are conveyed through masks and disguises.

Chapter 4 further expands on the regressive quality of fetishism and narcissism by investigating the novels and dramas of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Segnini offers new readings of the famous novel *Il fuoco* (1900), as well as fresh perspectives on lesser-known works such as the plays *La città morta* (1898), *La Gioconda* and *La Gloria* (both 1899). The author invokes the theories of French psychologist Alfred Binet, and even goes so far as to suggest that, in some measure, D'Annunzio's articulation of fetishism seems to prefigure Sigmund Freud's later contribution on the topic. In D'Annunzio's novels and dramas, the author sustains, the uncanny and sexually transgressive nature of the masks "challenge[s] the texts' explicit emphasis on hyper-masculinity" (p. 96). While acknowledging the obvious influence of Nietzsche, Segnini does not fail to notice how all of D'Annunzio's male *Übermenschen*, so convinced of the importance of their artistic and political mission, "suffer from a nervous condition, are effeminate, and display an excessive focus on the self" (p. 118). And this is perfectly in line with the symptoms of degeneration outlined by Lombroso and Nordau.

Combining the intertextual imprint of Chapter 3 and the close-up nature of Chapter 4, Chapter 5 examines the presence of masks in Jean Lorrain's fiction. Segnini takes a closer look at his short story collection *Histoire des masques* (1900) and his novel *Monsieur de*

Phocas (1901), suggesting that his work is equally informed by the imagery of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Marcel Schwob and James Ensor, as well as by the contemporary debates on historical decline and non-normative sexual practices. Through the attentive readings of stories in which masks are always at centre stage but in a different fashion at every turn, the author argues for the queerness of Lorrain's masks. Segnini's understanding of queerness consists in a patent resistance to both the politics of signification and the heteronormative societal norms. By constantly widening the gap between signifier and signified, or even refusing to 'signify' anything, Lorrain's unstable and queer masks "challenge notions of 'natural' sexuality and foreground gender and sexuality as individual performances" (p. 140).

Lastly, Chapter 6 attempts to draw a connection between two modernist milestones, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Andreas* (1907-1932) and Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1916). The two novels do not share much in terms of plot but, as Segnini suggests, they do have some common points in their use of the mask as a symbolic *leitmotif* which gestures towards the period's preoccupation with degeneration. Segnini notices how both novels dilate time through fantasies and dreams that blur the boundaries between facts and imagination, a well-known and established modernist quirk, no doubt, that is here enriched thanks to the respective characters' features. In both *Andreas* and *Petersburg*, in fact, the two protagonists are decadent scions suffering from neurosis and unable to properly relate with the opposite sex. Both figures, as Segnini asserts, experience a dissociation of the self that results in the proliferation of masks and doubles wherein the paradigm of regression finds an echo.

Segnini's aim is undoubtedly ambitious and the result is a sprawling effort, 'comparative' in the truest sense of the word. The author keeps steady command of her arguments while navigating and scrutinising several artifacts from different cultures, though of course each case study shows its own fine tuning. Throughout the chapters there are recurring themes, ideas, and names. One particular item, however, stands out: the *Inconnue de la Seine*, a plaster cast of a young woman drowned in Paris which, according to the legend, was made in 1880s in order to identify the victim at the morgue. Her features are too soft and well preserved to resemble a drowned person, but nonetheless the object became widely popular, and several copies appeared in the home of various artists and writers, as well in their stories, as was the case with Le Gallienne and Lorrain. If Ensor's *Self Portrait*, which dominates the book cover, merely testifies to the existence of a wide variety of masks, the *Inconnue* is the real totemic figure of this study, with her uncanny gaze which seduces, inspires and perplexes at the same time.

Submission and Assessment Criteria

Stylesheet

Synergies: A Journal of English Literatures and Cultures welcomes the submission of original articles and essays (min. 5,000 words – max. 9,000 words, including Abstract, Notes, and References) as well as reviews, notes, and interviews (min. 1,200 words – max. 3,000 words). Please note that this journal publishes manuscripts mainly written in English. However, reviews, notes, interviews and, in a few particular cases, longer contributions may also be published in Italian (these possibilities should be discussed and arranged with the editors).

Synergies is published once a year. This scientific journal is committed to upholding high-quality publications and rigorous review standards. Papers are first assessed for suitability by the editors or the scientific committee and, if receiving a positive evaluation, they will undergo a double-blind peer-review process by anonymous and specialised researchers, who may suggest any adjustment they deem necessary. All submitted papers are considered as confidential documents; potential contributors whose article manuscripts are not accepted will be notified promptly. As regards accepted and peer-reviewed papers, the editors reserve the right to make final recommendations and copyedit them for the sake of clarity or style. Please notice that *Synergies* may not take into consideration texts that have already been published or are being assessed for publication elsewhere. For further details regarding peer review and revision policies, submission procedures and deadlines, see the relevant sections on the journal's website.

Paper submission

Prospective contributors should submit:

- an electronic version (MS Word format) of their titled paper as an e-mail attachment
- an abstract (in English, max. 200 words) along with 3-5 suitable keywords (in English, separated by full stops). Abstract and keywords only pertain to articles and essays
- a bio-bibliographical note (max. 150 words) containing author's details and contact information (full name, institutional affiliation, e-mail address). This statement will not appear in the paper's version sent to peer reviewers

Formatting

- Use Times New Roman, 1.5 line spacing, justified margins (both left and right)
- Author's name: font size 14, in SMALL CAPITALS, centered
- Paper's title: font size 16, centered, with the first letter of each major word capitalised
- Main text: font size 12
- Page margin sizes: top: 3 cm / bottom: 2 cm / left: 2.5 cm / right: 2 cm
- Titles of paragraphs and sections (if any): font size 14, *Italicised*, with the first letter of each major word capitalised. Sections may be further divided into numbered subsections; all second-level headings must be in lower case (except for proper nouns and the first letter of the first word)
- Abstract, keywords, long quotations (more than 3 lines) and footnotes: font size 10
- Number pages progressively (upper right-hand corner)
- All new paragraphs should be indented (0.5 cm) except for long quotations and for the first paragraph after a line space and after a heading
- Use British English spelling conventions (e.g., -ise endings, 'programme', 'centre', 'organisation')

Quotations and quotation marks

- Short quotations (1-3 lines) must be included in the main text and enclosed in double quotation marks (" "), font size 12, 1.5 line spacing
- Long quotations (more than 3 lines) must be separated from the main body of text and be preceded and followed by a blank line, font size 10, 1.5 line spacing, no quotation marks (unless they

include a quoted passage), no indenting left or right. Quotations must end with a period. In case of a sequence of two or more quoted passages, a blank line must precede and follow each of them. In excerpts containing dialogue exchanges, the words spoken are enclosed in double quotation marks.

“ ” Double quotation marks are also used for
– one-word quotations
– titles of essays, chapters in volumes, short stories and single poems, journal and newspaper articles, reviews, interviews, lectures, speeches, and other short contributions

‘ ’ Single quotation marks are also used to
– highlight a specific concept
– illustrate the meaning of a word
– highlight an idiomatic, ironic or figurative use of a term

Italics

Italics should be used for
– emphasis
– foreign words (unless they are a quotation and except for the ones that have become common currency)
– stage directions in plays
– titles of books, collections, dissertations, journals and newspapers, art works, exhibition catalogues, films, TV or Web programs and series, theatrical performances, and multimedia works

Footnotes

– Use footnotes, not endnotes
– Footnotes are numbered consecutively within each paper by superscripts 1, 2, 3, and so forth
– Footnote numbers should be inserted directly after the relevant word and after punctuation marks
– Do not place footnotes within or at the end of titles
– Footnotes appear at the bottom of the corresponding page, font size 10, 1.5 line spacing, justified margins (both left and right)
– Footnotes may include references to bibliographic sources as well as concise comments and explanations
– In footnotes including a quotation, only the relevant page number(s) should be specified (the whole page range of articles, chapters or sections will be indicated in the reference list)

Ellipses

– Ellipses indicating missing material and omissions are made up of three periods in square brackets […]
– A space should be normally placed before and after the brackets
– The typographical symbol […] may be preceded or followed by marks of punctuation, but it is not used whenever the omitted information occurs right before or at the end of a quoted passage
– Never use ellipses to begin or close a quotation

References (General Bibliography)

– All sources must be acknowledged and listed in full at the end of the paper
– The reference list might also include titles that have not been cited directly in the body of text or in footnotes. However, all entries should refer to sources that have actually contributed to providing information and inspiration throughout the paper
– The list must be alphabetically ordered by author’s last name. If the author is unknown, the first letters of the work’s title are taken into consideration for alphabetisation purposes. If the author is not a person, but a corporation, an organisation or a department, the full name of the institution should as well be listed in alphabetical order

- If deemed necessary, the list might be divided into different sections (e.g., primary sources, secondary sources, digital resources, etc.)
- Author's (or editor's) SURNAME must be followed by a comma and FULL FIRST NAME (in case of a double name, the insertion of the two initials may suffice; whichever form you choose, use it consistently throughout the document). Both surname and name are given in SMALL CAPITALS
- Titles should be written in full. English titles and subtitles are separated by a colon, with one space added before the subtitle: *Title: Subtitle* / "Title: Subtitle"
- The first letter of each key word in English titles and subtitles is capitalised. If titles and subtitles are in languages other than English, the standard rules pertaining to that language might be applied
- Titles of essays, chapters, articles, and other short contributions are placed in double quotation marks " "
- Titles of volumes, edited books, collections, conference proceedings, and the like are italicised and followed by Place, Publisher, publication year. If there are two city names, they should be separated by 'and'; if there are three city names, 'and' should be inserted between the second and the third name; if there are more than three city names, only the first one should be cited. The publication year of the first or of a former edition should be put in parentheses after the publisher's name and before the year of the consulted edition: Publisher, (year) year
- Use U.P. when citing publications by University Presses (e.g. Chicago U.P., Manchester U.P., Yale U.P.). Use CUP for Cambridge University Press, OUP for Oxford University Press, PUF for Presses universitaires de France
- Titles of periodicals, scientific journals and newspapers are italicised. Periodicals and journals are followed by volume number in Arabic numerals accompanied by issue number (Arabic numerals in parentheses), year, page numbers. Newspapers are followed by Day-Month-Year of Publication, page numbers (if available)

Examples

ANDERSON, LINDA, *Autobiography*, London and New York, Routledge, (2001) 2011.

ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, eds JOHN BAXTER and PATRICK ATHERTON, Engl. trans. GEORGE WHALLEY, Montreal, London and Ithaca, McGill-Queen's U.P., 1997.

BRONTË, CHARLOTTE, *Shirley*, eds HERBERT ROSENGARTEN and MARGARET SMITH, Oxford, OUP, (1849) 1979.

ELIOT, GEORGE, *The Mill on the Floss*, 1860, Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6688/6688-h/6688-h.htm (last accessed on 20 July 2018).

FANON, FRANTZ, *Pelle nera maschere bianche. Il Nero e l'Altro*, trad. it. MARIAGLORIA SEARS, Milano, Marco Tropea Editore, 1996 (tit. or. *Peau noire masques blancs*, 1952).

GIUSTI, FRANCESCA, VINCENZO SOMMELLA e SANTA CIGLIANO, *Storia dell'Oceania: l'ultimo continente*, Roma, Donzelli, 2009.

GORDIMER, NADINE, "Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics", in EAD., *Living in Hope and History: Notes from our Century*, London, Bloomsbury, (1999) 2000, pp. 3-15.

KEMP, PETER, "*The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood – Review: *The Handmaid's Tale* Sequel has Many Surprises", *The Sunday Times*, 15 September 2019.

SHAW, BERNARD, *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, London, Constable, 1932, Vol. III.

WHEELER, BELINDA (ed.), *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, New York, Camden House, 2013.

WOODHULL, WINNIE, "Global Feminisms, Transnational Political Economies, Third World Cultural Production", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4 (2), 2003, pp. 76-90.

Please note that a fuller version of the STYLESHEET
is available for download on the journal's website

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com
Finito di stampare nel mese di dicembre 2021