

Tragic Delusion and Authentication

The present paper seeks to approach the problem of the tragic in Greek and Shakespearean drama through what will be considered as the fundamental determinant of tragic action: *delusion*. As it shall be argued, delusion has several modes of representation in tragedy, which though they may appear as extremely diverse, have the common denominator of leading the hero astray, of securing his constant *being in the wrong*. This deludedness is conceived of as such in tragic recognition, when individual reflection on delusion seems to take at least two distinct forms: *imputation* and *internalization*. The divine imputation of delusion, as Nietzsche¹ among others claims, may merely serve to avert responsibility. The realization of individual guilt, or error, is accompanied by its attribution to divine delusion. He blunders because he is deluded. On the other hand, internalization indicates the acknowledgment of personal responsibility in misjudgment. Apart from the categorical imputation following a melodramatic impulse, recognition of delusion in pure tragedy encompasses a fusion of the apparently incompatible forms. It is this blend characteristic of heroic understanding that will concern us in expounding the problem of delusion. Our analysis, focused in this way, is hoped to foster the gradual crystallization of some major differences between what we call 'pure tragedy' and 'melodrama.'²

Understanding the nature and scope of delusion also involves grasping its corollary: *tragic authentication*. It will be argued that tragic authentication is realized only at the expense of a preliminary assertion of an inauthentic miscon-

¹*The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Francis Golffing, Anchor Books, New York: Doubleday, 1956, p.228

²Emphasis should be laid on the *some*, since full definition of the genres would exceed the limits of the present essay.

ception of identity. Acquired identity will merit the qualification *authentic*, once this initial misconception is conceived of as such, and thereby eliminated in purged reflection. This authentication is *tragic* because it cannot possibly be assumed without the preceding state of deludedness which inevitably leads to destruction.

The very term 'delusion,' already implies an encounter between two agents, the deluding and the deluded, the deceiving and the deceived. This polar division, as well as the identification of delusion, are both already based on an implicit differentiation between perspectives. In what follows we will indicate the generic significance of delusion by explicating the relevance of diverse perspectives.

DUAL PERSPECTIVE AND TELEOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION

A dualistic perspective includes insider and outsider perspectives. The former is the prerogative of the hero, secondary characters and the Chorus. The latter is the privilege of the author-reader-audience triad. This dualistic sequestering of perspective is relevant in its mediatory role for the foregrounding of what will be termed 'differential teleology.' Differential teleology, characteristic of pure tragedy, harbours the opposition between the subjective *telos* of the hero immanent and constitutive of his action, and the objective *telos* of plot-structure. It may be argued that the hero's subjective teleological sequence of actions can hardly be isolated and identified without regard to the actions of other characters. Action is always interaction, and the interactive potential of the other characters is always already present in its commencement. However, the borders and the procedure of heroic action, similarly to the incurred reaction, are in terms of understanding, subject to an insider projection of subjective *telos*, or in other words, to a misleading prevalence of delusion. Delusion here is not merely a contingent attribute of insider perspective, but on the contrary, it appertains to its very nature. Deluded perspective becomes enlightened perspective in tragic recognition, when the whole past history of action is illuminated in accordance with the organizing principle of a new *telos* tragically incompatible with its subjective variant. The real direction of the action is revealed in retrospect, when the hero discovers at his own expense his true identity and fate. This retroactive constitution of the self in the light of the belated understanding of the objective *telos* is also the realization of a new *arche*. The final confirmation of differential teleology is contemporane-

ous with the final recognition of true beginning. The acknowledgment and realization of difference is revelative of identity. Oedipus' act of self-blinding can be seen, in this sense, as the only act following from true knowledge of identity. The *arche* of the action of Oedipus as King in search for the cause of famine is very different from that of the action undertaken by the Oedipus of recognition. The acquisition of true *arche* is made possible only in tragic *anagnorisis*. The subjectively non-envisaged self-affirmation of objective *telos* is a means not only of breaking down insider aspiration, but also a means for revealing true identity, and consequently authenticating individual action. Oedipus' self-imposed suffering following from recognition seen in its double sense of delusion-authentication is tragic in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and melodramatic in *Oedipus at Colonos*. In the latter, action and identity appear to be more or less independent from differential teleology, which consists in the externality of objective *telos* affirming itself against subjective understanding, and authenticating heroic action in recognition. Oedipus appears at Colonos as already authenticated, that is, if we approach the play in isolation, disregarding its mythical prehistory. What remains then to be justified is a tragically anachronistic self-validating move in plot-structure. This anachronism in plot-structure is the situating of the acquisition of true identity prior to the prescribed plot components of reversal and recognition.

The two Oedipus plays thus reveal the underlying structural discrepancy between tragedy and melodrama. It is relevant, however, to observe that differential teleology perseveres in the face of tragic recognition. The acknowledgment of delusion and the belated (non-anachronistic) understanding of true identity in recognition is not contemporaneous with a reconciliation with subjective and objective goals. In this retroactive self-constitution, the individual is eventually made to realize the contrary workings of objective *telos*. This individual understanding, however, consists in the mere acknowledgment of these incompatible, or parallel tendencies of an alien teleology, and not in the full recognition of objective *telos* itself. The division of perspectival goals in tragedy remains irreconcilable. In melodrama on the other hand, as in *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, the tragic discrepancy is substituted for a final justification of human goals. Here the complicity of divine will with human aspirations is the confirmation of the insider-heroic perspective, and the self-mitigation of objective *telos*. Orestes' matricide is in this sense justified by the divine command of Apollo, and is a process engendering a melodramatic culmination in the reconciliation of goals. This closure is brought about by the cadential moderation of the *fate-Erinyes* into the *appeased Eumenides*.

It is not by chance that the latter goddesses are the local ruling deities in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

A similar compatibility of goals presents itself in the end of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. The objective *telos* there is announced by the *deus ex machina*, and as a consequence, the hierarchical distance is abridged to secure a unification of goals. Heracles brings foreknowledge of and promise for the future, whereby the hero is willing to surrender his personal struggle for the subjective *telos*, and to follow the divine command towards elevation and harmony.

Teleological classification then, enhanced by the perspectival view, as outlined above, leaves us to reconsider the Hegelian concept of tragic reconciliation. Absence of generic differentiation within tragedies compels Hegel to merge an extreme diversity into a unified whole at the expense of having to discard a preestablished conceptual framework. His working concepts of situation, conflict, pathos and aspiration, applied to tragedies in general, prove untenable when forced onto particular plays like *Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Philoctetes*, which hardly endure subsumption. The problem of reconciliation now has to be recuperated under the light of the new findings in relation to differential teleology. For Hegel, reconciliation brings about the final appeasement of conflicting forces through the abrogation of one-sidedness.³ At the same time, however, reconciliation proves paradoxical in an overruling dialectic attesting to an over-emphasized perspective. From such an endlessly distanced perspective the actuality of performance or reading would fail to achieve its *cathartic* effects. A reduced scope of perspectives, in the manner of the dualistic differentiation between insider and outsider perspectives, introduced in the present analysis, situates tragic reconciliation on a more focused plane. Following our argument, reconciliation of conflict in tragedy cannot be also the reconciliation of subjective and objective goals. In fact, what the hero is finally made to accept, is precisely the irreconcilability of necessarily divergent goals. The conflict is brought to a halt in tragic recognition, the contradiction is apparently resolved, but the open-endedness remains. Resolution in this sense is not concomitant with reconciliation from a teleological standpoint. The irreconcilability of discrepancy between goals is maintained until death, when the manifestation of mortality and finitude proves itself to be an integral part of a higher purpose. Finitude dramatized is the performed resignation to the irreconcilability between individual aspirations and the invincible power of tragedy. The objective *telos*, prerogative exclusively of this absolute divine power or fate, sub-

³*Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M.Knox. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, Vol. II. p. 487

sumes and utilizes finitude itself in ways insider perspective can never account for. In tragedy, nevertheless, the notion of new *arche*, crystallizing in recognition, enables the hero to grasp his finitude as such, that is, as incapable of accounting for itself. The tragic experience framed by delusion-authentication has to be understood in this sense, namely that the miscarrying of deception, and its individual recognition, are essential preliminaries of an authentic internalization of finitude. True understanding of identity on the level of myth is the proper identification with finitude. It is this representation of a transformed consciousness of finitude that the actuality of performance brings about. The notion of finitude is shared by insider and outsider perspective, and serves as a point of identification, effectuating *catharsis*.

The concept of delusion then, serves as a structural axis of tragedy, around which the difference of objectives asserts itself. Due to its significance for the present teleological itinerary, it needs further consideration with regard to its manifest forms.

As a general rule, delusion is closely related to waywardness characterizing finitude. The finite conception of the *telos* of action is necessarily biased and wayward. This underlying ontological fallacy, a defect in being itself, is expressed in the one-sidedness of action. In Hegel's view, one-sidedness is activated through pathos, when circumstances and conditions are transformed into situation. The situation is established when the circumstances are no longer tenable, and harmony is shattered by collision.⁴ In tragedy this transformed state of affairs provides the grounds for the pathetic one-sidedness to activate itself. Its expressive representation in dramatic action is also the dramatization of finitude, and consequently the emplotment of delusion. Delusion appertaining to the nature of pathetic one-sidedness is evident in its inability to see itself as such. This is the tragic blindness of Antigone and of Creon alike, whose subjective waywardness in pursuing their respective goals is eliminated only in death. Creon's disproportionate punishment for ignoring the sacred duties of kinship is the irremediable loss of his wife and son. Through this loss however, the failure of one-sided aspirations and the waywardness of subjective *telos* are revealed, and Creon's identity authenticated.

Delusion, however, may be exercised by an external force, when an offended deity descends to mislead the over-confident mortal. The discrepancy between subjective and objective goals in these cases of deceiving divine intervention

⁴*Ibid.* p. 205

is most conspicuous. These didactic forms of deception determine action in tragedies like *Ajax*, *Hippolytus*, *The Madness of Heracles*, *Bacchanals*, etc., and elicit the authentication of action and identity. Such extremes of direct interference with human aspirations may seem to be isolated instances of what Ricoeur calls the 'theology of blinding.' Situating these instances in the context of our speculations on delusion-deception, however, it may be argued that what appears as isolated, in fact, is a didactic form of representing the manipulative operation of objective teleology. In this sense it is delusion inherent in finitude that is evinced and exposed by the direct external interference.

The respective elicitations of authenticated action prove the inauthenticity of all preceding human endeavours. Both, at the same time, appear to be indispensable within an encompassing totality of tragic action. By the individual acknowledgment of delusion, inauthenticity becomes a necessary prerequisite for achieving true identity. This authentic knowledge of oneself is precisely the integration of inauthenticity as inherent in one's finitude itself. The acquisition of this tragic wisdom takes place in the new *arche* of action, in recognition, when deludedness is finally overcome. This stage of overcoming is simultaneously the culmination of tragic action, as in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, since, as argued above, when made the basis and starting point of action, as in *Oedipus at Colonos*, it appears void of the required preconditions for tragic wisdom, and becomes melodramatic. The suicide of Ajax, the self-blinding of Oedipus, the self-sacrifice of Makaria, and the various forms of consummating individual suffering⁵ are all instances of authentic action, dictates of tragic wisdom.

The close interdependence of delusion-deception and authentication as illustrated above has been grasped as such through the preliminary stabilization of what we called dual perspective and differential teleology. The necessary waywardness of the subjective *telos* was claimed to be revealed in the recognition of the contrary workings of the objective *telos*. The stress was laid on the contrary workings, to highlight the persevering irreconcilability of goals. The individual realization of irreconcilability itself was presented as a new understanding of tragic reconciliation. What seemed, however, a substantial precondition for such a conclusion, was the immovability and invincibility of the objective *telos* or fate. The identification of the ultimate purpose of fate is the exclusive privilege of the representatives of outsider perspective versed in mythology.

⁵For the element of suffering as prescribed by Aristotle, cf. *Poetics* 1452b9

Fate from a teleological point of view may be equated therefore with the objective *telos*, the preserver of the sound totality of myth. It needs to be added at the same time, that not all the so-called traditional stories of mythology qualify as raw material for tragedy. According to Aristotle's restrictions, the plot (*muthos*) should recount a transformation from prosperity to adversity, *metabole ex eutychias eis dustychian* (*Poetics* 1453a14). It is most tragic, *tragicotatos*, when the plays end in adversity, *eis dustychian teleutosin* (1453a26). Euripides here is given preference as exemplary dramatist, who despite his other defects, is the most tragic of poets, precisely for his frequent and thorough exploitation of unhappy endings. The role of *muthos* as *telos* of tragedy and the rule of adverse cadence are given prominence in *Poetics*, and linked in this synthetic statement: the end is adversity.

In tragedy then, action, determined by differential teleology, is also characterized by a pre-subordination to an unfortunate conclusion. The sound totality of myth safeguarded by fate and objective *telos* is, consequently, to be understood to contain the necessary pre-subordination to adverse cadence in plot construction. It is this essential restriction, the emphasis on unhappy ending, that, along with other elements discussed, distinguish pure tragedy from melodrama.

MELODRAMATIC POTENTIAL IN SHAKESPEARE

The recourse to differential teleology and adverse cadence to secure the isolation of the tragic from melodramatic proves feasible also in Shakespearean drama. There we find the same mechanism of delusion-authentication expose itself for perspectival scrutiny. We must take into account however, that it is problematic to label any Shakespearean play melodrama, with the possible exception of *Titus Andronicus* to which we shall return later. The focus of the following brief survey therefore will be restricted to some indications of melodramatic potential inherent in the tragedies. The pinpointing of this potential may serve to illumine the architectonics of the genre as a whole.

Instead of the typical commencement of Greek tragedies, which presents a hero predestined to delusion, Shakespearean figures like Richard III or Lady Macbeth appear on the stage as endowed with apparently self-assured identity. The self-confidence and commitment to individual purpose implies an anachronistically acquired selfhood. This assuredness is made explicit in Richard's prologue, "I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days"

(I.ii.30-1).⁶ This programmatic deliberation is based on a confessed identity, “I am subtle, false, and treacherous” (37). Both didactic articulations of aspiration and identity run contrary to Aristotle’s appertaining requirements. The hero, according to the *Poetics*, should not fall into adversity through evil and depravity (*diakakian kai mochterian*), but through some kind of error (*hamartia*) (1453a8-9).

At this point in *Richard III* there is nothing to indicate that Richard’s self-identity is based on an erroneous judgment of himself. It is only in recognition, enhanced by the ghosts of the murdered victims, that the error of misconception of identity is confirmed in the words of conscience:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me! [...]

What do I fear? Myself? There’s none else by;

Richard loves Richard, that is I and I.

Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am!

Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why,

Lest I revenge? What, myself upon myself?

(V.iii.180-7)

The former self and its misdirected actions are here split, “I rather hate myself for the hateful deeds committed by myself” (190-1). The character appears as divided within itself, which in Richard’s case, is also the surfacing of personal value. In recognition, internal division seems to reveal the deludedness of the previously maintained self-identity, and authenticates the character through the removal of delusion. This removal of delusion preserving false identity is constitutive of a new beginning, an authentic identity which sees itself as divided, and which as such surfaces immanent virtue. Personal excellence and virtue revealed in dividedness cancel an impending melodramatic closure through their final annihilation in death. In other words, we may argue that it is the loss of authentically surfaced value which creates tragic completion.

Misjudgment of personal identity confirmed in retrospect is an inevitable failure, the acknowledgment of which brings tragic wisdom. Tragic wisdom is authenticated self-knowledge, which according to the generic precepts of tragedy, is concomitant with extensive suffering and death.

We find similar congruence of ceasing delusion and acquired wisdom in *Macbeth*. In her role of proximate instigator Lady Macbeth appears as a domesti-

⁶All references to Shakespearean plays are to the Arden editions

cated witch, fully intent on exploiting the rising opportunity of regicide. The fervour of deliberation itself implies an already unsexed, or rather sexless⁷ nature, which is problematic with regard to effectuating instigation. Lady Macbeth unsexed could not possibly achieve influence on a puzzled husband.

The assumed one-dimensional stabilization of identity is expressly melodramatic in the defiance of human qualities: "no compunctious visitings of Nature / Shake my fell purpose" (I.v.45). It can hardly be doubted that after this determination of identity and purpose, reminiscent of that of Richard's, it is precisely and exclusively the compunctious visitings of Nature that can secure tragic fulfillment. In other words, this purposive deliberation has to be redefined as delusion on the tragic schema, and proved anachronistic.

It is the scene of recognition in somnambulism that identity is confronted with itself. The futile attempt to eliminate the effects of the deed, "will these hands ne'er be clean?" (V.i.41) shows the uncontrollable overpoweredness of identity by action. The dividedness of the character is concomitant with the realization of irredeemability; "What's done cannot be undone" (64). The scene of indelible defilement contextualizes the tragic recognition of true identity. The despair foreshadowing the authenticated act of suicide is the unconscious counterpart of Richard's sober conclusion, "I shall despair" (V.iii.201).

A more didactic mode of delusion is, of course, that of Macbeth himself. The prophecy of the witches, which seemingly vouchsafes protection for the hero, engenders overconfidence and pride in him. This pride is manifest in the forgetting of finitude in the supernaturally encouraged mastering of the future.⁸ Finitude at the same time, asserts itself in the paradox of disbelief: Macbeth cannot conceive of the supernatural mobility of Birnam wood, and the possibility of being murdered by a not-of-woman-born, though he never doubts the prophesying supernatural forces. It is only when the unexpected turns reality, the state of delusion is transformed into the state of dividedness, that Macbeth is confronted with the contrary workings of fate, "And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd, / That palter with us in a double sense" (V.viii.19-20). Equivocality pres-

⁷She will soon confirm her sexlessness in the meticulous arrangement of execution, when she "dares do more than may become a man," and becomes "none." "None" here indicates superhuman; or devilish, cf. Arden fn. to I.vii.47. ed. Kenneth Muir, London and New York: Routledge, 1994

⁸Cf. Macbeth's offhand reaction to the servant's announcement of the approaching English force, "Where gott'st thou that goose look? [...] Go, prick thy face, and over-red thy fear, / Thou lily-liver'd boy. What soldiers, patch?" (V.iii.12,14-15).

ents itself here to reinforce the fair-is-foul-foul-is-fair pattern,⁹ and to confirm the non-viable aspirations of self-idolizing finitude. In didactic representations of delusion, however, this inherent double sense is made conspicuous from the very beginning of action, through the duplication of perspectives. The first appearance of the chthonic ministers of fate, and their encounter with Macbeth already establish an incompatible divergence of visions, which only outsider perspective can account for. The fair-is-foul-foul-is-fair pattern is the foundation of a superhuman truth, to which the individual can only unconsciously consent: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I.iii.38).¹⁰ This unconscious confirmation of the predominance of a superior organizing principle becomes conscious in recognition through reflection on the double sense.

Apart from *Macbeth* we hardly find didactic representations of delusion in Shakespeare. It may be argued however, that the ghost of *Hamlet* predestines with a delusive command. It is not deluding because the ghost "may be a devil" who "abuses me to damn me" (II.ii.595,599), since tragic delusion, as expounded above, cannot tolerate its anachronistic revelation. What never presents itself as an impossibility to Hamlet in his reflecting procrastination is the demand of *private* revenge. The King is never alone, publicity serves to camouflage privacy in pretence. The only occasion for private revenge is Claudius' attempt at prayer, when considerations of heavenly afterlife prevent the regicide. The scene of prayer then, is significant for at least two reasons.

Firstly, Hamlet's task reveals itself as an impasse, the impossibility of private revenge. The impasse is asserted in the overmagnification of the task on the one hand, and in a mistake on the other. The exaggerated concentration on Claudius' perdition points to the inevitably exaggerated character of the command itself: revenge by definition transcends privacy. However, at the same time, Hamlet is mistaken in postulating salvation for the King, since the prayer is unsuccessful, "words without thoughts never to heaven go" (III.iii.98).

Secondly, the contrition scene averts the melodramatic potential inherent in Claudius' public role-play. The latter involves the Machiavellistic machinations of pretence, which characterize Claudius' initial appearance. The speech of the

⁹For the constantly recurring tone of equivocality let us recall Macduff's often neglected though crucial statement following Malcolm's deliberately puzzling self-criticism, "Such welcome and unwelcome things at once, / 'Tis hard to reconcile" (IV.iii.138-9).

¹⁰The verbal resonance of superhuman truth in Macbeth's first sentence already shows the necessary subordination of heroic aspiration to predicting forces.

declaration of power presents a rhetorical mingling of public affairs with personal interests. Matters of privacy claim general appreciation and justification through their seemingly casual insertion between the public remembrance of mourning and foreign policy (remembrance of "our dear brother's death" and the territorial claims of young Fortinbras). The stabilization of institutionalized identity is in its inception grounded on role-play and appearance. The apparent perfection of appearance defines the character until recognition, when disguise succumbs to dividedness, intent to guilt, "My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent" (III.iii.40).

The recognition of indelible defilement in the words, "Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it¹¹ white as snow?" (45-6) recalls Lady Macbeth's futile washing of her stained hands.¹² The common tone of despair is complemented with an acquired notion of irredeemability in the experience of an excess of blood stains for Lady Macbeth, and of binding present possessions for Claudius, "I am still possess'd / Of those effects for which I did the murder" (54).¹³

Tragic recognition then, as argued above, involves the transformation of false identity to internal conflict which engenders dividedness and the simultaneous surfacing of human value. Without a proportionate discovery of an object of appreciation in the character, the impending human loss would enhance a melodramatic closure. At the same time, *proportion* needs further consideration as a generic determinant in relation to delusion. The absence of transformation in Iago's character does not make *Othello* melodramatic, while Aaron's rigid immovability seems to justify the isolation of *Titus Andronicus* as Shakespeare's version of melodrama. The emphasized inflexibility of the deceiver-villain on the tragic schema has to be proportionate with the dividedness produced in the deceived victim. Iago's rigidity, in this sense, serves to increase the dividedness in Othello, and to prepare a tragic downfall. Aaron's immovability¹⁴ on the contrary, is disproportionately magnified, since there appears to be no countermovement in Titus' heroic consciousness.

¹¹i.e. the "cursed hand" (43).

¹²Cf. "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (V.i.47-8).

¹³See also Lady Macbeth's "Whats done cannot be undone" (V.i.64), and Claudius' "My fault is past" (III.iii.51).

¹⁴Consider, "I am no baby, I, that with base prayers / I should repent the evils I have done; / Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did / Would I perform, if I might have my will. / If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul" (V.iii.185-190).

These variations of intersubjective delusion present a situation when an opposing aspiration gains predominance temporarily. In such cases however, these deceivers, observed from an outsider perspective, prove merely mediators in the unfolding of a more profound existential experience of delusion, when the deceived seems to enlarge the actuality of delusion to a transformed understanding of being.

Gabriella Hartvig

The Rhetorical Sources of *Tristram Shandy*

The original style of *Tristram Shandy* has been an issue of investigation ever since it was first published. It has given rise to interpretations that place the work among the musical, philosophical, dramatic or rhetorical novels. Peter J. de Voogd proves that the marbled pages in the third volume are different not only from each other but from all the other volumes as well in the early editions (de Voogd 284). He explains the significance of the singular visuality of the novel: "Each marbling is unique, as is each reading of *Tristram Shandy*. It is fitting that your copy of *Tristram Shandy* is different from mine, since your subjective experience of the book is different" (de Voogd 287). Many of the approaches focus on the problem of how all the rhetorical devices, typographical oddities and syntax in the novel are there to serve Sterne's intention: to convey the characters' thoughts to each other in the most authentic way and to the reader who is free to interpret them in his/her own way. The ambiguous success of such an undertaking is expressed in the comic misinterpretations of words by the members of the Shandy family or in the narrator's imaginary dialogues with his fictional reader. Sometimes the characters have the greatest difficulty carrying their meaning through in an intelligible way. They try to bridge the gap between thoughts and words with "gestural eloquence" (Holtz 80). The success of communication turns upon their oratorical knowledge which they presumably shared with the majority of contemporary readers. My argument will be that certain rhetorical figures such as double entendres, puns and aposiopesis in *Tristram Shandy*, while pointing out the impossibility of autobiographical writing

in the conventional sense, also serve to parody the elocutionist concept of rhetoric in Sterne's time.¹

When depicting his father's rhetorical skills, Tristram recalls several rhetoricians whom Walter Shandy unconsciously follows in his orations:

But, indeed, to speak of my father as he was; - he was certainly irresistible, both in his orations and disputations; - he was born an orator; - geodidaktoV. - Persuasion hung upon his lips, and the elements of Logick and Rhetorick were so blended up in him, - and, withall, he had so shrewd a guess at the weaknesses and passions of his respondent, - that NATURE might have stood up and said, - "This man is eloquent." In short, whether he was on the weak or the strong side of the question, 'twas hazardous in either case to attack him: - And yet, 'tis strange, he had never read *Cicero* nor *Quintilian de Oratore*, nor *Isocrates*, nor *Aristotle*, nor *Longinus* amongst the antients; - nor *Vossius*, nor *Skioppius*, nor *Ramus*, nor *Farnaby* amongst the moderns.

(TS, I.19)

Although Walter Shandy does not know the rhetorical works of these writers, several times he refers to Aristotle and Cicero and on the occasion of his son Bobby's death, he quotes at great length from Sercius Sulpicius's consolation letter to Cicero. Also, he likes to make allusions to entirely spurious works that never existed.² He proves to be profoundly well read in philosophy, logic and ethics but his rhetorical knowledge is a "gift of God," he is born to be the master of elocution. Since the appearance of John Traugott's influential study, *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric*, Sterne scholarship has extended its research in the rhetorical direction. Traugott calls Sterne a "rhetorician and not a 'novelist'" (Traugott xiii) and argues that rhetoric in *Tristram Shandy* is the leading principle of characterisation³. Agnes Zwaneveld gives a close analysis of the rhetorical figures in the first chapter of the novel and claims that "under the surface of his spontaneous outburst the narrator displays a sufficient command of

¹In his analysis of Sterne's style, J. M. Stedmond traces the characteristics of the anti-Ciceronian prose in *Tristram Shandy*. ("Style and *Tristram Shandy*." *MLQ* 20 (1959): 243-251.)

²Judith Hawley collected all the works, genuine, partially, or entirely spurious, to which allusions are made in *Tristram Shandy*. ("Hints and Documents' I: A Bibliography for *Tristram Shandy*." *The Shandean* 3 (1991): 9-36.)

³"Every character of the book, indeed, is primarily a rhetorical effect, a device by which *Tristram* explicates his life and opinions" (Traugott 115).

rhetoric to hold our attention” (Zwaneveld 66). The changed role of oratory in Sterne’s day is mirrored in the playful use of rhetorical devices in *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne’s plan was to assign dramatic roles to his characters in which they would act, unknowingly, as skilled orators (Traugott 113-15).

In England classical rhetoric underwent an essential change before the eighteenth century and that change might be reflected in how Sterne represents his characters in the story. The parodic way he treats Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby or Trim, and Tristram’s unsuccessful attempts to write an autobiography, create a paradox that reveals Sterne’s idea of autobiography writing. The narrator makes the characters expressive through their orations and gestures: they communicate their eccentricity through carefully composed rhetorical speeches, which, however, never reach their purpose because they are most of the time misinterpreted. Any attempt to communicate their own life turns into failure. Tristram’s presence in *Tristram Shandy* is restricted to being the explicit mover of the story, the intruding narrator. The reader receives little information about his life compared to the lives of the other characters. Instead he appears in the role of the stage director that is responsible for putting an end to the scenes.⁴ His opinions express what lies behind elocution, the non-verbal matter of what a life turns out to be after the curtain is dropped: what is the meaning that continues where language is cut by an aposiopesis and only dashes refer to the unspeakable.

STERNE’S RHETORICAL EDUCATION

The reading of most of the rhetoricians referred to in *Tristram Shandy* were prescribed to students in the general syllabus for the colleges at Cambridge University in the first half of the eighteenth century. Sterne studied at Jesus College, Cambridge, between 1733 and 1737. As an undergraduate, his tutors must have followed a contemporary work on recommended readings, Daniel Waterland’s *Advice to a Young Student. With a Method of Study for the Four First Years* (1706-40)⁵. Tristram refers to him when he talks about how Yorick always commented upon his own sermons:

⁴Traugott writes, “The only possible way to imagine Tristram Shandy as a play is to imagine Tristram in front of the curtain as a chorus or commentator pointing to the stage action...” (Traugott 133).

⁵See Cash, Arthur H. Laurence Sterne. *The Early & Middle Years*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1975, chapter two.

For instance, This sermon upon the jewish dispensation - I don't like it at all; - Though I own there is a world of WATER-LANDISH knowledge in it, - but 'tis all tritical, and most tritically put together. - This is but a flimsy kind of a composition; what was in my head when I made it?

(TS, VI.11)

Waterland lists the courses in philosophy, classical and divine studies. His list of the classical studies includes the reading of the rhetorical works of Cicero, Vossius, Isocrates.⁶ For those who intended to be preachers, an additional list was offered, in which Aristotle's *Rhetorica*, Plutarch, Longinus, Curtius, and Pufendorf were found among others (Wordsworth 337). In *Tristram Shandy*, there is an allusion to Jesus College as well, where Tristram continues the description of his father's rhetorical skills:

... he knew not so much as in what the difference of an argument *ad ignorantiam* and an argument *ad hominem* consisted; so that I well remember, when he went up along with me to enter my name at Jesus College in * * * *, - it was a matter of just wonder with my worthy tutor, and two or three fellows of that learned society, - that a man who knew not so much as the names of his tools, should be able to work after that fashion with 'em."

(TS, I.19)

Sterne shared the classical rhetorical knowledge that he received at Jesus College with any educated reader of his day. As a preacher, he wrote sermons and had a great oratorical practice. Traugott writes about his skills: "Sterne's pulpit oratory was as full of rhetorical tricks as Hume could have wished, had he wished for a pulpit oratory at all, and Cowper allowed that if any rhetoric could save souls, Sterne's could" (Traugott 85). The characters' inability to make themselves understood might illustrate the loss rhetoric suffered by the elocutionist movement.

⁶I have found the syllabus in the appendix of Christopher Wordsworth's study, *Scholae Academicae: Some Account of the Studies at the English Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: University Press, 1877: 333-334).

THE BRITISH ELOCUTIONISTS

In the third volume of *Tristram Shandy*, where Tristram explains an aposiopesis from the previous chapter, he makes a remark upon the dying out of eloquence in those days (the cause of which is that orators do not wear mantles any more):

All which plainly shews, may it please your worships, that the decay of eloquence, and the little good service it does at present, both within, and without doors, is owing to nothing else in the world, but short coats, and the disuse of trunkhose. - We can conceal nothing under ours, Madam, worth shewing.

(TS, III.14)⁷

The passage ironically refers to the changed concept of classical rhetoric. This change began with Petrus Ramus in the sixteenth century and resulted in a limited concept of rhetoric.

Samuel Howell describes the main trends running parallel in Sterne's time.⁸ The Ciceronians tried to restore the classical rhetorical tradition, the five arts that Cicero defined as the five major procedures of rhetoric: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *pronuntiatio*. The reform known as Ramism consisted in detaching the first two arts, *inventio* and *dispositio*, from rhetoric and referring them to logic. Tristram's statement, "we can conceal nothing under ours, Madam, worth shewing," might refer to this loss. It meant, Howell argues, that rhetoric remained without the "considerations of content and form:" "Limited to delivery and to the mere externals of style, rhetoric no longer had anything of real importance to say or do" (Howell 78-79). Extreme Ramism in the eighteenth century saw rhetoric as the art of voice and gesture alone. The elocutionist movement considered the art of speaking, oratory, as restricted entirely to the elegance of style. The elocutionists regarded Cicero's third art, *elocutio*, as an equivalent of the fifth art, *pronuntiatio* (Howell 145).

⁷Cf. Hume's essay, "Of Eloquence" (1742): "It may be pretended that the decline of eloquence is owing to the superior good sense of the moderns, who reject with disdain all those rhetorical tricks, employed to seduce the judges, and will admit of nothing but solid argument in any debate or deliberation..." (Quoted from Traugott 85).

⁸See Howell, Samuel. *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971.

In *Tristram Shandy*, the characters are often presented as actors, orators. The circumstances of the reading of the “Sermon on Conscience” symbolise well the whole structure of the novel. The “subject matter” (*inventio*) accidentally falls out of Stevinus and the eloquence of the speaker seems to gain greater emphasis than the content of the sermon. In Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* there are two articles on elocution. The first defines it in the Ciceronian sense, as the “choice of words.” However, there is a more restricted, second meaning of “elocution” that Chamber also offers, where the term is defined as “the just and graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture, in speaking,” which was identical with the fifth art, *pronuntiatio*, for the Ramists. Chambers considers gesture as a requisite of good delivery, which he discusses in detail in a separate article (“gesture”) referring to Quintilian, Cicero, Ward, and Sheridan’s *Lectures on Elocution*.⁹ Sometimes Walter Shandy is unable to overcome his greatest affliction through an oration. He then decides to take a walk to the fish pond or -- when he learns about Tristram’s flat nose -- he throws himself on his bed “in the wildest disorder imaginable, but at the same time, in the most lamentable attitude of a man borne down with sorrows, that ever the eye of pity dropp’d a tear for” (*TS*, III.29). The narrator devotes page after page to the detailed description of similar scenes to exemplify the role of non-verbal devices in characterisation. When Trim is reading out the sermon, Tristram paints his gestures and posture:

He stood before them with his body swayed, and bent forwards just so far, as to make an angle of 85 degrees and a half upon the plain of the horizon; - which sound orators, to whom I address this, know very well, to be the true persuasive angle of incidence;

(*TS*, II.17)

The description of Trim’s posture has two sources: gestures are discussed as the second part of pronunciation, and the passage also alludes to William Hogarth’s theory of the line of beauty (“...his knee bent, but that not violently, - but so as to fall within the limits of the line of beauty.”) The allusion to Hogarth is ironic: the over-sophisticated description serves to instruct orators about the right posture. However, those who would want to embody the line of beauty in their postures would in fact fall on their noses (“unless they practise it”). This comic remark

⁹Sterne must have known Sheridan’s *Lectures* since he possessed an 1762 edition of them (see Whibley’s Catalogue, item 567).

places the whole subject of elocution in an ironic context. Cicero discusses gesture as the necessary accompaniment of emotion. In Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* gesture is a "motion of the body, intended to signify some idea or passion of the mind." Gestures are intended to complement or substitute language: they are to convey feelings in a non-verbal way and they can also be expressive of thoughts, not merely emotions. Whenever he gives a speech, Trim's gestures and voice comply with the rules of pronunciation and elocution. In the second book, he is portrayed as a faithful servant of Uncle Toby with great affection. The only flaw in his character is that he is too eloquent:

... he was voluble; - the eternal interlardings of your Honour, with the respectfulness of Corporal Trim's manner, interceding so strong in behalf of his elocution, - that tho' you might have been incommoded, - you could not well be angry.

(*TS*, II.5)

Trim's hobby horse is his elocution, his characterisation is built around his voice, bows, gestures and postures. The gestures of the other characters are also expressive of the ruling passion of their bearers. In Sterne's day a deeper connection was assumed between the art of elocution and national character. Addison, in the *Spectator* (No. 407), emphasises the importance of gestures:

Most foreign writers who have given any character of the *English* nation, whatever vices they ascribe to it, allow in general, that the people are naturally modest. It proceeds perhaps from this our national virtue, that our orators are observed to make use of less gesture or action than those of other countries. Our preachers stand stock-still in the pulpit, and will not so much as move a finger to set off the best sermons in the world.

Despite the dying out of eloquence, Sterne's characters are skilful orators; they always use proper gestures and know the graces of speaking. Gestures in their communication often prove to be more successful than words.¹⁰

¹⁰See Marie-Paule Laden. "Tristram Shandy: Imitation as Paradox and Joke." In *Self-Imitation in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*: 128-156. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1987 (144): "It is remarkable that whatever communication occurs between Walter's and Toby's monadic universes is achieved through gestures."

THE ROLE OF THE CHARACTERS' ELOCUTION IN TRISTRAM SHANDY

Yorick, Walter Shandy, and Uncle Toby are eccentric characters. The reader gets to know them through their ruling passions which are always associated with either figurative language usage or non-verbal communication. The communicative failure in the characters' speeches reveals Sterne's intention: to show that the human mind and passions are not depictable or communicable by the means of elocution. Although figurative and non-verbal rhetorical means would serve better to convey thoughts than words, the comic effect that always arises proves their failure. They become the individual patterns of Tristram's various attempts to express the continuous flow of thoughts in the mind.

Each of the lives of the three main characters has one feature in common: the life they live is a contradiction of their knowledge. Yorick is introduced in the first book as falling victim to his own wit. His jokes and his role as a jester make him an eccentric among people with no sense of humour. These jokes and his deeds are ambiguous, therefore people always misinterpret them. When he picks up the chestnut that Phutatorius threw on the floor, he innocently becomes accused.¹¹ Tristram describes his character:

... but it was his misfortune all his life to bear the imputation of saying and doing a thousand things of which (unless my esteem blinds me) his nature was incapable.

(*TS*, IV.27)

Phutatorius interprets Yorick's gesture of picking up the chestnut as a "plain acknowledgement (...) that the chesnut was originally his" whereas the reason why Yorick picked it up was simply a trifling incident:

...He did it, for no reason, but that he thought the chesnut not a jot worse for the adventure - and that he held a good chesnut worth stooping for.

(*TS*, IV.27)

Yorick seems to be bound by the same language the Shakespearean jester used. He is able to communicate his life only through gestures, riddles and metaphors

¹¹Traugott explains this scene as an example of the "rhetoric of existence" (Traugott 109-13).

which people around him constantly misinterpret. The narrator alone knows what is behind Yorick's figurative speech:

All I blame him for - or rather, all I blame and alternately like him for, was that singularity of his temper, which would never suffer him to take pains to set a story right with the world, however in his power.

(*TS*, IV.27)

Yorick's high spirit is represented in his gestures and the figurative language he always uses but never explains; however, it always results in a comic effect, which proves the failure of possible interpretations.

The second book of *Tristram Shandy* is devoted to the characterisation of Uncle Toby. This is perhaps the most profound place where Tristram reveals the difference between his writing a biography and the characters trying to communicate themselves. Uncle Toby's hobby horse is the fortifications built on the bowling green. Although he has a broad knowledge of military science, his wound makes him unable to practise this knowledge. His life in this wounded state is limited to sitting in the parlour and making odd remarks on Walter Shandy's theories; or he gives a lecture on one of the attacks in the siege of Namur. Tristram depicts him as an eloquent person but Uncle Toby's eloquence fails most of the time:

... my uncle Toby was generally more eloquent and particular in his account of it [the principal attack at Namur]; and the many perplexities he was in, arose out of the almost insurmountable difficulties he found in telling his story intelligibly ...

(*TS*, II.1)

The unlucky attempts to explain these attacks to his visitors almost cost Uncle Toby his life. What saves his life and ultimately heals his wound is that he becomes capable of putting his obscure explanations into action, in Tristram's words, "of procuring my uncle Toby his HOBBY-HORSE." Tristram's answer to the critic's question of

-- How, in the name of wonder! could your uncle Toby, who, it seems, was a military man, and whom you have represented as no fool, -- be at the same time such a confused, pudding-headed, muddle-headed fellow, as --

(TS, II.2)

would be “Go look” assuming that the reader will be able to look behind the dropped curtains. However, Tristram writes a biography so he must cope with the rules of rhetoric when drawing the character of Uncle Toby. The “Go look” answer is only possible for the other characters that can afford to use non-verbal devices when they are not able to express themselves. Tristram the narrator must explain himself in an intelligible way:

... for tho' it [the “Go look” answer] might have suited my uncle Toby's character as a soldier excellently well, - and had he not accustomed himself, in such attacks, to whistle his *Lillabullero*, - as he wanted no courage, 'tis the very answer he would have given; yet it would by no means have done for me.

(TS, II.2)

Tristram must follow the rules of narration if he wants to avoid the critics' attacks. He must strive to be intelligible and avoid any possibility of misinterpretation of his words. His answer instead of saying “Go look” is comparing his narration with Locke's *Essay*. This is a history-book, he says, on “what passes in a man's own mind.” Tristram wants to show that apart from the possible causes of obscurity and confusion in the perception of ideas in a man's mind there is a deeper failure: the impossibility of assigning words to those ideas. He concludes the chapter about Uncle Toby's perplexities by saying, “'Twas not by ideas, - by heaven! his life was put in jeopardy by words.”

Walter Shandy is the greatest orator among the characters. His entire life seems to turn on the speeches he gives on every possible subject. His elocution is both the fortune and the misfortune of his life:

My father was as proud of his eloquence as MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO could be for his life ... it was indeed his strength - and his weakness too. - His strength - for he was by nature eloquent, - and his weakness - for he was hourly a dupe to it...

(*TS*, V.3)

His theories presented in speeches are his hobby horse; they help him overcome the tragedies that happen to the Shandy family: Bobby's death, Tristram's flat nose and his unlucky circumcision. However, his misfortune is that his eloquence most of the time falls victim to the door hinges which creak whenever the door opens and it either puts an end to the oration or gives another flow to his thoughts:

Never did the parlour-door open - but his philosophy or his principles fell a victim to it; ... Inconsistent soul that man is! - languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal! - his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!

(*TS*, III.21)

The same thing happens when someone enters the room and brings a message from upstairs or when Trim returns with Stevinus:

... but, to the loss of much sound knowledge, the destinies in the morning had decreed that no dissertation of any kind should be spun by my father that day; - for as he opened his mouth to begin the next sentence, (ch.15) In popp'd Corporal *Trim* with *Stevinus*;

(*TS*, II. 14, 15)

The characters are often silenced by accidents like this before they could ever reach the end of their sentence. The narrator cuts their speeches short by applying the figure of aposiopesis. It is an important element in Tristram's life narrative and is used for different purposes.

APOSIOPESIS AS THE PRINCIPLE OF TRISTRAM'S NARRATIVE

In oratory, aposiopesis serves as a rhetorical embellishment to give a greater emphasis to what has been said: "The emphasis is produced through Aposiopesis if we begin to say something and then stop short, and what we have already said

leaves enough to arouse suspicion" (*Rhet. ad Her.* IV. 54.67). Aposiopesis is the rhetorical principle of Walter Shandy and the other characters' speeches as well. Its various functions are connected with the function of elocution in the presentation of their lives and designates the necessarily fragmentary nature of life writing. Tristram has to cut their speeches because they always deviate from the point at issue. Aposiopesis is also used in cases when something bawdy or ambiguous is meant to be said. In *Tristram Shandy* it is defined as an important ornamental figure in oratory because eloquence many times depends on where the speaker stops:

– "My sister, mayhap," quoth my uncle Toby, "does not choose to let a man come so near her ****." Make this dash, –'tis an Aposiopesis. – Take the dash away, and write *Backside*, – 'tis Bawdy. – Scratch *Backside* out, and put *Cover'd-way* in, – 'tis a Metaphor; – and, I dare say, as fortification ran so much in my uncle *Toby's* head, that if he had been left to have added one word to the sentence, – that word was it.
(*TS*, II.6)

It is that type of aposiopesis where the speaker must respect decency and not use expressions which might embarrass the audience.¹² Traugott considers the use of aposiopesis in the novel as "a device of a festive irony," which expresses the characters' emotions but at the same time makes the reader aware of the ironic effect (Traugott 123). Sterne's most ingenious use of aposiopesis of this type is the last sentence of *Sentimental Journey* where the reader can only guess what the end of the sentence might be.¹³

Another function of aposiopesis in the characters' orations is to raise suspicions in the reader that there is more behind elocution that is not told. The characters constantly make efforts to reach beyond the boundaries of language. When they are not able to put their emotions into words, they turn to non-verbal devices such as Uncle Toby's *Argumentum Fistulatorium* (*TS*, I.21); his infallible method of persuasion is to whistle his Lillabullero. Dr. Slop, intending to give emphasis to his speech, suddenly shows the said thing in question instead of

¹²Heinrich Lausberg calls this type "publikumrespektierende Aposiopese" (Lausberg 439)

¹³The novel's contemporary German translator, Johann Joachim Bode, decided not to leave it up to the readers' imagination as to what part of the Fille de Chambre's body Yorick caught hold of: "Also, da ich die Hand ausstreckte, faßte ich der Kammerjungfer ihre." (*Yoricks empfindsame Reise durch Frankreich und Italien*. Mannheim, 1780.)

talking about it. In the middle of his argument, he pulls out his forceps from his bag but in such haste that, accidentally, a squirt comes out with it, which Uncle Toby immediately misinterprets:

“Good God!” cried my uncle Toby, “*are children brought into the world with a squirt?*”

(*TS*, III.15)

Even efforts like this, where the characters try to make their argument as clear as possible to avoid any misunderstanding, fail because of the unexpected connections of thought they evoke in others. Walter Shandy’s thoughts and actions are entirely unpredictable as well. His thoughts are always ruled by surprising chains of associations. It is impossible, for example, to tell how he will react to the unfortunate circumcision of Tristram:

There was that infinitude of oddities in him, and of chances along with it, by which handle he would take a thing, - it baffled, Sir, all calculations. The truth was, his road lay so very far on one side, from that wherein most men travelled, - that every object before him presented a face and section of itself to his eye, altogether different from the plan and elevation of it seen by the rest of mankind.

(*TS*, V.24)

It seems what is common in the characters’ thoughts is that they lack any kind of logic. Or, when there is logic in the argument, it is not accepted by the other participant of the dialogue: in vain Walter Shandy tries to explain to his wife before Tristram’s birth that “the belly of the mother might be opened extremely well to give a passage to the child” (*TS*, II. 19), any reasoning is lost on Mrs. Shandy to agree to the Caesarian section.

Although it does not bridge the gap between meaning and words, elocution plays a most important part in *Tristram Shandy*. The characters seem to be actors with oratorical skills but the content behind their eloquence several times cannot be reached. Whatever they talk about, elocution seems to be equally important to the actual content of their speech. The more they talk the more they deviate from the reader’s expectations and the less Tristram learns from them about his own life; that is the reason why he must interrupt them from time to time and cut their speeches short otherwise the characters, and consequently his writing, would elude him. The endless attempts to find his past with the help of

the characters, through their memories, is Tristram's greatest endeavour in *Tristram Shandy*. The characters embody his unsuccessful attempts to put thoughts into words through their elocution. Their eloquence illustrates well what happens if elocution means merely the choice of words and pronunciation (the general management of speaking). In Sterne's day, the main practice of elocution was to find the most adequate way of employing language. At the same time it also meant the removal of the philosophical problem of how to translate thoughts into words. Sterne illustrates this problem when he shows that one's past is unreachable as the subject material for any "life and opinions," in the sense that biographers in his day assumed. In his opinions Tristram expresses his concerns about the deficiency of his subject material, the impossibility of constructing his life from the memories and orations of the characters and family anecdotes. The exaggerated use of oratorical devices function as the deliberate frustration of the narrative movement as well.¹⁴ On a rhetorical level, aposiopesis proves to be the best device to designate the fragmentary and arbitrary nature of life and its communicability as represented in a biography. Its function in *Tristram Shandy* is to raise suspicion in the reader that the philosophical problem cannot be solved on a rhetorical level, that something will always remain unsaid.

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¹⁴Baldwin explains ecphrasis as a sophistic device of oration by referring to Sterne: "The habit of decorative dilation in oratory confirmed a decadent habit of literature. That the habit is decadent even when indulged with more taste is suggested by certain passages in De Quincey, in Pater, most clearly perhaps in that English sophist Laurence Sterne." To illustrate ecphrasis, he quotes from *A Sentimental Journey* (Baldwin 19).

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Dóra Csikós

Narrative Techniques in *The Four Zoas*

The acceptance of Blake's major prophecies took a long time in coming. While the later ones, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, have by now become accepted as part of the canon, *The Four Zoas* is still struggling to be admitted on equal merit. The main reason, it seems, is that the epic is considered a fragment.

Having finished his minor prophecies and the watercolour drawings and engravings for an edition of Young's *Night Thoughts*, Blake started to write *Vala* – later to be revised as *The Four Zoas* – in 1797 only to abandon it in 1804 for *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. Unlike the latter two, the first one was left in manuscript form and was never etched, a fact that urges Northrop Frye to conclude that it was not intended to be the part of an exclusive and definitive canon.

The Four Zoas remains the greatest abortive masterpiece in English literature. It is not Blake's greatest poem, and by Blake's standards it is not a poem at all; but it contains some of his finest writing . . . Anyone who cares about either poetry or painting must see in its unfinished state a major cultural disaster.¹

A recent critic, Andrew M. Cooper, writes in a similar vein: "Blake's evident abandonment of *The Four Zoas* . . . no doubt rescued the poem from the

¹Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 269. Unlike the majority of critics who claim that the poem is fragmentary because the Apocalypse of the final night is so abrupt that it cannot be accounted for, John Beer suggests that it is the middle sections of *The Four Zoas* that call for completion. (Personal interview with Professor John Beer, Cambridge.)

process of calcification depicted in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. But of course a rescue so desperate is failure by any other name.”²

Yet, even though Blake did abandon the poem, he did not dismiss it (as the successive revisions prove) and G.E. Bentley claims that there is reason to assume that certain passages in *The Four Zoas* were borrowed from *Jerusalem*, and not the other way round.³

Even those who acknowledge the greatness of the poem, attempt to retrieve the outlines of a poem—or an imagined poem—that lies behind the pages, unable to accept the *The Four Zoas* as it has been left to us⁴. They ignore Blake’s notes *On Homers Poetry*: “Every Poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity . . . when a Work has Unity it is as much in a Part as in the Whole. the Torso is as much a Unity as the Laocoon.”

Rajan’s distinction between incomplete and unfinished poems is especially illuminating:

Incomplete poems are poems which ought to be completed. Unfinished poems are poems which ask not to be finished, which carry within themselves the reason for arresting or effacing themselves as they do. If an unfinished poem were to be finished it would ideally erase its own significance.⁵

Unfinished as distinguished from incomplete is what the Romantics call a fragment – an authentic representation of their sense of reality, spiritual or material.⁶ Peter Otto – in line with what has been said about the Romantic fragment—convincingly suggests that there are cogent thematic and contextual reasons to surmise that when Blake finally stopped working on the manuscript of *The Four Zoas* he believed that the form it had taken was the only one that the subject matter could assume, as its form embodies the poem’s insights about the nature of the

²Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry*, p. 56. As a change, Paul Mann notes that Blake’s abandonment of *The Four Zoas*, usually rationalized on poetic grounds, might easily have been the result of complications in his material plan for the work, “continuing debt and the successive commercial failures of the *Night Thoughts*, and both editions of the *Ballads* could have . . . pushed him on toward *Milton* and *Jerusalem* and back to the techniques of illuminated printing.” Mann, “The Final State of *The Four Zoas*”, p. 208

³Bentley, *Vala or The Four Zoas*, p. 165

⁴One notable example is G. E. Bentley.

⁵Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound*, p. 14

⁶For more about the Romantics’ inclination towards fragments see Péter, *Roppant szivárvány*, p. 39

fallen world and of fallen perception.⁷ To consider the poem unfinished rather than incomplete would help do away with at least part of the prejudice that has been accumulated ever since the birth of the poem.⁸ We may conclude that the poem is unfinished in the same sense as *Kubla Khan* is—they are both organic and fully appreciable in the form they were left to us.

To claim, however, that what makes *The Four Zoas* “probably the least read of all the major English Romantic poems”⁹ is its – reputed – fragmentariness, would be a gross oversimplification, when so many incomplete/unfinished literary works have become famous and widely read (Kafka’s *Das Schloß* or Camus’ *Le premier homme*, to mention just a few). What, then, is the reason for the interpretative cruxes in the poem; what made the editors of the Norton Critical Edition of *Blake’s Poetry and Designs* reduce Blake’s longest poem, originally 4025 lines, to 408 lines deeming only these worthy of publication?

Before we answer the question we shall have a look at the original title of the poem: VALA / OR / The Death and Judgement of the Ancient Man / a DREAM / of Nine Nights / by William Blake 1797 (later to be retitled as *The Four Zoas: The Torments of Love & Jealousy in the Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man*, in approximately 1805). Organized into nine “Nights” on the model of Young’s *Night Thoughts*, the poem is Blake’s first attempt to synthesize all his previous myths in a single dream; to depict the nightmare of the fall and the subsequent regeneration of Albion, the cosmic man. Paradoxically, Albion is withdrawn from the story, he is lying unconscious in a deadly sleep; the actual subject is the warfare between his four primary attitudes and their emanations. They all present the story of their fall from their own point of view, the one voice disintegrates into a plurality of voices and the result is a constantly shifting perspective.

The major challenge of reception then, we can conclude, is to be found in Blake’s invention of the dream technique, which S. Foster Damon considers the poet’s greatest contribution to literary methods.

⁷Otto, “Final States, Finished Forms, and *The Four Zoas*”, p. 144

⁸Nancy M. Ide, approaching the problem from an entirely different angle, also presents an appealing as well as compelling argument in spite of those who claim that the poem is a fragment. Her computer analysis of the images of *The Four Zoas* proves that there is a conscious scheme discernible behind the narrative. Ide, “Image Patterns and the Structure of William Blake’s *The Four Zoas*”

⁹Fuller, *Blake’s Heroic Argument*, p. 88

This technique destroys the effect of a continuous and logical narrative. It permits the tangling of many threads, abrupt changes of the subject, recurrent repetitions, obscure cross references, sudden intrusions, even out-and-out contradictions. Crucial scenes are omitted; others are expanded out of all seeming proportion.¹⁰

Since connective devices are muted – if provided at all – active participation and a “willing suspension of disbelief” are required of the reader to fill in the blanks in the disrupted narrative.

Besides the suppression or exclusion of elements from the narrative field, the multiplicity of voices presents additional difficulties. Since the four members of Albion – the four Zoas – and their emanations, coeternal and coexistent, are mutually interconnected in the one body of Albion, the fall of one inevitably means the fall of the others, so we would expect their individually related stories to be substantially similar and congruent. Yet, due to the different perspectives – “a series of incommensurable universes which intersect precisely at their lacunae”¹¹ – and the different starting points from which the respective accounts of the fall commence,¹² these juxtaposed stories and interpolated visions not only complement one another, but also render each thematic fragment even more difficult to reconcile and syncretize. This may have caused Paul Cantor to remark that “certainly no creation myth has ever done a better job of conveying a sense of the initial chaos out of which the world began.”¹³

To avoid total chaos, however, three basic methods are employed with the help of which the multiple styles and genres that contain multiple perspectives can hold these perspectives in dynamic tension.

1. At those points where the juxtaposed perspectives are difficult to understand, Blake uses overlapping imagery, diction and syntax.¹⁴ The repetition of

¹⁰Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, p. 143

¹¹Ault, “Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake’s Anti-Newtonian Text”, p. 299

¹²Compare, for example, Luvah’s (II, 26-27:80-110) and Ahania’s (III, 39-42:31-105) point of view. (E. 317-18, 326-28.) or the account given by Enitharmon (I, 10-11:260-280) and the Spectre of Urthona (IV, 50:84-110).

¹³Cited in Pierce, “The Shifting Characterization of Tharmas and Enion in Pages 3-7 of Blake’s *Vala or The Four Zoas*”, p. 93

¹⁴Several critics have noted the reflections of Night I in Night IX, regarding it as an indication that Night I represents the inversion of the apocalypse in Night IX (Wilkie-Johnson, *Blake’s Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream*, p. 11)

certain key elements in different contexts is used to communicate to the reader the significance of the given contextual variation in the overall structure.

2. The other technique typically used by Blake is what we may call, adopting Brian Wilkie's coinage, a *prequel* meaning a unit composed later but relating an earlier part of the story.¹⁵ These prequels form "an increasingly comprehensive and progressively detailed texture of imaginatively interrelated and mutually reflecting events"¹⁶, allowing the scattered portions to add up to a coherent (or at least "recoverable") – though certainly taxing – narrative.

3. Blake's use of *typology* also facilitates our apprehension of the interconnected threads of actions. The significance of the use of typology is two-fold. Types provided Blake with an "intellectual shorthand"¹⁷ that would permit an

The recurrent images (such as agricultural labour-harvest, plowing, sowing, wine, youth, blood, marriage feast) help us recognize the substantial interrelatedness of characters and events. Nancy M. Ide has identified 196 such image groups (Ide, op. cit. p. 126) She points out—based on her computer analysis of *The Four Zoas*, its imagery, their density and frequency distribution—that the imagistic allusions remind the reader of the earlier scene in which they were used, but the fact that these images appear in a new context, surrounded by new images, fundamentally alters the meaning of the whole.

Thus the reader is forced to reconsider his earlier perception, and by recognizing a second perspective, moves beyond the viewpoint defined by one or the other of these perspectives and subsumes the two. . . . The appearance of images from earlier portions of the text invokes alternative connotations, and in comparing them the reader moves to a higher level of abstraction, and recognizes not only that alternative meanings exist, but also that meaning is substantially defined by context. (ibid. p. 130). For related matters see also: "Identifying Semantic Patterns: Time Series and Fourier Analysis", and Ide, "A Statistical Measure of Theme and Structure"

¹⁵Wilkie, "The Romantic Ideal of Unity", p. 16

A typical example for a prequel is the account of the disintegration related by the Messengers from Beulah (I, 21-22:476-550) and the Spectre of Urthona's description of the fall (VII, 84:278-95) (E. 310-312 and 359.)

What Wilkie calls a prequel, Donald Ault terms as "perspective analysis".

A simple perspective analysis of a prior event re-enacts the same event within the same fictional framework—as when the initial conversation in the poem between Tharmas and Enion is twice re-enacted, once in the metaphorical action of weaving and once again in the metaphor of sexual union. (...) The most complex mode of perspective analysis "embeds" subsequent events in prior plots. (...) An embedded plot means that previous actions are being re-enacted within a new perspective, thereby revealing information suppressed within the previous fictional framework. (Ault, *Incommensurability and Interconnection in Blake's Anti-Newtonian Text*, p. 300)

¹⁶Kittel, "The Book of Urizen and An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," p. 128

¹⁷Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art*, p. 118

easier understanding of highly complex ideas. Secondly, typology significantly contributes to a fuller appreciation of the extratemporal aspect of Blake's myth. Because of its vertical view of history in which events are not related to each other chronologically but thematically, typology divorces these events

from any chronological matrix... Time remains fixed and all events are perceived to be contemporaneous; past, present and future are fused through the perception of those events as repetitions of a single paradigmatic event.¹⁸

As opposed to critics who regarded Blake's new narrative technique as a stumbling block and a proof of the lost poetic control,¹⁹ the majority of recent Blake scholars today attribute special significance to this unrewarding method and try to find the poet's motivations for employing such a taxing narrative. Although their point of departure is substantially similar – they suppose that the verbal texture of *The Four Zoas* is functional rather than ornate – their conclusions are very different. Northrop Frye – with his customary elegance – simply states that it is difficult “because it was impossible to make [it] simpler.”²⁰ Morton gives a historical explanation. He contends that the poem – and indeed the other prophecies – are both grotesque and obscure because Blake was unable to relate his reality to that of everyday life. But more importantly it was a characteristic of the strange sects (whose ideas Blake seems to have found appealing) that regarded themselves as the possessors and guardians of a secret doctrine, not to be easily revealed to the uninitiated. Besides being intentionally secretive and obscure, Morton asserts, Blake must have felt it a historical necessity to conceal these ideas since these sects were often persecuted for their dangerous tenets.²¹ G. J. Finch cannot accept Morton's claim that Blake was *incapable of* reconciling his reality with the world. On the contrary, he finds that the fundamental challenge of Blake's poetry is

¹⁸*Ibid.* 118-119

¹⁹A recent example for this prevailing opinion: The loose forked tongue of *The Four Zoas* is where Blake left off before beginning *Milton*; by now accepting this tongue as the only one he's got, Blake will perhaps be able to make it speak true, thus recovering poetic control. . . . The runaway tongue of *The Four Zoas* is a form of wandering erroneous and forlorn." (Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry*, pp. 64-65)

²⁰Cited in Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, p. 54

²¹Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake*, p. 33

to our hold on what we take to be real. The reconstruction of a new self and the discovery of new modes of being involves a radical assault on accepted ways of perceiving ourselves and the world around us. Poetry is not a re-creation of secondary emotions but the disclosure of an enduring inner possibility. To see it that way is to realize the possibility in ourselves. Blake's poetry is concerned to initiate us into a world where the normal rational boundaries of accustomed perception are dissolved by the indeterminacy of untrammelled experience. Such a vision inevitably involves an undermining of formal syntax and poetic structure.²²

Finch's argument that conventional aesthetic satisfactions might have dulled our reception and resulted in a disengagement of ideas is the most widely shared opinion.²³

Even though Jerome McGann's research deals with the textual disorderliness of *The Book of Urizen*, his observations seem indispensable to our full appreciation of *The Four Zoas*. His findings are all the more applicable to the poem under discussion since *The Four Zoas* was most probably intended to be the continuation of *The [First] Book of Urizen*, as the early - later erased - title, *The Book of Vala*, shows. Even more convincing is the fact that where the two poems intersect - where borrowings from *The Book of Urizen* can be found - in Nights IV and V, these Nights were originally called "Fourth Book" and "Book the Fifth," thus proving that both *The [First] Book of Urizen* and its continuation, *The Four Zoas*, were a deliberate parody of the Pentateuch. This obvious allusion to the Bible allows McGann to examine Blake in the light of Alexander Geddes' "Fragment Hypothesis," according to which the Bible is a disorderly text, comprising a heterogeneous collection of various materials assembled at different times by a number of editors and reductors.²⁴ Just like the biblical texts do not comprise a seamless narrative, the obscure pages of Blake's Bible of Hell²⁵ do not locate authorial errors or unresolved incoherences,

²²Finch, "Blake and Civilization", p. 200

²³See also Fuller, *Blake's Heroic Argument*.

²⁴The shifting perspectives of the characters could well correspond to this.

²⁵One of the first titles of *The Four Zoas* was "The Bible of Hell, in Nocturnal Visions collected. Vol. I. Lambeth" (on the back of a Young drawing). This is the Bible of Hell that Blake promised to give the world on Plate 24 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and whose Genesis is *The (First) Book of Urizen*.

the textual anomalies are structural, they are part of a deliberate effort to critique the received Bible and its traditional exegetes from the point of view of the latest research findings of the new historical philology."²⁶

Also in the Bible Blake could find a principle of form based not on external rules but on a principle of inner coherence.

Taking individual units of history, poetry, or oratory as his working blocks, he was not bound by chronological or historical order, nor was he obliged to provide transitions between individual units. Meaning and coherence were created through the thematic juxtaposition of individual parts.²⁷

Once we accept McGann's contentions, all the formal problems discussed so far seem to be resolved, the diagrammatic design of *The Four Zoas* becomes deliberate architecture.

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²⁶McGann, "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes", p. 324. About Blake's conceivable familiarity with Geddes' hypotheses see Tannenbaum, op.cit. p. 13 and p. 292

²⁷Tannenbaum, op.cit. pp. 35-36

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Zsolt Mohi

“Knot in Hand, and Knot in Head”

The Enigmatic Language of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’*

The work of contradictions, the contradictions that amount to nothing, the nothing that is impossible to neglect or forget. The ever-recurring “leaden-hued swells” (p. 214)¹ wash away the cheerfulness of our soul, their burden lies heavy on one’s mind irremovably like “waved lead that has cooled and set in the melter’s mold” (p. 212). The means that accomplish that irresistible effect are extremely complex, and can hardly be explored within the limits of a single essay. In order to account for the compelling force of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’ therefore, it is inevitable to restrict the scope of the observation to some of the most characteristic features of the long short story.

The most striking effect, at the first encounter with the text, is perhaps due to its

POETIC LANGUAGE.

Melville is, as J. S. Adler claims, “a poet-maker, not taker, of symbols, methods, and forms.”² The intricate and enigmatic web of extremely condensed and systematically contradictory images requires an exhaustive effort of the reader, which makes it necessary to refer to the features that constitute the diffi-

*My thanks to dr. Zsófia Bán for her encouragement

¹Page references without indication of the author are to the edition of Melville’s short story in question as described in the Bibliography.

²Adler, *War in Melville’s Imagination*. p. 88

culty and, in addition, to make clear how it contributes to the effect of the text as a literary work on the reader.

Like a living organism that, from the very moment of its birth, bears an indication of self-destruction in its nature, the long short story—starting with its smallest particles, i. e. words, up to the largest components (authorial narration plus deposition)—is built up of constituents with definite meanings on their own which will, however, ultimately be blurred and mutually neutralized by their constantly recurring opposition.

The following examples might at first sight look like *harmless* plays on words. The fishing party of the seamen of the *Bachelor's Delight* “had returned, having met with no small success” (p. 214) which stands, of course, for great success. The wind entirely dies away “not many minutes” (p. 218) after the boat’s pushing off. In Benito Cereno’s apparel there seems something “incongruous” (p. 226), and Captain Delano, finding his companion withdrawn, becomes “less talkative” (p. 233). Some more formal and unusual negative expressions can, however, be added to the list: “unacquaintance,” “incommoded,” “inquietude,” “discontinuing,” “less good-natured,” etc. We have here instances of more or less contracted simple negation.

Having started to approach the complexity of the text in a mechanical way with the least complicated constituents, on the next level we find words and expressions consisting of double negation: *litotes*. Captain Delano does, for example, not simply suspect, but he “is not without the idea, that” Benito Cereno should be more energetic (p. 219). Babo does not look at his master gratefully, but he eyes him “not ungratefully” (p. 237). After Captain Delano beholds the Spanish sailor behind the great stay trying to signal him something, he is not just bewildered, he is “not unbewildered” (p. 246). Surveying the knot knitted by the old, simple-witted negro, Captain Delano’s mind passes from his own entanglements to those of the hemp by a “not uncongenial” (p. 248) transition. Upon the invitation of Babo into the cuddy, Captain Delano is, instead of being pleased, “not unpleased” (p. 255), etc.

With a step further, we leave the level of words and expressions and arrive at the more complex realm of poetic images. It is not surprising at all that they also teem with contradictions and paradoxes. “The sea,” we read, for example in the description of the depressing nautical landscape, “though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed” (p. 212). Incessant ambiguities serve two aims at the

same time. They bring about, on the one hand, the constant hesitation of Captain Delano, for whom

the same conduct, which, in this instance, had raised the alarm, served to dispel it. In short, scarce any suspicion or uneasiness, however apparently reasonable at the time, which was not now, with equal apparent reason, dismissed.

(p. 240)

On the other hand these paradoxes corroborate the gloomy impression and embarrassment of the reader. The latter intention is, furthermore, confirmed by the recurring allusion to an impending danger:

Flights of troubled grey fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storm. Shadows present, fore-shadowing deeper shadows to come.

(p. 212)

Delano's misgivings are now attributed to the meteorological conditions, as above, now to the conduct of someone as follows:

that icy but conscientious policy [of the Spanish captain] obliterates alike the manifestation of sway with every trace of sociality; transforming the man into a block, or rather into a loaded cannon, which, until there is call for thunder, has nothing to say.

(p. 221)

Besides, the strange ship itself can also be blamed for his uneasiness:

The present destination of the ship [viz San Dominick] was the anchorage. There she would be near his own [Amasa Delano's] vessel. Upon gaining that vicinity, might not the San Dominick, like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?

(p. 239)

Captain Delano's uncertainty is fully justified, among many other circumstances, for example by the appearance of the Spanish captain:

[...] there seemed something so incongruous in the Spaniard's apparel, as almost to suggest the image of an invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague.

(p. 226)

A more surprising and puzzling characterization of a captain in charge of a sail is hardly conceivable. A true and sensuous contradiction indeed. Accounts of the American captain's state of mind complete the picture and convey the uncertain atmosphere effectively to the reader. As for the second purpose, i. e. inducing the reader's embarrassment, here stands another visual contradiction:

Trying to break one charm, he was but becharmed anew. Though upon the wide sea, he seemed in some far inland country; prisoner in some deserted château, left to stare at empty grounds, and peer out at vague roads, where never wagon or wayfarer passed."

(p. 246)

The constant repetition of the same word with different endings (*figura etimologica*: "charm," "becharmed," "shadows," "foreshadowing," "shadows," etc.) and the seeming tautologies provide the text with a monotonous rhythm and thus underline the bewildering style of the narrative. As a consequence of the twofold role of ambiguities, it applies both to Captain Amasa Delano and to the reader of the story that "[...] of the details no clear understanding had been had" (p. 222).

Contradictions and opposing images, moreover, contribute to the characterization of the ship from outside, as well as from inside. The "faded grandeur" (p. 215) of the *San Dominick* already gives a taste of all that is going to surround Captain Delano on board of it. "The ship's general model and rig appeared to have undergone no material change from their original warlike and Froissart pattern. However, no guns were seen," (p. 215) the narrator observes, while Delano, in his whale-boat, approaches the *San Dominick*. New oppositions await us on board, e. g.: "the living spectacle it [viz the ship] contains, upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment" (p. 216). Most of the images suggest the fake nature of things, persons and behaviours. The scene seems from the very beginning to be odd, even the morning is "peculiar to that coast" (p. 212). The *San Dominick*, even more from inside than from outside, and its people are curious: "The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces but a shadowy tab-

leau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave" (p. 216).

The opposite directions of the gestures "giving" and "receiving back" annihilate each other, the latter revokes the result of the former. Consequently, they appear to be *exclusive contradictions*, although the possibility of a correlation, moreover, of mutual dependence between the two poles is suggested. Although "giving" and "receiving back" cannot be performed at the same time, they can be accomplished successively, and so, from the point of view of the agent, can be regarded as *complementary contradictions*. The ambiguity of antagonism and correlation is even more striking in the pretended (again, not real!) relationship between Atufal and Don Benito: "The slave there carries the padlock, but master here carries the key" (p. 232).

To tell exclusive contradictions from complementary ones is, as a result, not easy. A further example illustrates that the difference can be merely a matter of viewpoint: white people tend to separate work and leisure in terms of time, but this is not the case with the black. As we understand it, there is a "peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime" (p. 217). Hence, an exclusive contradiction in one culture can be considered as complementary in another, that is, contradictions are culturally bound.

He is "less a servant than a devoted companion" (p. 219), we read about Babo. The more he is a companion, the less he can be a servant. The question itself whether Babo is a servant or a companion (or both) contains a presupposition and therefore cannot be answered unequivocally. The contradiction is thus doubled, and the mystery of the situation constitutes itself in the way Delano tries to solve the riddle. At the same time, there lies the actual problem of the whole story, for Babo is neither servant nor companion to Benito Cereno; he is but his master since the rebellion, or his kidnapper, to be more precise.

The statement: "The ship seems unreal" (p. 216), already quoted above, seems to me to comprise one of the most general paradoxes of 'Benito Cereno' in a most condensed and very subtle way. William B. Dillingham, who gives special emphasis to his distinction of four points of view in 'Benito Cereno' "labelled reportorial, official (the deposition), authorial, and individual (Delano),"³ in referring to similar expressions of visual sensation, deems it necessary to record that "Melville frequently uses the words *was like* or *seemed*, but seldom adds to *Delano*

³Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 243

when figures are used.”⁴ Dillingham attributes this peculiarity to the portrayal of the American Captain’s personality:

Since Delano is blunt-thinking and incapable of irony, the elaborate similes and metaphors that characterize much of the style of ‘Benito Cereno’ come most commonly from the authorial voice.⁵

Melville, however, has accomplished yet another very important effect by writing “The ship seems unreal” instead of, e. g., *The ship seems unreal to Captain Delano*. Although “the ship” is the subject of the kernel clause, it is not certain that it is also the ship that the statement is all about. The fact that no recipient of the vision is represented overtly, and a semantic slot is thus empty and blurred, gives the sentence a general character and encourages the reader to accept a universal interpretation of Delano’s bewilderment. Consequently, the ship, together with everything that has happened or is going to happen on board of it, is endowed with a symbolic significance and, at the same time, with a peculiar, almost otherworldly, infernal atmosphere.

Although the subject complement “unreal” refers, grammatically, to the ship, semantically this adjective, due to the ellipsis, obtains a twofold character and very much relates also to Captain Delano himself. Since he is constantly full of doubts concerning the past history of the ship, the identity of its crew and its passengers, the meaning of Benito Cereno’s and Babo’s gestures, etc. (for example: “The singular alternations of courtesy and ill-breeding in the Spanish captain were unaccountable” [p. 234], or “what did all these phantoms amount to?” [p. 238]), he is more and more uncertain about the validity of his own interpretation concerning them as well (“He rubbed his eyes, and looked again; but again seemed to see the same thing. Under a new form, but more obscure than any previous one, the old suspicion recurred...” [p. 242]). His doubts, as a result, affect his existence too, and so, after a while, it appears that it is only a matter of viewpoint whether the ship is unreal or he himself.

I have shown above how an exclusive contradiction can be transposed into a complementary one and vice versa, by changing the viewpoint. A similar, constant alternation can be observed in the role of the main characters. As long as Delano is on board of the *San Dominick*, the relationship of the two captains is

⁴*Ibid.* 245

⁵*Ibid.* 245

undefinable, ambiguous. Now their spirits change in a parallel way ("finding his companion [Benito Cereno] more than ever withdrawn, [...] by and by Captain Delano likewise became less talkative, oppressed, against his own will" [p. 233]), then they act just in the opposite direction, with a deliberate intention of complementation and substitution ("Well, thought Captain Delano, if he has little breeding, the more need to show mine" [p. 271]), another time again, Delano thinks Benito to be hostile towards him ("he began to feel a ghostly dread of Don Benito" [p. 238]), that is, they appear to embody the two sides of an exclusive contradiction. On the whole, nonetheless, the two captains seem to be attracted to each other, even to the extent of seeming inseparability, which is corroborated by the seating arrangement at lunch: "Without companions, host and guest sat down, like a childless married couple, at opposite ends of the table..." (p. 264).

That attachment produces tension when Captain Delano is about to leave: "I can go no further; here I must bid you adieu," Benito Cereno says. "Adieu, my dear, dear Don Amasa. Go—go!" (p. 274). The separation seems to be inevitable, even the "meekly admonitory eye of the servant" hastens it. The tension is at its peak when Captain Delano orders "the boat shoved off," while Don Benito is "standing rooted in the gangway," but ultimately they find themselves again together, now in the boat.

Benito Cereno and Babo ("a black man's slave was Babo, who now is the white's" [p. 232]), in contrast, stand at the utmost ends of the scale. The captain is a white man, Babo is a black slave, who ordered to kill Benito's friend, Don Alexandro Aranda and threatens the captain of the *San Dominick* constantly with death: "Keep faith [...] or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader" (p. 286). They are still bound together by the murderous violence of Babo. Although Benito succeeds in fleeing into Delano's boat, immediately after, Babo follows him. Their desperate duel reaches its end in the narrow space of the boat. Melville uses in that passage a wide range of shades and turns of contradictions, like "an artist carving a three-dimensional scene in ivory and ebony, working subtle designs that are hidden away in the recesses."⁶

Behind the layer of seeming contradictions brought about by rhetorical structures, dealt with in the first part of this section, there lies the real contradiction between Delano's world, his way of thinking and the world of "the most savage energies" (p. 234) he enters when stepping aboard the *San Dominick*. The riddle is even demonstrated for him, again ironically, by someone who is not only

⁶Adler, *War in Melville's Imagination*, p. 109

a black, a slave and an outlaw, but also “simple-witted” who often plays “his odd tricks,” and who looks “like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon” (p. 248).

At last, puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot, Captain Delano addresses the knoter:—

“What are you knotting there, my man?”

“The knot,” was the brief reply, without looking up.

“So it seems; but what is it for?”

“For some one else to undo,” muttered back the old man, plying his fingers harder than ever, the knot being now nearly completed.

[...]

For a moment, knot in hand, and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute...

(p. 248)

Thus we have reached the highest level of contradictions and paradoxes, where they are the most intricate and most elaborate, contributing to “the realization of mystery, the effective presentment of overwhelming complexity.”⁷

The complexity, and even more the mystery, lies in the perplexing image: “knot in hand, and knot in head.” In order to arrive at an adequate appreciation of the message or *meaning* of the knot being at once in the “hand” and in the “head,” I have to come to the analysis of

AMASA DELANO, THE UNWILLING DETECTIVE.

Stanley Cavell, in his analysis of Beckett’s *Endgame*, observes that “the unbelievable, the plain truth which you cannot tell, that others will think you mad when you try to tell, is one of Hitchcock’s patented themes.”⁸ In this respect, nevertheless, the Anglo-American film director has talented rivals like Woody Allen, for example, who, in his film, ‘Manhattan Murder Mystery’ (1993), as protagonist, is confronted with a series of unaccountable events and facts that gradually convince him of his friendly neighbour’s being a cold-blooded murderer and make him act as a detective in spite of himself.

⁷Fogle, “Benito Cereno.” p. 122

⁸Cavell, *Must we Mean what we Say?* p. 131

Captain Delano is lured into a similar situation by his mere curiosity, by his "benevolent interest" (p. 222). This "no small interest" (p. 213) with which he peers at the *San Dominick* "through the glass" (p. 213), at first, leads him into a trap (on board of the *San Dominick*) literally and proves to be a pit-fall figuratively for him, at the same time, since he can neither resist the temptation of tracing the apparent facts back to their origins, nor comprehend anything relevant in that respect, due to his self-preserving instinct.

Melville makes use of the possibility that the two frames of mind, curiosity and blindness, scornful suspicion and terror, may be connected so that they alternate from time to time in a way that naïveté, on the one hand, releases tension caused by dread; and fear, on the other hand, enables Delano to be again on the alert. As an illustration, a characteristic example of this constant alternation follows: "...he could not but smile at his late fidgety panic. Presently, while standing with his host, looking forward upon the decks below, he was struck by one of those instances of insubordination previously alluded to" (p. 228). Delano, then, carries both his suspicion and bona fides too far, so as to make excessive statements concerning Don Benito, like: "The man was an impostor" (p. 234), or, soon after: "Away with suspicion. He was a true off-shoot of a true hidalgo Cereno" (p. 235).

Shakespeare's Othello, likewise, in his hesitation between two poles, does not accept anything in between:

By the world,
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

(III 3 384-386)

Once Othello has felt the slightest doubt concerning his wife's being faithful, he, in contrast to Amasa Delano, who never asks a straightforward question, demands absolute certainty:

Make me to see 't; or, at least, so prove it,
That the probation bear no hinge, nor loop,
to hang a doubt on: or woe upon thy life!
(III 3 365-367)

It is “to see it” that Delano is eager for, also. It is his sight, though, that is impaired mentally, in spite of his eagerness and exertion, owing, among other things, to his prejudice, and physically by the deceitful arrangement of things. The tension between his intention to look and his inability to “see” is reinforced from the beginning of the story, on the one hand, in strongly suggestive accounts of Delano’s efforts, like: “With no small interest, Captain Delano continued to watch her [the *San Dominick*]—a proceeding not much facilitated by the vapours partly mantling the hull...” (p. 213); and, on the other hand, in poetic images, for example: “...the sun [...] which, wimpled by the same low, creeping clouds, showed not unlike a Lima intriguante’s one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk *saya-y-manto*” (p. 213).

In connection with vision in the narrative, William B. Dillingham observes: “Central in ‘Benito Cereno,’ then, is the acting of seeing.”⁹ Later on, he remarks that “Delano’s vision is willfully myopic.”¹⁰ Dillingham understands this myopia both literally (“Whenever he looks out into the distance, as he does in the beginning to see the *San Dominick* entering the harbour, he is troubled”¹¹) and metaphorically (“To avoid seeing the far-reaching implications of the *San Dominick* situation, Delano, in moments of fear, makes himself dwell on the individual details of what he has seen.”¹²) At the end of the story’s second part, Captain Delano, in retrospect, gives his own explanation of his short-sightedness, casting a psychological light upon his behaviour and allowing, at the same time, a deeper interpretation of his role throughout the story: “...acuteness might have cost me my life, without saving another’s” (p. 296).

As we have seen above, Othello’s reaction to doubt is quite different from Delano’s. While the captain suffers from his deficient vision and cannot overcome his paralysed state, the Moor, to conclude his writhing between the poles of fanatic belief and utmost apostasy, takes what he sees for granted and proceeds with his action accordingly. As a Renaissance hero, he sacrifices his own life (besides his wife’s) in defence of his moral conviction. Delano, in contrast, sacrifices his sense of reality to save his life.

Whereas Othello, in order to get the better of doubt, points to someone who seems to undermine the order of his world, René Descartes, the philosopher,

⁹Dillingham, *Melville’s Short Fiction*. p. 247

¹⁰*Ibid.* p. 249

¹¹*Ibid.* p. 249

¹²*Ibid.* p. 254

preserves his scepticism and uses it as the only proof of his existence. Descartes relates his state of mind when doubt attacks him like an unexpected, agonizing disease:

...just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface¹³.

Having once swallowed the hook of suspicion, the philosopher cannot get loose either:

I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something which is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain.¹⁴

Considering oneself to be submitted to a superior power may aggravate the confusion and open the way to the presumption of being *deliberately* exposed to doubt:

Is there not some God, or some other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind? [...] But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me.¹⁵

The answer to the Cartesian question concerning the existence of the self, and, at the same time the restriction of the self to its mere mental abilities, is not denied by the possibility of being deceived. On the contrary, the activity of a superior power on the self does nothing but confirm the undeniable existence of the self:

But what am I, now that I suppose that there is a certain genius which is extremely powerful, and, if I may say so, malicious, who employs all his powers in deceiving me? [...] I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. [...] But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing

¹³Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy. Meditation II." p. 77

¹⁴*Ibid.* p. 77

¹⁵*Ibid.* p. 78

which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.”¹⁶

Delano, aboard the *San Dominick*, is, similarly, nothing but “a thing which doubts [...], affirms, denies...,” without the ability, nevertheless, to point, e. g., to Benito Cereno, saying *you are the one who deceives me* (which would be very Othelloan since, like Iago for the Moor, it is Babo who stages a fake world for the American captain so that both Iago and Babo appear to be altruistic companions, while Desdemona and the Spanish captain are looked upon with suspicion). Nor does Delano point to himself, realizing that he lacks the firm stand indispensable to sound judgement, and nobody but he himself is to blame for it, which would lend his mentality a philosophical depth. No, the means that would free Amasa Delano of his inhibition that renders him incapable of detecting the past of the *San Dominick* and of judging whether he is deceived or not is *not in hand and not in head*. His being paralysed finds, therefore, its adequate expression in the words: “For a moment, knot in hand and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute” (p. 248).

The Moor of Venice has become the captive of his own consciousness, and laments the fact accordingly:

Othello. I swear, 't is better to be much abus'd,
Than but to know 't a little.

(III, 3, 337-338)

Consequently, not reality itself is unbearable, but the knowledge of it. No wonder, then, that the Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, blames consciousness as such saying: “Man, by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness, is a diseased animal”¹⁷. It is awareness Delano tries to escape throughout the story, and it is oblivion he recommends to Don Benito in the end: “See, your bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves” (p. 297).

The style of the dialogue about the knot above, with the figura etimologica (“knot,” “knotter,” “knotting”) lending a repetitive manner to it, and with its terse narrative elements resembling stage directions, might almost have

¹⁶*Ibid* p. 78-79

¹⁷Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*. p. 17

been taken from an absurd play. This is, however, not the only reason why I have to turn my attention now to the

ABSURDITY IN 'BENITO CERENO.'

On the one hand, this is justified by the tendency towards the foregrounding of the poetic function of language¹⁸ observable in the extract above and also elsewhere in the text. Dillingham, for instance, in his essay already referred to, points out that Melville must have been struck with the final 'o's' that appear in the names of the real people mentioned in *Voyages* [the real Captain Delano's book serving as "the primary source for 'Benito Cereno'"¹⁹—Delano, Benito Cereno, Don Alexandro..."²⁰ On the other hand, further characteristics of the text also urge me to propound the notion of absurdity in connection with 'Benito Cereno.' I think my assumption does not contradict Dillingham's opinion according to which "Melville was in a sense rewriting *Mardi* ['Mardi and a Voyage Thither,' his novel published in 1849] with its ceaseless and meaningless repetitions and alternations."²¹ Similar repetition, also coupled with alternation like in the dialogue above ("knot," "knotter," "knotting"), as an absurd element, is to be found, for example, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*:

MARTHA: I like the way you move.

NICK: I like the way you move, too.

GEORGE: [to HONEY] They like the way they move.

HONEY: [not entirely with it] It's so nice.²²

Guildestern, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, while referring to his own and Rosencrantz' prospects:

¹⁸Jacobson, *Linguistics and Poetics*. p. 350-377

¹⁹Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 229

²⁰*Ibid.* p. 235

²¹*Ibid.* p. 235

²²Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* p. 81

GUIL: This is all getting rather undisciplined... The boat, the night, the sense of isolation and uncertainty... all these induce a loosening of the concentration,²³

seems to be delineating a situation similar to that which Captain Delano is caught in: "The calm was confirmed. In the far distance, away from the influence of land, the leaden ocean seemed laid out and leaded up, its course finished, soul gone, defunct" (p. 250). Similarly to Delano, who, "despite present prospects," is "cherishing hopes of a breeze, and a fair and fresh one" (p. 250), Guildenstern is engaged in "the speculation or the assumption or the hope that something is about to happen."²⁴

If the condition of waiting only implicitly characterizes the extracts compared above, Melville, like Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, presents us straightforwardly with the problem of filling meaningless time: "By way of keeping his mind out of mischief till the boat should arrive, he tried to occupy it with turning over and over, in a purely speculative sort of way, some lesser peculiarities of the captain and crew" (p. 251). Beckett contrasts with this only in the circumstance that for his figures death has lost its meaning, too:

VLADIMIR: [...] What do we do?
 ESTRAGON: Wait.
 VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.
 ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?²⁵

Rosencrantz, in his effort to find a way out of the labyrinth of lost identity, tries to trace his life, shared with Guildenstern and Hamlet, back to their childhood thus establishing a vague connection between past and present:

ROS: [...] We, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from our young days brought up with him, awakened by a man standing on his saddle, are summoned, and arrive, and are instructed to glean what afflicts him and draw him on to pleasures, such as a play, which unfortunately, as it

²³Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. p. 82

²⁴*Ibid.* p. 82

²⁵Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. p. 18

turns out, is abandoned in some confusion owing to certain nuances outside our appreciation – which, among other causes, results in, among other effects, a high, not to say, homicidal, excitement in Hamlet, whom we, in consequence, are escorting, for his own good, to England...²⁶

Similarly, Delano endeavours to maintain integrity by means of reviving his childhood memories:

What, I, Amasa Delano—Jack of the beach, as they called me when a lad—I, Amasa; the same that, duck-satchel in hand, used to paddle along the waterside to the school-house made from the old hulk;—I, little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of!

(p. 249)

Eugène Ionesco's definition of the absurd fits both cases quoted above: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."²⁷

There certainly may be strong objections to my proposal for looking at 'Benito Cereno' from the point of view of the absurd. I am aware of the fact that the narrative has a "cleverly constructed story" and even its most repetitive parts cannot be labelled as "incoherent babblings."²⁸ Regarding Esslin's other criteria concerning plays, nevertheless, I would like to point out some that definitely support my argument. Although 'Benito Cereno' has a characteristic beginning and an end, its theme is "finally solved"²⁹ only in the second part of the story, in the deposition, which is loosely connected to the narrative, and the difference in style represents a strongly marked division between the two. Consequently, the "key" to the "padlock" is merely presented to us, the story still remains "a kind of riddle that the reader, no less than Delano, must solve."³⁰ Another strong argument may be built on the fact that the story undeniably fulfils Esslin's criterion according to

²⁶Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. p. 81

²⁷quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. p. 23

²⁸Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. p. 21, 22

²⁹*Ibid.* p. 22

³⁰Bickley, *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 102

which works of the absurd “seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares.”³¹

Even though I do not intend to claim that ‘Benito Cereno’ is an absurd narrative proper, I still affirm that it undoubtedly bears absurd traits as I have shown above. Thus I attempted to establish a connection between the narrative and a literary style blossoming a hundred years later.

Like Captain Delano, who is left without any hope for a “clear understanding” (p. 222) of obscure signs and riddles, the philosopher, in his utmost doubt, is bereft of a firm grasp of the meaning of existence. Descartes, assuming an elemental unity of the self, points to it as to the ultimate answer to all the uncertainties of the outer world. *Inside*, however, as we learn from psychoanalysis, there is not less ground for doubt and suspicion than outside, which justifies the

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT

of literary analysis.

Dillingham, at the end of his profound analysis of ‘Benito Cereno’ proposes that the story may be understood as a “parable of a psychological situation that might well have projected Melville’s fears about himself.”³² He implicitly identifies the author’s “concern for his mental stability”³³ with the narrator’s intention by claiming that Melville’s severe illness and existential difficulties have to be included in a psychological interpretation of the short story. According to him, Benito Cereno and Babo belong together as two components of the same, “split personality, one side violent, strong, and rebellious, the other side humane, reasonable but weaker.”³⁴ Murfin refers to a similar practice of applying a much simplified version of Freudian theory in psychoanalysing the author: “Figurative literary language in general is treated as something that evolves as the writer’s conscious mind resists what the unconscious tells it to picture or describe.”³⁵

This kind of approach is now definitely obsolete, and elementary but enthusiastic application of Freudian theory in literary criticism since the 1950s became much humbler. Precedence of psychoanalysis over literature was resisted,

³¹Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. p. 22

³²Dillingham, *Melville’s Short Fiction*. p. 267

³³*Ibid.* p. 266

³⁴*Ibid.* p. 268-269

³⁵Murfin, *What is Psychoanalytic Criticism?* p. 119

first of all, by the authors. O'Neill, for example, emphatically rejected conjectures concerning his closely following Freud's and Jung's teachings saying: "Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented."³⁶ Elizabeth Wright, in her overview of psycho-analytic criticism, unmistakably declares that "after all, psychoanalysis is now being used to show how clever literature is."³⁷

What Melville does in 'Benito Cereno' is, in my estimation, nothing but the opposite of concealment. He does not disguise the content of any of his "manifest dreams" by means of a metaphorical language (by "condensation" or "displacement"), but tells a fearful, dystopian tale about repressed, inarticulate, and savage energies breaking their shackles and, through overturning the sensitive balance, subjugating their ruler.

What black people, especially Babo in 'Benito Cereno' represent, is certainly very close to what Freud calls, according to the topographical viewpoint of the mind, the *id*, "the dark, inaccessible part of our personality."³⁸ He even attributes "a strong upward drive" to the *id*, "an impulsion to break through into consciousness."³⁹ The *id*, like Babo in the American captain's culturally determined conception, is normally subdued, its drives are held within limits. Babo's presence and actions represent a threat, an outburst of once repressed savage energies. The social criticism of the story may be derived hence, since the author's irony is directed not only against Delano (who refers to blacks as "stupid" [p. 247], while he is not able to grasp what they are about), but against the hypocrisy of white people in dealing with blacks in general. The idea however, that the masked figures, Castile and Leon, on the sternpiece of the *San Dominick*, refer to Melville's potential selves or his disguised "fear of what could happen to him"⁴⁰ sounds far-fetched and certainly cannot be proved by Melville's text.

We have to accept, therefore, that the sensuous metaphor represents, first of all, the concealment of the existing situation aboard the "haunted" ship. The "dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure" (p. 215) is but the emblematic representation of Babo. Although it is tempting to project on to the satyr, and thus on to the figure of Babo, the attributes of the

³⁶ quoted in Egri, *The Birth of American Tragedy*. p. 31

³⁷ Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism*. p. 176

³⁸ Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychological Personality*. p. 105

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 100

⁴⁰ Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*. p. 270

inherent, similarly disguised component of the psychical personality, the Freudian *id*, that “knows no judgements of value: no good and evil, no morality,”⁴¹ an even more general interpretation of the symbol is possible and, in addition, supported by the whole body of the text.

The vast amount of contradictions and interdependencies that permeate human relations as well as Melville’s language describing them in ‘Benito Cereno’ seem, after all, to amount to nothing but the idea of life and death, in the purely physical sense of the words, engaged in an incessant striving against each other. Truth and principle have nothing to say, since bodily survival is constantly at stake, moral has no bearing on action, cruelty and murder are part and parcel of everyday life on the *stage* of the Spanish ship. All that resembles a nightmare teeming with fierce monsters, full of mortal danger, or a rather real, but inhuman, prehistoric state in which nothing but pure instincts ruled over living creatures. The amoral striving of antagonistic but inseparable forces is not far from that what Freud says about the everlasting rivalry of the two kinds of basic instincts:

If it is true that – at some immeasurably remote time and in a manner we cannot conceive – life once proceeded out of inorganic matter, then, according to our presumption, an instinct must have arisen which sought to do away with life once more and to re-establish the inorganic state.⁴²

Freud calls this “death instinct”, and believes that it cannot “fail to be present in every vital process.”⁴³ He assumes the contradictory forces of life and death to be mutually presupposing each other:

And now the instincts that we believe in divide themselves into two groups – the erotic instincts, which seek to combine more and more living substance into ever greater unities, and the death instincts, which oppose this effort and lead what is living back into an inorganic state.⁴⁴

Captain Delano, from the first moment on, struggles with his own incapability of discovering the concealed (or far too obvious) hostility controlling the uncanny ship. The clear fronts in the second half of the story, the discharge of

⁴¹Freud, *The Dissection of the Psychical Personality*. p. 107

⁴²Freud, *Anxiety and Instinctual Life*. p. 140

⁴³*Ibid.* p. 140

⁴⁴*Ibid.* p. 140

tensions and the consequent restoration of order, nevertheless, bear nothing but death and amoral destruction. A full cycle has been accomplished: the rebellion on the unreal ship, on this weird stage has been suppressed, the dark, evil forces have with commensurate cruelty been exterminated, and it seems that the depth "must receive back what it gave" (p. 216). The sole *purpose* of knotting the knot was "for some one else to undo" (p. 248); and there is no meaning in the dead Babo's vacant eyes. "Why moralize upon it? Forget it" (p. 297), these are the words of advice Delano gives Don Benito, and, although they call each other "my dear friend" (p. 295), the Spanish captain never again visits him. "Nor then, nor at any time after, would he look at him" (p. 298). Three months after Babo's "body was burned to ashes" (p. 298), Benito Cereno dies. The contradictory forces seem ultimately to have annihilated each other.

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Tom Hubbard

North and South in the Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson *

During a newspaper interview in 1991, the Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi declared his deep passion for the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. During his adolescence, Tabucchi had developed his interest in fiction via Stevenson and other English-language writers such as Joseph Conrad, Jack London and Henry James. That's a diverse group, but a common factor, vital to their art, is that they were all great travellers. Of Stevenson in particular, Tabucchi maintained that he "has this capacity for looking outside himself, and for learning about himself by looking at the world, open to adventures. He was a vagabond, in the sense of a free man, a roving spirit - intellectually, morally and aesthetically. I like that."¹

A free man. For Stevenson, vagabondage was the alternative to bondage. In his native Scotland there were two threats to that prized freedom.

The first was his chronically poor health. He had weak lungs, though it was a brain haemorrhage which caused his sudden death at the age of forty-four. The harsh Scottish climate was unsuitable to his condition. He described Edinburgh, Scotland's capital and his home town, as "the city of the winds."² The city

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¹ "Tuscan Vanishing Tricks with the Truth: Graham Fawcett talks to Antonio Tabucchi about the homely art of storytelling." *The Independent on Sunday* (7 July 1991), pp. 26-27 (27)

² *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin* (Tusitala 19), p. 109 - For Stevenson's works, references are to the Tusitala Edition (35 vols., London, 1924). Citation will be by title followed by its volume number, e. g. *The Master of Ballantrae* (Tusitala 10).

is built on volcanic rock - it's hilly and unsheltered. If one walks across the North Bridge, which links the Old Town with the New, one feels the winds at their strongest: a wintry experience by no means limited to winter.

Stevenson suffered physical pain from his earliest days. In one of his last novels, *The Ebb-Tide*, which is set in the South Pacific, a character is likened to "a child among the nightmares of fever."³ One of young Stevenson's own nightmares was recurrent - he would dream that he had to swallow the whole world.⁴ However, such nocturnal ordeals could be transformed into art; bad dreams gave him raw material for his fiction, most notably *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). There is much in his work that possesses a nightmarish quality even where it may not have been directly influenced by nightmares. There's a paradox: if ill-health was a threat to his physical freedom, it did help to liberate his imagination. As Yeats might have put it, the body was bruised to pleasure the soul.

A similar paradox is discernible in the second major threat to his freedom: the religion and culture of Calvinism. Stevenson grew up in a deeply Protestant bourgeois family; his beloved nurse, Alison Cunningham, held very strong Calvinist views. She told him stories of the Protestant martyrs who were rounded up on the bleak Pentland Hills and executed at the Grassmarket in Edinburgh's Old Town, below the Castle Rock. Again, this was terrifying stuff - but it nurtured one of the most intense and fertile imaginations in the history of literature.

During the nineteenth century, Scottish Calvinism had become somewhat domesticated; it was the religion for a stuffily respectable middle class - prudent, puritanical, professing a negative morality. The emphasis was on the Ten Commandments: thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that. Such a culture was deeply hostile to art, as indeed to all else that was spontaneous, instinctual, sensuous - including, of course, sex. (In a Scottish novel of the 1930's, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, a character remarks that his neighbours are so prudish that they must have fathered their children with their trousers on.)

Stevenson's Dr Jekyll is damaged by a pious, repressive upbringing; his response is to damage himself even more by splitting his personality in two - by means of a potion which he has created in his laboratory. His idea is to retain his respectable reputation as the "good" Dr Jekyll while allowing himself to practise his secret vices as the "evil" Mr Hyde. In a letter Stevenson denied that *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was about sex. This is unconvincing. Of course it's about sex (albeit

³*The Ebb-Tide* (Tusitala 14), p. 137

⁴"Memoirs of Himself," in *Memories and Portraits* [etc.] (Tusitala 29), pp. 150-151

not explicitly), as well as about a great deal more than sex. It also concerns the often hidden dynamics of personality, as well as the hidden dynamics of a society that shapes personality, not just as regards sex but across the range of human behaviour.

The point here is that Stevenson believed in the whole man, but that Scottish Presbyterian culture was conducive to the atrophy of the personality. In the early "Lay Morals" (posthumously published in 1896), Stevenson's position reads like a Victorian foretaste of Carl Gustav Jung's advocacy of "individuation," that synthesis of a person's conscious and unconscious forces. Condemning the extremes of asceticism and of self-indulgence, Stevenson calls for one's contrary drives to be respected and channelled:

Now to me, this seems a type of that rightness which the soul demands. It demands that we shall not live alternately with our opposing tendencies in continual see-saw of passion and disgust, but seek some path on which the tendencies shall no longer oppose, but serve each other to a common end. It demands that we shall not pursue broken ends, but great and comprehensive purposes, in which soul and body may unite like notes in a harmonious chord.⁵

"Wholeness" is a word which is etymologically related to "healing" and "health." On grounds of both health and culture, of the physical and the spiritual, it may be that Stevenson felt as if someone who came from the neurotic North should complete himself by acquiring the qualities of the sensuous South; after all, why not learn how to enjoy life's pleasures without feelings of guilt? The reverse could be equally true; Southerners should acquire the Northerners' more positive qualities. A later Scottish writer, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, believed passionately in the need for diverse cultures to enrich each other: having been based in Salonika during World War I, MacDiarmid felt that the Greeks, excitable and emotional by temperament, would benefit from the restraint preached by the ancient Greek moralists; conversely, Northerners - especially Scots - were by nature steady and restrained, and MacDiarmid implied that they had to learn how to loosen up and lighten up.⁶

⁵"Lay Morals," in *Ethical Studies* [etc.] (Tusitala 26), pp. 27-28

⁶Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems 1920-1976*. ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken. London, 1978. p. 662

The young Stevenson would have applauded that, up to a point. During his twenties, he led a self-consciously bohemian life, mixing with the prostitutes and other outcasts of Edinburgh, reading such unPresbyterian writers as Whitman and Baudelaire. However, he was far from a consistent rebel; the northern piety and guilt would reclaim him, so back he'd go to his stern father, the prodigal son begging forgiveness, dutifully attending his lectures at the university's law faculty instead of boozing in the pub across the road (Rutherford's, in Drummond Street - still worth checking out!)

I'd suggest, though, that there is more to his youthful rebelliousness and unconventionality than an immature posturing. The immaturity is certainly there. But it was his travels which afforded him a more robust, more subtle, antidote to the Protestant ethic. During the early 1860's, when he was twelve, Stevenson accompanied his family on a trip to the French Riviera and neighbouring Italy. Admittedly he was too young to make immediate use of the experience, but I submit that this first exposure to the South had long-term effects on his writing, duly reinforced by later sojourns at Menton and Hyères. (There's a comical side to the culture clash between Protestant North and Catholic South: his nurse Alison Cunningham would enter Italian churches where she deposited anti-Popery tracts.)

It was France, rather than Italy, which made a substantial impact on Stevenson. Nevertheless, one of his earliest stories, written in 1875, is set in Italy during the Renaissance. It's called "When the Devil was Well," and already it shows his power to enthrall his readers with a blend of charm and suspense. It also happens to be one of his sexiest tales. A young sculptor falls for a beautiful Duchess, whose neglectful husband is a Machiavellian rogue primarily interested in power. (Such an atmosphere of sexual and political intrigue would be transposed, much later, to the eighteenth-century Scotland of *Catriona*, the sequel to *Kidnapped*.) Of particular interest in "When the Devil was Well" are the accomplishments of the young sculptor, Sanazzaro: he's very much a Renaissance man, having developed himself in diverse arts. As well as a sculptor, he's a painter and architect; he writes sonnets and plays the lute.⁷ In Stevenson's writings one may find references to Leonardo da Vinci, whom he admires as someone who united in one person the fine arts and the more practical handicrafts. Stevenson felt guilty that he himself was a mere writer, whereas his ancestors had been very practical people: the Stevensons had designed and built the lighthouses along and around the coast of Scot-

⁷"When the Devil was Well." In: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* [etc.] (Tusitala 5), p. 121

land. We shouldn't wonder, then, that he was so keen to undertake eminently useful (and hard) work on his estate in Samoa. The Protestant ethic had its advantages. The main point here, however, is that Stevenson displayed a striving after unity of personality, in contrast to Jekyll-like division. For this consummate stylist of the 1880s and 1890s, extreme aestheticism - no less than extreme Puritanism - would have led to atrophy.

Southern Europe, then, held out the ideal of the all-rounder, the whole man. To stay in Scotland would mean that one was likely to remain less than what one could be; at the worst, one might take the self-destructive route of a Dr Jekyll-type. However, that early Italian tale prompts yet another line of enquiry, one which I believe to be new to Stevenson studies. In a letter of January 1875 he refers to the "colour" of "When the Devil was Well," playing it down as "purely imaginary of course, my own unregenerate idea of what Italy then was."⁸ Yet it cannot be unlikely that he was drawing on his pre-adolescent memories of Italy and on his more recent trip to the Mediterranean. Colour was important to him. In the essay "Ordered South" he dwells on sensations of colour, and of unexpected vistas, along the Riviera. Scotland is a predominantly grey country, in terms of the buildings, the weather, and people's perpetual Monday-morning faces. I concede that a trip to the Highlands in the autumn would suggest otherwise - there's a sheer blaze of colour in the leaves, the rocks, the heather. But for a Northerner such as Stevenson the generally more colourful South was an education of the vision. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the painters known as the "Scottish Colourists" settled in France, finding there the tones that were unavailable to them back home - not to mention a more liberated lifestyle.⁹

⁸Letter to Sidney Colvin [January 1875], in *Letters* (Tusitala 31), p. 211

⁹See my "Ordered South? Scottish Artists in the Mediterranean, 1864-1927," *Etudes Ecossaises* no. 2 (Grenoble, 1993), pp. 179-186. Richard Dury, of the University of Bergamo, has suggested that Stevenson uses themes and motifs in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* rather like colours in painting (or notes in music); meanings and symbols belong to the palette of a writer whose work, in its avoidance of what is too specifically referential, aspires to the condition of the abstract. Dr Dury argues that "though Stevenson may be seen as frustrated by the difficulties of expressing meaning, he may also be seen as experimenting with the freedom from having to provide a simple (and therefore false) meaning. [...] Stevenson, like Impressionist and Modernist painters, is interested in technique and in form, convinced of the polyvalence of perception and understanding: sounds, sound sequences, syntax, genre references, suggested symbolism and interpretation all forming part of his palette. [...] In other words, he uses elements of 'information' as aesthetic elements." (*The Annotated Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Richard Dury. Milano, 1993. p. 26).

The Italo-German composer Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) was an enthusiastic and perceptive reader of Stevenson. His opera, *Arlecchino* (1917), is based on the great legendary hero of the *commedia dell' arte*. According to tradition, Arlecchino hailed from Bergamo, and Busoni's opera is set in the Old Town, the Città Alta. The composer enumerated Arlecchino's characteristics - he wore motley dress, he had a supple body, and a bold, clever spirit.¹⁰ Let's apply this to Stevenson. Motley would serve as a symbol for his love of colour, variousness and wholeness; the supple body would also be Stevenson's, odd as that may sound, but in a sense it is true of a man who simply refused to allow ill-health to restrict his love of long hikes or the physical labours which he undertook at his final home in Samoa. And he certainly possessed the bold and clever spirit! All in all, Stevenson embodied that lightness of body and spirit which Friedrich Nietzsche maintained was a dancing, Latin quality which contrasted with the unrelenting solemnity of the misty Wagnerian North.

Busoni's *Arlecchino* was a key work in the composer's attempt to create a *nuova commedia dell' arte*. I believe that Stevenson is the champion of a *nuova commedia dell' arte scozzese*. Edinburgh in his youth was not entirely a dour, repressive place, and indeed the German writer Theodor Fontane, visiting Edinburgh in the 1850s, remarked that its High Street had a very unNorthern atmosphere: people chatted to each other in the street and strolled about in a leisurely manner that reminded Fontane of city life in Italy.¹¹ In our own time, during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival which takes place every August, there is a plethora of open-air performances in the streets and courtyards of the Old Town. There is a spontaneous carnival ambience which Stevenson would have loved - "the puppet booth of fun" to quote one of his early poems.¹²

I am talking of his cheerful, positive outlook, that lightness of body and spirit. However, as you would expect from the author of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, it is not all lightness. The Old Town of Edinburgh was a labyrinth of dark, sinister passageways where a Mr Hyde might stalk his victims. (*Jekyll and Hyde* is ostensibly set in London, but Stevenson is drawing on his memories of Edinburgh.) In

¹⁰I am indebted here to an article by Ronald Stevenson, "Busoni's 'Arlecchino.'" *The Musical Times* (June 1954), pp. 307-308. As so often, I have benefited from my conversations with Ronald, who is a Scottish and international composer, pianist, and authority on Busoni.

¹¹Theodor Fontane, *Across the Tweed: a tour of mid-Victorian Scotland*. Translated by Brian Battershaw. London, 1965. p. 26

¹²"A Valentine's Song," *Poems* (Tusitala 23), p. 122.

the following parts of my paper, I am going to stress more that darker side, and how Stevenson found it even in the supposedly sunny South.

As a young man he wrote: "Hurray for motley, for a good sound *insouciance*, for a healthy philosophic carelessness."¹³ Stevenson claims that the performing fool, the clown, is the wisest person of all. Such a one laughs at danger: wearing his cap and bells he dances fearlessly along the most slippery ledges.¹⁴ Now this is exactly the nature of an Arlecchino, who is not just a joker, but a joker in the face of nasty experiences; he must either make courageous choices as to how he will act in a desperate situation, or opt to let providence decide by the toss of a coin (in which case "providence" is reduced to "chance"). Among Stevenson's characters who entrust their future to chance are the Young Man with the Cream Tarts in *The Suicide Club*, and the Master of Ballantrae in the book of that name; "insouciance" even in the matter of their own life or death. In France Stevenson met strolling players whom he admired for their courageous humour despite constant financial insecurity; he considered them "a living protest against offices and the mercantile spirit".¹⁵ Take the story "Providence and the Guitar", where the strolling player Berthelini copes very charmingly with difficult situations, including the contempt of the local mayor and police chief who regard Berthelini and his kind as common vagrants and idlers. Stevenson remarks that even when an audience does not applaud, the strolling player maintains his belief in himself and his art: he "has gone upon a pilgrimage that will last him his life long, because there is no end to it short of perfection."¹⁶ No bourgeois can find such a pleasure in his own petty concerns. Indeed, against the respectable classes, Scottish Presbyterian or otherwise, Stevenson is advancing a kind of existentialism. The strolling player leads an insecure life, but that is his choice. He is not bound to comfortable convention. His pilgrimage is endless and is undertaken for its own sake. Stevenson wrote elsewhere that "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive".¹⁷

This brave existential spirit was to deepen and mature as Stevenson experienced other Southern cultures with their grim realities. The Mexicans, whom he

¹³Letter to Charles Baxter (October 1872), *Letters* (Tusitala 31), p. 57. The first four lines of "A Valentine's Song" are: "Motley I count the only wear/That suits, in this mixed world, the truly wise,/Who boldly smile upon despair/And shake their bells in Grandam Grundy's eyes."

¹⁴*Ibid.* p. 57

¹⁵*An Inland Voyage* (Tusitala 17), p. 103

¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 104

¹⁷"El Dorado," *Virginibus Puerisque* (Tusitala 25), p. 85

met in California, exploited by North Americans; the South Sea islanders exploited by Europeans - they were a far cry from the opulence of the Nice, Monte Carlo and Menton which he had known in his youth. Stevenson talked of "the indefinable line that separates South from North".¹⁸ In several of his writings he tried hard to define that line (I believe it passes through Bergamo - you have the foothills of the Alps to the north of the Città Alta, from where the funicular leads down to the new, lower town and the Lombard plain stretching out towards the Mediterranean world.) Travelling in the French Cévennes with a donkey, Stevenson experienced a distinct difference in the landscape at a certain point: he felt he was descending "into the garden of the world": at last he could view the Mediterranean Sea. He remarked that Hernando Cortès must have had a similar sensation when he saw the Pacific for the first time.¹⁹ Some years later, Stevenson himself would take that even more southerly journey to the Pacific. In one of his last novels, *The Wrecker* (1892), the dilettante artist Loudon Dodd leaves San Francisco and voyages into the Pacific: he experiences a kind of transformation, a "molecular reconstitution" as he puts it.²⁰ It all sounds a lot healthier and happier than Dr Jekyll's transforming potion. But Loudon Dodd, in that very ocean, will encounter realities that are far from pleasant.

We have reached a turning point in the discussion; it is now time to plunge into Stevenson's later and darker work.

The year is 1885, and the first publication of Stevenson's story "Olalla", which is set in Spain. The narrator is a Scottish soldier who has fallen in love with a beautiful young Spanish woman. She is a member of an aristocratic family which has lived for generations in a large hacienda high up in the sierra. Tragically, this family is doomed. It suffers from a degenerative condition which expresses itself in dangerously crazed behaviour. The soldier cuts himself on a broken window and Olalla's mother, smelling the blood, bites him like an animal. As for Olalla, she cannot marry the soldier because there is the risk that she will inherit the family curse. With such material, another late nineteenth century author such as Zola would have made much of heredity, as in his Rougon-Macquart novels. Stevenson, however, is concerned more with the moral-theological than with the scientific (as indeed is the case even among the test-tubes and phials of Dr Jekyll). The

¹⁸"Ordered South." Ibid. p. 62

¹⁹*Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*. In *An Inland Voyage* [etc.] (Tusitala 17), pp. 204, 213-214

²⁰*The Wrecker* (Tusitala 12), p. 180

soldier is a Scotsman and a Protestant who is aware that he is a heretic in a Catholic country. It is curious, however, that this Spanish Catholic family seems to illustrate the Scottish Calvinist doctrine of predestination: God or Providence has already decided whether one will go to heaven or hell, and one is not free to do anything to change that. In Stevenson this idea is in tension with the existential desire for freedom of choice. And so it seems that a Scottish obsession is actually a universal obsession; the South, too, has its hell. After all, it was Dante who gave us our most powerful image of the inferno.

Four years on, Stevenson publishes one of his greatest novels, *The Master of Ballantrae*. The Master, James Durie, is a Scottish aristocrat who has lived in exile in America, India and France; in Paris he has acquired an elegance and sophistication which are in stark contrast to the dour, plodding personality of his brother Henry. Henry is James's rival, his enemy even; he is the dependable, practical manager of the family's estate; he has never left home. James cannot resist ridiculing Henry's provincial Scottish manners. The insults become increasingly nasty and the two brothers are provoked into a duel. Henry kills James - or thinks he has killed him. The body disappears; James turns up later, very much alive. Is James an incarnation of the devil? An old family servant - who is the main narrator of the novel - believes that this is so. The servant, Ephraim Mackellar, finds himself obliged to become the Master's travelling companion on a transatlantic ship. In the course of the voyage, the Master relates to Mackellar the tale of an Italian count who lures his enemy, a German baron, to his death. The count excites the baron's curiosity concerning a dangerous pit within a ruined building situated in the wilderness just outside Rome. The baron feels impelled to visit the place alone, falls into the pit and of course perishes there. There is no proof that the count has murdered the baron, but that is exactly what he has done. Murder committed not so much by direct physical assault, but by devious psychological tactics, would be familiar to readers of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"; in a review of Poe's works, Stevenson comments on that tale, and it is not unlikely that the count's effect on the baron owes something to Montresor conducting Fortunato to his death in the catacombs. A detailed comparison of the stories would reveal many striking similarities; one of the most obvious is that both are set in Italy.²¹ In the context of Stevenson's novel, the story reflects its narrator: the count is, in effect, a self-portrait of the Master. James Durie describes

²¹Stevenson's review, "The Works of Edgar Allan Poe," appeared in *The Academy* (2 January 1875), and is reprinted in *Essays Literary & Critical* (Tusitala 28), pp. 178-185

the count as “something of the artist”²² - an artist in murder, as it turns out. James himself is a subtle devil, a wicked man with a charismatic personality, a consummate manipulator.

He is also a wanderer, a vagabond, actually an extremely classy sort of vagabond. He is always on the move - if he does wrong, nobody can catch him ... until, at last, his luck runs out towards the end, and his grandeur modulates from the satanic to the tragic. For our present purposes, the main point is that not all vagabonds are harmless, genial, strolling players who would never include real-life murder in the repertoire of their art. Moreover, vagabond villains are not all as classy as James Durie, Master of Ballantrae. Stevenson was to write about a good many sinister characters in the South Pacific - white men who had settled on the islands and who preyed on the native population as well as on their fellow-whites: crooks, colonialists, conspirators. Early in his career, Stevenson had already given us a selection of nasties among the pirates of *Treasure Island*. One of these is Long John Silver, a charismatic and even likeable villain, but a villain none the less. Here are north Europeans behaving very badly south of Europe. In fact, the South becomes a kind of distorting (and therefore revealing) mirror of the vices of the North - rather like Dr Jekyll looking in the mirror and seeing Mr Hyde.

As a young man Stevenson dreamed of the Pacific islands as a paradise, fruits dropping from the trees, ideal tourist territory. Later he discovered the reality, which included leprosy, alcoholism and exploitation. Stevenson and his South Seas friends would exchange legends from their respective cultures; a pleasant, even radiant instance of dialogue between north and south - but he found that the Pacific peoples, like the Scots, possessed (or were possessed by) a terrifying mythology concerning hell and damnation. The volcanoes on the islands suggested entrances to hell. Evil spirits were ubiquitous. Unscrupulous white traders could take advantage of the superstitions of the native peoples in order to cheat them. Such is the course followed by one Mr Case in Stevenson's greatest short story of his final phase, “The Beach of Falesá”. In the depths of a forest, Case sets up mask-like contraptions intended to scare the natives; he finds the use of luminous paint particularly effective for the darker corners of his lair. Clearly, we have come a long way from the *commedia dell' arte* props of Stevenson's relatively innocent strolling players, who presented high spirits rather than evil spirits.

In “The Beach of Falesá” Stevenson believed that he had created a piece of realism, eschewing a sentimental attitude to some Pacific paradise; he refused to

²²*The Master of Ballantrae* (Tusitala 10), p. 167

write what he called "a sugar candy sham epic".²³ However, his tales of the realities of the South did not find favour in the North. This time, by "North" I mean not Edinburgh, but London, the capital of the British Empire, London which considered itself the centre of the literary world, if not the Universe. Even Stevenson's friends there felt that he should write only what would be of interest to that milieu. Stevenson was furious. He declared that he wasn't interested in writing for the fashionable salons of the metropolis. At this time there was a younger writer who would have agreed with him - Rudyard Kipling, whose work excited Stevenson's interest and admiration. Kipling had grown up in India and, like Stevenson, found his material within cultures whose preoccupations were at the furthest remove from those of London. In 1892, Kipling wrote: "London is egotistical, and the world for her ends with the four-mile cab radius. There is no provincialism like the provincialism of London."²⁴

It's striking that this comes from that writer who was to become notorious as the apologist for Empire, for the "White Man's Burden." The European empires were active in the South Seas and Stevenson was moved to passionate protest at their interference in the lives of the native peoples. Here we have a brave example of existential choice, of commitment to a cause. In 1971 an Australian writer of Scottish origin published an essay on Stevenson's periods in Sydney. John Douglas Pringle discovered, in the files of Australian newspapers, a number of statements by Stevenson that had never been published anywhere else. Here, Stevenson denounced the exploitation of black labour on the sugar plantations of Queensland. He even claimed that natives of the Pacific islands were kidnapped and brought to Australia as virtual slaves. One newspaper remarked that, on the subject of Samoa, Stevenson was "apt to express his views in language rather too plain for publication in Australia."²⁵

So, to sum up, here we have a Northerner who involved himself very seriously in the life of the far South. He was a young Presbyterian Scot who completed his personality, made himself a whole man, by acquiring experience which most Scots lacked and which he transmuted into art and action. And yet it was down there in Samoa that he found himself writing about Scotland as never be-

²³ Letter to Sidney Colvin (28 September 1891), *Letters* (Tusitala 34), p. 101

²⁴ Rudyard Kipling, *Letters of Travel (1892-1913)*. Paris: Nelson's Continental Library Edition, n. d. p. 52

²⁵ John Douglas Pringle, *On Second Thoughts: Australian Essays*. Sydney, 1971. p. 75 and *passim*. Mr Pringle's essay "R. L. S. in Sydney" occupies pp. 59-83

fore; he recreated, in imagination, his native Edinburgh and the bleak Pentland Hills to which he knew he would never return. He confessed in a letter that although he laughed at the "old Presbyterian spirit," it was still the culture of his parents and indeed his own.²⁶ His last, unfinished novel is *Weir of Hermiston*, with its Edinburgh and Pentlands setting; he was working at the book on the very day of his death, 3 December 1894.

In *Weir of Hermiston* Stevenson remarks that the Scots have a strong sense of identity with their ancestors, "even to the twentieth generation."²⁷ He instinctively knew that the people of Samoa respected their ancestors and wished to provide for their descendants. One of his last acts, in October 1894, was to make a speech to the Samoan chiefs to celebrate the opening of a new road which they had just constructed. He told them that the generations yet unborn would benefit from such labours.²⁸

Stevenson himself had no children (apart from stepchildren) but such remarks, together with the Spanish story "Olalla," emphasise that while each of us may be a freely acting individual, making our individual voyage or pilgrimage, we are also linked to our ancestors and descendants, who either affect our thoughts and actions or are affected by them. Such a delicate relationship between choice and destiny is the experience of us all, whether we belong to Northern or Southern Europe, or to the Northern or Southern hemisphere.

²⁶ Letter to Adelaide Boodle [May 1891], *Letters* (Tusitala 34), p. 79

²⁷ *Weir of Hermiston* (Tusitala 16), p. 54

²⁸ Address of R. L. Stevenson to the Chiefs, on the Opening of The Road of Gratitude, October 1894, Appendix 2, *Letters* (Tusitala 35), p. 194

Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*

“Life is a strip of pavement over an abyss,” wrote Virginia Woolf into her diary in October 1920.¹ In this paper I will examine how this statement functions in Woolf’s late autobiographical writing, “A Sketch of the Past,” left unfinished two months before her suicide. My approach to the text will be twofold: on the one hand I will make an attempt to point out how the text deconstructs itself as autobiography yet desperately insists on constructing a unified self, on the other hand I will consider it in terms of autobiographics, i.e. how the text is inscribed and defined by all those discourses (and my primary focus here will be the genre of autobiography) that create the autobiographical subject in the text.

“A Sketch of the Past” was published posthumously in the collection of autobiographical writings entitled *Moments of Being*, in which texts written in different periods for different audiences are collected: an oscillation between autobiography and biography (that of Vanessa) in “Reminiscences,” “A Sketch of the Past,” covering basically the same period of life but written more than thirty years later; and three readings (“22 Hyde Park Gate,” “Old Bloomsbury” and “Am I a Snob”) given, within a span of fifteen years, to a circle of close friends, the Memoir Club.

These texts are thus diverse both in their date of origin, their assumed audience or readership and their choice of autobiographical form. Yet, this is not the single reason why I have avoided so far the term autobiography, I did so because in the argument I will rely on the concept that no writing, not even the

*This essay is a revised and substantially extended version of a paper given at the Conference of English and American Studies in Timisoara, Romania in 1996 and published in the 1997 issue of B.A.S., Timisoara.

¹Bell (ed), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf II*, p. 72. Henceforth abbreviated as *DVW*

so-called autobiographical can represent the verifiable absolute truth of identity; that the self cannot be truly represented in language even though autobiography came about as a genre of putting oneself into the text, of a revelation of self-knowledge, of verifiability and authentic truth-production about oneself, a genre in which the referentiality of the text is supposed to far exceed that of realist fiction. This concept of autobiography, grounded in the humanistic notion of

the self-evident existence of an autonomous, self-identical individual, is founded on the oneness of the author, narrator and subject, [and] presupposes the possibility of a whole truth which would be the property of the subject and which he could convey at will.²

This concept of autobiography, presupposing the referentiality of language and the direct availability of the author's self in the text, utilizes the "presumed factuality or historicity of autobiography."³

The homogenous identity of the self and the referentiality of language are, however, central notions problematised by poststructuralist theories on the basis that, summed up roughly, "to use signs entails that meaning is dispersed, divided and never quite one with itself. Not only meaning but 'I' too, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction."⁴

Inevitably, the change in the concept of the self leads to a different notion of autobiography in all its basic aspects: it erodes

the distinction between fiction and non-fiction and deconstructs the apparent relation between the self and its textual embodiment [and] autobiography is not seen as *produced* by a pre-existent self but as *producing* a provisional and contingent one.⁵

The same position is proposed by Paul de Man in his essay "Autobiography as De-Facement," where he argues that autobiography is

²Couser, *Altered Egos*. p. 23

³*Ibid.* p. 14

⁴*Ibid.* p. 18

⁵*Ibid.* p. 189

not a genre or a mode but a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. [...] [T]he author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone.⁶

In this way the question of fictionality/nonfictionality is not a valid distinction or a basis for any typology of texts:

[t]he interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalisation (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual sign systems made up of tropological substitutions.⁷

Following this logic there arises the question that

whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus seems determined in all its aspects by the resources of their medium [...] since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others.⁸

Thus autobiographical writing becomes not a representation of a unified identity but rather *one version* of the “technology of self.”⁹ In *Autobiographics* Leigh Gilmore introduces a complex method of investigation, combining the approaches of deconstruction and social constructionism. She sets her aim

to describe the elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine, not content with literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in the text where self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography –

⁶de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” pp. 921-922

⁷*Ibid.* p. 922

⁸*Ibid.* p. 920

⁹Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*. p. xiv

namely those legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity, through which the subject of autobiography is produced.¹⁰

She defines autobiographics as “a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation.”¹¹

Paul de Man’s and Leigh Gilmore’s concepts of autobiography as a mode of representation seem to be applicable approaches to Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past,” which in its very title questions the absolute control over the past and destabilises the authority of the author over the material handled: both the indefinite article and the word “sketch” suggest the incompleteness, the instability, the non-finality of the text. The title shatters the illusion of the basic assumption underlying the theory of autobiography based on the notion of the unified self and the referentiality of language. The title, rather, seems to express both a scepticism toward and the inevitability of genre constrictions, thus the text becomes a master text for autobiography, which can be conceived, in Gilmore’s words, as

the collection of rules offered by and produced in language that prefigures and even determines the historical modes of expression. In other words, in choosing autobiography, a writer is both enabled and constrained by the rhetoric of the style.¹²

In Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” both words: ‘enabled’ and ‘constrained’ (one could rephrase it and say enabled and disabled) function as key modes of creating the text of which the narrator seems to be self-reflexively aware. Reading the text one is confronted with a conspicuously elusive quality that results in an impact like that of the clever girl in the fairy tale who *has* come to the king’s court and *hasn’t*, who *has* brought some present to the king and *hasn’t*, who *has* greeted the king and *hasn’t* simultaneously, because she has come but on horseback, she has greeted the king but by bowing, and has brought pigeons by way of present, which the moment they are present in the king’s court become absent as she releases them. This is the very effect Woolf’s text produces: as

¹⁰Gilmore, *Autobiographics*. p. 42

¹¹*Ibid.* p. 42

¹²*Ibid.* p. 70

opposed to the fiction of autobiography where the illusion is sustained that the narrative 'I' can tell some verifiable truth about the subject of autobiography, in this autobiographical writing Woolf dismantles and at the same time recreates the fiction of autobiographical self-expression. The oscillation between these two modes of narratorial positions permeates the text and creates the paradoxes of assumed authenticity and admitted fictionality, assumed verifiability and admitted construction, assumed fictionality of truth-telling and admitted scepticism towards the possibility of finding and expressing a final cause. The text seems to enact the paradox of the impossibility of creating an individual life story, i.e. the "coming into being in the text,"¹³ yet it desperately makes attempts at still re-presenting at least the "moments of being" as the "scaffolding" of the individual¹⁴ - or, "A Sketch of the Past."

The oscillation, instability, and self-deconstructing quality of the text can be located on several levels, all related to the problem of the linguistic sign, of Symbol, and of a linguistic system of signs called autobiography, a special trope of reading. Thus, this autobiographical text written intermittently in the last two years of Woolf's life, with the assumed (or, rather, imposed) intention of giving an ultimate summary and evaluation of a life from the position of finality and retrospection rather turns out to be an admission of futility, of incapacity, of inappropriateness of language and linguistic signs to create a closure that can be called self and self-expression.

Woolf's scepticism towards the elements of the symbolic system of signification she chose for herself to be a master of, i.e. the medium of language goes back to the beginning of her writing career. One could quote endlessly from her letters, diaries, essays and fictional writings. By way of illustration here is a random sample spanning over thirty years of her writer's career: "Written words of a person who is dead or still alive tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in smooth folds annulling all evidence of life" ("Reminiscences," 1908, *MB* 43);

Words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them and were to their inexperienced touch so

¹³de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement." p. 922

¹⁴Schulkind (ed. & intr), *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being*, p. 82 (henceforth abbreviated as *MB*)

massive: but who knows [...] what precipices aren't concealed in them, or what slopes of ice don't shine on the sun on the other side?

(“Kew Gardens,” 1918, *Complete Shorter Fiction* 94)

“Suppose one could really communicate, how exciting it would be;”¹⁵ and “If I had the power to lift out of the past a single day as we lived about 1900, it would give a section of upper middle class Victorian life” (“A Sketch of the Past,” 1940, *MB* 161, emphasis added).

In “A Sketch of the Past,” however, the awareness of the unreliability and nonreferentiality of the system of linguistic signs is the most basic element of destabilising the authority of life-writing. Shari Benstock considers *Moments of Being*, and particularly “A Sketch of the Past” in terms of personal history and narrative, and states that “the entire project is posed on the question of self and its relation to language and storytelling strategies,”¹⁶ and draws the conclusion:

Woolf views the past not as a ‘subject matter’ – a content as such but rather a method, a scene-making. [...] Unable to argue logically the ontology of autobiography by means of self-consciousness, Woolf moves toward an instinctive notion that the ‘sealed vessel’ of selfhood is an artificial construct, that it ‘cracks’ and floods, allowing access to that which in conscious moments is considered wholly separate and different from self – ‘what is convenient to call reality’. But Woolf’s notion of reality is [...] rather a linguistic space (a ‘scene’) that conceals – and tries to seal itself against – the gap (the ‘crack’) of the unconscious. [...] ‘Writing the self’ is therefore a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity.¹⁷

What I would like to further investigate is *how* the narrator’s self-reflexive persona on the one hand consciously destabilises the authenticity of this personal narrative, while on the other hand persistently denies her own awareness of the futility of putting herself – or any other person – in a text, because in my opinion this dynamism of negation and assertion gives the key mode of the text, never

¹⁵Nicolson & Trautman (eds.), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf IV*. p. 97 (Letter to Gerald Brennan, 1929, emphasis added). Henceforth abbreviated as *LVW*

¹⁶Benstock, *The Private Self*. p. 22

¹⁷*Ibid.* p. 29

drawing any ultimate conclusion or taking the side of either autobiographical facement or de-facement.

In considering the narrator's position I think the narrative situation is of utmost importance, from which the question of memory, identity, re-presentating a memory/person in a text, the Woolfian notions of the 'cotton wool' and the 'moments of being,' and the disposition for scene-making are problematised. I would even argue that through this narrator, though really "unable to argue logically," Woolf was absolutely aware of the ontology of autobiography, and expounded it in a fictional treatise on autobiography, or more precisely, on the impossibility of autobiography.

The first sentences of the text imply the complexity of the autobiographical narrator's position as the site of conflicting discourses:

Two days ago – Sunday 16th April 1939 to be precise – Nessa said that if I did not start writing my memoirs I should soon be too old. I should be eighty-five and should have forgotten – witness the unhappy case of Lady Strachey. As it happens that I am sick of writing Roger's life, perhaps I will spend two or three mornings making a sketch. There are several difficulties. In the first place, the enormous number of things I can remember; in the second, the number of different ways in which memoirs can be written. As a great memoir reader, I know many different ways. But if I begin to go through them and to analyse them and their merits and faults, the mornings – I cannot take more than two or three at most – will be gone. So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself – or if not it will not matter. I begin: the first memory.

(MB 72)

The narrator is located in the text both in time (defining the precise date and her age) and as an authorised memoir-writer for Virginia Woolf the woman (the sister of Vanessa Bell) and the writer (the writer of Roger Fry's biography) who is still fully capacitated to recall memories (in opposition to Lady Strachey the problem is the great number of memories), with a personal knowledge of the conventions of writing a memoir and with the certainty that whatever she writes will sort out itself into a form, even if not into a conventional one. Yet, parallel with locating the narrator into this stable position of authority, all these elements are undermined and opened up in the same sentences.

The temporal location of the narrator's story-telling is sustained all through the text: the first date is 16th April 1939, the last 15th November 1940, but it is also known that Woolf stopped writing it in January 1941,¹⁸ two months before her suicide. These dates function significantly in the text: they are defined not only chronologically but also historically and psychologically: what it means to live under the threat of old age, of a possibly approaching bout of madness, under the threat of the German invasion (their house in London was ruined, a German helicopter passed their garden in Rodmell, and with her husband, who was a Jew, they decided to take poison should the Germans invade Britain – *MB* 111). For the memoir writer all these three threats lead to the same: the loss of memory, that is the loss of the idea of putting oneself into the text. The narrative situation is thus the classic case of the memoir: to remember one's self in the face of death, in the face of annihilation, and to recapture the essence of identity in the very last possible moments. One would suppose that this is the moment, the ultimate moment of being, when in spite of all the awareness of fragmentation and the inauthenticity of language a life-story is produced which, even though a "representation of [one's] *imagined* relation to reality, mediated by narrator and reader,"¹⁹ appears in the form of a relatively continuous and organic narrative, with the gaps successfully hidden. In the case of "A Sketch of the Past," however, the text does not even presume self-knowledge but from the first moment on problematises itself as an agent of representation and creates itself as fiction.

Old age, as a key element of the first paragraph, has ambiguous interpretations: it is not only the repository of the specular moment of autobiography, i.e. of remembering, but also that of forgetting memories (Lady Strachey's case). At this point forgetfulness is dismissed in a matter-of-fact way by stating that the problem now is rather the abundance of memories, but the comment obviously raises the question of selection: of inclusion in and omission from the text, with its concomitant issue of "true" representation. Later on, further theoretical questions are raised, most probably informed by Freud, whose works Woolf read right before writing "A Sketch of the Past" – they even met personally –, and to whom there is a reference in the text pointing out that his theory helped in analysing the love and hate relationship of the daughter to the father, Sir Leslie Stephen (*MB* 120). One can justifiably suppose that one of the major discourses shaping "A Sketch of the Past" is Freudian psychoanalysis, a powerful fiction of

¹⁸ deSalvo, *Virginia Woolf and the Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. p. 132

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*. p. xiii, emphasis added

the 20th century in other aspects as well: "the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important" (*MB* 78). How can, then, the reader ultimately presume the narrator as the authority of a life-story? At its best, the author may function as the authority of the story, which is the textual and symbolic substitution of life in a fiction of autobiography.

The unremembered (repressed? forgotten? unuttered because unutterable?) memories are attributed great significance in the context as they are contrasted with and posited as perhaps even more important than the first memories, the validity of which, in turn, undergoes a series of devaluations. The last phrase of the first paragraph is: "the first memory" (*MB* 73). Together with the narrative situation, in the face of death, summing up the essence of one's life, they form the most traditional framework possible for an autobiography: the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the departure and the destination, the origin and the goal, thus implying the perfect structure for the teleology of a personal narrative, which Paul de Man terms "the need to move from cognition to resolution."²⁰ The authenticity of the first memory, however, is undermined in several ways, not only by stating that the unremembered things might be more important. The narrator self-confidently sets out to describe the first memory, thus to authenticate the life-story with a proper beginning:

This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother's dress; and she was sitting either on a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. Perhaps we were going to St Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London. *But it is more convenient artistically to suppose* that we were going to St Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories.

(*MB* 72-3; emphasis added)

At the moment the life-story is authenticated by rendering a beginning to it, it is destabilised by fictionalising and dispersing it into other origins: the memory of St Ives, lying in the nursery and listening to the waves as they break on the shore. Is there *a* beginning, then? Or are there different beginnings? Which is the real one? Is there any real one? This other first memory is introduced by a typically devious sentence: "If life has a base that it stands upon, [...] if it is a bowl

²⁰de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement." p. 922

that one fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory” (MB 73). The sentence can be read in at least two ways: on the one hand as a pretence for tentativeness the underlying assumption of which is yet that of affirmation: yes, *this* is the base of her life. On the other hand it can be interpreted as the questioning whether one can ascertain at all that life has a base, i.e. whether what is *constituted as the beginning*, the origin, the point of departure has any verifiable validity of that kind.

Typically, the two first memories, complemented by a third one, and all the three described in details, can be defined as memories recalled, reconstructed from the child’s dyadic unity with the mother, the primordial unity of being, from the pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic phase: the memory of sitting in the mother’s lap, really close to her dress; then in St Ives lying in the nursery and listening to the waves “feeling the purest ecstasy I cannot describe” (MB 73); and finally

colour-and-sound memories [...]; it was highly sensual. [...] It still makes me warm; as if everything were ripe; humming, sunny, so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop, [...] and all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked.

(MB 75)

These images suggest the unity and the totality of being, not in its separation and differentiation but in its primordial wholeness and oneness: on the verge of self-consciousness, on the verge of differentiation and ego-formation, on the verge of entering the Symbolic and of falling into Oedipal sexuality (see the images of high sensuality pressing but not bursting the membrane and giving pleasure). This is the moment of Kristeva’s *jouissance*, the moment of bodily contact when the body is not split into senses but is enwrapped in the totality of sensual pleasure, without any consciousness of the self (“half awake, half asleep”). Paradoxically, the self-conscious narrator attempts to evoke these memories, to reconstitute them in the Symbolic, in linguistic differentiation, and the failure is appropriately admitted at the end of both: “such ecstasy I cannot describe” (MB 74); “But again I cannot describe that rapture” (MB 75).

To give the logic – or “illogic” – of the text one more twist (or, to reveal one more gap), the relatively long description of these memories, concluding in

the impossibility of verbalising the feeling, are, though not directly, preceded by the narrator's pondering:

I could spend hours trying to write [the purest ecstasy I can conceive] as it should be written. [...] But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself.

(*MB* 73)

Of this reflection three elements deserve attention. First of all the auxiliary 'should': "as it should be written." What can it refer to? What authority does it acclaim? The authority of the tradition of autobiography? The narrator's own authority? The text's authority? The memory's authority that wants to be put in the text? Perhaps all these, perhaps none of these. So, instead of solving the problem (or even clarifying it), the narrator rather seems to avoid it by forecasting failure only to give herself yet another chance and self-confidence: to describe Virginia – yet another base on which the long descriptions of the first memories can be "solidly" based.

Further complication and destabilisation ensue when this solid base – quite expectedly – becomes unstable. As opposed to what seems to have been one of the most self-evident tasks of any novelist and fiction writer, i.e. the verbal characterisation of human beings, it turns out that it is not only these primordial memories that cannot be put in the text. The self-reflexive narrator raises the following question:

Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties – one of the reasons why, though I read so many, many are failures. They leave out the person to whom these things happened. So they say: 'This is what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened.

(*MB* 73).

This is the question of coming into being in the text, the question of the possibility of verbal and symbolic representation, which Paul de Man phrases as the metaphorical substitution of the subject in a situation instead of the subject

being in the text.²¹ Facing the abyss of nonreferentiality of language, the narrator relapses into the most commonplace and most hackneyed way possible to

answer the question 'Who was I then?' Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen, born on 25th January 1882, descended from a great many people, some famous, others obscure; born into a large connection, born not of rich parents, but of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate late nineteenth century world.

(*MB* 73)

How can this, in Woolf's case most unnatural and atypical self-definition be interpreted? Obviously, on the one hand as a mockery of what Woolf ridicules in her essays "Modern Fiction" and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," i.e. what she calls "materialist Edwardians," who only consider the external material world but never look at the human being, in this case called Virginia Stephen. The passage, however, probes deeper. It can also be read as absolute despair over the impossibility of representation and the admission that one symbolic substitution is as good (or, rather, as bad) as another, thus annihilating all her self-confidence in the superiority of the kind of writing she advocated. On yet another level, it can be read as the ultimate result of self-persuasion that, in spite of all the doubts, writing, i.e. an attempt at self-representation must go on and in this effort such conveniences are at disposal as the traditional form of autobiography, in which one can feel comfortable because the homeliness of the technology of the genre offers a framework for the technology of self, for the textual reconstruction of the self – whatever that is.

The doubts, quite obviously, do not spare the identity of the self either. The previous question "Who was I then?" in itself deposes the authority of the narrator over her own subject by declaring herself not a master of her own understanding. This split between the narrator and the subject is further multiplied and dispersed in time and space and in terms of social discourse. The narrator writes,

2nd May... I write the date, because I think I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present – at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be in-

²¹*Ibid.* p. 921

teresting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is so much affected by the present moment. *What I write today I should not write in a year's time.*

(MB 84, emphasis added)

Later she adds:

Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse the invisible presences we know very little of the subject of the memoir.

(MB 90)

The identity of self, thus the narrator and the subject of autobiography, i.e. the authority of autobiography as the repository of self-knowledge, at this point are problematised in directions different from the question of textual self-representation: both the narrator and the subject are exposed to a matrix of infinite variables in which the innumerable versions of both selves (i.e. that of the narrator and the autobiographical subject) multiply each other thus capable of creating an endless number of texts, none of which can be *the* authorised version, the sacred narrative of the personal history. After deposing the base of the autobiographical subject's life-story ("If life has a base..."), at this point the narrator is destabilised under the pretence of discovering a solid base: the present, more exactly the date, which apparently looks solid, but actually keeps shifting ("What I write today I should not write in a year's time"), and in its interplay with the continually shifting 'identity' of the subject it engenders a process in which the endless number of significations only "demonstrate the impossibility of closure and of totalization of all textual systems."²² This is the basic reason why, I think, Woolf is absent from her memoir, not, as Shari Benstock argues,

because of the circumstances of her upbringing Woolf does not know 'how far [she] differ[s] from other people.' [As] it is precisely this difference, this individuality on which the traditional memoir premises itself,²³

²²*Ibid.* p. 922

²³Benstock, *The Private Self*, pp. 24-25

though inevitably *she* is absent from it.

In spite of the tragic – or rather tragicomic – awareness of the impossibility of closure, the narrator carries on with her desperate attempts to put herself into the text and find a fitting formula. Deviously and apologetically, she complains that

I have no energy at the moment to spend upon the horrid labour that it needs to make an orderly and expressed work of art; where one thing follows another and all are swept into a whole. Perhaps, one day, relieved from making works of art, I will try to compose this.

(MB 84)

The question is if “A Sketch of the Past” is really an uncomposed piece of writing without any structural unity at all. The editor of *Moments of Being* characterises the text as “a consciousness which follows its own particular byways rather than a preordained route,”²⁴ a statement that needs a slight revision. First, when considering the writing technique the reader must be aware that the general method of Woolf’s novels from *Jacob’s Room* on was what she laid down in her essay “Modern Fiction”:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. [...] Any method is right, every method is right, that express what we wish to express.²⁵

In this sense “A Sketch of the Past” is not a unique piece of writing, quite on the contrary, it perfectly fits into Woolf’s fictional oeuvre. One can, therefore, wonder how much the text lacks what Woolf considers “wholeness”, particularly because the other ‘truth-producing’ discourse most probably informing the text, i.e. Freudian psychoanalysis must have reinforced Woolf’s deeply rooted conviction of her mode of representing characters in fiction: by entering the mind, quite similarly to the method required by Freud’s technique of free associations.

²⁴Schulkind, *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being*. p. 20

²⁵Lodge, *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. pp. 89-90

In spite of the apparently random ramblings of the memoir, there is still a stable structure governing the text, a structure quite traditional, usual, something offered by the genre of autobiography, enabling the narrator to adopt a literary discourse with its concomitant positive effects: by accepting the structure of the memoir, a narrative becomes available, a fictional space in which an identity can be constructed, and the effect of a unified self can be produced. The framework of the fiction of autobiography consists, on the one hand, in the careful recurring dating of the moment of writing, on the other hand, of an absolutely chronological succession of the stages of childhood, represented by central characters dominating each stage. The key characters thus are Julia Jackson Stephen, the mother, then the first surrogate mother, Stella, preceding the father's figure, who seems to dominate the family's life after Stella's death, but parallel with this seemingly central position, the absolute centre as such is dispersed into a diversity of relationships: Vanessa, Thoby, and George Duckworth alternately gain a special role in a system of delicate interdependences. Yet, despite the simultaneity of dispersed focuses, a basic chronology of objective time is observed.

Autobiography as a mode of storytelling is also characterised by the convention that primarily the narrator's and/or the autobiographical subject's ideas and thoughts are presented and interpreted, the other characters are rather presented from the outside, defined from an external perspective. This element of autobiographics produces a narrative in which the exclusive authority of truth-telling is the narrator, relating all incidents, situations and characters to herself, even though some scepticism pervades the narrator's self-reflexive remarks on the re-presentation of the others: real representation is impossible. This doubt recurs concerning all the characters. Sometimes this happens in an indirect way, e.g. after discounting the category of 'type' as caricature both the father's and Jack Hills's figures are defined as 'types': the father is a type "like a steel engraving, without colour or warmth or body; but with an infinity of precise clear lines" (*MB* 120), whereas Jack Hills "stands in [her] mind's picture gallery for a type – and a desirable type; the English country gentleman type. I might call it, by way of running a line round it" (*MB* 112). In some other instances, most conspicuously in the mother's case, the inaccessibility of the core of the character is articulated by the narrator: "But can I get any closer to her without drawing upon all those descriptions and anecdotes which after she was dead imposed themselves upon my view of her?" (*MB* 92); "[b]ut if I turn to my mother, how difficult it is to single her out as she really was; to imagine what she was thinking, to put a single

sentence into her mouth! I dream: I make up pictures of a summer's afternoon" (*MB* 97).

The more or less openly admitted incapacity of representing the family members has a devastating effect on representing the subject of autobiography as well because they should all function as metonymic tropes for the autobiographical subject: to 'name' and identify her by their presence in the text, by the image of the diversity of their relationships. The insufficiency of verbal representation is expressed in her recurrently expressed desire for an image, a picture, a vision, a painting ("Yet, if one could give a sense of my mother's personality one would have to be an artist" [*MB* 95]). True, representation in painting is another kind of substitution, another type of symbolic representation with its special system of codes, yet the spatial images of painting seem to be closer to the images of the mind: as opposed to the analytic and temporal representation of the linguistic system, they are synthetic and spatial, which always had an appeal to Woolf from the beginning of her writing career. Coming back from Italy she envied the interrelatedness of the parts in Perugino's painting,²⁶ and in *To the Lighthouse* it is Lily Briscoe, the painter finishing her painting in a way that can be read as a balance between the Symbolic and the semiotic, the paternal and the maternal, the Oedipal and the pre-Oedipal,²⁷ and it is Lily Briscoe who seems to represent the ideal artist figure.

Knowing this preference for images and pictures it is almost natural that the essential moments of life are recorded in scenes, which are the closest to an image: as opposed to dependence on temporality, they rather constitute a suspension, a frozen moment, an eternalised momentariness. This is how in the autobiography all the moments of being are represented: in scenes, in symbols. "I could sum up [Stella's death] in one scene [...] Still the leafless tree is to me an emblem, the symbol of those summer months" (*MB* 154), one of the tragic moments of being in her life. The phrase 'moments of being' is very often referred to, quoted and taken for granted as the symbol for the essential moments of life, for the intensive moments of subjective time, for moments of great duration, and this is what the definition suggests: "These moments of mine were scaffolding in the background, were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child" (*MB* 82), in sharp contrast with "this cotton wool, this non-being" (*MB* 79), which is disproportionately more extensive in quantity.

²⁶Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. I. p. 138

²⁷Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*. p. 115

Yet, the moment the text defines these moments of being with an almost religious and metaphysical enthusiasm: "behind the cotton wool is a hidden pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this, that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of a work of art" (MB 81), the moment it is eulogised, the typical oscillation and self-contradiction of the text begins:

we are the words; we are the music. [...] If I were painting myself I should have to find some – rod, I shall say – something that would *stand for the conception*. It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to some background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool.

(MB 81-2 emphasis added)

The latter voice is that of the sceptical narrator, contradicting and resisting the previous one, and discounting the authority of truth-telling: the moments of being themselves are consciously conceived by the narrator as the integral part of a *conception*, i.e. the symbolic substitutions for the inexpressible, the unrepresentable; supposedly good representations, though, they constitute the rod, just like the line drawn in the middle of Lily Briscoe's painting, representing Mr Ramsay, *his* lighthouse, phallic authority, the Oedipal and the symbolic representation in language.

A further investigation in the nature of how these moments are presented in scenes seems to irrecoverably shatter the reader's belief in the control of the narrator over the text. Scene-making has its convincing definition and rationale given by the narrator:

I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion – it is irrational; it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene – for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made up of something permanent; that is a proof of their 'reality.'

(MB 156)

The notions, however, that characterise these 'scenes', or linguistic spaces ("comes to the top, arranged, representative"), are typical of the conscious, the artistic, the symbolic, the constructed and self-contained whole. The narrator is well aware of the falsity of this neat pattern, of the shallowness of the image: "Scenes, I note, seldom illustrate my relation with Vanessa; it has been too deep for 'scenes'." (*MB* 156).

Yet, the whole text is constructed upon a series of scenes representing the *moments of being* which stand for the metaphorical substitutions for the images of the persons who should, in turn, function as metonymical tropes for the identification of the image of the autobiographical subject, although in all these shifts and substitutions the closure becomes more and more impossible, the gap absolutely unbridgeable. This is the process Paul de Man calls autobiography as de-facement:

one's name is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figura*, figuration and disfiguration. [...Thus] autobiography veils a de-facement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.²⁸

Yet, the sceptical narrator, aware of the tragicomic effect of her effort, just like Sisyphos, does not give up her effort of putting herself in the text. More exactly, she does give it up: the autobiography is left unfinished...

The ultimate question remains: why is the narrator of "A Sketch of the Past" oscillating between authorising her own text and parallel with that undermining that position; why does she take all her efforts to position her story within a discourse of truth and identity while at the same time she creates not only gaps but abysses in the text? Louise deSalvo argues that Woolf stopped writing this autobiography because on the one hand her reading Freud may have put pressure on her to reinterpret what she had already written, which she was unwilling to do; on the other hand Woolf seems to have abandoned writing when she uncovered the so far unuttered element of Gerald Duckworth's sexual abuse when she was six or seven: the pain of breaking her hymen.²⁹

The memory comes to the surface not haphazardly: "A Sketch of the Past" is informed by a series of efforts working against Victorian taboos such as

²⁸de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement." pp. 926, 930

²⁹deSalvo, *Virginia Woolf and the Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. pp. 131-132

the taboo of death, birth, sexuality, the sanctity of childhood innocence and of the family. In this context the traumatic memories of her sexual abuse by both her stepbrothers provide a framework for the narrator's insistence on telling the truth, which is held back by

the rules of the game of Victorian society. [...] We still play the game. It is useful. It also has its beauty, for it is founded upon restraint, sympathy, unselfishness. [...] But the Victorian manner is perhaps – I am not sure – a disadvantage at writing. [...] On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched up straight and spoke out loud.

(MB 164)

What is so difficult to come out with? What is it that Woolf rather finds better to slip in? In *Moments of Being* right after the first memory comes the memory of the first abuse. After making up a series of reasons for her looking glass shame, this traumatic experience is revealed, even if not in its entirety, at the beginning. When the text ceases, on the other hand, the narrator is struggling to make the story of a supposedly seven or nine year long sexual abuse by the other stepbrother, George, audible: the period between 1895/7-1904. It follows the mother's death, when "a finger *seemed* laid on *one's* lips. [...] A finger *was* laid on *our* lips" (MB 104, emphasis added) repeats the narrator in a more affirmative and personal way on the same page. The taboo of incest, of sexual abuse even in 1940 prevents her from "telling the truth about my experiences as a body. [This is a problem] I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet," writes Woolf in her essay "Professions for Women".³⁰ The final twenty-four pages of *Moments of Being* are taken up by the effort of articulating and at the same time avoiding the most traumatic experience of those years.

Why do I shirk the task of wafting [Thoby] from the boat to my bed-sitting room at Hyde Park Gate? It is because I want to go on thinking about St Ives. [...] I do not want to go into my room at Hyde Park gate. I shrink from the years 1897-1904, the seven unhappy years. [...] I am not thinking of mother and Stella; I am thinking of the damage their

³⁰Gilbert & Gubar (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. p. 1387

deaths inflicted. I will describe it more carefully later, I will illustrate with a scene or two.

(*MB* 149-50)

This suspense could be interpreted as a natural remark of a narrator making up the story. But what makes it conspicuous and unique is that it has only one more parallel in the text: nowhere else can we read any other remark creating a suspense but twenty pages later, when after the description of George the narrator starts interpreting the character. In him “[s]ome crude wish to dominate there was; some jealousy, of Jack no doubt; some desire to carry away the prize; and, as became obvious later, some sexual urge” (*MB* 168). The structure of the argument follows the same pattern as the one attached to the looking-glass shame: a natural feeling of guilt because of being a tomboy; the inherited streak of the Puritan; some ancestral dread; being ashamed or afraid of her body; and then “another memory, also of the hall may help to explain this,” and then comes the memory when Gerald Duckworth lifted her on a slab and explored her body (*MB* 77), as if it were the most negligible reason, only a ‘may’, attached to the series of reasons, just like George’s “sexual urge”, which became obviously traumatic in Woolf’s life. But the text of “A Sketch of the Past” never releases the suspense the remark (“as became obvious later”) creates: the text ceases and only silence speaks.

One can interpret this giving up in several ways: on the one hand as Louise deSalvo does, based on Woolf’s diaries, that introspection became too painful and under the direct threat of the German invasion Woolf felt the coming of a new bout of depression. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as the victory of Victorian self-restraint, taboo, the finger on the lips. The silence, however, can also be interpreted as the ultimate conclusion of a narrator who from the very beginning of the text is sceptical about her authority, about the possibility of any textual representation, about the closure between the referent and the sign, about the process of signification. This narrator, who still maintained the game of authorising her text, gives up writing at the moment when a new system of signs, with referents supposedly never voiced before, i.e. a new language is needed to tell the truth about herself as a body. At this moment all pretence for textual representation fails: the strip of pavement that writing represents becomes insufficient and shaky, providing only a temporary, false and artificial bridge over the abyss of life.

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Árpád Mibály

'I too have the right to be shown impossible'
Re-reading the *Beckett Trilogy*

I'm the clerk, I'm the scribe, at the hearings of
what cause I know not.

Texts for Nothing, No. 5

The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the
spirit of system.

The Unnamable

'Baldrick, have you no idea what irony is?'
'Yeah, ... it's like goldy and bronzy, only it's
made of iron.'

Blackadder III

I. *'I SEEM TO SPEAK, IT IS NOT I, ABOUT ME, IT IS NOT ABOUT ME.'*

This re-reading of the *Trilogy* will be carried out in search of a presence. This will be detective work of a sort where I will be satisfied with finding the clues and will refrain from arresting the felon. After all, this case may be of a nature more diabolical than criminal.

The sought presence is in want of a space to be present in, and I suggest that the *Beckett Trilogy* seeks to satisfy the desire of this presence while conscious of its impossibility. Less obscurely: something/someone outside the text seeks, and is refused, admission to it. More tactfully: the text seems to encourage/admit

a reading that will see it as the attempts of a silent presence at claiming our attention.

This presence is the one that makes the narrator speak and provides a world for the narrator to speak of. One reason for my reluctance to call 'it' the name 'it' has earned in critical tradition is the confusion that surrounds this name.

Wayne Booth's 'implied author' had practical purposes at the time of its introduction: to relieve flesh-and-blood authors from accusations of immorality, when different works of the same writer seemed to suggest different authorial moral standpoints. The concept has gained wide currency¹ even though the definition was not unequivocal.² The most controversial issue is *how* the implied author manifests itself. Booth sees no difficulty here:

These differences [between the implied authors of different works of the same author] are most evident when the second self is given *an overt, speaking role* in the story. When Fielding comments, he gives us explicit evidence of a modifying process [of the author's persona] from work to work...

(Booth, pp. 71-2; my emphasis)

Later he partly qualifies his statement by saying:

It is a curious fact that we have no terms either for this created 'second self' or for our relationship with him. None of our terms for various aspects of the narrator is quite accurate. 'Persona,' 'mask,' and 'narrator' are sometimes used, but they more commonly refer to the speaker in the work who is after all only one of the elements created by the implied author and who may be separated from him by large ironies. 'Narrator' is usually taken to mean the 'I' of the work, but the 'I' is seldom if ever identical with the implied image of the artist.

(Booth, p. 73)

A consistent application of this idea will lead us to the realisation that 'I' is never identical with the implied author, that is, the implied author can never speak out *directly*. 'I' is reserved for the use of narrators, or, as William Nelles puts it, 'the

¹ For a review and critique, see William Nelles's 'Historical and Implied Authors and Readers.'

² In the first, 1961, edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; the definition which set in motion much of Iser's work on the 'implied reader.' The second, 1980, edition does not seem to solve the contradictions of the first one. For this, see Nelles.

historical author writes, the implied author means, the narrator speaks' (Nelles, p. 42).

Much attention is devoted to the problem in Uri Margolin's ambitious and rigorous 'alternative narratology':

The *author* of any FPN [first person narrative], be it fictional or factual, must use the 'I' expression to designate its textual speaker. In the case of a fictional narrative, the 'I' expression occurring in any of the propositions contained in it is neither speaker indicator nor a referring expression with regard to the author of the text. Yet, paradoxically, the author of a fictional FPN can exist or be himself *as* the author of a FPN only if he employs the 'I' expression without self-indication or self-reference, that is, only in so far as he assumes the role of the imputer who stands behind a not-I discourse... On the other hand, the author has no other expression but 'I' at his disposal on all those occasions when he wants to self-refer and self-indicate linguistically. Real creator and fictional creation are thus inevitably designated by one and the same expression. Once we know that a person is a writer of fictional FPN, each and every usage of the 'I' term by him becomes suspect, ambiguous, potentially undecidable, as it may designate the author and/or his double - the textual speaker, the person and/or the persona.

(Margolin, p. 205)

Both Booth and Margolin seem to comply with the traditional complacency that agrees to identify certain "I" terms' with the physical author (not to mention his implied double). What with language being a system of agreements, I may appear to be splitting hair when I insist the sweaty individual, as well as his dummy, be bereft of pronouns. 'I' I do not find suspect or ambiguous as regards authors, since it is not at their disposal at all to self-refer *linguistically*. Nothing is, that is. If the reference of 'I' is ascertained in the (speech-)situation, the narrative situation defines the user of 'I' as narrator. And vice versa: it is exactly the "I" term' that defines or constitutes the narrator's position: if one uses 'I' in a text to refer to oneself one is a narrator.³ Not only does the non-identity of author and narrator facilitate such narrative tricks as the unreliable narrator (c.f. Booth's reference to the irony separating speakers and [implied] authors), it should also forbid the reader to make that identification. Is it the death of the (implied) author then?

³ Meaning of course the use of 'I' outside inverted commas, i.e. non-reported discourse.

Perhaps not. What *is* in his (their) power as far as self-reference goes is rhetoric. Though I will concentrate on irony, I suspect that most, if not all, figurative use of language may help an author(-figure) to span the void between 'I' and him. Irony, understood as the conflict of intended (surface) and circumstantial meaning, is perhaps the most powerful tool in this respect. Consider but the case of the unreliable narrator: it is the ironic conflict of what he says and what it means in the given circumstances that posits, or calls the reader's attention to, the existence of someone 'smarter.' Someone, who not only knows more but is willing to let us see it.⁴

The problem with irony lies exactly in the role of intention: in its classic definition, the recognition of irony means the recognition of an ironic intention (c.f. e.g. Richter, p. 136). One aspect of Nelles's definition of the implied author – he who 'consciously created and intended every implication, subtlety, ambiguity and complexity that can be discovered in the text' (Nelles, p. 26) – will in fact give strong support to this idea, as it ties *all* intentions to the implied author. The reader's task seems to consist of the recognition of these intentions – the implied reader's task, that is:

The implied reader would function only to receive without addition or subtraction, without physical, psychological, or cultural "interference with contact," the complete intention of the implied author (which is not necessarily the same as that of the historical author) and to understand the full meaning of the text.

(Nelles, p. 32)

Since Iser the implied reader has been understood as a role offered by the text to the real reader (Iser 1978, p. 35). However, W. Daniel Wilson criticised Iser's scheme for not offering enough 'playground' to the real reader to perform this role:

The implied reader is part of the overall textual meaning and is not to be confused with the real reader, ... who actualises the meaning and who correspondingly *relates to the implied reader's role*.

(Wilson, p. 851; my italics)

⁴ If only by letting others speak about the same state of affairs. But that seems rather uncomplicated as (implied) author has his own recognizable role of compiler or editor, at least.

This role seems to include the realisation of the text's ironic intentions, which realisation *need be* accepted/recognised by the real reader for irony to work upon him.

Now, if irony is understood as the tension of intention and circumstance, and all intentions in the text belong to the implied author, all irony must belong to him and him alone. *Ergo*, irony is a means for the implied author to talk about himself, or at least to call attention to himself.

Or is it?

While juggling with these terms and definitions, our poor real reader has been allotted a rather inferior role: to recognise roles and intentions and (oh, all right) to relate to them. But what if, as I believe, he already *creates* these roles etc. for himself to play with? Not out of the blue of course, but by using textual possibilities, adding his imagination, education or blindness. What if these textual doubles of real authors and readers, as far as the real reader is concerned, are not so much implied as *inferred*? (I borrow the term from Gérard Genette [mentioned and ignored in Nelles, p. 22], not being quite certain whether it contains more than the customary definition of the implied author/reader.)

Inferred will certainly be the author figure that irony allows to appear, irony being as much the real reader's projection as the text's offer. My readerly intention is ironic when I *decide* that these texts will be read as if they were not primarily about their admitted hero-narrators but about their author(s). (Who knows, the title of the last volume may refer not to the narrator but an author-figure.) I 'actualise the meaning' (c.f. Wilson above) ironically by bringing those segments of the meaning-complex into play that are in tension with one another or the most apparent intention: that of an autobiography. This seems to be encouraged by the apparent play on the idea of autobiography itself in the whole of the trilogy, writing pursued into the infinite density of *now*: Molloy and Moran write *until* the moment of writing, Malone tries to make writing accompany him on the way out of existence, and the last narrator⁵ tries to write himself out of existence. Yes, it is the trilogy as a whole that encourages (not enables!) an ironic pursuit of its inferred author(s). Who will be referred to as IA, thus allowing for some nostalgia for the implied author.

⁵ Provided there is only one. See below.

II. 'BUT IT'S ENTIRELY A MATTER OF VOICES, NO OTHER METAPHOR IS APPROPRIATE.'

Any work of art will refuse to be reduced to any single meaning. An irony-centred reading seems to provide some unity to the various meanings the *Beckett Trilogy* offers. For instance, St. John Butler's reading in the light of Heidegger's *Being and Time* is illuminating enough and seems to tackle such puzzling problems as those of 'they,' 'the voices' and the longing for silence in *The Unnamable*. Yet, an important characteristic of the position of the narrators in the *Trilogy*, their consciousness of being authors and their awareness of being engaged in the writing of narratives, remains unapproached. Reading the *Trilogy* as a series of quests for IAs not only addresses this problem but accommodates a crux for long identified as central to the work, the mystery of the self. A mystery or an illusion? Whichever our preference, we will not be dissatisfied: the status of IA will cater for both tastes.

J. Hillis Miller finds the (realist) novel to (have) fulfil(led) a particular role in the maintenance of a (quaintly metaphysical) idea of the self:

... the novel, as the perpetual tying and untying of the knot of selfhood works, in the psychic economy of the individual and of the community, to affirm the fiction of character by putting it fictionally in question and thus short-circuits a doubt that, left free to act in the real social world, might destroy both self and community. Belief in the subject, in character, is precariously maintained by the novel over the abyss of its dismantling. ... The novel demonstrates, in a 'safe' realm where nothing serious is at stake, the possibility of maintaining the fiction of selfhood in the teeth of a recognition that selfhood is a fictive projection, an 'interpretation' not a fact, and is always open to being dissolved by a contrary interpretation - for example, that of the multiplicity or the nonentity of the ego.

(Miller, p. 213)

For believers of the ego the *Trilogy*, a work which constantly teases and dismantles the idea of a unified self (or any work for that matter), will offer the complete, though silent, self of IA: an insubstantial core that is doomed to manifest itself in delusive others yet strives to be recognised in its manifestations and offers those ironic possibilities for the reader to construe *him*. Advocates of the self as a metaphor for the intersection of discourses (a fiction) will recognise IA

as one such creature: a curious, textless, fiction, which needs the reader's active help to be assembled.

III. 'HOW LITTLE ONE IS AT ONE WITH ONESELF, GOOD GOD.'

If irony is the means by which IA finds relief from silence then the three novels appear to invite/admit a search for different kinds of irony.

*

In *Molloy* comic excess raises the reader's awareness and invites/allows him to seek for the source of the oddity of the text beyond the narrators.

The work is built around the quest metaphor: the quest for a mother, for Molloy, for a self. Moran's rambling seems to accentuate this; his looking for Molloy and the parallel disintegration of his bourgeois identity help us equate his search with one for a self. Both Molloy's and Moran's quests are reenacted in writing, by means of constructing narratives, autobiographies. However, both autobiographers admit to be fictionalising: 'What I need now is stories,' says Molloy at the beginning of his narrative (*M1*, p. 14)⁶ and later he talks about the period of his life being related as 'the one I am trying to patch together here' (*M1*, p. 70). Moran early on meets the possibility of Molloy's (together with earlier Beckett heroes') being a fiction of his own:

Oh the stories I could tell you if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. I would never have believed that - yes, I believe it willingly. Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one.

(*M2*, p. 126)

Thus the quest metaphor is soon associated with problems of authorship, more particularly with that of authorial identity, which will come to dominance in the later parts of the *Trilogy*, especially in *The Unnamable*. If the present narrative quest is unsuccessful as far as the goal is concerned, the project appears nevertheless accomplished with the circle neatly closing at the starting point. Actually, only in Molloy's case: Moran's last words not only admit his having

⁶ I shall use the following abbreviations for the novels of the *Trilogy*: *M1* and *M2* for part one and two of *Molloy*, respectively; *MD* for *Malone Dies*; *U* for *The Unnamable*.

been writing fiction but also uproot the narrative situation and thus the narrator's position: 'Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining' (M2, p. 162).

But let us first treat what I meant by the 'oddity' of the text. Molloy claims that 'I know that I know nothing' (M1, p. 25) but never ceases to comment on events or motives, seemingly only to reinforce the statement. However, his uncertainty or ignorance appears to be simulated: he often gives way to remarks of sound logic, which he hastens to shroud in a mist of doubt:

They paid no attention to me and I repaid the compliment. Then how could I know they were paying no attention to me, and how could I repay the compliment, since they were paying no attention to me? I don't know. I knew it and I did it, that's all I know.

(M1, p. 23)

Similarly, his despair often seems affected: 'But I have no reason to be gladdened by the sun and I take good care not to be' (M1, p. 29). He is brandishing his crippled state as if to appeal for compassion or, at least, attention.

But I was used to seeing the sun rise in the south, used to not knowing where I was going, what I was leaving, what was going with me, all things turning and twisting confusedly about me. It is difficult, *is it not*, to go to one's mother with things in such a state...

(M1, p. 42; my italics)

This is sharply contrasted with the ease, wit and occasional sombre beauty of his prose. He seems to take real pride in writing it:

And even my sense of identity was wrapped in namelessness often hard to penetrate, as we have just seen I think.

(M1, p. 30)

And though it is not part of my tottering intentions to treat here in full, as they deserve, these brief moments of the immemorial expiation, I shall nevertheless deal with them briefly, out of the goodness of my heart, so that my story, so clear till now, may not end in darkness...

(M1, p. 72)

This latter example already displays Molloy the ironist, who, though not finding a better way of self-exploration than the narrative, is fully aware of its limitations:

Yes, even then, when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. I say that now, but after all *what do I know now about then*, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. *All I know is what the words know*, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept.

(*M1*, pp. 30-1; my italics)

'To hell with it anyway,' he closes these ponderings, and he goes on affecting the 'incurious seeker' (*M1*, p. 59) for fifty more pages.

We might, like Steven Rosen, want to take these statements at face value and place Beckett's narrators in a tradition, that of pessimistic sages. However, if we take heed of Molloy's ironic attitude towards his endeavour, we might follow suit and probe, in our turn, into the structure and motifs of his narrative to find whether they can be of the same origin, that is, whether they lie within the realm of one and the same hero-narrator. This we might want to do even if we agree with Iain Wright that despite Molloy's doubts and deconstructive activity the 'secure narrative subject-positions' [i.e., the position of author and character] in his narrative remain intact (Wright, p. 22).

One such prominent discrepancy is the one between the various mythic and epic reincarnations of the quest metaphor that the narrators narrate themselves into. Rubin Rabinovitz provides a whole catalogue of allusions to the Bible, the *Odyssey* and *The Divine Comedy*, to mention only three texts the novel makes extensive use of.

[Molloy and Moran] appear in various guises when they play different parts in the quest metaphor: exiles, fabulous voyagers, explorers of the

underworld, religious pilgrims, or mental travellers. To underlie these roles, Beckett alludes to the various epic heroes who typify them.

(Rabinovitz, p. 44)

The roles often contradict one another, creating disunities the reader is hard put to settle.

This is the humour of reversals and unfulfilled expectations, a way of mocking the inflated claims epic authors sometimes make for their heroes. Beckett's irony transforms his own heroes into more human creatures of ordinary proportions lest they be overwhelmed by an aura of epic hyperbole.

(Rabinovitz, p. 41)

This seems credible – just as much as its opposite: the ambiguities may prompt the reader to look upon the heroes as less human, that is, more creature-like. Which, in turn, will set the reader upon looking for the creator. The quest, then, appears to be doubled on a different plane, with the reader in search of the source of the inconsistencies, i.e., a unifying meaning.

Such an attempt is encouraged by Moran alluding to, and then Malone claiming, authorship of Molloy's text. In fact, the function of the Moran narrative may be more readily anchored to another cause: the reinforcement of the main theme of the first part, the search for self through narration. This is carried out by reiterating scenes or even passages in the two narratives (or four, as this seems to apply to the other two, as well). Rabinovitz finds such repetition to be carrying underlying meanings common to both (or all four) texts:

Beckett uses these parallel scenes to hint that the trilogy's protagonists can in subtle ways be linked to one another, that their descriptions of certain temporal adventures can be interpreted as imperfect representations of subtle mental experiences that they have in common.

(Rabinovitz, p. 72)

Again, readers of an ironic orientation may want to see these common scenes as invitations to a search for a common origin. As a matter of fact, Rabinovitz himself may also hint at this aspect of the incongruities, when he says of the recurring motif of the bicycle: 'Here, as elsewhere in

the trilogy, the similarities serve to encourage inquiries rather than to terminate them prematurely'

(Rabinovitz, p. 84)

Iser also contributes to the discussions on the problem of contradictions in the *Trilogy*. He uses a concept of Sartre, negativity, which is the network of denials in a text, a system of obscurities that invite the reader to discover what the work suppresses (Iser 1989, p.140).

[W]hat the reader has to find can be taken to be the opposite of what has been negated, and so contrasts and contradictions form a frame of reference within which the intention of negation can be discovered. ... However, when such frames of reference are dismantled or even deliberately suppressed, negation changes into negativity, and instead of a demand we have a suction effect.

(Iser 1989, p. 140)

In the *Trilogy* the epic allusions create such a fantastic web which cannot provide a comprehensive frame of reference, what is more, the contradictions invalidate the working of any chosen epic as frame. 'If a negation can no longer be viewed in terms of any given frame of reference, it explodes into a multiplicity of possibilities' (Iser 1989, p.141). Iser also thinks that this richness prompts the reader to look for a common source. He quotes Merleau-Ponty, who has this to say on the medium of visual arts: 'it is peculiar to the visible ... that it is duplicated by something invisible which is, to a certain extent, absent and which the visible makes present' (quoted in Iser 1989, p. 141). Iser sees Beckett's prose as a peculiar medium calling attention to, or rather, prompting the reader to start searching for, its origin.

[O]ur own imaginations are concerned not with concretising the deformations of the characters or their constant failures so much as with the duplication of the 'invisible,' for the concretising of deformations and failures can only come about if we can discover their cause, and this is never given to us. We are compelled to try to fulfil a hidden potential, as we seek to conceive the conditions that alone can lead us to the sense of what we are reading.

(Iser 1989, p. 142)

Iser seems to mean that the *actual* absence of the *physical* deformations of the characters calls attention to the medium that allows for their *virtual* presence.

It is Moran who first sounds the new note of doubt concerning not simply the success but the rationale of the endeavour, a note that will claim supremacy in the ensuing volumes. Reminiscing about a Molloy he has probably never seen, he says:

But images of this kind the will cannot revive without doing them violence. Much of what they had it takes away, much they never had it foists upon them. And the Molloy I brought to light, that memorable August Sunday, was certainly not the true denizen of my dark places, for it was not his hour. But so far as the essential features were concerned, I was easy in my mind, the likeness was there.

(M2, p. 105)

This, as yet, is only the familiar tone of scepticism towards representation. But he goes on to add:

And the discrepancy could have been still greater for all I cared. For what I was doing I was doing neither for Molloy, who mattered nothing to me, nor for myself, of whom I despaired, but on behalf of *a cause which, while having need of us to be accomplished, was in its essence anonymous*, and would subsist, haunting the minds of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more.

(M2, p. 105; my italics)

'What I was doing': simply the search? Or rather the reminiscing, i.e. cladding 'the true denizen of my dark places' in words and thus bringing him 'to light'? And does 'us,' the agents of the 'cause,' refer only to Moran and Molloy? Or a narrator and his narratee? All narrators and narratees? What if the cause is speaking, naming or narrating? This conjecture is also made possible by Moran's hint at 'artisans' and a synonym two lines later: 'It will not be said, I think, that I did not take my work to heart. But rather, tenderly, Ah those old craftsmen, their race is extinct and the mould broken' (M2, p. 105).

IV. 'I CAN SAY NOTHING THAT IS NOT TRUE.'

If it is agreed that the cause is story-telling, *Malone Dies* takes up the hammer to break the mould. The irony here seems to operate with the blatant foregrounding of the act of narration, of creation.

Wright thinks that in this Malone differs from Moran only in the intensity of his practice: he seems to have 'nothing to do but repeat and extend the deadlock into which his two predecessors have narrated themselves' (Wright, p. 24). However, they may differ not merely in the fervour with which they seek the self *through* narration: Malone takes the decisive step of *equating* his life with the text. The statement – '[t]his exercise book is my life, this big child's exercise book, it has taken me a long time to resign myself to that' (*MD*, p. 252) – is prepared in many ways throughout his narrative. After giving his program ('I am going to play') he relates 'my old aporetics' of whether he can go on writing till the end, whether he can fill his time with narrative (*MD*, p. 166). But there are two episodes that show how narrative *is* his time, how only the narrative is time: it is only when *relating* the loss of his exercise book and then of his pencil that the time spent unwriting *appears*. Another 'quibble' that gains ironic overtones with the admission of his book being his life is whether he has lived at all.

And gravely I struggled to be grave no more, to live, to invent, I know what I mean. But at each fresh attempt I lost my head, fled to my shadows as to sanctuary, to his lap who can neither live nor suffer the sight of others living. I say living without knowing what it is. I tried to live without knowing what I was trying. Perhaps I was living after all, without knowing. I wonder why I speak of all this. Ah yes, to relieve the tedium. Live and cause to live.

(*MD*, p. 179)

His narrative of course is a series of examples of 'causing to live.' His 'shadows' illustrate what it is to be invented and made to live. This creates an awareness in the reader so that the better to appreciate it when he is revealed to be one who 'can neither live nor suffer the sight of others living':

I fear I must have fallen asleep again. In vain I grope, I cannot find my exercise book. But I still have the pencil in my hand. I shall have to wait for the day to break. God knows what am I going to do till then.

I have just *written*, I fear I must have fallen, etc. I hope this is

not too great distortion of the truth. I now add these few lines before I depart from myself again.

(*MD*, p. 191; my italics)

His apology reinforces and calls attention to the oddity of the previous paragraph. If it *was* written and *is* part of the text in the exercise book, and moreover Malone claims himself unable to have committed it, then somebody else had to do it. This is not a problem to reason about (with, say, the introduction of a super-narrator): it is there for the reader to *doubt*.

The IA of *Malone Dies* also claims our attention by the views Malone expresses on the nature of fictional language.

His starting position, though far from a firm belief in straightforward connotation, and thus in the difference between signified and signifier, will still admit the possibility. 'There is no use indicating words, they are no shoddier than what they peddle' (*MD*, p. 179). What they peddle is of course his life, and he pays dearly for his naiveté, since all he can say some thirty pages later is: 'It's vague, life and death' (*MD*, p. 206). Four pages later he is being ironic at the expense of the notion of soul – an irony we in our turn can apply to him:

And it is a pleasure to find oneself again in the presence of one of those immutable relations between harmoniously perishing terms and the effect of which is this, that when weary to death one is almost resigned to – I was going to say the immortality of the soul, but I don't see the connexion.

(*MD*, p. 210)

Six pages elapse, and he seems to have wised up:

But I tell myself so many things, what truth is there in all this babble? I don't know. I simply believe I can say nothing that is not true, I mean that has not happened, it's not the same thing but no matter. Yes, that's what I like about me, at least one of the things, that I can say, Up the Republic! for example, or, Sweetheart! for example, without having to wonder if I should not rather have cut my tongue out, or said something else.

(*MD*, p. 216)

'[I]t's not the same thing' but of course this said by such a superb ironist as Malone will make us wonder. Still later on, he inadvertently admits that his existence is tied to language, when talking about his chamber-pot he remarks: 'They are not mine, but I say my pots, as I say my bed, my window, as I say me' (*MD*, pp. 232-3).

It is his 'death,' long awaited, that is his final comment on the power of language in world-creation, a comment which, ironically, is not uttered by him. His narrative ends not on the metafictional level but while Macmann and Co.'s outing from the asylum is being related.

We are invited (by the novel's title, if nothing else) to construe this as a sign of the author's (Malone's) death *in medias res*, so to speak; nevertheless, an ambiguity lingers over this ending, leaving us to wonder, which was the 'more real,' the world in which Malone lives and (presumably) dies, or the world which he has projected, and within which the text ends.

(McHale, p.12)

Or perhaps the one in which Malone's world and narrative were written?

V. 'WHERE I AM THERE IS NO ONE BUT ME, WHO AM NOT.'

With such predecessors, *The Unnamable* has to use especially forceful irony to hint at its IA. Its narrator knows how shoddy words are and tries to dismantle language in search of a place for the self – or to show how fictional the self is.

The narrator startles us with how his narrative begins: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I' (*U*, p. 267). His first sentences seem to question, if not eradicate, the three basic components of a (fictional) situation that conventional narratives hasten to provide: person, place and time. 'I, say I' – like the M's, he declares himself both subject and narrator, but this curt sentence seems to be burdened with the awareness of how the subject is *created*. (Margolin's idea of this sentence [and the previous one?] as the author's reply or command in response to the textual speaker's question [Margolin, p. 206] is appealing but inapplicable, what with IA having no voice of his own.) He goes on to implore into the method: '... how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as soon as uttered, or sooner or later?' (*U*, p. 267). Malone's dabbling with creation and the nature of language, however,

has already shown us that in fiction no statement can be invalidated: what has been *said* is there to stay, cannot be *unsaid*. Hence the desire for silence. The aporetic nature of the whole enterprise, that is, seeking for the self with a language that distracts attention from it, is also realised early on:

One starts speaking as if it were possible to stop at will. It is better so. The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue.

(*U*, p. 274)

I hasten to add that a contrary reading, one which sees this text as an attempt to get rid of the old 'discourse' of the self, is also possible. Then the enterprise is a failure because language has its revenge by creating (or by inviting belief in) unwanted selves. This would explain the narrator's despair/rage over his creative forces. Again, the tension of the two readings is probably more valuable than a univocal meaning.

Perhaps it is time I paid a little attention to myself, for a change. I shall be reduced to it sooner or later. At first sight it seems impossible. Me, utter me in the same foul breath as my creatures? Say of me that I see this, feel that, fear, hope, know and do not know? Yes, I will say it, and of me alone.

(*U*, p. 275)

Speaking of himself alone is what seems impossible. He soon gets lost among his creatures, just like the reader when he tries to identify the voice speaking. Is it Ma-hood, the original speaker or perhaps Worm? It does not really matter: the less embodied, the more indefinable the voice is, the better it serves to express the basic predicament: language only obscures the object of the quest (be it self or self-less-ness). Variants of the clause 'it is only a matter of voices' appear at least six times in the text (e.g. *U*, pp. 298, 308, 317, 319, 354). Since the main themes are unfolded within thirty pages from the start (together with narrator's claim that it is not his voice speaking [(*U*, p. 281)] the whole text must be seen as a desperate attempt at getting behind the snare of language, at making it transparent: 'Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. Matter of habit' (*U*, p. 315). The ultimate goal is first named thus: 'Ah if I could only find a voice of my own, in all this babble, it would be the end of their troubles, and of mine' (*U*, p. 320). By this point the speaker has already tried to define himself in the

negative, as none of the M's or any other creatures (*U*, pp. 299, 308). Should the reader have reached this narrative unaware of the blows the notion of referentiality has taken, several hints at how the text should or can be read are provided, if only indirectly, in the form of notes, outbursts or 'resolutions':

I might as well tell another of Mahood's stories and no more about it, to be understood in the way I was given to understand it, namely as being about me.

(*U*, p. 299)

Well, if they ever succeed in getting me to give a voice to Worm, in a moment of euphory, perhaps I'll succeed in making it mine, in a moment of confusion. There we have the stake. But they won't. Did they ever get Mahood to speak? It seems to me not. I think Murphy spoke now and then, the others too perhaps, I don't remember, but it was clumsily done, you could see the ventriloquist.

(*U*, p. 320)

More resolutions. ... Assume notably henceforward that the thing said and the thing heard have a common source, resisting for this purpose the temptation to call in question the possibility of assuming anything. ... Set aside, once and for all, at the same time as the analogy with orthodox damnation, all idea of beginning and end. Overcome, that goes without saying, the fatal leaning towards expressiveness. Equate me without pity or scruple, with him who exists, somehow, no matter how, no finicking, with him whose story this had the brief ambition to be.

(*U*, p. 359)

If this latter sounds like a plea of IA to the reader we must still not forget that what we can hear/read are never his words. If we seek him with irony then he escapes into paradox, for how else shall we characterise our language-based cognitive search for 'someone' resting in the 'unthinkable unspeakable' (*U*, p. 307)?

... I am far, do you hear him, he says I'm far, as if I were he, no, as if I were not he, for he is not far, he is here, it is he who speaks, he says it's I, then he says it's not, I am far...

(U, p. 371)

In such circumstances it is only natural that this susceptibility of language, this impotence to name unequivocally should appear diabolical:

...all here is sin, you don't know why, you don't know whose, you don't know against whom, someone says you; it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that...

(U, p. 372)

Well, *I* will be damned if I finish my essay with the compulsory recital of the famous last words 'I can't go on, I'll go on' (U, p. 382). Especially because the supposed effect of the discourse rambling on in damnation for ever is undermined by that inconspicuous full stop. Oh, the discourse goes on all right but it is only in silence that there can be any speaking about 'me' – or it is only silence that can unveil the self-creating trick of language.

... it's his turn again now, he who neither speaks nor listens, who has neither body nor soul, it's something else he has, he must have something, he must be somewhere, he is made of silence, there's a pretty analysis, he's in the silence, he's the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can't speak, then I could stop, I'd be he, I'd be the silence, I'd be back in the silence, we'd be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn't been in story, it's not certain, he's in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn't matter, the attempt must be made, in the old stories incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his, I'll recognize it, the story of the silence that he never left ...

(U, p. 380)

*

A final remark: just *how many* IAs is the kind reader to consider? Has the *Trilogy* one and the same? Why is it not stated in so many words? Because this lies somewhat beyond my present interest, that is, showing how the text can (be made

to) refer to its silent origin, without *telling* what this origin is in fact like. Though it is implicitly there, the actual quality of the IAs of the three parts of the *Trilogy*, and their possible likeness or identity, requires a more detailed analysis. Even what my first epigraph aims to suggest in the present circumstances is only a vague awareness of how the attempt of upholding the problem returns in Beckett's later prose. In fact, a similar reading of *Texts for Nothing* appears very illuminating – but has to await its turn. Silence now.

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Tibor Tóth

'And the pool was filled [again] with water out of sunlight'

Northrop Frye, in his essay "The Archetypes of Literature," states that every poet has his 'private mythology' and implies that dramatists and novelists also have their 'private mythology.'

The three novelists discussed in this paper - John Fowles, Lawrence Durrell, and Philip Roth - are very much aware of the power of literary and mythological tradition. They also understand that in order to achieve freedom and authority over the realities of the world around them, a return to tradition is a difficult, but profitable, strategy. A return to literary tradition, myth, the supernatural and the occult helps them escape the aggression of reality against their creative ambitions. But they consider a return without conditions a very dangerous move because they insist on their uncensored authority over their fictional world, and as a result they construct their 'private' authority over tradition, their intentional reinterpretation of reality, literature, legend, myth and the occult. This attempt leads to an astonishing plurality of forms and functions that serve several fictional and metafictional experiments which do violence to both the 'realistic' elements involved and to much of the accompanying traditional elements in order to achieve their ultimate aim, which is their author's salvation through the myth of the Almighty Author.

This strategy seems to indicate the revival of a much older tradition discussed by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*.¹ Arnold states that Paganism, Hellenism and Hebraism should be handled as stations of man's development and adds:

¹Arnold: "Hebraism and Hellenism.", pp. 86-96

the lesson must perforce be learned, that *the human spirit is wider than the most priceless of the forces which bear it onward*, and that to the whole development of man Hebraism itself is, like Hellenism, *but a contribution*.²

Furthermore, when Arnold sets forth his critique of Puritanism, he envisages a 'modernist' strategy designed to escape chaos:

In all directions our habitual courses of action seem to be losing efficaciousness, credit, and control, both with others and even with ourselves; everywhere we see the beginnings of confusion, and we want a clue to some sound order and authority. This we can only get by going back upon the actual instincts and forces which rule our life, seeing them as they really are, connecting them with other instincts and forces, and enlarging our whole view and rule of life.³

T. S. Eliot is less liberal in this respect. His critique of Blake's 'private mythology' interpreting 'the actual instincts and forces which rule our life' seems to be of relevance. Blake's was one of the possible attitudes adopted by the Romantics and the artists of the turn of the century which culminated in the works of Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad and continued in new forms in the experimental writings of the first half of the twentieth century, to be further developed by some of our contemporaries. Eliot revises the 'view of life' discussed by Arnold. Eliot, in his essay on Blake⁴, states that the Romantic poet's 'exclusive' philosophy and visions determined him to attach to his 'private mythology' greater importance than he should have done, and this led to his inclination to formlessness. Eliot is searching for much the same 'plenitude,' but he confines himself to Christianity, or more precisely Catholicism, because he is convinced that without the stabilising power of Catholicism any attempt to interpret religion, myth, and visions lacks power. Blake's refusal to accept Christian tradition, in Eliot's interpretation, prevents him from creating 'the vision of the soul.' Eliot's intention is to establish the Catholic faith as the only valid frame that can keep together the gift of understanding human nature and the chaos of feeling, idea and vision. Yet, even Eliot opts for a frame provided by mythology, theology and philosophy.

²Ibid. , p. 93

³Ibid. , p. 96

⁴Eliot: "William Blake." pp. 120-127

Blake's rebellion against any established authority is important from the point of view of the authors discussed in this paper. Blake was convinced that he could escape being enslaved by other interpretations of the universe only if he devised his own 'private mythology.'

The strategy of the artists discussed in this paper is similar to the one proposed by Arnold and very close to Blake's practice: John Fowles, Lawrence Durrell and Philip Roth sense the confusion of the world surrounding them and they construct the myth of the artist who has the power to devise a new 'view and rule of life.' The artist they envisage becomes omnipotent and through his creative act gains the right to rule not only his fictional world but the real one as well.

Thomas Hardy, whose shadow Fowles cannot escape in his *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, reinterprets the Christian myth against pagan mythology. Hardy acknowledges the power of fate without ever accepting its omnipotence. He reconstructs the concept of divinity without violating the English, or rather the Anglo-Saxon, tradition. There is no trace of arrogance in this 'creative' process, and the divinity thus envisaged becomes intangible, yet challengeable, because traditional religious experience is adjusted to the very nature of everyday human expectations and experience. The concept of departure for the polemics formulated by Hardy is conventional in all the generic cases: God is the source of love and benevolence, man and woman are united in the name of a nearly transcendental love, nature is the signifier of divine harmony between man and the divine, the artist is a creator of beauty, and so on. Hardy does not negate these principles, he rather complements them. Hardy creates a Many-Faced God, and maintains its central position in the 'management' of the universe. Hardy's Many-Faced God is governed by the impersonal Imminent Will endowed with the power of deciding which face of the divine power should be shown to the deserving or non-deserving human beings. The play of personal and impersonal significance added to the divine allows for a new approach: God is not necessarily good, He can also be malignant. The consequences of this interpretation are obvious, for if God is not inherently and incontestably a source of goodness, the objects and persons of his creation are also purporters of this moral and ethical duality. Disharmony between man and woman, among people, between nations, and between man and nature is also a possible reflection of the divine will.

The advantages of this philosophy are clear: definite negation of the divine can be avoided. The disadvantages seem to be obvious as well: monodeism comes to be replaced by a plurality of divinities. Such a reinterpretation seems to

propagate pessimism, since disharmony threatens to deconstruct all traditional structures established by Christianity; therefore Hardy's formula relies heavily on Pagan tradition with all its occult implications. Hardy does not project himself into the role of the Creator, he only offers a modernist revitalisation of pre-Christian mythology. Fowles' ambition is to write the twentieth century variant of the novel of the Victorian Golden Age, but he cannot escape the shadow of Hardy,⁵ as Sarah, the French lieutenant's woman, cannot escape the shadow of Tess and other Hardy heroines⁶

Fowles becomes a twentieth century disciple of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and certainly acts as a kind of rival of his Victorian predecessors. The attempt to visit a distant time, acquire a special knowledge, return to reality and dominate it persists in Fowles' works.

In part two of *The Magus*, Nicholas finds an anthology of English poetry with the following passage from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" underlined in red ink:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

In *The Magus*, Nicholas finally comes to interpret freedom in terms of return instead of escape. Maurice Conchis associates himself with Zeus and Prospero. Nicholas notes a resemblance to Picasso and later to Ghandi. Maurice Conchis explains to Nicholas the very principle of his journey over space and time, the metaphorical account of a journey of self-discovery which Maurice Conchis interprets as both external and internal reality. Maurice Conchis defines the point of 'fulcrum' as the moment when one must accept oneself in stasis, not as what one will become, but what one is and will always be. The point of 'fulcrum' introduces the idea of the 'elect,' who have a secret life of their own. Bourani thus becomes a strange world, a manipulated reality in which nothing is altogether credible. As Fowles admits, Maurice Conchis remains for him an experiment, a character employed to interpret God:

⁵Fowles: "Notes on an Unfinished Novel.", p. 171

⁶Allen: "The Achievement of John Fowles.", p. 66

he is really a collocation of abstract ideas, rather uneasily squashed into one.⁷ really he was meant to be stages of the human attitude towards God.

Fowles considers faith in God a human illusion about something that does not exist. He states that absolute knowledge and absolute power don't exist either, and considers the destruction of such illusions an eminently humanist aim. Christian mythology is confronted with the occult in the novel as Maurice Conchis, the Magus - as the epigraph to the novel informs us - is borrowed from the Tarot. The divine is replaced by the occult: Nicholas refers to himself as Conchis' 'fool' or dupe on many occasions. Through the knowledge he acquires, the Fool manages to become a Magus and helped by his knowledge, Nicholas gains self-mastery. The result is that when he acts, Nicholas becomes master over both the real world and the world created by him.

Then in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles the novelist becomes the Magus: his creative act renders him master of his fictional world. Yet, Fowles can only offer his 'private vision' of Hardy's interpretation of the Victorian Golden Age. Hardy's 'private mythology' is also created anew. If Hardy's 'Imminent Will' is impersonal, the artist endowed with creative power can impersonate it, provided he uses a mask to hide his human characteristics.

Fowles casts himself in the role of the Almighty Author, who as the creator of that particular fictional world, can enter and depart whenever he chooses. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he declaredly assumes the right to shape the fates of his characters. He penetrates his fictional material, not once, but on many occasions in several guises. He is so confident that the myth of the author/creator of the fictional world assuming the role of God is real that he deliberately wipes out the difference between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, alternating them according to his will. Malcolm Bradbury, in his "The Novelist as Impresario,"⁸ explains that John Fowles' appearance as an impresario in the novel is an 'intrusion' and the fact that he appears on the stage to set the clock back in order to transform the futures of his two central characters leads to loss of confidence on the reader's part. Bradbury continues by stating that the novel cannot be stabilised: it maintains its right to manifold interpretations. It can be interpreted as a basically Victorian novel, or as a novel about emancipation in which the charac-

⁷Sage: "Profile 7: John Fowles.", p. 37

⁸Bradbury: "The Novelist as Impresario.", pp. 174-190

ters are set free from the formal containments of traditional Victorian fiction. It can also be taken as a pastiche novel showing the impossibility of present invading past. Emancipation, Bradbury seems to suggest, is paradoxical in that it offers both losses and gains. The third possibility set forth by Bradbury is a very exciting one: the novel questions the possibilities of modernist fiction. Bradbury is right in establishing the possibility of manifold interpretations, but the unstable world of the novel refuses coherent interpretation, and we definitely should look for their source somewhere else than in the instability of the novel, since the novel is suspended between the nineteenth and the twentieth century possibilities, just as its author is between the two declared procedures (the Victorian and the Modernist moralities and technicalities). The authorial gesture supported by the 'private myth' underlying it creates the very axis of the novel. The author is granted the possibility of writing the nineteenth century material into a twentieth century piece of fiction, and he uses the opportunity to write it. Similarly, one of the possibilities of the modernist novel is to return to the traditions of the nineteenth century and critically reassess it. This is as valid a starting point as any.

Fowles assumes the role of the 'Imminent Will' and the Creator. This strategy allows for intrusions and escapades in time, making the incredible credible and the invitation of the author to penetrate past with the wisdom of the present tempting. Contradicting his previous statement which referred to the instability of the novel as the source of its manifold interpretations, Bradbury himself reaches a very similar conclusion when he states that the novel lives within itself, because Fowles puts right at the centre of his work a superb generative energy, a history-making gift.⁹ The novel refers back to art: its possibilities and limits and the notions of selfhood and freedom reflect the consciousness of modern history. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the artist appears in disguise. He is 'the creator' in possession of truth about the past and future of the fictional present whose search for truth he has the power to direct. As a 'creator,' Fowles gains the right to historical reflections and digressions within an experimental novel by expressing his 'private vision' of both the age of which he writes and the age in which he writes. The reader is invited to accompany the author-narrator on his intrusions into an intimately and accurately evoked nineteenth century, but simultaneously the reader is constantly reminded that he is, after all, merely an observer from a great historical distance. The experiment of the 'creator' takes the reader back to

⁹Ibid., p. 178

the world of Dickens, George Eliot, and Hardy, but it is also aligned with the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes.

The French Lieutenant's Woman ends with the final line from Arnold's "To Marguerite." The poem's dominant metaphor compares humanity to many islands in the sea of life, between them ordained always and forever 'the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.'

The last scene shows what Fowles accomplishes:

Charles now begins to pace, a man behind the invisible gun carriage on which rests his own corpse. He walks towards an imminent, self given death? I think not; for he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build;

(p. 366)

Through this true uniqueness and faith in himself, John Fowles will rule "the sea of life."

Lawrence Durrell's search for truth is of a totally different nature. He favours mythic archetypes and insists upon both Christian mythology and classical Paganism. This strategy provides him with an interpretation which is acutely conscious of the truth about East and West and is reminiscent of Conrad's insistence on the myth of 'civilised' versus 'primitive.' Durrell's aim is to redirect western society and he attempts this by assuming the role of a Magus, a master of assimilation and disguise.

Just as in his Egyptian poems of *Cities, Plains, and People*, as in almost all his novels, Durrell remains a magician recreating "real" and "imaginary" places and people. Modern western morality is counterpointed by ancient eastern mythology. The men and women populating the world of *The Alexandria Quartet* are determined by an

interior poetic link with Osiris and Isis, with Ptolemy and Arsinoe - the race of the sun and the moon.

(*Clea*, p. 191)

The ancient myth is invoked to answer contemporary dilemmas regarding mortality and immortality, creativity and intellectual impotence. That Isis had the power to grant immortality to her brother-lover seems a perfect replica to Otto Rank's statements in "Two Kinds of Love":

In a word modern love is no longer Eros or Agape but has become Psyche, that is, basically, not a sexual but a psychological problem experienced in moral terms of good and bad. We have developed in ourselves both tendencies of love, the masculine Eros and the feminine Agape, the simultaneous expression of which makes human relationships into a symbiosis of two parasites feeding on each other's 'goodness.' Such relationship revives the primitive twin-conception of an alter-ego which modern man tries to find in the other sex, thereby denying its natural value as a symbol of difference. His ego wants likeness to support his yearning for personal immortalization while his personality needs difference in order to complement the denied part of his natural self.¹⁰

The Alexandria Quartet develops this symbolic reality within the historic present through its references to history, legend and myth. *Justine* takes us to the city which was built on the burial place of Alexander, and the plot, character and imagery reflect the world of Cleopatra. Durrell said once in an interview, "I think Cleopatra was probably something like her."¹¹

In *Balthazar*, Darley feels the cross-hatched typescript left on the table with its questions and answers in different coloured inks

to be somehow symbolic of the very reality we had shared - a palimpsest upon which each of us had left his or her individual traces, layer by layer.

(pp. 21-22)

Balthazar is trying to interpret the nature of truth and the nature of God, and perceives the dual vision of the ideal and real worlds. For Darley the search for the mystic vision of God and Truth seems a continual journey from the ideal to the real, because it is only through myth that one can approach one's present. As myth presides over truth, preserving its different layers in time and space, so the Tarot, the deck of cards invoked by Durrell, imposes its rules on each sequence of the novels so that all the sequels are related to a character or development in *The Alexandria Quartet*.

¹⁰Rank: *Beyond Psychology*. p. 201

¹¹Durrell: "Lawrence Durrell Answers a Few Questions.", p. 158

I'd like to hope that seen from the other end of the continuum my characters seem not just 'people' but symbols as well like a pack of Tarot cards.¹²

The deck as a whole follows the story of the young initiate's striving for manhood, artistry, and the heraldic vision, aided by the Fool seeking wisdom and the Hermit/ Philosopher seeking truth.

As Carl Bode¹³ has pointed out, it is the character of Pursewarden that brings convincingly to life the occult level of *The Quartet*. His conviction is that the artist must catch every scrap of wind and that the object of writing is to grow a personality which in the end enables man to transcend art and aligns him with the Fool. Pursewarden hopes that he might bring resolution and harmony into the dying lives around him. Pursewarden can also be interpreted as Dionysus the Greek god and Osiris the Egyptian and Durrell himself as the master Joker and novelist-god of the *Quartet*.¹⁴ In *Mountolive*, the central topic is the education of a young man to a point of success. Mountolive has to choose between nation or cause and someone loved. His formal British education leads Mountolive to act as Pilate:

'In matters of business a diplomat has no friends,' he said stiffly, feeling that he spoke in the very accents of Pontius Pilate.

(*Mountolive*, p. 188)

He speaks with the accents of Pilate; this is his role to play in Durrell's recasting of the Christian myth. As Pilate destroyed the yearnings and strivings of early religious leaders, so does Mountolive destroy the Palestinian hopes for a nation. The idea that there is no answer to the meaning of truth becomes the dilemma of Mountolive, who is "suddenly face to face with the meaning of love and time." (*Mountolive*, p. 281)

Antony and Cleopatra's attempt to control the East and the West comes to be combined with the Christian myth through the Pilate-role Mountolive assumes. The brothers Hosnani become the centre of the plot to aid Palestine. The demon and Christ figure contribute to the interpretation of the Coptic movement as a holy war. Narouz is dominated by his dream in which the divine spirit visits

¹²Moore: *The World of Lawrence Durrell*, p. 157

¹³Bode: "Durrell's Way to Alexandria.", p. 221

¹⁴Cavendish: *The Tarot*, pp. 59-66

him and declares the truth. He is a Christ-figure possessed by violence, evil and the power of his whip. Yet Narouz dies before the sacred thorn tree and is carried home, wrapped in a purple curtain. The Biblical implications are clear: "If he had been able to resort to the old-fashioned magic of the Egyptian fables, of the New Testament, he would gladly have told Narouz to rise." (p. 308) At his death, Narouz invokes Clea, a Delphic priestess to whom Plutarch addresses his opening lines of *De Iside et Osiride*.

Clea, the last volume, moves forward in time through war-torn Alexandria and concentrates on the theme of the growth of artist and man. It is Darley who is telling his story. Darley speaks of beginning to live "in the continuous present, which is the real history of that collective anecdote, the human mind." (*Clea*, p. 14)

The novel intended to be both "classical" and "for our time" is trying to formulate an answer to an earlier question: "Is poetry, then, more real than observed truth?" (p. 30)

Clea marks a movement back towards Justine's world. It then presents in Pursewarden's notes a central critical manifesto, while leading him through the deepest level within the *Quartet*, the myth of Osiris and Isis. Lastly, moving forward into the world of Clea, the "city's grey-eyed muse," it affirms the myth of rebirth. It also gathers within its broad, calm structure some of the most modern - and even contemporary - of approaches, to arrive at a triumphant exaltation of the artist's heraldic universe. Walking the streets of Alexandria, Darley sees the city as "Alexandria, princess and whore. The royal city and the *annus mundi*," (p. 63) container of myth and symbols present and ancient: Antony and Cleopatra, Osiris and Isis, Plutarch and Camus. Darley knows that he must wound to heal, even if the person healed is himself, because the artist must make the "enigmatic leap into the heraldic reality of the poetic life" to find himself, and as Lawrence Durrell writes:

The heraldic reality can strike from any point, above or below: it is not particular. But without the enigma nothing will remain. You may travel round the world and colonise the ends of the earth with your line and yet never hear the singing yourself.

(*Clea*, 154)

Darley used this chance, penetrating the heart of experience where there is coherence and harmony and where love and patience are the passwords to the un-

limited journey in time. It was the harmony of this multi-dimensional life experience Durrell wanted to give form to in *The Alexandria Quartet*:

It took me years to evolve Justine because I was having to work on many levels at once; history, landscape (which had to be fairly strange to symbolise our civilisation), [...] occultism, and finally the novel about the actual process of writing. What I was trying to achieve was a canvas that was both historic and ordinary; to get that I made use of every modern technique go back to the origins: *The Book of the Dead*,¹⁵ Plato, to the occult traditions which are still alive in the East.

That occult traditions and attempts are very much alive in the West as well is convincingly illustrated by Philip Roth in his *Zuckerman Bound*, the trilogy containing *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, and the *Epilogue: The Prague Orgy*. Zuckerman is a young writer who is trying to find out the truth about art and himself. His insistence on the truth about reality brings about methods of his own making and feeds on literary tradition, legends and myth.

In *The Ghost Writer*, art and reality are set against tradition and the hero's Jewish heritage. The story's characteristic narrative voice is Nathan Dedalus/Zuckerman, the 'autobiographer.' The implications are obvious: Stephen Dedalus is Joyce's young artist who can be associated with Daedalus of Greek mythology and he is also the protagonist of *Ulysses*, where references to Greek mythology and Homer are all too well known. The literary and mythological implications are further complicated through Nathan Dedalus's fictionalised revision of the Anne Frank story. Nathan fleshes out his reinvention of the real into a fully realised chapter, and admits only later that we were offered an artistic speculation, a 'fictionalised recall.' Nathan has been insulted by the Jewish community on account of his book and is in search of a literary father. He imagines Anne Frank alive and ready to defend him against Judge Wrapter's accusations. He feels martyred by the community and fears that the pressure of the community could transform him into a Public Relations man. The idea behind the speculative narrative is reminiscent of the Osiris and Isis myth. A martyr has the right to invoke another martyr, and the sister in martyrdom can help her brother assume immortality.

¹⁵Durrell: *The Big Supposer: Lawrence Durrell, a Dialogue with Marc Alyn*, p. 62

The disappearing¹⁶ texts of *The Ghost Writer* are counterpointed by the visions that penetrate the plot and clearly add to its significance. Nathan Dedalus fights the urge of the community to subdue his interpretation of the truth about the world to their demands and chooses to go back to the actual instincts and forces that rule the life of the Jewish community. He is convinced that the artist is 'elect' due to his superior knowledge of the truth about the world and that art can express truth better than life. Anne Frank becomes the prototype of Nathan Dedalus's own erotic object: she appears as Lonoff's possible lover, thus sharing Nathan Dedalus's admiration for the established writer. Nathan Dedalus brings Anne in as an outsider, who is not so much the object of sexual desire as the subject of a desire to subdue the other to his own sexual, artistic, and reevaluated cultural power. The process has far-reaching implications since Nathan Dedalus sees his own self reflected in Anne Frank, although she belongs to another sex and another time. Nathan attempts to achieve freedom in terms of returning to the source of the instincts of his community instead of trying to escape. Anne is chosen because she is a Jewish saint and a possible Isis of the mutilated Osiris, who is Nathan Dedalus/Zuckerman, the assimilated Jewish American writer torn by the doubts of his double standing within the world of the assimilated and non-assimilated Jews of late-twentieth-century America. But the mundane invades the extramundane, the saint comes to be desanctified. Anne Frank is revealed to be not the martyr purveyor of Jewish tradition, but a disoriented young woman who is begging for love in the secluded house of an ageing writer.

The Anne Frank of Nathan Dedalus/Zuckerman's creation desires to be purged of her Jewish martyr values, but she renounces meeting her father for the sake of remaining a Jewish martyr. Deconstruction touches the limits of the obscene and the incredible: Anne Frank makes sexual advances to an ageing married writer, then she marries Nathan, later she proves to be just an ordinary American girl, and finally she disappears without a trace. The martyr is revealed to be a human being: it remains to be seen whether this means that the real human being has assumed the dimensions of a martyr.

Lonoff is the Magus who knows the power of myth too well, but he is not potent enough any more to penetrate the world of myth. Anne Frank's attempt at being a great master's lover proves to be Nathan Dedalus's narrative abuse of reality. The literary father is revealed to be ineffective in the context of

¹⁶The definition is taken from Patrick O'Donnell's essay dedicated to the analysis of the narrative techniques in *The Ghost Writer*.

the 'fictional recall.' When Nathan's fictional reinvention of Anne Frank ends, there is no possibility for the liberated Anne to free Nathan Dedalus/Zuckerman.

The young artist attempts to achieve authority over his art and his interpretation of Jewishness through returning to his literary father and taking that literary father further back to the source of his view of life and art. Nathan Dedalus, the young artist, remembers his visit of some years ago, when he played about with the idea that Anne Frank was still alive and appeared to him in a vision. This 'return' helps him formulate the truth about his community: Nazi persecution will only end when Jews will discard their burdensome and divisive traditions and behave as well as to be regarded on a par with everyone else.

The Ghost Writer, with the help of a return to literary and historical aspects of the past, attempts to reveal the truth about the defectiveness of the real. Legend and myth are shown as unquestionably dominating reality. It is myth, not the understanding of it, that helps formulate the truth about reality. This is why Nathan Dedalus creates Anne:

Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders of this idiotic indictment! Heedless of Jewish feeling? Indifferent of Jewish survival? Brutal about their well-being? Who dares accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank?

(p. 148)

Patrick O'Donnell has written of *The Ghost Writer* that the "ghost writers" from whose writings Philip Roth's novel derives "generate texts over which they disclaim authority"; their "very act of originating generates the seeds of erasure and denial."¹⁷ Patrick O'Donnell is right in many respects, yet the different narrative layers identified by him suggest an interpretation based on the Tarot principle so much favoured by Durrell. Stephen Dedalus' implied presence foreshadows the emergence of Anne Frank from European legend into American present.

Stephen Dedalus' allegiance with Leopold Bloom, the Hungarian Jew converted to Catholicism, repeats the attempt of the individual to transcend the religious and ethnic barriers imposed on him. The wanderings of Ulysses forecast the hardships the young writer will encounter in his attempt to find home. The mythological dimensions of Dedalus clearly bear reference to the creative act cen-

¹⁷O'Donnell, p. 374

tral to both rebels in each case: Nathan and Stephen Dedalus refuse to serve something they don't believe in.

However chaotic the presence of so many possible elements of the past might seem, it is clearly Roth's intention to return to all aspects of the mythical, religious, occult, and literary tradition to provide the young artist with a knowledge that could establish his authority over his art and life.

Nathan Dedalus also mentions Joyce, Flaubert and Wolfe, in order to defend his refusal to justify himself to his elders:

Hadn't Joyce, hadn't Flaubert, hadn't Thomas Wolfe, the romantic genius of my high-school reading list, all been condemned for disloyalty or treachery or immorality by those who saw themselves as slandered in their works? As even the judge knew, literary history was in part the history of novelists infuriating fellow countrymen, family, and friends. To be sure, our dispute hadn't achieved the lustre of literary history quite yet, but still, writers weren't writers, I told myself, if they didn't have the strength to face the insolubility of that conflict and go on. But what about sons? it wasn't Flaubert's father or Joyce's father who had impugned me for my recklessness - it was my own. Nor was it the Irish he claimed I had maligned and misrepresented, but the Jews. Of which I was one. Of which, only some five thousand days past, had been millions more.

(pp. 66-67)

Next, Nathan Dedalus - to gain the 'inches' that could help him overhear, that is, to create a fictional scene - kneels to 'insert' between his feet and Lonoff's desk a volume of stories by Henry James, and he states that 'James would understand' his desire to write and to 'invent as presumptuously as real life.'

The silent presence of Flaubert, James and Joyce is also meant to demonstrate the young artist's knowledge of literary tradition and its implications. In Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, although the meanings created by the speculative narratives seem to displace one another, they also add to one another. Nathan clearly is yearning to be master of his own meanings added to reality, a drive that could be illustrated by his pseudo-prayer in the closing lines of the second chapter:

Oh, if I only could have imagined the scene I've overheard! If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life. If one day I could just approach the originality and excitement of what actually goes on! But if I

ever did, what then would they think of me, my father and his judge?
 How could my elders hold up against that? And what if they couldn't, if
 the blow to their sentiments was finally too wounding, just how well
 would I hold up against being hated and reviled and disowned?

(p. 91)

The hermit writer acknowledges the authority of the initiate: the Philosopher and the Fool exchange their roles. Lonoff goes on turning one sentence into another, without even noticing that he failed to understand the proximity of myth. The reader knows more about the sources of his permissiveness than Lonoff himself. Reader, writer and fictional writer share the truth about Lonoff's fate when the literary father encourages Nathan to use what had transpired that morning in one of his stories. Nathan, this time the dutiful son, begins making "feverish notes." (p. 108)

Stepping onto, and perhaps into Henry James' novel, Nathan overhears the conversation between Amy and Lonoff and obviously extends his authority over this secret material, since it comes to be described in the first layer of the novel. Lonoff, on the other, hand acknowledges the fact that he is to become a textual object, so his reaction is in fact that of the objectified character under authorial control. Nathan accepts the offer and retains a final authority, because the narration of Nathan's visit to Lonoff's house will be Nathan's version of the events. Thus Nathan gains immortality with the help of literary tradition and the mythical and occult filters through which Philip Roth, the Magus, creates him. Philip Roth thus tests his aesthetic interest both against social reality and fictional reality. Through its realistic illusion, this strategy gives way to the occult and mythic dimensions already noted. In the symbolism of the Greater Arcana, each of the twenty two cards represents a power, a law, or a principle of the cosmos. The first (or last in some systems), numbered zero, is the Fool; the second, Roman numeral one, is the Magus. Arthur Edward Waite in his *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* tells us that the Magus is the human reflection of God, the man who possesses the knowledge and power to manifest the cosmic truth on earth. The Fool is the spirit in search of experience and also signifies the flesh, the sensitive life. Nathan Dedalus/Zuckerman passes through the experiences suggested by some of the other symbols of the Great Arcana in order to become a fictional Magus. He repeats Lonoff's fictional career, but unlike Lonoff, he dominates and understands Anne Frank, alias Amy Bellette, who can stand for the 'naked dancer' whose image is the last, number XXI, of the Great Arcana. The Fool car-

ries the magical symbols of the wand, cup, sword, and pentacle, but he has no understanding of their meaning and power. Nathan gains understanding over these symbols and thus gains self-mastery; through his creative act the young artist becomes master of his world. Lonoff does not understand the power of the symbols he carries, but Nathan Dedalus/Zuckerman does. Like Fowles and Durrell, Roth attempts to construct the image of the artist as the creator.

In the works of these writers' earlier experimental writing 'comes back,' and offers a mixture of fantasy, realistic narrative, and self-consciousness. Lawrence Durrell, John Fowles, and Philip Roth's qualifications, reversals, and denials of traditions which predate their narratives demonstrate their writing's indebtedness to both the modernists' developments in form and technique and to philosophical, theological, and aesthetic thinking and strategies which are earlier than the twentieth century. They try to escape from what Lawrence Durrell calls 'the serial form of the conventional novel: the time-saturated novel,' and reconstruct instead a belief in 'pattern and eternity' by amending the traditions to which they return. Their reaction is determined by a reality defined by B. S. Johnson as discouraging direct reflection of reality in art:

Present-day reality is markedly different from nineteenth-century reality. Then it was possible to believe in pattern and eternity, but today what characterises our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation.¹⁸

The general fragmentation and absence of 'pattern' of the modernist and post-modernist age direct the novelists discussed in this paper to focus more or less on art, reflect on their own methods, and formulate a new responsibility for the artist. The artist is projected into the position of the Creator, who can offer a 'pattern' which helps him represent and shape the real world not through escapism, but by dominating the chaos of the end of the second millennium.

Myth, the occult and literary tradition alongside realism are the constituting elements of a modern adventure into the realm of truth: they stand in a complex relation to one another and should be interpreted as two halves of a whole. The major intention behind these novels is to represent reality and recognise artistic difficulties. Since access to the real without a mediating factor seems impossible, they invite the 'ghosts' of times past as if they wished to be ruled by them.

¹⁸Johnson: *Aren't You Rather Young ...*, p. 17

The aim of this strategy is to get rid of their burdensome responsibilities by way of transfer. The gains for the 'creator' are obvious: the myth provides protection, and since it entered into the rarity of that fiction due to that artist's will, it seems clear who the master is. The attempt is clearly to formulate twentieth century man's desire to regain his long lost authority over truth through myth. The myth of his own creation is purporter of particular and universal meanings in itself and is perceived as inclusive of both the real and the ideal.

Fowles, Durrell, and Roth are a long way from T. S. Eliot, who tries to chart the timeless perfection and fulfilment in human life in the poems included in *Four Quartets* through his quest for divine love. Eliot is searching for the stillness of the divine revelation intersecting the present moment, that is, the meeting of mortality and immortality, the transient and the everlasting. In Eliot's philosophy, these momentary intersections are visions of divine fulfilment, and they express the harmony of the universe while offering a glimpse of divine love. Eliot suggests that only divine love can offer these timeless moments, these momentary visions when 'the pool is filled with water out of sunlight.' The writers discussed in this paper construct the myth of the artist as the creator and declare their right to 'fill the pool with water out of sunlight' themselves.

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Innovation and Representation in Postmodern Fiction

“Oh I wish there were some words
in the world that were not the words I always hear!”¹

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Legitimation

Each age and each culture has its very own sources of anxiety. The Greeks feared *chaos*, the Middle Ages feared the withdrawal of divine benevolence, modernity fears facelessness. The threat of amnesia, the vacuum of lost identity, the uniformity of the crowd and the monotony of custom. The horror of the blank page. This fear explains the irrepressible urge of the modern individual to establish his identity, justify his existence, find his place in the world. It also explains the reflectiveness of our age, its longing for new definitions and new beginnings.

(Post-)modernity² is caught up in a self-perpetuating cycle of self-definition and self-legitimation. This is not only its accidental characteristic, but its very essence and *raison d'être*. “It is not self-evident that an epoch poses itself the problem of its historical legitimacy; just as little is it self-evident that it

¹ D. Barthelme: *Snow White*. p. 6

² The problem of defining the relationship of modernity and postmodernity lies beyond the scope of this essay and so does a systematic comparison of postmodernist and modernist fiction. I will, therefore, make the admittedly sweeping generalisation that the central issues in modernity and postmodernity are similar, hence the brackets. Arguably, however, postmodernity articulates its position on these issues in essentially novel ways, this is why I have not used the brackets when going on to discuss innovation in postmodern *fiction*.

understands itself as an epoch at all.”³ An understanding of the past as a source of traditions handed down from one generation to another is superseded by ‘history’ - a chronological account of past events established through ‘objective’ verification procedures. History in modernity is constructed by critical thought in order to serve as an objective reference point in the process of contemporary self-evaluation and self-legitimation. As Habermas argues, “Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape.”⁴ Consequently, even the present, the *now* of modernity itself will become a construct that will be re-examined and re-constructed again and again. “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities.”⁵

The problem of self-legitimation manifests itself particularly acutely in (post-)modern aesthetics: “...the question of modern aesthetics is not: ‘What is beautiful? but ‘What is art to be (and what is literature to be)?”⁶ The numerous innovative strategies developed in postmodern fictions may be seen as attempts to answer this question in new ways. Postmodern fictions do not break radically with the aesthetics of modernism, inasmuch as self-legitimation continues to be the crucial problem. Yet they are to a very large extent innovative *in the ways in which they seek to secure their legitimacy*, making use of new artistic strategies to represent an essentially new way of experiencing the world.

³ H. Blumenberg: *Legitimität der Neuzeit*. p. 72. Quoted in: J. Habermas: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Twelve Lectures. p. 7

⁴ J. Habermas: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Twelve Lectures. p. 7

⁵ J.-F. Lyotard: “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” p. 77

⁶ J.-F. Lyotard: *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982-1985*. pp. 6-7. Or the same question in a somewhat more fortunate wording: “the modern aesthetic question is not ‘What is beautiful?’ but ‘What can be said to be art (and literature)?” J.-F. Lyotard: *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?* p. 75. It is highly interesting that the same question was posed by Georg Lukács in the opening passage to his *Heidelberg Fragments on the Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics* as early as the second decade of the twentieth century. By posing the question: “works of art exist - how are they possible? [Műalkotások léteznek—hogyan lehetségesek?],” he had addressed the fundamental question of (post-)modern art even before modernism, let alone postmodernism, would have reached full maturity. cf. G. Lukács: *A heidelbergi művészetfilozófia és esztétika*. p. 15

1.2. Outline

A number of traditional and innovative narrative techniques used by postmodern writers will be discussed in the following essay, in order to investigate the nature and extent of aesthetic innovation in postmodern fiction. I will look in particular at the works of two American and a British author to demonstrate the use of these techniques. Obviously, this limited selection is not meant to stand for all the various movements and directions in contemporary fiction. Nevertheless, the selected writings of John Barth (*Lost in the Funhouse*), Donald Barthelme (five short stories) and John Fowles (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*) illustrate important modes of innovation. In addition, these works may be said to occupy distinctly different positions on a scale of varying aesthetic radicalism,⁷ and therefore show that there may be considerable discrepancy in terms of the degree and scope of innovation.

I will adopt the term 'strategy' to label innovative narrative techniques, because it may be quite fruitful to interpret these techniques as aesthetic means serving a certain artistic purpose. Strategies are vehicles of the artistic intention. Furthermore, the term should also express the markedly conscious and calculated use of innovative artistic devices in postmodern fiction. Obviously, innovative strategies are products of a thoroughly creative process, but this does not alter the fact that they are employed in a tendentious and systematic manner. It will be argued that by and large these innovative narrative strategies can be subsumed under two general categories (dominants): *transtextuality* and *metafictionality*.

If innovative narrative strategies can be shown to manifest certain patterns and tendencies, then one may speculate that these uniformities indicate a more fundamental and systematic change in the aesthetics of postmodern literature. The analysis of innovative narrative strategies and new dominants in postmodern fiction is in this sense not the end, but the beginning of the enquiry which concerns the changing functions of aesthetic representation in postmodernity. What is the relationship of representing word and represented world? To what extent can postmodern writing be said to be mimetic? How can the postmodern concern with self-legitimation be related to innovation and the changing functions of fictional representation?

There is little sense in trying to find ultimate answers to these questions. The problematic nature of the relationship of representation and reality (word

⁷ Such a scale of postmodern fiction from the most radical modes of innovation to the most conservative is, for instance, set up in: P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. pp. 115-150

and world, sign and signified) lies at the very heart of the whole philosophical debate about postmodernity. Any attempt to present what is supposed to be *the* exact description of the relationship of representing and represented would be begging the question, namely the question concerning reality and its true representations. Nevertheless, it may be possible to find *relevant* models of the relationship of reality and representation. Postmodern fictions may provide us exactly with such models. They seem to have developed (a) new model(s) of how reality is experienced and constructed, experience is represented and constructs deconstructed.

In the conclusion, therefore, I will return to the crucial problem of self-legitimation in postmodernity. I will try to explain how the pursuit of self-legitimation and authenticity yields innovation and why innovation in postmodern fiction must fundamentally alter the status and function of fictional representation.

2. INNOVATION AND REPRESENTATION

2.1. *Innovation and tradition in postmodern literature*

"What's new? Nothing ... Conventional startling opener."⁸ The paranoid preoccupation of postmodern literature with the threat of crisis and aesthetic impotence is perhaps unparalleled in the history of literature. One senses an omnipresent fear of there being nothing new to say and no new ways to say it, an exhaustion of all possible means of literary innovation. The terror of the blank page. The paradigmatic moment of postmodern literature is the author sitting at his desk, pen in hand and nothing to fill the piece of paper in front of him. "Everything's been said already, over and over; I'm as sick of this as you are; there is nothing to say. Say nothing."⁹ And then again... The paradigmatic moment of postmodern literature is *not* the author sitting at his desk, pen in hand and nothing to fill the piece of paper in front of him: it is rather the author sitting at his desk, *writing about* the moment of an author sitting at his desk etcetera. Postmodern literature may be the 'literature of exhaustion,'¹⁰ but it is still literature in the full sense of the word. Whatever the particular obsessions and

⁸ J. Barth: "Title" in: *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 105

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 105

¹⁰ J. Barth: "The Literature of Exhaustion." pp. 29-34

paranoias of this literary period may be, what matters is that they are being articulated continuously and constructively in works of fiction.

In other words, the contemporary sense of aesthetic and existential insecurity is expressed in definite and positively identifiable forms in postmodern literature. What is more, these forms share a number of similar features, therefore, they lend themselves to description and categorisation by a *poetics* of postmodern literature. The first task of such a postmodern poetics is to describe these literary forms as constituents of an organised system. Secondly, to explain *how* and *why* this system differs from those of previous literary epochs. Obviously, there will be no attempt made in the following to develop an independent poetics of postmodern literature. By analysing the works of the three authors selected (Barth, Barthelme and Fowles), I will only offer a few examples from the array of artistic devices constituting the organised system of contemporary literature.

One should, however, never lose sight of the fact that literary innovation is a continuous process: the supersession of one literary period by another involves a reshuffling of the hierarchy of the constitutive elements of the old literary system and a redefinition of the relationship between these elements, rather than 'creation out of nothing'. The concept of the *dominant* developed by the Russian formalist school is often cited to describe this dynamics of literary innovation:¹¹ "The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure... a poetic work [is] a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierarchy."¹²

I will argue in the following that the two features that seem to be the 'focusing components' of postmodern fiction as well as the 'focusing components' of individual postmodern works are metafictionality and transtextuality. It is, of course, not the case that fictional works produced in previous literary periods would be entirely devoid of metafictional or transtextual features. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is, for instance, a characteristically metafictional novel, and transtextual practices, such as parody, have already reached highly developed forms long before the dawn of postmodernity in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Fielding's *Tom Jones* (not to mention parody in Greek antiquity). "...[The] *term* 'metafiction' might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel

¹¹ cf. P. Waugh: *Metafiction* and B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*.

¹² Roman Jakobson: "The dominant." Quoted in: B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*. p. 6

itself... metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels,"¹³ writes Patricia Waugh on metafictionality. The same point can be made with regard to the uninterrupted literary tradition of transtextual practices.¹⁴ In postmodern works of fiction, however, these two features assume an absolutely central significance: they seem to underlie all of the innovative literary strategies employed by postmodern authors. To put it another way, the direction of innovation is fundamentally determined by these two pivotal aspects in postmodern literature.

"Plush upholstery prickles uncomfortably through gabardine slacks in the July sun. The function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary, plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the 'rising action'. Actually, if one imagines a story called 'The Funhouse' or 'Lost in the Funhouse,' the details of the drive to Ocean City don't seem especially relevant."¹⁵

Coming across such a passage in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, the reader will inevitably be stricken by the feeling of being exposed to something new, of being addressed in a novel way: the blunt arrogance and directness of the authorial intrusion in the above quote is no doubt unusual.

So is the frequency of such authorial intrusions and self-reflexive interruptions, for as Patricia Waugh points out: "[in *Lost in the Funhouse*] almost every sentence is undermined and exposed as fictional."¹⁶ In fact, almost all postmodern texts contain the conspicuous metafictional tendency observable in Barth's story. The explicitness and intensity of this tendency may differ, but the fact remains that postmodern texts display an unprecedented consciousness of their fictionality. They persistently 'lay bare the devices of art' and remind the reader of their own fictional status.

¹³ P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 5

¹⁴ cf. G. Genette: *Palimpseste*. Die Literatur auf zweiter Stufe. At the time of writing, Genette's book was not yet available in English. I will, therefore, invariably refer to the German edition when giving page numbers. All translations are mine.

¹⁵ J. Barth: "Lost in the Funhouse." in: *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 77

¹⁶ P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 95

Once again, pre-modern and modernist texts have also often shown some explicit awareness of their fictionality, but this awareness has never been a constitutive, 'focusing component' of these texts. By contrast, metafictionality is present at all levels of postmodern fiction: from the minutest word-play or typological allusion to the general structuring of the text, the presentation of characters and the construction of fictional time and space. The reader cannot help participating in an incessant to and fro movement between fiction and metafiction. Something presented in the text - whether a description, a character or an event - will be immediately questioned, undermined and even revoked as it is made clear to the reader that these fictional objects only exist in and through the act of presentation.

The other ubiquitous feature, 'focusing component' of postmodern texts is their transtextuality. In a narrower sense, this means that they continuously refer to, quote, paraphrase and parody earlier literary texts. In Gérard Genette's words, postmodern texts display a very strong textual transcendence, a presence of all those textual elements "... that establish an explicit or hidden relationship between one text and another."¹⁷ Needless to say, literary works have always drawn very strongly upon one another. The etymology of the word *parody* suffices alone as evidence that transtextual practices are as old as literature itself.¹⁸

Postmodern literary strategies, however, exploit the textual transcendence of texts in radically new ways. First of all, one encounters a series of formal and stylistic innovations. Postmodern fictions have refreshed literary forms and genres, such as allegory and the picaresque novel that were neglected in previous literary periods. They have also successfully incorporated certain topoi and techniques of popular genres, such as science fiction and pornographic literature, previously held to be 'below' the standards of high literature. Moreover, postmodern fiction has generally defined itself "on the basis of its rejection of norms and patterns that originate from nineteenth-century romanticism and realism as well as on the basis of its return to 'pre-modern' (or pre-postmodern) literary techniques of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."¹⁹

Even more important is the fact, however, that postmodern authors radically alter former conventions of transtextuality. They reject the traditional

¹⁷ G. Genette: *Palimpseste*. p. 9

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 21-39

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 286

transtextual etiquette, conventional ways of quoting, imitating and parodying other texts. It is not only that the texts they quote and imitate differ from those quoted and imitated by other authors before them. The key difference (and this a point not mentioned by Genette in the quote above) lies in how they quote, parody and insinuate and why they quote, parody and insinuate. What I hope to demonstrate in the following is that this difference is significant enough to make transtextuality one of the distinguishing marks of postmodern texts. In short, what lies ahead is to show that these transtextual practices—alongside their metafictional companions—are the ones that really make postmodern texts different.

2.2. *Innovative narrative strategies in Barth, Fowles and Barthelme*

Innovative strategies may be used at different levels of the literary work. Some innovative strategies affect the overall structure of the text or the description of characters, whereas others operate at the level of vocabulary or typographical presentation. The following analysis will primarily concentrate on establishing relevant correspondences between the innovative strategies employed by these three authors. Accordingly, there will be no effort made here to set up an exact hierarchy or provide an exhaustive list of narrative strategies at all possible levels of postmodern fictional works. What is of much greater importance is the point made in the introduction, namely that similar narrative strategies may be used in a more or less innovative fashion, so the selected texts may be said to occupy different positions on an imaginary scale of aesthetic radicalism. I will argue that John Fowles' novel could be located nearest to the 'conservative' pole, John Barth would be found somewhere in the middle and Donald Barthelme fairly close to the other, 'revolutionary' end of this scale.

Certain critics tend to view the new techniques used by postmodern authors as independent entities. Thus, for example, Edgar H. Knapp talks about the dialectic relationship of "technical obtrusions and the rest of the story" in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*.²⁰ It seems meaningless, however, to assume the separate existence of technical innovations from that of 'the rest of the story.' Innovative narrative strategies are not somehow imposed on an otherwise neutral text, on the contrary, these strategies *constitute* the text. They are interwoven in intricate ways to make up the 'texture' of what is presented.

²⁰Edgar H. Knapp: "Found in the Barthhouse: Novelist as Savior." in: Joseph J. Waldmeir (ed.): *Critical Essays on John Barth*.

It also follows from this that narrative strategies, innovative as well as traditional, almost always occur in combination. Theoretical considerations may justify a separate analysis - it may be perfectly justifiable to concentrate on the innovative rhyming pattern of a certain poem, should that be the most remarkable novelty presented by that poem. Nevertheless, the following theoretical classification of narrative strategies should not obscure the fact that the works discussed always constitute in the end an irreducible and organic unity.

I will discuss innovative narrative strategies used by Barth, Barthelme and Fowles under four separate headings. The first two will be devoted to overtly metafictional and overtly transtextual strategies, respectively. These present fewer theoretical difficulties because they can be easily related to the dominants of postmodern literature. It will also be easier to determine the direction and scope of literary innovation in these cases. At the same time, it seems to me that it is exactly the innovative use of strategies in the other two categories that proves the general claim that metafictionality and transtextuality can be seen as the 'focusing components' of the poetics of postmodern literature. The fact that even these postmodern literary strategies, not explicitly metafictional or transtextual, can be shown to have been informed by metafictional and transtextual tendencies is the most important evidence of the 'dominance' of metafictionality and transtextuality.

2.2.1. *Overtly metafictional strategies*

"Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality... Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion."²¹ Metafictionality is a tendency rather than any clearly identifiable literary pattern. This tendency is by definition inherent in all novels, but it only acquires central and systematic importance in postmodern works of fiction. Here metafictionality is not limited to certain levels or areas of literary works, but affects each level and the general organisation of the text as well. It may be useful, therefore, to distinguish between overt and covert forms of metafictionality.²² In the present

²¹P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 2, p. 6

²²L. Hutcheon distinguished between overt (thematized) and covert (structuralised, internalised, actualised) forms of textual narcissism in her work on metafiction (*Narcissistic Narrative*:

section, I will concentrate exclusively on *explicitly* metafictional strategies figuring in the selected texts. These strategies are self-conscious comments or reflections on the fictionality of the very text in which these comments and reflections are made.

“Under the broadwalk, matchbook covers, grainy other things. *What is the story’s theme?* Ambrose is ill. He perspires in the dark passages; candied apples-on-a-stick, delicious looking, disappointing to eat...”²³

John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* has been referred to as the paradigmatic example of self-conscious fiction: “the most noticed, most prototypical, and most overt kind of metafiction.”²⁴ The story is full of similar comments, reflecting on the narrative developments just described, considering alternative ways to continue, offering parallel characterisations of the same figure. Moreover, one can identify an even more saliently metafictional type of authorial intrusion in which the author criticises himself for continuously ‘going off at a tangent’, thus failing to develop the story according to the standard ways of writing fiction.

“We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant.”²⁵

These intrusions could even be called *meta-metafictional* strategies, since they are in effect comments on the *metafictional*, excessively reflective character of the text.

It is important to notice the abruptness of the juxtaposition of such explicit metafictional intrusions with sentences or passages that could not only figure in any realistic short story, but are even conspicuously flat and commonplace. Sudden juxtaposition of this kind would be inconceivable in *Tristram Shandy* or *Don Quixote*, the classic forerunners of postmodern metafiction. The brusqueness of the shifts creates a tension between the pieces of text placed side by side. Further examples taken from the texts will also testify

The Metafictional Paradox. New York: Methuen. 1984.) This distinction is then taken over and elaborated by S. E. Luzen in her “Notes on Metafiction: Every Essay Has a Title.” in: Larry McCaffery (ed.): *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*. pp. 93-116.

²³ J. Barth: “Lost in the Funhouse” [henceforth LiF]. p. 79. [italics mine!]

²⁴ S. E. Luzen: *Notes on Metafiction*. pp. 94-95

²⁵ LiF, p. 79

how this radical collage technique foregrounds the fictional status of fiction and so stresses the division between representing word and represented world.

"I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind."²⁶

This authorial intrusion in John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* explicitly declares the fictionality of his characters and can therefore be classified as a metafictional strategy as well. It clearly tells of the author's intention to destroy that mutual agreement entered into by writers and readers of realist works of fiction. The terms of this 'realist' contract stated that the writer will respect the principle of verisimilitude in every possible way, offer insight into the innermost thoughts of his or her characters and provide access to places barred from other mortals, if the reader is also ready on his or her part to suspend the knowledge that what he is reading is after all: only fiction.

At a later stage in the novel the 'author' even enters the fictional world:

"I see this with particular clarity on the face, only too familiar to me, of the bearded man who stares at Charles. And I will keep the pretence no longer. Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles..."²⁷

The bearded man is, of course, the 'author' himself just caught in the act of frame-breaking. He breaks the frame around his fictional world by entering into it. In a sense, this metafictional strategy may seem more radical than those employed by John Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse*. It should be noted, however, that the overt metafictional strategies used by Fowles are always well prepared and motivated. Jarring shifts from the metafictional discourse to the fictional and back, often favoured by Barth, are avoided in *the French Lieutenant's Woman*. Fowles' explicit acknowledgement of the fictionality of his text notwithstanding, the introduction of the 'author' into the fictional work "far from abolishing the frame [of the fictional work] merely *widens* it to include the author as a fictional character."²⁸

It is remarkable that the five short stories by Donald Barthelme contain very few such overt metafictional intrusions. All the more surprising, as Barthelme's texts

²⁶J. Fowles: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* [henceforth FLW]. p. 97

²⁷Ibid, p. 389

²⁸B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 198

are thoroughly self-conscious and self-contained. That the written text is also an artefact is emphasised in manifold ways. Barthelme can hardly be said to respect the realist 'contract' in any way. It seems to be the case, however, that the metafictional tendency usually operates at deeper or more general levels of his texts. He does construct a 'fictional illusion' and then 'lays this illusion bare' (see Waugh's definition of metafiction above), but construction and deconstruction is more often effected by linguistic means.

Consider the first few lines of *Sentence*:

"Or a long sentence moving at a certain pace down the page aiming for the bottom - if not the bottom of this page then of some other page - where it can rest, or stop for a moment to think about the questions raised by its own (temporary) existence, which ends when the page is turned..."²⁹

Although "if not the bottom of *this* page" [my italics] is an obvious metafictional comment, but then, as if the sentence took off and assumed a completely self-contained existence. One could *almost* place a truly explicit metafictional phrase before the beginning of the text, something like 'and then I said to myself the short story I will write will either consist of short and snappy sentences... "or a long sentence moving at a certain pace down the page" etc.' - but it is exactly the absence of such a phrase that make the text appear to be 'beyond' the explicitly metafictional level.

2.2.2. *Overtly transtextual strategies*

The most obvious transtextual strategy is when another literary or non-literary text is quoted, plagiarised, paraphrased or directly referred to. Gérard Genette gives the generic name *intertextuality* to this kind of transtextual relationship between two texts. "I will define [intertextuality]... as a relationship in which two or more texts are simultaneously present. Precisely speaking, this involves in most cases the actual appearance of one text in another."³⁰ Stereotypical characterisations of postmodern innovation in postmodern literature tend to concentrate exclusively on the growing significance of intertextuality in postmodern texts. Undoubtedly, all of the texts discussed here are full of such

²⁹Donald Barthelme: "Sentence." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 157

³⁰G. Genette: *Palimpseste*. p. 10

direct references or at least allusions to other texts, but a closer look at them should also reveal that the so-called 'eclecticism' of postmodern works is based on more fundamental changes in postmodern literature.

Intertextual strategies can also be used with a different degree of radicalism. Each chapter of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is headed by one or more quotations. The novel contains countless references or allusions to other literary and non-literary texts. The protagonist's manservant is called Sam, a clear and acknowledged allusion to Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. There are constant references to Darwin's *The Origins of Species* on both the diegetic and the narrative level,³¹ relevant aspects of Thomas Hardy's life are discussed.

It is important to note, however, that the intertextual presence of other texts in Fowles' work are also well motivated and can be harmonised with the fictional world of the story. Even at their most provoking (reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes³² in a novel set in Victorian times), they only serve to heighten and not to undermine the plausibility of the fictional world. Through the deliberate anachronism of some of the explicit intertextual references, Fowles makes it clear to the reader that his intention was to present a Victorian story, but to present it from a *contemporary* perspective. Paradoxical and unconventional narrative strategies are used because the story is to be relevant today. Nevertheless, Fowles never seems to doubt that it is possible to reconstruct our past in authentic ways.

By comparison, *direct* intertextual references occur more infrequently in *Lost in the Funhouse* and the five short stories by Donald Barthelme. When they occur, their function is to amplify the effect of other transtextual or metafictional strategies:

Having to pause for a full hour almost within sound of the breakers was difficult for Peter and Ambrose when they were younger; even at their present age it was not easy to keep their anticipation, *stimulated by the briny spume*, from turning into short temper. The Irish author James

³¹i.e. in the story itself *as well as* in citations and references made by the author. See G. Genette's definition of these terms: "I... use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content... and the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse, or narrative text itself... With the same meaning ['story'], I will also use the term *diegesis*..." G. Genette: *Narrative Discourse*. p. 27

³²FLW, p. 97

Joyce, in his unusual novel entitled *Ulysses*, now available in this country, uses the adjective *snot-green* and *scrotum-tightening* to describe the sea.³³

In contrast to the quotations from Victorian works in the *French Lieutenant's Woman*, the reference to *Ulysses* in this context does not serve here to highlight the connection between the text and Joyce's work. Nor is it meant to increase the plausibility of the fictional world by incorporating a real document from the time of the story. By referring to Joyce's description of the sea, Barth presents rather an alternative of his own description in the previous sentence. Whereas Fowles used Victorian documents to back up the realistic effect of his own descriptions and characterisations, Barth employs an intertextual strategy to flaunt the fictional status of his text by providing two stylistically opposing descriptions of the same object in consecutive sentences.

This passage is, therefore, another good example of Barth's (and Barthelme's) collage technique. His change of register is as jarring as possible which significantly intensifies the tension between the two juxtaposed elements. The reader is aggressively confronted with the fact that the description of an object is the function of rhetorical and stylistic patterns. In other words, the description is not inherent in the object described, representation is always the result of a linguistic and textual construction process.

A general reason for the relatively smaller frequency of direct *intertextual* references, quotations and allusion in the works by John Barth and Donald Barthelme is that other overtly transtextual (but not intertextual) strategies play a more significant role in their texts. The two most important of these is the *borrowing of topoi from popular literature* and *parody*.

In metafiction [and postmodern fiction in general], though, writers experiment more commonly with the formulaic motifs of popular literary traditions which have often passed into cinematic forms of representation in the twentieth century: science fiction, ghost stories, westerns, detective stories, popular romance.³⁴

³³*LiF*, p. 74

³⁴P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 81

There are numerous examples of the use of this innovative strategy in the works of both Barth and Barthelme, but once again, it is worth noting how differently they make use of this strategy in their texts.

The word *fuck* suggests suction and/or flatulence. Mother and Father; grandmothers and grandfathers on both sides; great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers on four sides, et cetera. Count a generation as thirty years: in approximately the year when Lord Baltimore was granted charter to the province of Maryland by Charles I, five hundred twelve women - English, Welsh, Bavarian, Swiss - of every class and character, received into themselves the penises the intromittent organs of five hundred twelve men, ditto, in every circumstance and posture, to conceive the five hundred twelve ancestors of the two hundred fifty-six ancestors of the et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera et cetera of the author, of the narrator, of this story, *Lost in the Funhouse*³⁵

Lost in the Funhouse is conspicuously rich in such erotic allusions. The most salient feature of these passages is their deliberate unsubtlety. They play with motifs from erotic cinema and popular literature without trying to accommodate these to the stylistic standards of 'high literature'. On the contrary, such 'clips' are placed side by side with the most elevated and poetic segments. This, of course, undercuts both registers.

An even more obvious illustration of this technique is offered in excerpts where the author refers to bodily functions or deliberately tries to provoke disgust.

Funhouses need men's and ladies' room at intervals. Others perhaps have also vomited in corners and corridors; may even had bowel movements liable to be stepped in in the dark.³⁶

One can observe a fundamental ambiguity in the presentation of such passages. Naturalistic details are always described only to be undermined and revoked again in the same passage. They are de-represented through typographical, linguistic or metafictional means. Thus, in the first quotation, the deliberate linguistic clumsiness of the whole description, the several 'et cetera', 'ditto' and the

³⁵*LiF*, p. 80

³⁶*LiF*, pp. 79-80

unpunctuated repetition of 'the penises the intromittent organs' interferes with the blunt naturalistic effect. A similar deconstruction of the naturalistic presentation is achieved through a deliberately awkward repetition of the preposition "stepped in in the dark" in the second quotation.

Brian McHale claims that

[postmodern works of fiction] often draw on the repertoires of peripheral or sub-literary genres - thrillers, gothic horror, pornography, cinematic or televised melodrama and farce, and so on. The aim of such sensationalism is to lure the reader into making an emotional investment in the sequence under erasure, typically by arousing his or her anxieties, fascination with the taboo, or prurient interests. Having become 'involved' in the representation, the reader thus resents it when the representation is *de-represented*, erased.³⁷

This de-representation, says McHale, increases the ontological instability of the presented world and calls the readers' attention to the different ontological status of representing and represented.

This dialectic of representation and de-representation is not specific to the use of vulgar and popular forms in postmodern fiction. It is important to note that the same dialectic is at work when other metafictional or transtextual narrative strategies are used. Innovative strategies of postmodern fiction undermine the status and question the authenticity of both the representing word and represented world by intensifying their opposition. McHale argues that this opposition is of an ontological nature and sees innovative narrative strategies as artistic devices serving to foreground this ontological opposition. Arguably, this interpretation views the relationship of representing and represented in postmodern fiction too much as a static and ontologically absolute opposition. I will try to make a case in the third, concluding chapter for a more dynamic understanding of the same relationship.

What has been said about the idiosyncratic use of overtly *metafictional* strategies in Barthelme's short stories can more or less be repeated with respect to the function of overtly *transtextual* strategies in his texts. These display a very intense consciousness of their own textuality, as well as a consciousness of being related to other literary texts through the great structuralist 'network of literature'. Yet,

³⁷B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 102

once again, the transtextual tendency usually operates at deeper or more general levels.

Barthelme deliberately maintains a sense of indeterminacy: some passages or even entire stories are often strongly reminiscent of other texts, but it is never quite possible to determine what exactly these texts are. *Concerning the Bodyguard*, for example, plays with the language and motifs of cheap crime stories, journalistic reports and political literature, but ultimately, the text does not imitate a specific book, author or even any of the aforementioned genres as such. *Concerning the Bodyguard* is rather a simultaneous reconstruction and deconstruction of the discourse *underlying* all of these genres. Any number of stories could be developed from the situations sketched by Barthelme, but none is actually developed. There is a great deal of information supplied, almost too much, but all this information is immediately and thoroughly 'insubstantiated' by the question mark at the end of every sentence. The sense of indeterminacy thus achieved has been most concisely described by Barthelme himself in *Snow White*: "...matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on. This 'sense' is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves..."³⁸

Today Goethe inveighed against certain critics who had, he said, completely misunderstood Lessing. He spoke movingly about how such obtuseness had partially embittered Lessing's last years, and speculated that it was because Lessing was both critic and dramatist that the attacks had been of more than usual ferocity. Critics, Goethe said, are the cracked mirror in the grand ballroom of the creative spirit. No, I said, they were, rather, the extra baggage on the great cabriolet of conceptual progress. 'Eckermann,' said Goethe, 'shut up.'³⁹

Parody has played such an important role in postmodern fiction and been used in so many innovative ways that it can safely be said that no postmodern work is entirely free of parodic elements. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is, of course, an obvious parody of traditional nineteenth century novels. *Lost in the Funhouse* has been referred to as an "elaborate parody, revival, and refutation of Joyce's

³⁸D. Barthelme: *Snow White*, p. 106

³⁹D. Barthelme: "Conversations with Goethe." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 67

masterpiece, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.”⁴⁰ An exhaustive list of all the parodic narrative strategies in the works analysed here would be beyond the scope of the present work. I will, therefore, only discuss the innovative use of parody in Barthelme’s *Conversations with Goethe*. This work, a representative of the most radical form of postmodern parody, is an excellent example of how traditional literary genres, such as parody, have been transformed by postmodern authors.

Let us then compare Barthelme’s *Conversations with Goethe* with Thomas Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar*.⁴¹ Thomas Mann’s novel is an ironic and playful exercise of the imagination, where the source of Mann’s gentle parody is the contrast of the tragic atmosphere and passionate protagonist of Goethe’s *Werther* to the actual serenity and comfort of Goethe’s life in Weimar. Despite the fictitiousness of the situation - Goethe is visited by Charlotte Buff, his one-time beloved and model for the heroine of Goethe’s novel - Thomas Mann thoroughly respects the principle of historical and aesthetic verisimilitude: whatever is uttered by Mann’s characters *could have been said* by Goethe, Charlotte Buff or Riemer (Goethe’s secretary and travel companion at the time), and though unlikely, such an encounter *could have taken place*.

By contrast, one can hardly imagine Goethe and Eckermann leading the kind of conversation reported by Barthelme. The source of Barthelme’s rather ungente parody is in the main *linguistic* (rather than situational), its object being the respectful tone of literary biographies and recorded conversations. Barthelme’s parody is self-contained, it does not have a theme like Mann’s *Lotte* - youthful passion, the inevitable compromises of age, romantic ideals mellowing into classic tranquillity - it is aimed to imitate and deconstruct a certain type of discourse.

Furthermore, Barthelme’s text is an illustrative example of the postmodern handling of the principle of verisimilitude. Dates given at the beginning of each entry are indeed from the time when Eckermann acted as Goethe’s secretary, the general form of Barthelme’s conversations at least approximate those recorded and published by Eckermann himself, Goethe may well have made a similar remark on Lessing, but the aphoristic style of the conversations is hilariously exaggerated throughout the entire short story. Finally,

⁴⁰Michael Hinden: “Lost in the Funhouse: Barth’s Use of the Recent Past.” in: Joseph J. Waldmeir (ed.): *Critical Essays on John Barth*. p. 191

⁴¹This comparison is all the more relevant, since Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar* is itself an explicitly transtextual text. G. Genette calls it a ‘supplément’ to Goethe’s *Leiden des jungen Werther*. cf. Genette: *Palimpseste*. pp. 281-283

the flagrant violation of verisimilitude in the last line - surely, Goethe never told Eckermann to 'shut up' - drives home the linguistic comedy through an abrupt change of register.

Innovative strategies employed by Barthelme in *Conversations with Goethe*, such as the manipulation of the principle of verisimilitude or the abrupt change of register, demonstrate how parody, a traditional transtextual form, is transformed to serve typically postmodern ends. Unlike Thomas Mann's *Lotte*, Barthelme's text has nothing to say about what the *real* Goethe or the *real* Eckermann may have been like. Barthelme concentrates exclusively on formal aspects of a certain type of literary discourse (represented here by Eckermann's *Conversations*).⁴²

The parodic effect is achieved through the re-contextualisation of the figures, structural patterns and linguistic conventions of the target text. What is new about postmodern parody is that this re-contextualisation also exposes the discursive and rhetorical machinery of the parodying text. The two discourses of parodying and parodied text will be placed side by side at each other's expense, they mutually undermine each other. The transferring of various linguistic and textual features of the target text into the new context of the parodying text will automatically expose the *textuality* of the parodying (con-)text as well.

The same mechanism underlies the use of other innovative transtextual strategies in postmodern fiction, including the incorporation of popular forms or the revival of previously neglected literary genres. Postmodern fictions put the structuralist view of the history of literature into practice, and treat the body of literary tradition as an intricate 'network of texts'. Overt transtextual strategies - quotation, imitation and parody - foreground the inevitable textuality of *all* fictional works, and this always includes not only the text that is being quoted, imitated or parodied, but also that which quotes, imitates and parodies.

Overt metafictional and transtextual strategies discussed in these two sections constitute only a part of the innovative narrative strategies used in postmodern fiction. What is at issue now is whether other innovative strategies in the works analysed here can also be described in terms of a wider definition of metafictionality and transtextuality. In the following, I will not only give a positive answer to this question, but also claim that *covert* metafictional and

⁴²Consider Susan Stewart's comment on parody: what has been a 'matter of course' becomes a 'matter of discourse'. Quoted in: P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 68.

transtextual strategies are simply more radical forms of metafictionality and transtextuality. They radicalise metafictional and transtextual tendencies by transferring these to more general levels of the literary work.

2.2.3. *Structural strategies*

With some simplification one could say that narrative strategies forming the subject-matter of this and the following chapters affect more fundamental or comprehensive aspects of the literary work than those discussed until now. Overtly metafictional comments may occur in a work that in every other respect adheres to the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. Transtextual references, allusions and quotations would also be perfectly conceivable in such a work. Up to this point, therefore, the originality of postmodern fiction has still been more a matter of quantity than of quality. In other words, what has distinguished postmodern works so far has been the unprecedentedly high number of openly metafictional or transtextual strategies. The innovative strategies to be considered in the following, however, could hardly occur in a realist novel. They operate at basic structural and linguistic levels of postmodern fiction.

Given the wide scope of these strategies, it will also be increasingly difficult to separate those that can be associated with the metafictional dominant of postmodern poetics from those that seem to be more related to the transtextual dominant. For the sake of greater transparency, however, I will draw a clear and somewhat arbitrary line between innovative strategies that target the structure and those that target the language of fiction. On the whole, *structural innovations* seem to be emphasising the fictional status of the literary text, and can therefore be described in terms of the metafictional dominant, whereas *linguistic innovations* focus more on the textuality of the text, and can therefore be connected to the transtextual dominant of postmodern literature.

“Fictional writing matches an imaginatively constructed fictional object with a general class of possible real objects.”⁴³ In terms of the ‘realist’ contract between the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’, the latter will suspend his or her knowledge that the fictional object has a different ontological status, and so strictly speaking can never correspond to any member of any class of real objects. Postmodernist metafictional strategies expose precisely the different ontological status of the fictional object by foregrounding the ways in which these objects are constructed

⁴³P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 105

in fictional representation. The 'realist' contract is cancelled. Fiction still (re)presents, but foregrounds simultaneously the fictionality of the objects (re)presented as well. The more realistically a fictional object is presented, the more ostentatiously its fictionality will be flaunted.

Uncle Karl tapped his cigar ash out the ventilator window some particles were sucked by the slipstream back into the car through the rear window on the passenger side.⁴⁴

This should also explain the abundance of seemingly unnecessary details in *Lost in the Funhouse* or Barthelme's short stories. The minute elaboration of these details serves to heighten the realistic illusion, but this only makes the effect more striking when the fictitiousness of the same details is exposed a moment later. In *Concerning the Bodyguard*, for example, the otherwise realistic and plausible details taken from the 'life' of the bodyguard are immediately undermined by the question marks: "Does the bodyguard know which sections of the National Bank's yearly report on debt service have been falsified?... Does the bodyguard patronise a restaurant called The Crocodile?"⁴⁵ The same effect is produced by the description of a certain object in too much detail. The amount of information supplied about the fictional object does not correspond to the significance of the role this object is supposed to play in the fictional world.

... a Toby jug, not one of those garish-coloured monstrosities of Victorian manufacture, but a delicate little thing in pale mauve and primrose yellow, the jolly man's features charmingly lacquered by a soft blue glaze (ceramic experts may recognise a Ralph Wood)... the Toby was cracked, and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged ...⁴⁶

The 'Toby jug' is described too accurately in comparison to its marginal function in advancing the narrative. The minuteness of the description heightens the

⁴⁴ *LiF*, p. 76

⁴⁵ D. Barthelme: "Concerning the Bodyguard." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 48

⁴⁶ *FLW*, p. 268

illusion of reality to an extent that while the reader may indeed find the existence of the described object plausible, he or she is at the same time forced to acknowledge the inherently deceptive nature of fictional representation. In addition, the elaborate description of the 'Toby jug' is in the following undermined by the direct intrusion of the author - incidentally, a good example of the combination of an overt metafictional strategy (authorial intrusion into the fictional world) with a covert metafictional strategy (describing a fictional object in unnecessary detail). By presenting the same 'Toby jug' as a fictional object *and* a real object,

Fowles employs the [realist] convention against itself. The effect of this, instead of *reinforcing* our sense of a continuous reality, is to split it open, to *expose* the levels of illusion. We are forced to recall that our 'real' world can *never* be the 'real' world of the novel.⁴⁷

This effect may be further intensified by inserting entirely unexplained details and contingent information into the narrative. At one point in Barthelme's interminable sentence, the reader suddenly comes across the following greeting inserted between two self-reflective comments on the sentence itself:

but of course it is not that query that this infected sentence has set out to answer (and hello! to our girlfriend, Rosetta Stone, who has stuck by us through thin and thin) but some other query that we shall some day discover the nature of...⁴⁸

It may be objected that realist fictions also contain countless examples of seemingly random details, one only has to think of Princess Bolkonskaya's famous moustache in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Such apparently contingent details are always meant, however, to increase the illusion of the autonomy of the represented fictional world. By contrast, over-determined, contingent and unnecessarily elaborate details have a diametrically opposite function in postmodern fiction. They are used to destroy the independence and plausibility of the fictional world by producing a deliberately exaggerated, and therefore subversive, hyperrealistic effect.

⁴⁷P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 33

⁴⁸D. Barthelme: "Sentence." in: *Forty Stories*, p. 163

This strategy may be carried to a point where fiction becomes a series of miniature narrative segments only connected by an arbitrary motif. In Barthelme's *On the Deck*, for instance, the meticulously described details are only spatially related to one another - they are all 'on the deck'. The story resembles a *trompe-l'œil*, but one in which the illusionary character of what is presented is continuously foregrounded by the fact that the pieces constituting the *trompe-l'œil* seem to have been thrown together perfectly at random. A similar strategy is used in *The Flights of Pigeons from the Palace*, where the general motif giving coherence to the individual narrative segments is merely the series of fantastic performances in a palazzo, so "...the mimetic framework that might serve to motivate the clash of discourses realistically has been reduced to the absolute minimum."⁴⁹ These strategies are radically different from those used in constructing the fictional world of realist narratives. Realist strategies are aimed to increase the coherence of the fictional world by establishing as many causal and hierarchical links as possible between the fictional objects constituting it. Postmodern strategies reduce the connection between isolated narrative segments to a merely spatial, chronological, or even completely accidental relationship.

The strategies enumerated thus far in the present section experiment with possible ways of linking narrative segments to one another. Structural innovations, however, can also be applied to the general organisation of the fictional text.⁵⁰ The works discussed here offer paradigmatic examples of such structural innovations: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* contains three alternative endings and *Lost in the Funhouse* is a typical labyrinth story. In Barthelme's short stories, one comes across various kinds of *mise-en-abyme*, 'chinese-box' and other characteristically postmodern structures.

These structural inventions are of considerable interest in their own right because they develop new ways of structuring fictional texts. Nevertheless, it is even more remarkable that, together with other innovative strategies, they stand for a new approach to mimesis and verisimilitude in fictional representation. They can be characterised as (covertly) metafictional structural techniques, since they serve to highlight the fictionality of literary texts. They foreground the opposition of representing and represented. At the same time, they demonstrate

⁴⁹B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*. p. 169

⁵⁰B. McHale offers an exhaustive list of structural innovations in postmodern fiction. *Ibid*, pp. 106-

that the ostentatious display of this contradiction does not necessarily entail a pessimistic view of the mimetic potential of postmodernist fiction. Just as all other innovative metafictional and transtextual strategies in postmodern fiction, these structural innovations are not only used to criticise traditional realistic forms, but also to explore new possibilities of mimetic representation.

Consider the function of the three alternative endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The first ending does not trespass the boundaries of the diegetic world, being subsequently explained away as the dream of the protagonist. By contrast, the second bifurcation already involves a metafictional frame-breaking. A 'happy end' and a 'tragic end' are subsequently presented as alternative conclusions of the *same* story. This bifurcation is *not* motivated at the level of the story, i.e. there is nothing in the plot itself that could justify this impossibility. After the 'happy end', Fowles returns once again to the point of bifurcation, and now offers the 'tragic end'. This involves, of course, a massive violation of the hypothetical autonomy of the fictional world.⁵¹

At first sight, Fowles' strategy of presenting alternative endings of the same story may seem outright anti-realistic. Logic tells us that a proposition and its contradiction cannot both be true, and indeed traditional realist fictions tend to respect the principle of the excluded middle, otherwise they would seriously decrease the plausibility of their fictional worlds. Yet the *French Lieutenant's Woman* may be an anti-realist novel if realism is understood as a specific period in the history of fiction, but it is certainly not an a-realist novel if realism is meant to imply a belief in the descriptive and representative potential of fiction. Fowles does not question the assumption that it is possible to establish true and meaningful correspondences between the represented fictional world and 'our' 'non-fictional' 'world'. The validity of the principle of the excluded middle as well as other basic principles of a 'traditional' logic may be suspended for the time being, but the world of Fowles' novel still remains 'similar' to 'our world' in fundamental ways.

What is more, precisely *because* the principle of the excluded middle and other basic logical tenets are deliberately ignored, the fictional world of the *French Lieutenant's Woman* can be highly relevant to the contemporary reader. Realism is not discarded, but transposed to another domain of the literary work. The most

⁵¹It is interesting that this intervention at the narrative level is coupled with the authorial intrusion at the level of the story already discussed in section 2.2.1. Another example of the combination of an explicit and implicit metafictional strategy.

important themes of the *French Lieutenant's Woman* are concerned with various aspects of human freedom. To what extent are human decisions free? How far are these decisions determined by the prevailing morality and prejudices of an age? Can such limitations be transcended through love? What authenticates Fowles' treatment of these questions is his use of innovative strategies. By arrogantly encroaching upon the freedom of his characters, Fowles reflects the sense of impotence felt by the (post)modern individual in face of the enormous pressure exerted on him or her by personal, social and political networks. By emphasising the "ineluctable writtenness of character,"⁵² on the one hand, but also confessing his ignorance of Sarah's innermost motives, on the other, he gives a faithful account of the post(modern) ambiguity with regard to the human psyche - the working of which is supposed to be describable in terms of scientific laws, and is found again and again to be irreducible to any final explanation. Ostentatiously flaunting the moment when the fate of his protagonist is decided by the toss of a coin ("I take my purse from the pocket of my frock-coat, I extract a florin, I rest it on my thumbnail, I flick it... So be it..."),⁵³ he reflects the (post)modern understanding of human destiny as a series of contingent events. The contingency and seeming alogicality of the novel's structure represents, therefore, a (post)modern reality that is itself contingent and alogical.

In a short story about Ocean City, Maryland, during World War II, the author could make use of the image of sailors on leave in the penny arcades and shooting galleries, sighting through the crosshairs of toy machine guns at swastika'd subs, while out in the black Atlantic a U-boat skipper squints through his periscope at real ships outlined by the glow of penny arcades.⁵⁴

This notion of transposed realism can also be applied to the works of Barth and Barthelme. *Lost in the Funhouse* flagrantly repudiates and ridicules obsolete conventions of realist fiction. Yet exactly the labyrinth structure of the story - created through innumerable jumps of the narrative backwards and forwards as well as abrupt juxtapositions of incongruous narrative segments - directs the readers' attention to central themes of the story. Form and content stand in a most 'realistic' unity: the 'funhouse' becomes both the key metaphor and the

⁵²B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*. p. 105

⁵³*FLW*, p. 390

⁵⁴*LiF*, p. 86

underlying structural principle of Barth's short story. Through the use of innovative narrative strategies, Ambrose's identity crisis and complexes, his wavering between daydreams, sexual fantasies and accurate observations acquire a much deeper meaning. They are made to stand for such pre-eminent post(modern) concerns as the increasingly blurred boundary between reality and fiction, the irresolvable antagonism of growing reflectiveness and the longing for immediacy, and so on.

In his *Sentence*, Barthelme offers an even more radical example of the symmetry of form and content. "Barthelme's story *Sentence (City Life)* sets out to be a sentence, to show what a sentence can do. It shows how a sentence can be a clause within a clause within a clause which has at its centre a story, 'The Fantastic Orange Tree', composed of sentences which..."⁵⁵ Form and content become interchangeable labels: *Sentence* is a sentence about a sentence. The metaphors developed within this sentence appear to have an independent and gratuitous existence, or in Brian McHale's words, they "take off" and have a "liveliness of their own."⁵⁶ It is deliberately made difficult for the reader to establish an overall frame of reference through which the microscopic worlds of these metaphors could be related to a non-linguistic reality. The text is on the verge of becoming a purely self-contained linguistic continuity, it resembles an elaborately embellished two-dimensional surface.

In short, hardly could a text be more antagonistic to traditional realism. Yet exactly by developing a self-contained linguistic continuity Barthelme can say something new about how fictional representation tries to capture the will-o'-the-wisp of reality. A frustrating and unending pursuit, resembling that of swift Achilles after the inert tortoise in Zeno's paradox. No matter how refined fictional representation becomes, suggests Barthelme, it will never leap over its own shadow, remaining the representation and construction of reality in and through its own textuality, never becoming immediate reality itself:

...a disappointment, to be sure, but it reminds us that the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones.⁵⁷

⁵⁵P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 142.

⁵⁶B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*. p. 138

⁵⁷D. Barthelme: "Sentence." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 163

2.2.4. Linguistic strategies

It has been mentioned previously that the separation of (covertly transtextual) linguistic strategies from (covertly metafictional) structural strategies necessarily involves a degree of theoretical arbitrariness. In fact, Barthelme's *Sentence* clearly shows that these strategies almost always operate in combination in the actual texts. This is the reason why much that belongs to this section has already been discussed above. I will now concentrate, therefore, on a single text, Barthelme's *On the Deck*, to consider how innovative narrative strategies manifest themselves in the *language* of postmodern fictions. At issue is whether linguistic strategies can indeed be seen as radical, though implicit, counterparts of overtly transtextual strategies. More generally, such radical examples of postmodern innovation as Barthelme's text may also reveal more about the relationship of representing word and represented world in postmodern literature.

Many would characterise *On the Deck* as a completely anti-mimetic text, being one of "those fictions that, in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions".⁵⁸ Indeed, Barthelme employs several highly unconventional linguistic strategies in order to prevent the reader from putting together a coherent mimetic framework. Although individual narrative segments are realistically described, when placed side by side they do not constitute a *possible* world. Obviously, it would be extremely difficult to interpret the text realistically, associating its 'imaginatively constructed fictional objects with a general class of possible real objects'. Moreover, *On the Deck* cannot even be read as a fabulation or a fairy tale. What the text (re)presents is neither our world nor is it a fantastic world with a logic different from ours, but still with an internal consistency of its own. Radical metafictional (structural) and transtextual (linguistic) narrative strategies are deliberately exploited in a way that makes a final contextualisation of the narrative segments impossible.

Having long catered to the objectives of fictional representation most obediently, now the language of fiction assumes its independence and actively subverts the possible development of a fictional world. Instead of flowing smoothly to help concentrate the reader's attention on what is happening or what is described, the language of the text distracts us with an aggressive persistency from our attempts at 'making sense of it all'. Textual fluency is systematically undermined through disruptions of various kinds: repetitions, conspicuous

⁵⁸P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 19

typographical devices, obtrusive lexical items, deliberately clumsy sentences, and finally even through an abrupt change of focalisation.⁵⁹

Take, for instance, the obstinate repetition of colours. The waves are grey, the lion in the cage is dirty yellow-brown, the captain is a "red-faced man in a blue blazer", and so on. There are altogether nineteen references to colour in a text two-and-a-half pages long. By flagrantly over-emphasising a minor descriptive element, which is normally supposed to increase the realistic effect, the reader's attention is diverted from the object described to the descriptive element itself. The rhythm of the recurring adjectives becomes more important than what they describe. The repetition of the same word, a strategy much cherished by Barthelme, works to the same effect: "a young woman with a black hair in a *thin thin* yellow dress"⁶⁰ or "The dog is afraid of the *lion*, keeps looking back over his shoulder at the *lion*"⁶¹ [my italics].

The vocabulary of *On the Deck* is strongly characterised by what Brian McHale calls lexical exhibitionism.⁶² Consider references to the pick-up car parked on the deck as "Camry", to the barbecue as "hibachi", or to "PRISMATEX", the label on the "yellow fifty-five-gallon drum", all taken from a technical jargon. In contrast to this, the text may suddenly switch to an eloquent register in phrases such as "The captain kisses the *hem* of the young woman's yellow dress"⁶³ and "The wicker *exclaimed* as your weight fell upon me"⁶⁴ [my italics]. The effect of such unexpected lexical items may get further emphasis through alliteration: "The basin is full of brown blood, brown-stained blooms of gauze,"⁶⁵ or even the typographical presentation, for instance, "PRISMATEX" and "HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS" both capitalised, "*Smithsonian*" in italics.

Nevertheless, the most striking evidence of the destructive utilisation of language against fictional constructions is provided by Barthelme's peculiar sentence-structures: "the construction of sentences so awkward (to the point of ungrammaticality) that it is the sentence-structure itself that fixes the attention,

⁵⁹For a theoretical definition of focalisation, see G. Genette: *Narrative Discourse*. pp. 189-194

⁶⁰D. Barthelme: "On the Deck." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 15

⁶¹*Ibid*, p. 15

⁶²"Lexical exhibitionism involves introducing words which are by their very nature highly conspicuous, self-foregrounding as it were: rare, pedantic, archaic, neologistic, technical, foreign words." in: McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*. p. 151

⁶³D. Barthelme: "On the Deck." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 15

⁶⁴*Ibid*, p. 16

⁶⁵*Ibid*, p. 15

distracting us from whatever content the structure may carry".⁶⁶ A few examples: "There is someone inside the car, behind the wheel. This person is named Mitch.";⁶⁷ "The tilting of the deck increases; spray."⁶⁸ and "There's a bucket of raw liver between his knees, liver for the lion, he's up to his elbows in liver."⁶⁹ Once again, one gets the impression that Barthelme was more interested in these structures themselves, their creative awkwardness, their rhythmic effect and their "sludge quality"⁷⁰ than in what they are actually supposed to describe. "It's an *itself* if it's successful..."⁷¹

On the Deck does not have a world, it only has a relief-like surface. The strategies discussed above are combined with metafictional strategies to produce a *trompe-l'œil*, or even better, a pop-up picture, containing cut-out figures and objects that rise up when the page is turned. Several explicit comments scattered in the text reinforce this relief or 'pop-up' effect. Consider "*Next to but not touching* the lion, members of a Christian motorcycle gang,"⁷² "*To the right of the Christian bikers and a bit closer to the coils of razor forward of the lion is a parked Camry (in profile),*"⁷³ "*Next, a shuffleboard court and two men...*"⁷⁴ [my italics] - the camera moves left to right and back, zooms in and out to focus on various parts of the picture, and then it even gives us two full 'stills': "Winter on deck. All of the above covered with snow. Christmas music" and "Then, spring. A weak sun, then a stronger sun."⁷⁵

Finally, the abrupt change from third-person to first-person singular at the end questions the status of the preceding text as a whole. It is suggested that the man "sitting in a red wicker chair" is the same person as the 'I' of the last paragraph: "You came and fell upon me, I was sitting in the wicker chair,"⁷⁶ but we cannot be sure. The unresolved tension between the homodiegetic and

⁶⁶B. McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction*. p. 154

⁶⁷D. Barthelme: "On the Deck." in: *Forty Stories*. pp. 14-15

⁶⁸Ibid, p. 15

⁶⁹Ibid, p. 16

⁷⁰D. Barthelme: *Snow White*. p. 96

⁷¹Barthelme's own words in: J. D. Bellamy: *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*. Chicago: Urbana. 1974. pp. 51-52. Quoted in: P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 144

⁷²D. Barthelme: "On the Deck." in: *Forty Stories*. p. 14

⁷³Ibid, p. 14

⁷⁴Ibid, p. 16

⁷⁵Ibid, p. 16

⁷⁶Ibid, p. 16

heterodiegetic perspectives⁷⁷ shows both the preceding 'relief' and the 'you' and 'I' of the last paragraph to be nothing more than linguistic constructs. The textuality of the text is systematically played off against the fictional illusion. "There can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language."⁷⁸ The fictional world is denied even the minimum degree of autonomy, the sign completely determines the signifier.

On the Deck represents, therefore, one of the most radical forms of postmodern transtextuality. Explicit transtextual practices in postmodern fiction exposed the textuality of literary works by having shown that fictional representation necessarily depends on the prevailing conventions and approved discourses of a literary period. Going even further, covert transtextual strategies, such as those in *On the Deck*, make the claim that fictional representation as such is merely a function of the textuality of the text. Ultimately, every con-text is only another text. The represented world is shattered into pieces that cannot be put together. What remains are the 'words on the page.'

3. CONCLUSION

"These adventurers of the psyche, called writers, go to the very end of the darkness where our relationships no longer dare venture forth"⁷⁹

3.1. Realism and authenticity

Why should we be interested in these 'words on the page'? Why should this postmodern literature of 'non-sense', this endless mumbling of linguistic 'dreck' have any relevance to our, often much too common-sense lives? Why should anyone - apart from literary critics and university students in search of a suitable topic for a seminar paper - feel the need to listen to authors theorising about their fiction?

the fact is that people still lead lives, mean and bleak and brief as they are... people still fall in love... and what goes on between them is still not only the most interesting but the most important thing in the bloody murderous world, pardon the adjectives. And that my dear is what

⁷⁷ see G. Genette: *Narrative Discourse*. pp. 244-245

⁷⁸P. Waugh: *Metafiction*. p. 53

⁷⁹J. Kristeva: *Tales of Love*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1987. p. 380

writers have got to find ways to write about in this adjective adjective hour of the ditto ditto same noun as above...⁸⁰

Yet postmodern fictions are not *theories* of fiction in a narrative form. Their excessive self-reflexivity and ubiquitous irony, their indulgence in a self-destructive inferiority complex and their outbursts of arrogance are all symptoms, means to an end.

Postmodern fictions challenge the conventions and norms of realist (and modernist) writing through explicit and implicit forms of critique and subversion. They examine, analyse and dissect. Traditional narrative techniques and topoi are exposed as carefully designed parts of a discursive and rhetorical machinery. These traditional figures are treated in a parodic and critical fashion because their use can no longer guarantee the authenticity of the literary work. This, however, does not mean that the problem of authenticity *per se* would have become irrelevant in postmodern literature. On the contrary, it is exactly the characteristically postmodern search for authentic forms of expression that dictates this critical attitude. Postmodern fictions become introverted, meditative, critical and ironic, reflecting the general epistemological insecurity of postmodernity. In order to refute the charge of inauthenticity, they constantly have to justify, verify, confirm, validate, authenticate, legitimise their way of describing the world.

"The Real cannot be articulated as such."⁸¹ The epistemological uneasiness of postmodernity is coupled with an ontological insecurity. Two sides of a coin. Reality itself falls victim to the interminable process of deconstruction and analysis. It is also shown to be an elaborate construct, a network of conventions, institutions and traditions. The authenticity of fictional representation can no longer be guaranteed through the correspondence of the fictional object to a 'general class of possible real objects'. Real objects prove to be no less a result of a construction procedure than fictional objects. Reality is fictionalised and fiction is real-ised. If reality ceases to be experienced as a hierarchical world-order governed by unchanging ontological laws, then this change has to be reflected in the aesthetics of fictional representation as well. If reality can no longer be comprehended as a cohesive unity, then fictional representation will also have to let go of the illusion of totality.

⁸⁰J. Barth: "Title", in: *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 113

⁸¹J. Kristeva: *Tales of Love*, p. 378

Yet realism is not discarded, but only transposed to other levels of the literary work. When the world outside is perceived to have been atomised into disjunctive and self-contained ontological domains, then fictional representation can only remain authentic if it also becomes self-contained and incoherent. If these ontological domains seem to carry an ever increasing burden of self-reflexivity, then fictional representation is also to show a growing awareness of its fictional status.

Postmodern fictions ostentatiously admit to being part of just another self-contained language-game in the inexhaustible plurality of postmodern language-games: innovative narrative strategies loudly proclaim the contingency, superficiality, fictionality and textuality of contemporary literary works. It is precisely the ability to do so, "to turn ultimacy against itself"⁸² that distinguishes postmodern fiction from other language-games. Postmodern fictions guarantee their own legitimacy by demonstrating that even if traditional forms of realism are consequently rejected, it is possible to preserve the immanent authenticity of fictional representation. This paradoxical ability of finding authentic forms to represent a non-imitable, anti-mimetic non-reality is the real source of postmodern innovation.

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⁸²J. Barth: "Title". in: *Lost in the Funhouse*. p. 109

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Borbála Faragó

“Artfully placed mirrors”

The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian

I. “THE MOON IS MY SECOND FACE” - A NEW POETIC VOICE

Medbh McGuckian, perhaps the best known Northern Irish woman poet, writes a poetry that is undoubtedly difficult. Arriving on the scene with the second generation of the Ulster ‘poetic revival’ (together with Muldoon, Paulin, Carson and others), she emerged as a poet in the 1980s with a new, sensuous and intense language that challenges the reader’s traditional approach to poetry. On the following pages I wish to explore the basic features of this poetry, and I especially want to focus on the way the private and the public relate in her poetic imagination, but for such an investigation the treatment of the linguistic texture of her work must be the initial step.

It is necessary to explore this linguistic texture all the more because McGuckian’s use of syntax and vocabulary constantly challenges the reader’s primary conception of language. Her sentences do not speak with a linguistic logic. The pronoun (referent) may change within one sentence, often baffling our attempt to paraphrase. And this is exactly what McGuckian aims at. She does not want her reader to paraphrase, instead she opens the door to a different kind of understanding. Her poems mirror life similarly to Lewis Carroll’s “looking glass:” one has to go through the glass into its other world in order to understand what is seen there. I have chosen a poem, “Open Rose”, to enter McGuckian’s looking glass and depict what is “found there.”

The moon is my second face, her long cycle
 Still locked away. I feel rain
 Like a tried-on dress, I clutch it
 Like a book to my body.

His head is there when I work,
 It signs my letters with a question-mark;
 His hands reach for me like rationed air.
 Day by day I let him go

Till I become a woman, or even less,
 An incompletely furnished house
 That came from a different century
 Where I am a guest at my own childhood.

I have grown inside words
 Into a state of unbornness,
 An open rose on all sides
 Has spoken as far as it can.
 ("Open Rose")¹

The hidden, the mysterious and obscure is McGuckian's "second face." The moon, an age-old image, stands not only for femininity here but it also represents night and darkness. "Her long cycle still locked away" may mean that the moon is never visible in its completeness, neither in time nor in extension. (The phase and the face.) Thus the poet's "face" will always be "locked away" from the illuminating intellect (which is the sun, the "male light" as opposed to the "female dimness". Here gender distinctions refer to attributes of the self rather than actual sexual difference.) "Rain" is a "tried-on dress" is a "book" in the next few lines of the poem. This is a very typical way of using the metaphor in McGuckian's work, which one might argue is inconsistent and confusing, yet it may remind one of Gertrude Stein's famous line: "A rose is a rose is a rose."² The complex metaphor emphasises an essence (the 'roseness'). Similarly, McGuckian's "rain," "tried-on dress" and "book" cover up one, essential, image. In my interpretation this is the

¹ Medbh McGuckian: *Marconi's Cottage* (The Gallery Press, 1991), p.80.

² Gertrude Stein: *The World is Round* (New York, Camelot, 1972), p.5. and also p.89: "I am Rose and while I am Rose / Well well Rose is Rose." Stein's sentence is brought up in Clair Wills: *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford, 1993)p.175n.

image of poetic activity. Rain has always been a (male) symbol of fertilisation, impregnation. The connection between fertility and poetic creativity is clear. For a poet poetic creativity can indeed be like a “tried-on dress.” It is like a dress because it is a mask, a different ego if you like (which the poet from time to time puts on and takes off), and it is “tried-on,” in a sense that its shape follows the poet’s shape.³ The connection between the already connected images of “rain,” “tried-on dress” and the image of “book” is now evident. Poetry is poetry is poetry, as we are informed, and the relationship between poet and her work, which is really the new information here, is also expressed in three, connected, ways. Poetry is the poet’s “second face” (seen only at night - a possible explanation for the difficult understanding), her “tried-on dress” and something that is “clutched to the body.” They all express that writing poetry is very closely attached to the speaker-poet, but final unification, just as final separation, is impossible.

The second stanza explicitly mentions the word “work” and also introduces a strong male presence: “His head is there when I work.” The male agent questions her work. We can interpret this as a disturbing presence of a man in her life, but also (and I think more aptly) as a disturbing presence of the male in herself. Poetic activity, traditionally, is male. Especially in Ireland, where religion and tradition so strongly tied down the woman to passivity (think of Mother Ireland and also see Seamus Heaney’s *The Tollund Man* and Paul Muldoon’s *Aisling* that reflect a traditional female-Ireland image), writing poetry for a woman was a challenge to deconstruct her stereotypical role as a passive, often asexual, female. This deconstruction leads to a gender-confusion, or rather, a complex gender identity. Thus representing poetic activity as a questioning male is, in my opinion, very accurate. Also that the “he” of the poem “signs” her “letters” suggests that he is in a way one with her, his signature is her signature and his presence is not the least provisional. “His hands reach for me as rationed air” underlines the idea that she talks about her poetic self, referring back to their ‘relationship’ depicted in the first stanza (“I clutch it / like a book to my body”).

³ Michael Longley has a beautiful poem called “Form” in which, I think, he talks about the same relationship, emphasising the impossibility of having a “tried-on dress” that could absolutely fit the poet: “Trying to tell it all to you and cover everything / Is like awakening from its grassy form the hare: / In that makeshift shelter your hand, then my hand / Mislays the hare and the warmth it leaves behind.” (in: *The Ghost Orchid*, p.1.)

The third stanza deepens and also unfolds the metaphor. It speaks about her 'self' deprived of the poetic self. "Day by day I let him go / Till I become a woman, or even less, / An incompletely furnished house". These lines wonderfully connect to the traditional female-stereotypes mentioned above. That poetry is a male image means not only that it is strong and "aggressive". It also means that "he" is a lover to the female poet. As such, when he "leaves" the woman poet, she necessarily becomes "incomplete" and only a woman, in the traditional sense. Without the male the female is passive and unproductive ("unreproductive"). Deprived of poetry the woman poet becomes the woman of a "different century," where she has no control over her life ("a guest at my own childhood").

The last stanza plays with language again. "I have grown inside words / Into a state of unborndness" carries two meanings, depending on the grammatical function of "inside." If it is a preposition meaning 'in' (i.e. in the words) then the sentence says that the poet has grown into a state of unborndness inside of words. If "inside" is an adjective (like the inside pages of a newspaper) then we can paraphrase the sentence this way: 'I [the poet] have grown the words inside me into a state of unborndness'. In the first case it is the poet who has grown into a state of unborndness, in the second it is the words (i.e. her poetry). The grammatical ambiguity, I believe, enriches rather than dulls the metaphor. What it tells us is that the poet, entrapped in her work, is 'unborn' (maybe for the 'normal', traditional female identity?) and also that she is unable to give birth to words: poetry is a life-long pregnancy for her. (Pregnancy is a recurring metaphor for poetry in McGuckian's work. Just one example: in "Next Day Hill"⁴ she says: "Upstairs, the hard beds, the dimity / Curtains, the dreadful Viking strain / Of the study's brick floor where / My poems *thicken* in the desk" -my italics.)

The last two lines and the title articulate what Medbh McGuckian thinks about her work: "An open rose on all sides / Has spoken as far as it can." This belief is again twofold: first it formulates an attitude towards the reader, claiming the passivity of a rose and also the opening up to the intellect as a rose. Secondly, it claims a metaphorical simplicity in a Gertrude Stein-way, saying that her poetry is an open rose and remains to be so.

⁴ *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (The Gallery Press, 1982, 1993) p.52.

II. "TO PROTECT THE INNER INWARDNESS" - STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION

"Open Rose" has shown some of the most important features of McGuckian's work. In the following I intend to outline the arguments that characteristically appear in McGuckian - criticism.

Obscurity, or linguistic ambiguity, are the most frequently considered ideas. Patrick Williams, in his notorious review of Medbh McGuckian's third collection, *On Ballycastle Beach*, says:

If lines are so arbitrary that they mean more or less anything, then necessarily they mean more or less nothing - less than nothing in a vicious sense, as they add to unreality.⁵

And Tom Clyde quotes a similar sentence in his work: "Sounds great Medbh: can't understand a word, but sounds great."⁶ While accepting that reading McGuckian is difficult, I would disagree with Patrick Williams on the grounds that poetic meaning and poetic understanding are rooted in a different linguistic logic than everyday speech. The coherence and logic of a poem may be associative. 'Arbitrariness' does not "necessarily" lead to chaos, to a meaning "less than nothing." On the contrary, the linguistic ambiguity of a poem can be understood as a door, an entrance to manifold interpretations. McGuckian's poems, even the very difficult ones, offer themselves to intellectual interpretations. It is true, however, that many of her poems deny paraphrasing. Marina Tsvetaeva's line aptly expresses this idea: "All my doors are entrances, with no exits. Understand?"⁷ I would suggest that not only her poems carry a meaning but her obscurity itself also bears major significance. Medbh McGuckian's own interpretation of her obscurity is the following:

I feel every poem is a whirlpool around me to protect the inner inwardness - that if anyone did actually pierce to the centre of the poem, the poem is then ... that there always must be some part of it that cannot

⁵Patrick Williams: Review of Medbh McGuckian's third collection, *The Honest Ulsterman* 86 (Spring 1989), p.50.

⁶Tom Clyde: "An Ulster Twilight," *Krino* 5 (Spring 1988), p.101.

⁷ Marina Tsvetaeva: letter to Boris Pasternak, in *Letters Summer 1926: Correspondence between Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke*, quoted in Clair Wills: *Improprieties*, p.169.

be penetrated. There always must be this inner inviolability to it. The language is just spinning around all the time, and it's never going to be "this is what happened". It's all imagined, and the imagination is so very vulnerable, and if anyone did actually deconstruct the whole poem, the poem is dead, the poem is killed.⁸

It is an interesting and paradoxical desire which the poet has. Writing and publishing poetry suggest a wish "to be seen", to be exposed to the public. At the same time she talks about her poetry as a means of protecting herself (her "inner inwardness") from the scrutinising eye of the public. The defensive walls around her premises are "artfully placed" transparent mirrors:

And in artfully placed mirrors,
A single, grieving shape, to the
Weak eyed, echoes and re-echoes,
More than sister, more than wife.
(“Journal Intime”)⁹

Thus we have seen that obscurity is a consciously used device which is aimed at protecting the poet's personality. (Another element of her obscurity is her attitude towards the English language. She says in an interview: "I feel I don't love the language enough ... Because it's an imposed language, ... and although it's my mother tongue and my only way of communicating, I'm fighting with it all the time. [My aim is] to reach an English that would be so purified of English that it would be Irish."¹⁰) But why does she need protection? There is an argument that the various tensions in Northern Ireland facilitate creative activity. Poets react to the tense and complex situation they live in, each in his/her own way. Writing in a difficult language creates a space for an "inner exile". The linguistic reaction to a difficult environment provides artistic security. Medbh McGuckian's new and individual language shows "resistance to the mechanistic, bureaucratic, media-polluted language and thought of the contemporary world."¹¹ It is also a resistance to the political situation. McGuckian never talks directly about the Troubles. We

⁸Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: "Comhrá" with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor" in: *The Southern Review* 31 (July 1995), p.606.

⁹*Marconi's Cottage*, p.26.

¹⁰"Comhrá" in: *The Southern Review* 31 (July 1995), p.605-6.

¹¹Clair Wills: *Improprieties*, p.47.

may say, she never speaks directly at all. Ciaran Carson's reaction to the Troubles is a "fusillade of question-marks," as he writes in *Belfast Confetti*, McGuckian's is obscurity. Neither of these attitudes show ignorance. As Clair Wills argues:

Moreover, the veiling of personal experience, behind a cloak of obscurity and semantic indeterminacy merely intensifies the suggestion that significant truths lie within. Secrecy becomes both a form of protection and of seduction.¹²

Medbh McGuckian's "symbolic meta-language"¹³ is an exile that gives protection in its precariousness.

That "secrecy is protection and seduction" is apparent in many of McGuckian's recurring imagery. She constantly uses familial relationships, personal spaces and objects as metaphors in her poems. She concentrates on the female body and many of her poems are highly erotic. Again, I believe, her exploration of the well-known represents complex, and not only personal, ideas. One reason for returning to the same images is that exile for a woman could hardly be an actual leaving-of-the-place. Women are more strongly tied to the home and, consequently, women poets will more often turn to household-imagery. That does not necessarily mean that this metaphorical language is narrower. On the contrary, reading Medbh McGuckian one has the feeling that she has crammed the universe into her poems. I have already interpreted, to some extent, the metaphors in the "Open Rose" ("the moon"; "tried-on dress"; "book"; "body"; "woman"; "incompletely furnished house"; "childhood"; "unbornness"). Let us see now another poem where personal metaphors dominate:

Night-hours. The edge of a fuller moon
waits among the interlocking patterns
of a flier's sky.

Sperm names, ovum names, push inside
each other. We are half-taught
our real names, from other lives.

Emphasise your eyes. Be my flare-

¹²Wills: *Improprieties*, p.64

¹³Edna Longley's term, in *The Living Stream*, p.54.

path, my uncold begetter,
 my air-minded bird-sense.
 ("Captain Lavender")¹⁴

The first verse is a good example of semantic indeterminacy. However, it definitely evokes the notion of incompleteness ("the edge of a fuller moon") and night. The second and third line, in my interpretation, speak about her poetry again. "Flier" would be the poet, the pilot of her work, whose "sky" has "interlocking patterns." Indeed, McGuckian's images create "interlocking patterns" in her work. (For example "moon" has appeared in "Open Rose" as expressing mystery and obscurity. It reappears here as a metaphor for [in]completeness.) Thus the first verse tells us that completeness (the "fuller moon") is hidden in her poetry, but it is not yet revealed. (We can only see the "edge" of it.) The next verse brings the female and male together in very strong sexual imagery: "Sperm names, ovum names, push inside each other." McGuckian first of all knocks down the stereotype of the male 'pushing inside the female and creates an equal responsibility. This has a personal, a social and a political message as well, but since we have already seen in "Open Rose" that male and female can represent something within her own personality, we suspect that something similar might take place here. "Open Rose" talks about the way "he" facilitates and inhibits her poetry. "Captain Lavender" (the title refers to a male figure) depicts the nature of this relationship. "Sperm" and "ovum" are obviously metaphors of reproduction. (Biologically speaking not metaphors at all.) If, as I mentioned above, pregnancy stands for writing poetry in McGuckian's work, organs of the reproductive system clearly represent poetic activity. "We are half-taught / our real names" suggests that "sperm-names" and "ovum-names" are not real, in a sense perhaps that they facilitate creation but the pushing "inside each other" is not yet art and "other lives," which might mean the past or the opposite sex or simply someone outside, are needed to "make it real." The last verse addresses somebody: "Emphasise your eyes." It may be Captain Lavender who, in my interpretation, has already turned out to be the poet (the "flier"), it might be a male figure (inside or outside), it might be her poetry or she might directly be speaking to herself. Whoever it is, the addressee is the seer, the eye who guides the poet in her flight ("my flare-path") and who "begets" her and/or her work. "Air-minded bird-sense" goes back to the beginning, unfolding the sky-metaphor. This

¹⁴*Captain Lavender* (Gallery Press, 1994), p.76.

is a “sense” that concentrates on the air and sky rather than the earth - the poet again. However, as we have seen, she does that exactly through “earthy” images.

This poem again can be seen as an *ars poetica* though nothing is said explicitly about art. McGuckian uses the personal to show something universal. Moreover, her intimacy does not unfold anything biographically personal at all. The reader is invited into her “house” to find something which belongs very much to the outside. Or rather, to return to a previous simile, her poetry is like the living mirror of Carroll. We climb in, find a “Jabberwocky-poem,” we decode it with great difficulty and find ourselves outside again. (And what McGuckian tells us is the following:

They [the poems] don't so much translate fact as build fantasy on fact. I'm not sure they don't remain private, at least until some scholar totally identifies with me.¹⁵)

Her poems remain private but show a private sphere which is disrupted, claustrophobic and at the same time exposed, open and receptive. Occasionally the sea or the sky represent a more intimate sphere than a house or the body. (As for example in “Dovecote”: “Even to the wood of my sunflower chest, / Or my kimono rack, I owed no older debt / Than to the obligatory palette of the rain / That brought the soil back into tension on my slope / And the sea in, making me an island once again.”¹⁶) McGuckian’s focus on personal dimensions is very complex. She hides into what she wants to escape from and escapes from what she wants to hide into. Her use of language and imagery “parodies the very idea of a private or intimate domain; instead of intimacy we are confronted with secrecy...”¹⁷

But this secrecy is not merely a parody. As a metaphor, it represents an important, and serious, message. McGuckian’s microcosm is again a mirror of the macrocosm around her. For a Northern Irish poet the relationship between private and public is a tangled and delicate issue. The painfulness of what is said to be public (politics) settles down in a private language (poetry) which, when published, becomes public again. Some poets make this connection very apparent

¹⁵Kathleen McCracken: “An Attitude of Compassions” (An interview with Medbh McGuckian) *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall 1990), p.20.

¹⁶*Venus and the Rain* (The Gallery Press, 1984, 1994), p.40.

¹⁷Wills: *Improprieties*, p.75.

in their work, others approach the question “crabwise.”¹⁸ Medbh McGuckian does not approach at all; she opens up the personal sphere for the public and she creates a new language, as well as a new “imaginative space” for herself:

McGuckian’s “miniaturised domestic interiors” escape into the public and political world ... The imagery ... creates for McGuckian the sort of “imaginative space” necessary not only for Irish poets to thrive but for an Irish woman poet to speak to her political and cultural situation without at the same time having her poetic voice distorted...¹⁹

In my opinion McGuckian’s poetic voice is distorted, but distorted in a way which mirrors the distortedness of the public sphere around her. She attempts to talk about public issues through her private symbolism. As Clair Wills asserts: “The body, the home, and the family are thus not outside culture, but the very place where society’s battles are staged.”²⁰ Public and private are not separated in McGuckian’s world but tangled. The inside mirrors the outside and the outside mirrors the inside. Indeed, this “incomplete separation”²¹ is in itself a mirror to the actual social, political and cultural condition of Ulster. McGuckian’s “artfully placed mirrors” show a claustrophobic universe where private is exposed and public is drawn inside. I have chosen a poem from her earliest volume to demonstrate my discussions above:

Close your eyes
Unwinding the bitter onion -
Its layers of uncertainty are limited,
Under brown paper its sealed heart sings
To the tune of a hundred lemons.

Today I am feeling up to it:
I bend my throat aside -
There is no pain, only the soft entrances

¹⁸“I’ve usually chosen a bit of personal mythology or a bit of mythology from Irish myth or Greek myth to allow me to approach the subject ‘crabwise’, as it were, and at the same time be direct.” Michael Longley in *BBC STANZA Northern Irish Poetry*

¹⁹Susan Porter: “The ‘Imaginative Space’ of Medbh McGuckian” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 15/2 (December 1989), p.103.-104.

²⁰Wills: *Improprieties*, p.190.

²¹Wills: *Improprieties*, p.67.

Again, again, the vegetable's
 Finely numbered bones.
 ('Chopping')²²

Nothing could be more stereotypically a "female site" than the kitchen. And the peeling and chopping of onions are also most everyday activities. However, the fact that onions make us cry, is symbolic. It is a symbol of the burden of housework, of the rigidity of stereotypes, of the claustrophobia and loneliness of the kitchen. (And it is also a symbol of fake tears, fake emotions.) Thus it is well understood why McGuckian says "Close your eyes" in the first line. It means that the pain of being entrapped in a stereotype should not reach you and also that you should remain honest. "Its layers of uncertainty are limited" perhaps suggests that the easy tears of the onion lead the woman to "uncertainty": she cries and after a while it becomes uncertain whether it is merely because of the onion. "Its sealed heart sings / to the tune of a hundred lemons" reinforces the previous image: the "sealed heart" is the real pain, real tears, "tune of a hundred lemons" is the emphatic sourness of them. By using only kitchen-images the first verse has already expanded the imaginative space of the poem.

The second verse introduces a (female) speaker. The first line - "Today I am feeling up to it" - may refer again to several things. Either she feels up to the unpleasant onion chopping, or she feels up to accepting her role as a housewife, or she feels up to crying ("to the tune of hundred lemons"), it is not to be decided. The next line ("I bend my throat aside") shows a very physical submission. The poem is no longer about the chopping of onions; the knife is aimed at her throat. McGuckian "dissolves her being into that of the object, which thereby becomes subject," says Tom Clyde²³. What is interesting here is to trace the basis of the association from onion to throat. Cutting or "unwinding" the onion you find tears. Cutting the throat: "There is no pain, only the soft entrances / Again, again, the vegetable's finely numbered bones." What are we then to make of this? That opening herself up, entering her personality (remember: "all my doors are entrances, with no exits") does not mean that something else is found there apart from "the vegetable's bones"? Do "vegetable-bones" refer to the 'vegetableness' of the vegetable (roseness of the rose)? Or is there a wider, more general message here? Perhaps that the familial and social tensions lead her to "cut her throat," to

²²*The Flower Master and Other Poems* (The Gallery Press, 1982, 1993) p.17.

²³Tom Clyde: "An Ulster Twilight" *Krino* 5 (Spring 1988), p.102.

open up herself, to write poetry? Whatever our understanding of the poem may be, it is evident that the way McGuckian uses personal, household images shows that she is not simply a “housewife-poet.” In this poem the kitchen, the onion and her own body served as battlefields for fighters inside and outside herself.

As a conclusion to this section I would argue that the main characteristics of Medbh McGuckian’s poetry is ‘mirroring’ the public and private in a transformative way. The objects and persons around her are mirrored and transformed at the same time in her poetry. She transforms them and dissolves herself in them to show herself. The ‘knottedness’ and difficulty of her poems are partly a result of this method. If the poem is dismantled into its original components it ceases to be a poem. Metaphors work in “interlocking patterns”. The appropriate approach, in my view, is “feeling up” to McGuckian’s “bird-sense” (rather than “chopping” her up to “finely numbered bones”).

She dissolves the public in the private and vice versa. She inserts one thing into an other to arrive at a “scattered alphabet.” When she begins with homely, familial images she ends with hard, and harsh ones. Her poems are like misunderstood aeroplanes that can never reach land, empathy and understanding:

So one river inserted into another
Becomes a leaping, glistening, splashed
And scattered alphabet
Jutting out from the voice,
Till what began as a dog’s bark
Ends with bronze, what began
With honey ends with ice;
As if an aeroplane in full flight
Launched a second plane,
The sky is stabbed by their exits
And the mistaken meaning of each.

('The Dream-Language of Fergus', second part)²⁴

²⁴*On Ballycastle Beach* (The Gallery Press, 1988, 1995), p.57.

III. "TIME OUTSIDE OF TIME" - AN ANALYSIS OF "THE WAR DEGREE"

You smell of time as a Bible smells of thumbs,
a bank of earth alive with mahogany-coloured
flowers - not time elaborately thrown away,
(you wound yourself so thoroughly into life),
but time outside of time, new pain, new secret,
that I must re-fall in love with the shadow
of your soul, drumming at the back of my skull.

Tonight, when the treaty moves all tongues,
I want to take the night out of you,
the sweet Irish tongue in which
death spoke and happiness wrote:

a wartime, heart-stained autumn drove
fierce half-brick into the hedges; tree-muffled
streets vanished in the lack of news.
Like a transfusion made direct from arm
to arm, birds call uselessly to each other
in the sub-acid, wintry present. The pursed up
fragrances of self-fertile herbs
hug defeat like a very future lover.

Now it is my name and not my number
that is nobody now, walking on a demolished
floor, where dreams have no moral.
And the door-kiss is night meeting night.
(*"The War Degree"*)²⁵

The reason I have chosen this poem is that its approach to the public sphere is markedly different from McGuckian's other poems. She addresses a political situation directly: she brings up political images and words, which is not typical of her. Before taking a closer look at the poem, let me quote from an interview where she talks about "The War Degree":

²⁵*Captain Lavender*, p.74.

"Could you introduce [...] your poem 'The War Degree'?"

"I was sort of accused by my own side [Catholic] really of not taking issue, or of not supporting them or of escaping. Then I began to feel a bit conscious-stricken as an artist.

I think I'm basically, if I'd been born in different time, I'm just a love-poet you know. So I'm not a war-poet. So this is a love-poem to the war if you like. I suppose it masculinizes it in a way. ... It [the title] plays on the word 'degree'. Like extent and also qualification."

"If you'd been living in a Northern Ireland that was free of violence and free of division how different would your poetry have been?"

"It wouldn't exist. It lives of it."²⁶

The most important information here are that her poetry would not exist without the Troubles and that she considers herself a love poet. That explains the absurdity of writing a love poem to the war. The unbearable political (social, cultural) situation haunts her imagination as a lover would do. Writing a love poem to the war is a recognition of the fact that nobody can escape the war. McGuckian said in an interview:

No one here can be an observer. Everyone has lost someone or been scarred over twenty years. More than half of my life - all my adult life - has taken place in this war. It's impossible not to see the poetry as a flower or defence mechanism, so the relationship is a complex one.²⁷

Thus addressing the war as a lover suggests a defence mechanism as well: by masculinizing it it becomes human, more predictable and less fearsome.

And this is what the first verse actually seems to be about. The first three lines evoke (describe) the war. "You smell of time as a Bible smells of thumbs" tells us that the war, just like the Bible, has an eternal presence in the history (time, chronology) of mankind. However, the time-conception of war is different: "not time elaborately thrown away / [...] but time outside of time"... This "time outside of time" describes the inhuman nature of war. (Almost all of the holocaust-books describe this phenomenon. In his bewildering book, *La Nuit*,

²⁶BBC STANZA *Northern Irish Poetry*, interview with Michael Longley, Edna Longley, Medbh McGuckian and Ciarán Carson by Simon Armitage; recorded at the John Hewitt International Summer School on 28th July 1995

²⁷Kathleen McCracken: "An Attitude of Compassions" (An interview with Medbh McGuckian) *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall 1990), p.21.

Elie Wiesel writes the following: “So many things have happened in just a few hours that I have lost my sense of time. When did we leave our home? And the ghetto? And the train? Was it a week ago? Or was it just one night ago? Just one night? And for how long have we been standing here in the icy wind? For an hour? One single hour? Sixty minutes? I must be dreaming.”²⁸) The fourth line of the poem, “(you wound yourself so thoroughly into life),” expresses the impossibility of ignoring war. (The past tense verb ‘wound’ forms a telling homograph with the noun ‘wound’ here.) The second line, “a bank of earth alive with mahogany-coloured / flowers,” is again a description of war, the flowers being human blood that “vitalise” war. What the first verse has told us so far is that, when it is there, war is inescapable. The relationship thus is very much predestined. That the poet approaches the war by “re-falling in love” with it does not mean that she would celebrate violence. On the contrary, the poem brings to the fore the impossibility of relating to violence in any ‘normal’ ways. When war is constantly “drumming at the back of my skull” a reaction is forced out and “re-falling in love” is indeed a “must”.

The second verse mentions a political event. The “treaty” is the cease-fire which was declared in September 1994. (*Captain Lavender*, the volume in which this poem appeared, came out in November 1994.) Thus the first line places the poem at a particular time where war and violence were, supposedly, “killed” by peace. “All tongues” both refer to a collective “everybody” and the different languages (mother tongues) of the people living there. “Tonight [...] I want to take the night out of you” - here the poet speaks to her lover, the war, with an attempt to take the darkness, the evil out of him(?). This is just as absurd as falling in love with the war and shows the same impossibility of relating to violence. It is linguistically uncertain whether “the sweet Irish tongue” refers to the “night” or the “I” of the previous line. I will assume the first, where the darkness of the war is the “sweet Irish tongue” itself. This, journalistically, could easily refer to the IRA’s allegiance to the Irish language. The more so because it is a language “in which death spoke and happiness wrote.” (Speech and writing are contrasted in an interesting way here. Is death “audible” because of its immediate communication and, similarly, is happiness “written” because it communicates in a less immediate way?) The first three lines of the next verse contain the message of the “sweet Irish tongue”: “a wartime, heart-stained autumn” - this might be the autumn of 1994 - “drove / fierce half-bricks into the hedges; tree-muffled / streets vanished in

²⁸Elie Wiesel: *Az éjszaka (La Nuit)*, (Láng kiadó), p.47. (my translation)

the lack of news." Communication, either of death or of happiness, is not reached. The "news", maybe that of the cease-fire, is not heard. Looking back to the previous verse this, in my interpretation, means that the "night" (darkness, evil) of the war is that its own death (the treaty) is not heard, or understood. Thus the speaker's attempt to take this (indeed the non-achieved or incomplete peace) out of him is actually an attempt to kill him, i.e. to achieve peace. (This is very complicated but I think it aims to be complicated. The other possible interpretation, where "Irish" stands for "I," in fact unfolds the same implication.)

The next few lines illuminate another aspect of the matter: "Like a transfusion made direct from arm / to arm, birds call uselessly to each other." "Birds" (as "bird-sense" in the other poem, "Captain Lavender") stand for the poets, whose language, generally in McGuckian's work, stands above the "inherited grievances"²⁹ and hostilities of the others. (McGuckian several times compared her profession to priesthood: "I decided that the second best thing to becoming a priest would be to become a poet," she said in an interview.³⁰ That explains why she considers poetry a language that stands above ordinary language.) However, the two lines quoted above speak about the incomplete communication between poets ("birds call uselessly to each other"). "Transfusion" might mean that what McGuckian calls "inherited grievances" actually communicate much more directly than any poetic message would. The hostility towards the 'other' is transfused by blood "from arm to arm" despite poetry's attempt to communicate a new understanding. That makes the "sub-acid, wintry present." ("[In my poetry] I just suggest an attitude of compassion in what is part of a universal tragedy."³¹)

The last three lines of this stanza, in my reading, speak about the treaty and its chances in the future as McGuckian saw it at the time. "Self-fertile herbs" I understand to be the metaphor of the treaty. With reference to this metaphor another line from another poem comes to mind: "You cannot reproduce in your own shade," says McGuckian in "Dovecote."³² This "self-fertility," or indeed

²⁹Medbh McGuckian in "An Attitude of Compassions": "I don't have a fixed allegiance. I have inherited grievances, but while these are consciously eliminated they subconsciously obtrude." p.21.

³⁰Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: "Comhrá" with a Foreword and Afterword by Laura O'Connor, *The Southern Review* 31 (July 1995), p.592.

³¹Medbh McGuckian in "An Attitude of Compassions", p.21.

³²*Venus and the Rain*, p.40.

sterility, explains why “defeat” (of peace which is war) is again the “very future lover.” (Now we know it was not that far in the future at all.)

I am afraid that I am losing the reference of the first line of the last stanza (does it speak for the Catholic community that is a minority in number and with the treaty its identity - name - is put at stake?) However, I think, the closing section of the poem depicts a very pessimistic opinion about the peace-process. The “demolished floor” is probably Belfast, the “dreams” that “have no morals” are probably dreams that have been pursued by violence. “Door-kiss” assumes an “unreal kiss,” “night meeting night” speaks for itself: nobody could take the night out of the war.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Medbh McGuckian’s poems are not only capable of carrying public, or even political, messages, but this seems to be occupying a central space in her imagination. McGuckian is a poet with several coexisting and clashing identities: there is the shy housewife and mother (“I just felt that I was a weak person. I felt I had to belong to somebody, or felt that in order to be free in the poetry, I had to be tied in the life.”³³), there is the free and autonomous woman artist and there is the male alter-ego as a poet as well. It seems to me as if her poetic strategy was to mirror these identities into each other. This way she is able to personalise public matters and also to bring the private to a public sphere which becomes available to her readers. She speaks about herself all the time (“It is a funny book. It is exactly me - me all over again.”³⁴) and she does not speak about herself at all. (As I have mentioned earlier, biographical information are not explicitly played out in her poetry.) She says in “Harem Trousers” that

A poem dreams of being written
Without the pronoun ‘I’.³⁵

³³Kimberly S. Bohman: “Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian, Belfast, 5th September, 1994” in: *The Irish Review* 16 (Autumn/Winter 1994), p.103.

³⁴She speaks about *Captain Lavender* here. “Surfacing: An Interview with Medbh McGuckian” *The Irish Review* 16 (Autumn/Winter 1994), p.106.

³⁵On *Ballycastle Beach*, p.40.

What is fascinating about this sentence is the personification of “a poem.” In McGuckian’s mind a poem, and language in general, has an individual power and an individual identity. She is writing a sentence where the sentence dreams of being written without her. Not only is she a woman and/or a poet but her poems themselves form a separate branch of identity. These manifold aspects of her identity create a tension in her poetic language and imagery which, in an artistic way, are mirrors of the diverse political, cultural etc. tensions she lives in. (“My dream sister has gone into my blood / To kill the poet in me before Easter.”³⁶)

Mirrors are indeed central to McGuckian’s poetry. The mirror as an object is exciting in itself: it is an object and it is not an object since it merely reflects other objects. It is the representation of unreal reality, a mirrored life which is never there. However, mirror is not only reflection but self-reflection as well. Since nobody can ever see him/herself, there are several things we call and see as mirrors. Mirrors are the beloved people, mirror is the work we are doing, mirror is the visual reflection of our face(s). That explains why it is an exciting and rich metaphor to use in poetry. Earlier I mentioned Lewis Carroll’s mysterious “looking glass” which, instead of and apart from reflecting, takes the reader inside. This is exactly what McGuckian is doing. In her mirrors we see her many faces but only from the inside. There is no way of staying outside. “My words are traps,” as she says very aptly in “On Ballycastle Beach.”³⁷

Her poetry is “A book with primrose edges and a mirror / In the cover”³⁸ which reflects the writer and the reader as well who opens the book. “With the mirror where her soul was”³⁹ we are lead into the inside of the “book” to face her soul, “A scarlet-draped window-seat, shaped to echo / The circular mirror, itself a sort of chamber....”⁴⁰ Within this “chamber” we see “small tables taking shape / in an unbroken, ray-reflecting mirror that did away with the possibility / of other conversations...”⁴¹ It sometimes turns against its creator so McGuckian says: “The mirror bites into me,”⁴² which I find a wonderful image of the way identities clash and confront each other. The mirror we found outside is there in the inside as

³⁶*Venus and the Rain*, p.36.

³⁷*On Ballycastle Beach*, p.61.

³⁸“Next Day Hill” *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, p.52.

³⁹“Mazurka” *On Ballycastle Beach*, p.20.

⁴⁰“Brothers and Uncles” *Marconi’s Cottage*, p.27.

⁴¹“The Appropriate Moment 4. Ignoras in Artes” *Captain Lavender*, p.24.

⁴²“The Blue She Brings with Her” *On Ballycastle Beach*, p.29.

well. The deeper you wish to get the more “scattered” images you find. And in the end “The mirror doubles distances / So the garden is a cascade of paths.”⁴³

My discussion in this paper outlined the way McGuckian weaves and mirrors public and private spheres together. While I believe that poetry in a way mirrors politics I would not like to forget that this is a “mirror of a kingdom that nobody believes in”⁴⁴ and, moreover, that “the mirror [itself] hardly believes it.”⁴⁵ What is important when reading Medbh McGuckian is to take her advice and always

Remember
The overexcitement of mirrors, with their archways
Lending depth...⁴⁶

⁴³“Scenes from a Brothel” *On Ballycastle Beach*, p.48.

⁴⁴“East of Mozart” *Marconi’s Cottage*, p.65.

⁴⁵“Porcelain Bells 3. Speaking into the Candles” *Captain Lavender*, p.17.

⁴⁶“Aviary” *Venus and the Rain*, p.25.

Judit Baróthy

'Intimacy which is knowledge': Fact and Fiction from a Feminist Point of View

Nóra Séllei:
Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. A Personal and Professional Bond
(Debrecener Studien zur Literatur. Bd. 2)
Frankfurt am Main, etc: Peter Lang, 1996

The second publication of "Debrecener Studien Zur Literatur" explores the biographical and literary links between two 'New Women', Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield.

In the "Introduction" Séllei defines her aims and methods: her prime concern is to find the reasons for the "curious friendship" the "uneasy sisterhood" between the two writers, who are "after so very nearly the same thing."¹ Séllei approaches the question from two different angles, from the personal and the professional points of view. These approaches are

the two pillars that support the whole building of the book: the numerous chapters and subchapters are organised around two major sections, "Katherine and Virginia" and "Mansfield and Woolf". Séllei's investigation of both aspects makes use of the results of feminist literary criticism, especially of those feminist revisions of psychoanalytic theory which help her find the roots of the writers' practice in their childhood experiences (Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Julia Kristeva, Adrienne Rich). Séllei, along with other feminist critics, argues that for women writers "to achieve artistic recognition required the double efforts of creating their

¹Mansfield quoted by Séllei, 35

identity both as individuals and as artists" (14) if they wanted to shake off the label 'feminine' attached to their work mainly by male critics. Thus their life, their struggle to escape from the prison of traditional femininity is inseparable from their literary achievement. The author also strives to find the reason why Mansfield has been neglected while Woolf's literary reputation has always been unquestionable. Feminist critics were the first to appreciate Mansfield's literary merits with due seriousness, but her reputation as a major Modernist, or even as a prominent woman writer, is still ambivalent. One of Séllei's declared aims is "to suggest that Katherine Mansfield, both as a self-conscious woman and as a female writer, represents an equally appropriate response to the same (human and aesthetic) situation" (14). She also argues that the two influential models these two 'foremothers' created in their lives, their theory and practice are combined by second wave feminist writers and theoreticians: "like Mansfield, they utter the previously unutterable experiences, but in a language that flows like Woolf's sentences." (19)

In the first section of her book Séllei examines the personal side of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf's relationship by contrasting their lives on different levels: she is

equally interested in their "social and educational background, their psychological and psychosocial development, and the artistic models they follow" (23). Séllei herself admits that she is entering the marshland of subjectivity and claims that she is reconstructing "a true story" based on their thoughts of each other, expounded in their letters and diaries, which, although were often manipulated by rumours and prejudices, functioned as truth for Mansfield and Woolf: "they contributed to the opinion forming process, thus to their story." (23)

Despite the 'professional disagreement', which the author outlines in the second part, their friendship survived thanks to their mutual 'love of writing' and it appears that the happiest moments were when only the two of them discussed literature. However, these intimate 'chats' became less and less frequent due to Mansfield's serious illness. She suffered from consumption and sought a cure abroad. Séllei describes Mansfield's hopes and anguish, also increased by the death of her mother, and Woolf's attitude towards her illness, the compassion she felt for Mansfield and the irrational hatred she felt for Mansfield's husband, Murry. The complexity of their relationship was also marred by the feeling of jealousy on both sides: Mansfield envied

Woolf's stable background provided by her husband, Woolf was jealous of Mansfield's success. Mansfield got favourable reviews for her three published volumes of short stories, while Woolf's first two novels (*The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*) and two stories ("The Mark on the Wall" and "Kew Gardens") were not received with such enthusiasm. Woolf's attitude towards Mansfield remained ambivalent even after her rival's death. In her diary and private correspondence she often remembers her figure and their relationship: "We did not ever coalesce; but I was fascinated, and she respectful, only I thought her cheap, and she thought me priggish; and yet we were both compelled to meet simply in order to talk about writing."²

Séllei also explores the differences in the writers' social and educational background that some critics (Antony Alpers, Claire Tomalin) consider responsible for the tensions in their friendship. She convincingly argues that these differences were not significant enough to lead to such serious disagreement. In her opinion "the greatest disparity in their friendship can be traced back to their different constitutions of their own womanhood." (59)

In her analysis of the two women's self-identification processes and relationship she employs theories of recent feminist revisions of psychoanalytic theory concerning the female child's psychosocial identification process (Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, and Elaine Showalter). Based mainly on her *Journal*, the author describes the adolescent self-creating period of Mansfield's life with its Wildean ideals and aspiration to be "more than a woman." These 'masculinely' individualistic ideals in the artistic sphere had a certain impact on her personal life, as well: though "she did not deny her femininity, she wanted to experience it to the full and required for herself the freedom granted for men." (15) Séllei continues with an analysis of Woolf's psyche to find the answer to the question why Woolf was so much irritated by Mansfield's character. She goes back to Woolf's early experiences, with a special emphasis on Woolf's relationship with her father and step-brothers after her mother's death, her "looking-glass shame", an early symptom of psychosexual disturbances. Her self-denial, in Kristeva's terms, signals a refusal of the Oedipal phase. Séllei looks at Woolf's 'bouts of madness' "in the light of the conflict between the female self and the external patriarchal order." (78) Her argument is

²in a 1931 letter to Vita Sackville West, quoted by Séllei, 50

based on Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of madness as an alternative existence for women in the nineteenth century, among other recent theories of Woolf's mental problems. By citing the thoughts and concepts of Woolf's doctors concerning mental disorder, she proves that their views were that of a hidebound conservative, who termed any deviation, any eccentricity insanity. In Séllei's interpretation they represent the 'lawgiver,' 'norm-imposer' dominant culture, the "Law of the Father," which Woolf did not obey, but escaped back into the pre-Oedipal, semiotic stage. She keeps on exploring Woolf's ego constitution from this special point of view and seems to find the "root of both her art and her madness," her strong attachment to women and the reason for her social feminism in her personal psychological development. Séllei concludes her train of thought with the summary of differences between the two writers' image of their own womanhood: "Mansfield's search for identity was predominantly masculine, characterised by father-orientation in the Oedipal and Symbolic, adopting the model's dominant culture, thus a *feminine* discourse [in Showalter's term it means the imitation and adoption of the dominant mode]; whereas in Woolf's case mother-identification played the more

significant role, so her discourse was more disruptive, informed by the non-acceptance of the dominant discourse" (in Showalter's term the *female* phase) (82).

In the second part of her study, entitled "Mansfield and Woolf," Séllei sets out to compare the two women's aesthetic concepts, mainly in an indirect way, as Mansfield did not form her views on literature into separate essays; they can be found in her *Journal*, letters and reviews. Séllei, on one hand, relies on their respective opinions of Dorothy Richardson's stream of consciousness novel sequence *Pilgrimage*, outlined in their reviews of the book, and their reception of each other's work, on the other. The author limits her investigation to Mansfield's reviews and opinions of Woolf's *Night and Day* and "Kew Gardens" and to Woolf's views, public and private, on Mansfield's "Bliss" and "Prelude". According to Séllei, these critical remarks reveal "the extent to which Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf had, indeed, 'the same job,' as well as the aspects in which they were so antagonistically opposed." (18)

Although Mansfield's review of Woolf's *Night and Day* was not an open attack, her description of the novel as "Jane Austen up-to-date" offended Woolf. She condemned it for

its narrative technique, the omnipresent narrator who describes and controls the characters and never lets them speak for themselves. Séllei also points out the ethical dimension of Mansfield's review: she thinks that "the universe of the novel conveys a sense of security, which, in a post-war atmosphere, is a betrayal of art." (96)

In the following chapter Séllei goes on to describe Mansfield's ideas concerning the function of writing, technique, organisation and construction. The new perspectives behind everyday reality can be revealed, in Mansfield's opinion, in a moment "of direct feeling when we are most ourselves and least personal" (100), which Séllei compares to the Joycean epiphany. In these moments, which have an organising effect in her stories, subjectivity and objectivity are intertwined. No wonder she rejected Dorothy Richardson's *The Tunnel* (the first volume of her experimental novel series, *The Pilgrimage*) which, she thinks, lacks any kind of organising principle and is "composed of bits, fragments, flashing glimpses, half scenes, whole scenes, all of them quite distinct and separate, and all of them of equal unimportance" (Mansfield quoted by Séllei, 100); it is a typical example of, what she calls, "the notebook literature of our day." According to Mansfield, despite the technical

perfection Richardson most certainly achieved, her novel remains marginal, because "she lost sight of the function of literature: that it should retain its meaningfulness to the reader, and should not turn absolutely inward and be self-reflective." (104) Although Virginia Woolf's review of Richardson's novel is not unanimously appreciative, she finds Richardson's stylistic and theoretical achievement remarkable, and as Séllei points out, Woolf and Richardson are on common ground concerning, for example, the representation of the characters' consciousness. The comparison of their different evaluation of Richardson's novel also indicates the difference between their relationships towards the female tradition, and the author thinks that "the stance they take is also invariably expressive of their womanhood," and "the motivation for these different positions can certainly be found in their dissimilar gender constitutions." (108) What Woolf praises in Richardson's novel *Revolving Lights*, "the psychological sentence of the feminine gender," corresponds with her own ambitions to create "a woman's sentence." It reveals Woolf's language-oriented 'female aesthetics,' which Séllei calls 'feminine textuality.' Mansfield's approach is thematic ('thematic femininity,' in Séllei's term), "her target was to con-

vey a specifically feminine vision of life," (110) but her stories do not offer stylistic innovations, which she rejected as "sheer technicality" in Richardson's novels. Mansfield, in her review of "Kew Gardens" emphasises the existence of all those elements that she most misses in Richardson's novel: coherence, interdependence of details, and its point of view technique. Mansfield seems to have detected the 'new mould' she was also looking for in the narrative of "Kew Gardens" and she especially appreciated the author's 'indifferent' attitude as opposed to the author's omnipotence in *Night and Day*. Although Woolf was hurt by Mansfield's review of her novel, she always appreciated Mansfield's views of literature and they also influenced her further work.

Mansfield did not remain unaffected by Woolf's aesthetic principles, either. In the chapter entitled "The detached existence of a work of art" Séllei compares the two versions of Katherine Mansfield's short story: *The Aloe*, which Mansfield offered for Hogarth Press publication on Woolf's request in 1917, and the rewritten version, which came out entitled "Prelude" in 1918. Séllei suggests that the alterations were initiated by Woolf and she demonstrates her idea by thoughtful close reading of the two stories. She concludes that the omis-

sions, changes in grammatical structures, punctuation, chapter construction and the narrative technique "brought about a thematically and stylistically more coherent short story, which, while remaining typical of Mansfield's style and concerns, could satisfy also Woolf's critical expectations, laid down in 'Modern Fiction.'" (114) In "Prelude" by shifting from one consciousness to another, Mansfield managed to present a series of visions of life in a new and unique form. She gave up her main structural device, the epiphany and replaced it by 'minor illuminations,' which can be compared to Woolf's favourite method, the reverie. Consequently Woolf's opinion was basically positive, she thought "Prelude" "has the living power, the detached existence of a work of art" (125). Nevertheless, she found fault with "Prelude" as well: she still maintained her main objection to all of Mansfield's writing, that is, she condemned its 'cheap realities.' Her rejection of "Bliss" had the same basis, but she extended it to the whole work. Séllei goes on to investigate the background to Woolf's ambivalent evaluation and again, seems to find the answers in their different psychological construction, "in their attitude to their womanhood, and to the expression of women's experiences in fiction." (126) To support her hypothesis

she gives a thorough analysis of "Bliss" and also compares the themes and structures of the two stories. In her interpretation she uses the terminology and ideas of feminist psychoanalytic theories basing her study of the protagonist's character on Adrienne Rich's concept of motherhood as experience and institution. In both stories Mansfield uses the point-of-view technique, so the technical and the thematic resemblance should have encouraged a similar evaluation, yet Woolf disliked "Bliss." To explain this 'paradox' Séllei turns to Woolf's essays on *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, in which she seems to detect the same contradiction. Woolf preferred Emily Brontë's novel, because contrasted with Charlotte Brontë's novel "there is no 'I' in *Wuthering Heights*. [...] The impulse which urged her to create was not her own suffering or her own injuries. She looked upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book." (144) Woolf condemns the 'angry' first person singular female narration in *Jane Eyre*, which, Séllei points out, is the technique of "Bliss," too, while in *Wuthering Heights*, like in "Prelude," the perspective is multiple. Another possible reason for Woolf's discriminative judgment of "Bliss" is its more conventional structure with a climax at the

end, which creates the traditional effect of fixity and wholeness.

In the "Conclusion" of the book Séllei sums up the essence of Katherine Mansfield's and Virginia Woolf's antagonistically different writing strategies which also led to personal disagreements. Behind the professional differences Séllei sees their different 'psychosocial development.' Woolf's "boundlessly flowing feminine sentence" betrays her unfixed ego boundaries, "her concept of androgyny, on the other hand, shows traits of the suppressive effect of a male hierarchy she could never get rid of." (147) Séllei agrees with Rich that Woolf suppressed her anger in a fear of male criticism, and sublimated her femininity into "sentence pattern and fiction structure." (148) Mansfield, on the other hand, in her efforts to maintain her independence and individuality, identified with the dominant, the *symbolic*, and in consequence, "in her fiction she preserved more focus, more fixity, which corresponds with her more fixedly structured ego boundaries and separate individuality." (148) Thematically, however, she is more gender conscious than Woolf, trying to "tell the truth about her own experiences as a body." That is why, Séllei thinks, Mansfield has never been accepted by the dominantly male criticism. In Séllei's opinion true and

equal recognition of both writers came with recent feminist writing and criticism. She interprets Luce Irigaray's statement, "if we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story" as a testimony to Woolf's language, which provides the framework for Mansfield's "story of a self-conscious sex."

In her fresh, thorough and most interesting study - especially in its first part - Nóra Séllei has "tried to make a portrait" of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf "almost as a novelist might make a character in fiction."³ The characters of the two 'protagonists' are often reflected in their relationship, and their characters, or rather 'ego constitutions' - the term used in the study - define this bond.⁴ Séllei's psychoanalytic ap-

proach is based on mother-daughter bonding, which, according to J.K. Gardiner, "encourage critics to investigate relationships among women, [...] both outside and inside texts' fluid margins."⁵ The theory (of mother-daughter relationship), however, does not stay in the background in Séllei's book: the author seems to suggest a parental hierarchy in the two writers' relationship by assigning the role of 'surrogate' mother, or that of an elder sister who takes over mother's duties, to Woolf. Having described the increase of Mansfield's 'depression' and 'feeling of loss' after her mother's death, with whom her relationship "had never been absolutely harmonious," she goes on to say that in consequence "Virginia's presence became more and more vital." (42) Séllei also points out Woolf's motherly attitude by emphasising that she frequently visited Mansfield "to alleviate the pains of a woman and a writer who was seven years her junior" (*italics added*) (42). This implied 'mother-

³Virginia Woolf about 'recreating' Fry's figure in her preface to her "Impressions of Roger Fry," in: *The Virginia Woolf Manuscripts: From the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection at The New York Public Library*. 21 35 mm microfilm reels. (Reading: Research Publications International, 1994)

⁴Elisabeth Abel describes the friendship of women characters in similar terms: "through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self"

in: E. Abel: "(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women" (*Signs*, 6, 3, 1981, 413-35).

⁵Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Mind mother: psychoanalysis and feminism" in: Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (eds.): *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985, 1991, 113-145), 136.

daughter' bond between 'Virginia' and 'Katherine' is a personal attachment (outside texts' fluid margins),⁶ but later, in the second part of the study, it is implicitly extended onto the professional bond, too. Séllei suggests that the alterations Mansfield made in her short story *The Aloe* - which resulted in "Prelude" - were not simply proposed by Woolf, but also influenced by her aesthetic principles, although there is no written evidence of this. Both suppositions, despite their convincing argumentation, are rather speculative, thus they are also a part of the fictitious world of - Séllei's book (inside texts' fluid margins).⁷ 'Inside merges with outside' in other respects, too: the psychology of the two women determined the kind of prose they wrote and also their views of each other's work. Séllei puts down Woolf's innovations in language, her "boundlessly flowing feminine sen-

tence" to her 'unfixed ego boundaries,' which in turn is the result of her "troubled relationship with her parents," and her "childhood sexual abuse." (147) Mansfield's fiction, which preserves "more focus, more fixity," on the other hand, "corresponds with her more fixedly structured ego boundaries and separate individuality." (148) Such reductive statements tend to weaken her otherwise engaging and stimulating theme. Her analyses of the literary works are fascinating, although when she starts applying the terms of different feminist discourses (Rich, Chodorow, Kristeva, Cixous) the pattern becomes somewhat predictable.

There is one (more) point where I would like to take issue with the author: the evaluation of Woolf's concept of androgyny. Séllei perpetuates the traditional misinterpretation of early feminist criticism, especially that of Showalter, who saw the 'sexless' state of the androgynous writer as "an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness," from "personal identity, from the claims of the self to be expressed."⁸ Showalter also suggests that Woolf's awareness - and fear - of a male audi-

⁶The author uses the writers' first names in the first part, which strengthens the impression of their being fictitious characters - we are 'inside the text's fluid margins.' On the other hand, the author deploys 'facts,' original 'documents' to support her ideas - we are also 'outside the text's fluid margins.'

⁷The analogy of maternity can be - could have been - played out on several other levels, too: in connection with the writers' relationship with their texts and characters, for example.

⁸Elaine Showalter: *A Literature of their Own. British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing.* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), 289-290.

ence contributed to her rapprochement of expressing anger and protest in art. Séllei continues in the same vein, connecting this latter argument - the fear of the dominant male opinion - to her theory about the effects of Woolf's childhood experience of male violence. She also argues that the concept of androgyny "worked well" and contributed to Woolf's acceptance in the literary canon by the predominantly male criticism and seems to suggest that Mansfield was rejected because of her unwillingness to make up a similar 'camouflage.' Woolf was undoubtedly "conscious of," and even anxious about "being overheard by men," as her diary entries at the time of the publication of *A Room of One's Own* show,⁹ but I do not think it should be seen as a motivation for her concept of androgyny. Toril Moi as

early as 1985 pointed out the flaws in Showalter's argumentation. She sees Woolf's theory not as a method for fleeing gender identities, but as a deconstruction of "the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity."¹⁰ Possibly Pamela Caughie's excellent study (1991) came too late for the author - in her investigation of androgyny in *Orlando* she goes even further saying that androgyny reflects not only a sexual ambiguity, but a textual one as well. While Showalter condemns Woolf's theory for its ambivalence, its avoiding strategy to take position, Caughie praises it for its "refusal to choose." In her view, the androgynous vision is "paratactical, not dichotomous," which "affirms a 'fertile oscillation' between positions."¹¹ Many other recent feminist studies deal with Woolf's concept of androgyny in similar terms.¹² But we may as well take

⁹"It is a little ominous that Morgan [E.M. Forster] won't review it. It makes me suspect that there is a shrill feminine tone in it which my intimate friends will dislike. I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind, from Lytton [Strachey], Roger [Fry] and Morgan; that the press will be kind and talk of its charm and sprightliness; also I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist;" in: Leonard Woolf (ed.): *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1954) 148.

¹⁰Toril Moi: *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge 1985, 1991), 13.

¹¹Pamela L. Caughie: *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism. Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 82.

¹²see, for example, Rachel Bowlby: *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), Rachel Blau DuPlessis: *Writing Beyond the Ending* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), Marianne DeKoven:

Woolf's original intention seriously and look at androgyny as a concept of artistic creation, an ideal, which she tried to realise in her novels. What is manifested in this ideal is the artist's longing to restore primordial unity, at least in creation, in an age of final fragmentation. The artist figures in Woolf's novels - Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* or Bernard in *The Waves*, for example, - struggle to combine the feminine and masculine modes of perception, which is the precondition of the creative act for them. The result is a kind of balance in which neither principle is prevalent, nor are they fused into one, but are simultaneously present in a state of androgyny. A comparison of Woolf's androgyny with other writers' concepts of artistic

creation in the same period would help one place it in a much wider context and see its importance in the modernist paradigm.

Naturally Séllei's feminist context does not allow such diversions; its coherent feminist discourse, if it is not a contradiction in terms, is one of the many merits of the book. The consequent and convincing combination of the two women writers' biographies and works, and the excellent and engaging style also contribute to the 'reader-friendly' attitude that this study represents among other academic works. The author's clever arguments do not lack a woman's intuition, either, and it helps her get close to her material, reach "intimacy itself, which is knowledge."¹³

Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991), Makiko Minow Pinkney: *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1987)

¹³ "for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, [...] nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge." in: Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse* (London: Grafton Books, 1995), p. 58.

The Modern Which Wants to Be a Classic

Richard Ruland - Malcolm Bradbury:

Az amerikai irodalom története. A puritanizmustól a posztmodernizmusig.

Corvina, Budapest, c1997.

ford: Balkay Fruzsina, Bán Zsófia, Gázsity Mila, Kozma Zsolt, Orbán Katalin,

Péter Ágnes, Rakovszky Zsuzsa, Takács Ferenc.)

[*From Puritanism to Postmodernism. A History of American Literature.*

New York: Penguin Books, 1991]

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury's book, as it says about itself, besides being a literary history is also a fable, a fictitious quest-story. ("All literary histories are critical fictions," "Our own book is no less a fiction than any other. ... our own tale of a nation's literature ... and the fable a country told itself as it tried to understand its own becoming in writing."¹) It is a quest for origins: the origins of American literature, and the essence

of the so-puzzling Americanness of this literature at the heart of which lies a certain fiction making process. It is already a well known cliché of our postmodern days that the search for an origin in and through language will always only show us the lack of an absolute centre, an unquestionable origin, and where we hope to find this origin we only find language, writing and traces. It is this unspoken supposition which seems to be lurking behind the arguments of the two authors since, through a play with reciprocity, their implications may be reduced to the following conclusion: if we cannot

¹ p. xv, xix. References are to the Penguin edition, indicated in parenthesis after the quotations.

find the origin, let us then create the fiction of the origin by making fiction the origin. Quite paradoxically, but not so surprisingly, this critical manoeuvre, calling literary history fiction, is by no means a renunciation of the past and history, quite to the contrary, it is the genuine expression of the authors' desire to belong to a tradition, to be embedded in the history of a certain kind of writing which we call American.

The authors suggest a multiple-step development. In the beginning there was America as mere writing since "... 'America' existed in Europe long before it was discovered, in the speculative writings of the classical, the medieval and then the Renaissance mind" (4). "It is an invention of Europe, as old as western history itself" (5). This "foreword" sealed the destiny of American literature and became its most important structuring force. After the discovery and naming of the continent, thanks to the uncritical transplantation of the old language to the New World, America proved to be a creative writing which destroyed the actual America but was still not necessarily essentially American. "Because of this imaginary history, which preceded the real one and all but obliterated the history of those who had lived American lives before the Europeans came, we will never

really find a single demarcation point to show us where American writing exactly starts, and certainly not when it became distinctive or broke finally loose from European writing" (6). America as writing destroyed its own would-be referent and then committed suicide before it was even born. Throughout the 17th, 18th and most of the 19th centuries the literary output of the country was undoubtedly "the literature of America" but was not necessarily *American* literature. The history of America starts with this "imaginary history" and, as we will see, ends with another which is essentially the same.

The real change came with the birth of the Modern. The heaviest burden of American modernism was the paradox of a "historyless history." Thus the central project of the era was the dissolution of this burning paradox into a fiction: the fiction of the usable past. The birth of this fiction means the birth of the recognisably American quality of American literature, and it implies an act of creative forgetting inasmuch as it is a conscious reaction against the genteel tradition. Even though the authors do not point out the analogy this modern gesture is indeed a return to the "origins" (or at least to the spirit of the origin) since the merely fictitious (re)creation of America is in accordance with the

European prehistory of the land. It is a return to fiction making or writing as an origin and self-identity. Modernism is the golden age of American literature since "American literature is indeed pre-eminently a modern literature ..." (xvii), and the authors do not refrain from the far-reaching implication that modern literature is essentially American². This already foreshadows the next and so far last transformation of the concept. Thanks to her position as the most influential world power of our times, and to the constant development and widening of the possibilities of exchange and communication which resulted in the breakdown of limiting international boundaries of influence and taste America has become through a not so surprising metonymic extension the emblem for the present state of Western literature.

Due to the intricate relationships between modernity, literature and history, a literary history which has its focus on modernism and makes as one of its main contentions the claim that the essence of that literature, the history of which is to be written, is its modernity, and which

implicitly aspires to the state of being itself a modern history of literature, should take certain perils into consideration. I would like to use Paul de Man's speculations on the subject to highlight some of the problems. "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks new departure"³. Seen as such, "Modernity and history relate to each other in a curiously contradictory way that goes beyond antithesis or opposition. If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without at once being swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process." (151) "If we see in this paradoxical condition a diagnosis of our own modernity, then literature has always been essentially modern" (151). De Man even lets the concept grow into a mystic force, the key to our understanding of literature: "Modernity turns out to be indeed one of the concepts by means of which the distinctive nature of litera-

²This implication is mainly created by the unmistakable presence of Hugh Kenner's book, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers*, in the background.

³Paul de Man: "Literary History and Literary Modernity" in *Blindness and Insight, Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, Second Edition*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 148. Subsequent references are parenthesised.

ture can be revealed in all its intricacy" (161). If we add all these up we might reach, against our will, some surprising conclusions. If we say that American literature is essentially modern, we may also say that all literature is essentially modern. But if we say that modern literature is essentially American may we also say that all literature is essentially American? The question is, of course, rhetorical.

After stating that a single point of origin of American literature is most likely never to be found, since it is irretrievably lost in an inextricable dialectic intertextual relationship between Europe and America which defies univocal classifications based on e.g. anteriority, the authors still fall into their own trap when they contradict their own premises by performing an act of renaming. Ruland and Bradbury refuse F. O. Matthiessen's label "American Renaissance" for the literature of the middle of the 19th century (which arose from a totally different, but not necessarily valid, understanding of the word) and through a stroke of *originality* they call it instead "American naissance." They think it a more proper expression since this was the era which gave birth to the modern instinct which came into its fullest bloom at the beginning of the next century. This is why the authors constantly emphasise

Poe's, Melville's, Hawthorne's, Whitman's and Dickinson's "modernity," which in most of the cases appears to be an intentional ambiguity which "was more than a wilful obscurity, for it gave America what it lacked and soberly needed, a truly critical literature" (144). However, as we have seen, if we understand modernity as "a way of acting and behaving" (de Man 142), as an urge for constant renewal, the concept becomes so large and universal that it appears to engulf the whole of Literature regardless of temporal and geographical boundaries. This spirit of modernity is echoed by Ezra Pound's "Make it New," and for that matter also by William Carlos Williams' "Back to the Beginning." The peculiarity of America is that (in spite of their different roots) the two coincide and not necessarily only because the renewal of something may be achieved through the dubious return to even more dubious beginnings or, to turn it around, not even because the return to the beginnings is something new, but because the two in the present contexts mean essentially the same. The history of America (on the continent), as we know it, was initiated by the desire to rewrite either the maps or history. The utopia with which the first Europeans arrived, no matter whether of spiritual or of pecuniary nature, was

the utopia of "starting it all over again." From the beginning there is only beginning *again* and the wish to make it *new*. Emerson's *Nature*, which marks the beginning of the American *naissance*, "with its repudiation of the past and the 'retrospective age' and the assertion of a new vision" (Ruland, Bradbury 105) is indeed the manifesto of the same modernist instinct, the renunciation of the past in the hope of reaching the present as a source of origin, which in de Man's interpretation is the essence of Nietzsche's and Baudelaire's modernity. But the same relation to the past is reflected by the utopistic writings of the European Renaissance as well as the puritan dissent and revolutionary patriotism. So the celebrated "*naissance*" of American literature is after all a *renaissance*, a single moment resembling all the others in the metaphoric chain of a constant *renaissance*, an endless labour. As de Man points out about all the tragic penmen who ever tried to be modern: "... their claim to being a new beginning turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always already been made" (161).

The postmodern turn is presented by the two authors as a multiplying, mirroring substitution. It is easily seen as the phase of modernism which realises (in both senses of the word) the impossibility of being

original or to take it one step further (and this is also a reflection on the methods of the critic): "One is soon forced to resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern." (144) (If there is an edge of self-irony in these words let us simply call to mind that de Man is after all a postmodern critic who is aware of his "modernity.") According to the authors one of the basic experiences of the postmodern individual is the confrontation with a reality which does not resemble reality anymore, it is more like what one used to know as fiction. The point of departure is the birth of the fiction that reality is a fiction, and as reality became fiction the role of literature underwent another modernisation, "... and fiction needed to become *superfiction* to cope with an ever more fictional age of history" (Ruland, Bradbury 371). But what is the role of criticism in this wilderness of changing roles and mirrorings?

The two authors' rather meagre survey of post-W.W.II American literature, which in some cases really does not exceed a mere cataloguing of names and titles, is closed by a reflection on American literary criticism. This last subchapter, which starts from the institutionalised New Criti-

cism of the 1950's and arrives at the Yale critics, fits very well into the plot of our tale. After pointing out that Leslie Fiedler called his work *Love and Death in the American Novel* a novel and that Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* is actually a poem the authors write that "[f]or a time, this critical writing that so resembles and asks to be read as poetry has been the freshest, most imaginative literary work produced in the United States" (428). And if we did not do it so far then this is where we start to realise that the postmodern story that we have been reading is the metafictional history of its own coming into existence: a very *American* history of literature. What the authors wrote about American is true about this history of literature: it is the fable the text "told itself as it tried to understand its own becoming in writing" (xix). In the present case the history of American literature ends with Ruland and Bradbury's book, a tale about the history of American literature itself.

What Walter Benjamin observed about Baudelaire's rebellious modernity, that it was controlled from the background by a desire to be a classic⁴, also pertains to the literary

history we have been reading. The work presents its own way into the canon. And if we think that such a tendency is in direct opposition with the innovating spirit of modernity we are mistaken. As a matter of fact this is where we should start looking for its modernity because the ambiguity of language is such and the paradoxicality of modernity is so deep-rooted that it may well be disguised as its opposite. "We live or have lately lived in the age of Postmodern deconstructions, in which more energy has been put into demythologizing interpretive myths than constructing them. Earlier canonizations have led to a rage for decanonization as the desire to challenge the usable past of the moderns has become dominant." (xv) The modernity of this literary history is by no means to be found in its return to the modernist credo of a usable past or its conception in the spirit of the postmodern obsession with fictions but in its pro-canon stance which is presented by the text itself as a mode of anti-postmodernity (which has to assert and deny itself at the same time). As de Man put it: "[Modernity] is a very revealing paradox, confirming again that anything touching upon literature becomes at once a Pandora's box, that the critical method which denies literary modernity would appear - and even, in certain respects,

⁴Walter Benjamin: A második császárság Párizsa Baudelaire-nél. in *Angelus Novus*. Magyar Helikon, 1980. p. 917.

would be - the most modern of critical movements" (164). Whether this work will actually make it into the canon or not is to be decided by the generations of readers that are to come. Reminding us that the postmodern era is drawing closer and closer to its end,

the authors themselves awaiting a conservative turn, the work ends with a quite optimistic millennial prophecy and leaves us with the taste of the same old realisation in our mouth: we are standing on the edge of a new beginning.