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Geographies of knowledge

Metaphors of Gender

Sexual Identities

Shakespeare

Culture and the City

Ethnicity and Language

"Left Conservatism"

Vol. 1, n. 1-2
1997

65

Anglistica is published twice a year by the Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari dell'Occidente, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli

Yearly subscription rates
Lire 60.000

Single issues
Lire 30.000

Orders:
Herder Editrice e Libreria
Piazza Montecitorio 120
I-00186 Roma
Tel. ++39-06-679 46 28
Fax ++39-06-678 47 51
(Payment by credit card accepted)

Exchange proposals for periodicals are welcome; please send to Editorial address

ISSN 0391-5956

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anglistica

vol. 1 (1997), n. 1-2

IST. UNIV. ORIENTALE
N. inv. 66260
Dipartimento di Studi letterari e linguistici dell'Occidente.

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Vol. 1 (1997), n. 1-2

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EDITORIAL

The radical reconfiguration of critical studies and what constitutes 'knowledge' over the last three decades whereby 'theory' and writing, literature and the 'social', poetics and politics, have crossed each other's path has led to an irreversible interrogation of their previous autonomies. It would be simple to reduce this trajectory to a superficial social history that commences around 1968 and develops, above all, through the writings, both theoretical and creative, of new historical subjects distinguished by gender, ethnicity and minority status. However, these are also symptoms of an altogether deeper current that, to use the unfashionable concept of egemonia, draws our attention to the limits and crisis, both intellectual and institutional, of a particular historical-cultural formation and its subsequent arrangement of disciplines in the western academy. The confident nineteenth-century positivism and/or idealism that cultivated and established the present day divisions and distinctions of the social sciences and humanities (and the critical and historical sense of such terms are themselves to be investigated) is exhausted. Confronted by nervous retrenchment into orthodox backwaters or else the continual adjustment of the inherited discipline in order to continue to converse with change, the initial dispositif is now clearly in crisis.

Yet crisis is, of course, the very basis of criticism. This is to suggest a theoretical modality that is neither conservative nor merely accommodating. But if positivism and idealism are no longer able to mirror the world in their languages, if the confidence of a subjective objectivity orbiting around the universal I/eye (humanism) is justly afflicted by doubt, then critical work, whether in literature or anthropology, becomes an altogether more exposed, more vulnerable, undertaking. Whatever the response to such a situation, which, of course, requires recognition as a critical situation and not as something

to be brushed under the carpet, it becomes clear that a local response, for example restricted to the field of 'English literature', cannot be divorced from a wider comprehension of the crisis-criticism of the humanities and its particular tutelage of 'knowledge'. It is in this direction that the new series of Anglistica proposes to travel, drawing critical strength, above all, from an interdisciplinary approach that has historically developed within the vicinity of English literary studies, that of cultural studies. But, precisely because it is interdisciplinary, existing between and beyond established disciplines, neither cultural studies nor the critical perspective proposed for this journal can claim the authority of an intellectual orthodoxy nor the institutional recognition of a disciplinary regime. Being vulnerable is an uncomfortable, but necessary, position to occupy; the only comfort it provides is the perpetual aperture, the opening, through which an intellectual challenge can continue on its way.

Anglistica New Series will be published twice a year, in Spring and Fall; each issue will seek to focus on a theme, although it will remain open to more general contributions. An outline of the forthcoming issues, more or less corresponding to the next three years, the proposed period during which I shall be main editor, can be seen in the call for papers section.

The editorial board, whose members are all part of the Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari dell'Occidente, includes scholars with a diverse range of interests, from English and North-American studies to linguistics and cultural studies. This accentuates the variety of voices and areas already signalled in the essays of the previous version of *Anglistica*, founded and brilliantly directed for many years by Fernando Ferrara. My task in directing the journal after him is certainly a hard one.

The new *Anglistica* will be published mainly in English both to reach a wider, international readership within English studies and to encourage possible external contributions. With this in mind *Anglistica* will soon have a Web page on the Orientale's Internet site where summaries of the articles will be published, to be eventually followed by the essays themselves.

This volume of *Anglistica*, comprising two issues, has been delayed owing to editorial and publishing changes, and is published without reviews; we hope to commence the review section as soon as possible. Copies of books and journals for review from publishers, distributors and individuals are welcome.

In the present issue, we have sought to focus on an important shift in contemporary critical thought. Moving out from the initial moment in which essential and necessary differences – between black and white, women and men, the political and the cultural – were recognised and registered in an expansion of the modern academic gaze we now find ourselves in the altogether more delicate situation in which such 'additions' and 'inclusions' are internally complicated and externally multiplied. For the initial phase has subsequently been overruled by a set of questions and doubts about the clarity and the desirability of such initial distinctions.

Stuart Hall's seminal essay, which opens the issue, signalled such a change within black cultural politics, at the end of last decade: from the struggle for the rights of representation to the contestation of the stereotypes of such representations, by both white and black artists and intellectuals. In insisting on the recognition of the diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black' – a category which has no guarantee in nature – he refers to a Gramscian inspired struggle around positionalities. Here he outlines the importance of a new politics of representation based on "a diaspora experience... a process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and 'cut-and-mix'..."

This question is subsequently echoed in the cultural debate on postmodernism, cultural studies and politics ignited by the recent 'Sokal affair', to which Marina De Chiara widely refers, and Judith Butler responds in this issue. The hoax that Sokal played at the expense of the journal *Social Text* gave rise to an attack against the interdisciplinary perspective of cultural studies and the aestheticizing character of postmodernism from both right-wing and left-conservative critics. These attacks are based on another kind of essentialism, the separation between

the political and the cultural, as De Chiara recalls: "an ideological split between the 'real' on one side, and 'culture' on the other." She charts positions on the one and the other side, concluding with Donna Haraway on the problematicity of a split between power relations and cultural utterance, and on the simplifications of a univocal picture of postmodernism as an unpolitical cultural trend.

Judith Butler, who deeply believes in calling things into question ("calling into question something called a postmodern paradigm would be fabulous") articulates her response recalling the long critical tradition within marxism – from Williams to Hall and Sahlins – that has supported "a kind of mutual determination between the semiotic and the material." Butler points out that the disparagement of the cultural is linked with "a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the left." She refers to social movements that are identified with the 'merely cultural' as apparently having no place in political economy: lesbian and gay struggles, for instance, are seemingly unconnected to the division of labour.

Other essays are directly or indirectly related to the questions of overcoming false and rigid binaries: Jane Wilkinson's essay discusses how Wole Soyinka's work presents a contaminated terrain bridging the local and the global; Mariagrazia De Meo underlines how Brian Friel's theatre represents the Ireland of today as the site of contradiction, mediation and translation between an essential native identity and language, and its oppressive 'other', English; Marialuisa Pasquariello in her essay on culture and technology, puts in question the natural/artificial distinction, and finally Silvana Carotenuto's review essay of Judith Butler's more recent work questions the distinction between external and internal life, the social and the psyche.

Culture and language are the complex coordinates in the making of our identities and the orders we inhabit. Anna Maria Cimitile through a detailed analysis of the 'casket test' and the trial scene in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, demonstrates how the apparent fixity of the legal paradigm gives way to a contradictory and ambivalent structure. John

Rieder's and Maria Stella's essays engage with nineteenth century poetry: Rieder deals with the historical exclusion of women from the traditional canon of British Romantic poets and reopens the question of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and political engagement. Stella's discussion of Thomas Hardy's production gives an insight into the double-ended operation of the nineteenth century authors' sense of history functioning as a form of hermeneutic probing into the 'historical continuum' which recreates both the past and the present.

Finally, Nicole Ward Jouve's essay deals with how gender works in the metaphors of language, wandering through images of tongue and mouth, boat and sea, mollusc and shell, showing that they are 'analogues for each other and for the self in literature, the self that creates in language ...'. She analyses some creative and critical texts of the last two centuries, when "the creative act has been more gender biased than at other periods", coming to the conclusion that it is only in narrative that gender makes a difference. In particular in Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter she sees the woman creator as a many-voiced subject, "not ownness; but multiplicity, but becoming..."

It is on the uncertain boundary between owning and disowning that I would like to conclude, speaking for a journal that moves on the boundaries between cultures, while largely projecting the Italian gaze on other cultures, on the many that now inhabit English. Nicole Ward Jouve recognizes in this condition "aspects of my own divideness, belonging as I feel I do to two worlds. Mediterranean-born but now close to the North Sea, a writer in English as well as my own native French, of fiction as well as criticism, I warm up to the clash of shores and languages". Similarly the geographies of our title refer to places that speak at once of proximity and distance on the part of those who own and disown their own culture. Fixing their critical gaze on the other, they look back at themselves through the other: a constant wavering between exile and being at home.

Lidia Curti

Richter and Marie Stella's essays engage with nineteenth-century poetry. Richter deals with the historical extension of women from the traditional notion of British Romantic poets and reopens the question of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and political engagement. Stella's discussion of Thomas Hardy's production gives an insight into the double-ended operation of the nineteenth-century novel, sense of history functioning as a form of ideological mediation into the historical continuum, which rewrites both the past and the present.

Finally, Nicole Ward Jouve's essay deals with her recent work in the metaphor of language, wandering through images of range and night, day and sea, motion and still, showing that they are analogous for each other and for the self in the world. She analyzes the text that creates in language. She analyzes some creative and critical texts of the last two centuries, when the creative act has been more gender biased than at other periods, coming to the conclusion that it is only in narrative that gender makes a difference. In particular, Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter are seen as women creators as a many-voiced subject, we are aware, but implicitly, but becoming.

It is on the uncertain boundary between writing and knowing that I would like to conclude speaking for a journal that crosses in the boundaries between cultures, while largely neglecting the Italian gaze on other cultures, on the many that now inhabit English. Nicole Ward Jouve recognizes in this condition "a part of my own blindness, belonging as I feel I do to two worlds. My blindness is not but how close to the world I am, a world as I have as well as my own native French of fiction as well as English. I want to be in the class of those who are bilingual, primarily the English of our time, to the part that speak in one of proximity and distance on the part of those who own and throw their own culture. Finding their ethical gaze on the other, they look at themselves through the other's essential way, with an eye and being at home.

Journal of American Studies, Volume 42, Number 1, Winter 2008, pp. 1-10. doi:10.1017/S0021875808001001

ARTICLES

Stuart Hall

New ethnicities¹

I have centred my remarks on an attempt to identify and characterize a significant shift that has been going on (and is still going on) in black cultural politics. This shift is not definitive, in the sense that there are two clearly discernible phases – one in the past which is now over and the new one which is beginning – which we can neatly counterpose to one another. Rather, they are two phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and interweave. Both are framed by the same historical conjuncture and both are rooted in the politics of anti-racism and the post-war black experience in Britain. Nevertheless I think we can identify two different ‘moments’ and that the difference between them is significant.

It is difficult to characterize these precisely, but I would say that the first moment was grounded in a particular political and cultural analysis. Politically, this is the moment when the term ‘black’ was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities. In this moment, politically speaking, ‘The black experience’, as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became ‘hegemonic’ over other ethnic/racial identities – though the latter did not, of course,

¹ Originally published in Kobena Mercer, ed., *ICA Documents 7. Black Film, British Cinema*, 1989.

disappear. Culturally, this analysis formulated itself in terms of a critique of the way blacks were positioned as the unspoken and invisible 'other' of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses.

This analysis was predicated on the marginalization of the black experience in British culture; not fortuitously occurring at the margins, but placed, positioned at the margins, as the consequence of a set of quite specific political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and 'normalized' the representational and discursive spaces of English society. These formed the conditions of existence of a cultural politics designed to challenge, resist and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation – first in music and style, later in literary, visual and cinematic forms. In these spaces blacks have typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation. The struggle to come into representation was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishization, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject. There was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the black experience but with its simplification and its stereotypical character.

The cultural politics and strategies which developed around this critique had many facets, but its two principal objects were: first the question of *access* to the rights to representation by black artists and black cultural workers themselves. Second, the *contestation* of the marginality, the stereotypical quality and the fetishized nature of images of blacks, by the counter-position of a 'positive' black imagery. These strategies were principally addressed to changing what I would call the 'relations of representation'.

I have a distinct sense that in the recent period we are entering a new phase. But we need to be absolutely clear what we mean by a 'new' phase because, as soon as you talk of a new phase, people instantly imagine that what is entailed is the *substitution* of one kind of politics for another. I am quite distinctly not talking about a shift in those terms. Politics does not necessarily proceed by way of a set of oppositions and

reversals of this kind, though some groups and individuals are anxious to 'stage' the question in this way. The original critique of the predominant relations of race and representation and the politics which developed around it have not and cannot possibly disappear while the conditions which gave rise to it – cultural racism in its Dewesbury form – not only persists but positively flourishes under Thatcherism.² There is no sense in which a new phase in black cultural politics could replace the earlier one. Nevertheless it is true that as the struggle moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree *displace*, reorganize and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another. If this can be conceived in terms of the 'burden of representation', I would put the point in this form: that black artists and cultural workers now have to struggle, not on one, but on two fronts. The problem is, how to characterize this shift – if indeed, we agree that such a shift has taken or is taking place – and if the language of binary oppositions and substitutions will no longer suffice. The characterization that I would offer is tentative, proposed in the context of this essay mainly to try and clarify some of the issues involved, rather than to pre-empt them.

The shift is best thought of in terms of a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself. It would be useful to separate out such a 'politics of representation' into its different elements. We all now use the word representation, but, as we know, it is an extremely slippery customer. It can be used, on the one hand, simply as another way of talking about how one imagines a reality that exists 'outside' the means by which things are represented: a conception grounded in a mimetic theory of representation. On the other hand the term can also stand for a very radical displacement of that unproblematic notion of the

² The Yorkshire town of Dewesbury became the focus of national attention when white parents withdrew their children from a local school with predominantly Asian pupils, on the grounds that 'English' culture was no longer taught on the curriculum. The contestation of multicultural education from the right also underpinned the controversies around Bradford headmaster Ray Honeyford. See Paul Gordon, "The New Right, Race and Education", *Race and Class* XXIX, 3 (Winter 1987).

concept of representation. My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus, while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life. I think it is the move towards this second sense of representation which is taking place and which is transforming the politics of representation in black culture.

This is a complex issue. First, it is the effect of a theoretical encounter between black cultural politics and the discourses of a Eurocentric, largely white, critical cultural theory which in recent years has focused so much analysis of the politics of representation. This is always an extremely difficult, if not dangerous, encounter. (I think particularly of black people encountering the discourses of post-structuralism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis and feminism.) Second, it marks what I can only call 'the end of innocence', or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject. Here again, the end of the essential black subject is something which people are increasingly debating, but they may not have fully reckoned with its political consequences. What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature. What this brings into play is the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects. This

inevitably entails a weakening or fading of the notion that 'race' or some composite notion of race around the term black will either guarantee the effectivity of any cultural practice or determine in any final sense its aesthetic value.

We should put this as plainly as possible. Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily 'right-on' by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction. Namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are *the same*. After all, it is one of the predicates of racism that 'you can't tell the difference because they all look the same'. This does not make it any easier to conceive of how a politics can be constructed which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification that make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity. It entails the movement in black politics, from what Gramsci called the 'war of manoeuvre' to the 'war of position' – the struggle around positionalities. But the difficulty of conceptualizing such a politics (and the temptation to slip into a sort of endlessly sliding discursive liberal-pluralism) does not absolve us of the task of developing such a politics.

The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories

and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity. (I make a distinction here between race and ethnicity to which I shall return.) To me, films like *Territories*, *Passion of Remembrance*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, for example, make it perfectly clear that this shift has been engaged; and that the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity.

Difference and contestation

A further consequence of this politics of representation is the slow recognition of the deep ambivalence of identification and desire. We think about identification usually as a simple process structured around fixed 'selves' which we either are or are not. The play of identity and difference that constructs racism is powered not only by the positioning of blacks as the inferior species but also, and at the same time, by an inexpressible envy and desire; and this is something the recognition of which fundamentally *displaces* many of our hitherto stable political categories, since it implies a process of identification and otherness which is more complex than we had hitherto imagined.

Racism, of course, operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness. Along this frontier there arises what Gayatri Spivak calls the 'epistemic violence' of the discourses of the Other - of imperialism, the colonized, Orientalism, the exotic, the primitive, the anthropological and the folk-lore.³ Consequently the discourse of anti-racism had often been founded on a strategy of reversal and inversion,

³ Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Methuen, 1987), 6.

turning the 'Manichean aesthetic' of colonial discourse upside-down. However, as Fanon constantly reminded us, the epistemic violence is both outside and inside, and operates by a process of splitting on both sides of the division - in here as well as out here. That is why it is a question not only of 'black-skin' but of '*Black Skin, White Masks*' - the internalization of the self-as-other. Just as masculinity always constructs femininity as double - simultaneously Madonna and Whore - so racism constructs the black subject: noble savage and violent avenger. And in the doubling, fear and desire double for one another and play across the structures of otherness, complicating its politics.

Recently I have read several articles about the photographic text of Robert Mapplethorpe - especially his inscription of the nude, black male - all written by black critics or cultural practitioners.⁴ These essays properly begin by identifying in Mapplethorpe's work the tropes of fetishization, the fragmentation of the black image and its objectification, as the forms of their appropriation within the white, gay gaze. But, as I read, I know that something else is going on as well in both the production and the reading of those texts. The continuous circling around Mapplethorpe's work is not exhausted by being able to place him as the white fetishistic, gay photographer; and this is because it is also marked by the surreptitious return of desire - that deep ambivalence of identification which makes the categories in which we have previously thought and argued about black cultural politics and the black cultural text extremely problematic. This brings to the surface the unwelcome fact that a great deal of black politics, constructed, addressed and developed directly in relation to questions of race and ethnicity, has been predicated on the assumption that the categories of gender and sexuality would stay the same and remain fixed and secured. What the new politics of representation does is to put that into question, crossing the

⁴ Kobena Mercer, "Imagining the Black Man's Sex", in Patricia Holland et al., eds., *Photography / Politics: Two* (London: Comedia / Methuen, 1987), and various articles in *Ten*, 8, 22 (1986), an issue on 'Black Experiences' edited by David A. Bailey.

questions of racism irrevocably with questions of sexuality. That is what is so disturbing, finally, to many of our settled political habits about *Passion of Remembrance*. This double fracturing entails a different kind of politics because, as we know, black radical politics has frequently been stabilized around particular conceptions of black masculinity, which are only now being put into question by black women and black gay men. At certain points, black politics has also been underpinned by a deep absence or more typically an evasive silence with reference to class.

Another element inscribed in the new politics of representation has to do with the question of ethnicity. I am familiar with all the dangers of 'ethnicity' as a concept and have written myself about the fact that ethnicity, in the form of a culturally constructed sense of Englishness and a particularly closed, exclusive and regressive form of English national identity, is one of the core characteristics of British racism today.⁵ I am also well aware that the politics of anti-racism has often today constructed itself in terms of a contestation of 'multi-ethnicity' or 'multi-culturalism'. On the other hand, as the politics of representation around the black subject shifts, I think we will begin to see a renewed contestation over the meaning of the term 'ethnicity' itself.

If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically – and the concept which refers to this is 'ethnicity'. The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time.

The displacement of the 'centred' discourses of the West

⁵ Stuart Hall, "Racism and Reaction", in *Five Views on Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978).

entails putting in question its universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere. The fact that this grounding of ethnicity in difference was deployed, in the discourse of racism, as a means of disavowing the realities of racism and repression does not mean that we can permit the term to be permanently colonized. That appropriation will have to be contested, the term dis-articulated from its position in the discourse of 'multi-culturalism' and transcoded, just as we previously had to recuperate the term 'black' from its place in a system of negative equivalences. The new politics of representation therefore also sets in motion an ideological contestation around the term, 'ethnicity'. But in order to pursue that movement further, we will have to re-theorize the concept of *difference*.

It seems to me that, in the various practices and discourses of black cultural production, we are beginning to see constructions of just such a new conception of ethnicity: a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses *difference* and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities. Difference, like representation, is also a slippery, and therefore, contested concept. There is the 'difference' which makes a radical and unbridgeable separation: and there is a 'difference' which is positional, conditional and conjunctural, closer to Derrida's notion of *différance*, though if we are concerned to maintain a politics it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier. We still have a great deal of work to do to *decouple* ethnicity, as it functions in the dominant discourse, from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state, which are the points of attachment around which a distinctive British or, more accurately, English ethnicity have been constructed. Nevertheless, I think such a project is not only possible but necessary. Indeed, this decoupling of ethnicity from the violence of the state is implicit in some of the new forms of cultural practice that are going on in films like *Passion* and *Handsworth Songs*. We are beginning to think about how to represent a non-coercive and a more diverse

conception of ethnicity, to set against the embattled, hegemonic conception of 'Englishness' which, under Thatcherism, stabilizes so many of the dominant political and cultural discourses, and which, because it is hegemonic, does not represent itself as an ethnicity at all.

This marks a real shift in the point of contestation, since it is no longer only between anti-racism and multi-culturalism but *inside* the notion of ethnicity itself. What is involved is the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand, the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race' and, on the other hand, what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery. That is to say, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or film-makers. We are all, in that sense, *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity.

The final point which I think is entailed in this new politics of representation has to do with an awareness of the black experience as a *diaspora* experience, and the consequences which this carries for the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and 'cut-and-mix' – in short, the process of cultural *diaspora-ization* (to coin an ugly term) which it implies.

In the case of young black British films and film-makers, the diaspora experience is certainly profoundly fed and nourished by, for example, the emergence of Third World cinema; by the African experience; the connection with Afro-Caribbean experience; and the deep inheritance of complex systems of representation and aesthetic traditions from Asian and African culture. But, in spite of these rich cultural 'roots', the new cultural politics is operating on new and quite distinct ground –

specifically, contestation over what it means to be 'British'. The relation of this cultural politics to the past; to its different 'roots' is profound, but complex. It cannot be simple or unmediated. It is (as a film like *Dreaming Rivers* reminds us) complexly mediated and transformed by memory, fantasy and desire. Or, as even an explicitly political film like *Handsworth Songs* clearly suggests, the relation is inter-textual – mediated, through a variety of other 'texts'. There can, therefore, be no simple 'return' or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present. This is something that was signalled as early as a film like *Blacks Britannica* and as recently as Paul Gilroy's important book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*.⁶ Fifteen years ago we didn't care, or at least I didn't care, whether there was any black in the Union Jack. Now not only do we care, we *must*.

This last point suggests that we are also approaching what I would call the end of a certain critical innocence in black cultural politics. And here, it might be appropriate to refer, glancingly, to the debate between Salman Rushdie and myself in the *Guardian* some months ago. The debate was not about whether *Handsworth Songs* or *The Passion of Remembrance* were great films or not, because, in the light of what I have said, once you enter this particular problematic, the question of what good films are, which parts of them are good and why, is open to the politics of criticism. Once you abandon essential categories, there is no place to go apart from the politics of criticism – and to enter the politics of criticism in black culture is to grow up, to leave the age of critical innocence.

It was not Salman Rushdie's particular judgement that I was contesting, so much as the mode in which he addressed them. He seemed to me to be addressing the films as if from the stable, well-established critical criteria of a *Guardian* reviewer.

⁶ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1988).

I was trying, perhaps unsuccessfully, to say that I thought this an inadequate basis for a political criticism and one which overlooked precisely the signs of innovation, and the constraints under which these film-makers were operating. It is difficult to define what an alternative mode of address would be. I certainly didn't want Salman Rushdie to say he thought the films were good because they were black. But I also didn't want him to say that he thought they weren't good because 'we creative artists all know what good films are', since I no longer believe we can resolve the questions of aesthetic value by the use of these transcendental, canonical cultural categories. I think there is another position, one which locates itself *inside* a continuous struggle and politics around black representation, but which then is able to open up a continuous critical discourse about themes, about the forms of representation, the subjects of representation, above all, the regimes of representation. I thought it was important at that point, to intervene to try and get that mode of critical address right, in relation to the new black film-making. It is extremely tricky, as I know, because as it happens, in intervening, I got the mode of address wrong too! I failed to communicate the fact that, in relation to his *Guardian* article, I thought Salman was hopelessly wrong about *Handsworth Songs*, which does not in any way diminish my judgement about the stature of *Midnight's Children*. I regret that I couldn't get it right, exactly, because the politics of criticism has to be able to get both things right.

Such a politics of criticism has to be able to say (just to give one example) why *My Beautiful Laundrette* is one of the most riveting and important films produced by a black writer in recent years and precisely for the reason that made it so controversial: its refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always 'right-on' – in a word, always and only 'positive', or what Hanif Kureishi has called, 'cheering fictions':

the writer as public relations officer, as hired liar. If there is to be a serious attempt to understand Britain today, with its mix of

racism and colours, its hysteria and despair, then, writing about it has to be complex. It can't apologize or idealize. It can't sentimentalize and it can't represent only one group as having a monopoly on virtue.⁷

Laundrette is important particularly in terms of its control, of knowing what it is doing, as the text crosses those frontiers between gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class. *Sammy and Rosie* is also a bold and adventurous film, though in some ways less coherent, not so sure of where it is going, overdriven by an almost uncontrollable, cool anger. One needs to be able to offer that as a critical judgement and to argue it through, to have one's mind changed, without undermining one's essential commitment to the project of the politics of black representation.

⁷ Hanif Kureishi, "Dirty Washing", *Time Out* (14-20 November 1985).

Anna Maria Cimitile

**The (Un)fixity of the Law:
Modalities of Stasis in *The Merchant of Venice***

Law is one of the topics dramatized in *The Merchant of Venice*. In this text law seemingly stands for fixity as well as necessity; it appears as the inalterable that guarantees order and stability; in this sense, as a realm of stasis, presented almost to oppose the dangerous space of circulation and exchange, equally important in the play, represented by commerce.

Law in *The Merchant of Venice* is "the law of the father": in Belmont, it is so literally, as it is the will of Portia's dead father that actually determines her future; but it is so even according to the psychoanalytic use of the phrase, as in the play the space of the law sums up necessity and predetermination, unalterability and authority; what Jacques Derrida has defined "Force of Law". At the same time, however, this law enforces its realm in ways that disturb the stasis that it embodies as "law of the father". In "The Theme of the Three Caskets", Sigmund Freud's essay on the play, the psychoanalyst detected at the heart of the comedic episode of the caskets test the dark motif of the human compulsion towards death. He revealed the uncanny ambivalence of what appeared as the choice of love and life. In a similar fashion, this essay aims at uncovering the aspects of the law that infringe its alleged fixity. To do so, it explores the presentation of the law, the modalities that characterize its realm in the play, and the extent to which they reinforce or uproot its fixity. It focuses on the discrepancies that can be found in the text's definition of the law; it is my argument that those discrepancies are part of the very structure of the law, that its fixity and stasis rely in fact on them.

Walter Cohen has stated that all explanatory power is "inextricably bound ... to such questions as what sort of knowledge is being sought and why";¹ reading the ambivalences and discrepancies of the presentation of the law in *The Merchant of Venice* questions the alleged uniformity that other readings, at other times, have attempted to confer to it; it questions the 'homogeneity' of the text – and the culture – under discussion. As the stasis of the realm of law proposed in the play is here exposed in its movements and plural modalities, and ultimately in its unfixed character, so the fixity of any cultural paradigm always contains the elements for its own subversions.

Appearances and essences in the caskets test

Belmont, home to the heiress Portia, appears as the realm of stasis par excellence. Already time is of a static nature in Belmont. To the *chronos* of Venice, the time of becoming, "always related with the concept of strategy and therefore of gain and loss", Belmont opposes its immutable, ahistorical temporality, *aiòn*, time as being, which the mythic, arcadian atmosphere created in the exchange between Lorenzo and Jessica in 5.1 contributes to shape.² The sense of absoluteness of this temporality befits a world whose wealth is a given and is not subject to the fluctuations of mercantile riches.³

Portia's wealth is inherited from her father; its future, along with the heroine's future, is bound to the outcome of the three

¹ Walter Cohen, "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism", *English Literary History* 49 (1982), 765-89, 784.

² See Margherita Giulietti, "Tempi della temporalità di *The Merchant of Venice*", in Mariangela Tempera, ed., "*The Merchant of Venice*". *Dal testo alla scena* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1994), 53-62. The quotation is at page 56.

³ W. H. Auden also linked the notion of time to the nature of wealth; he talked of a cyclical, repetitive time in Belmont, where wealth is inherited rather than made, and opposed it to the linear and dynamic time of mercantile societies (see W. H. Auden, "Brothers and Others", in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1963], 218-37).

caskets test, the one condition for the 'choice' of her husband as devised by the heiress's parent: in order to win Portia, each suitor must undertake a test, and choose the one casket among three that contains her portrait. Before his death Portia's father decreed that only the suitor who would give the right answer to the caskets test would deserve his daughter and her dowry. Portia's father maintains control over his riches even after his death; his will predefines his daughter's future and consequently the future of the whole of Belmont. The destiny of Belmont has its origin in the dead; it cannot be changed, and in this sense makes Belmont a static world; it is as it were completed, accomplished even prior to its own enactment; it is a fate which puts the end at the beginning, readjusts the notion of time-as-becoming by adding to it a quality of eternity, here foregrounded by death's presence at the very beginning of Belmont's 'history'.⁴

The stasis of a world that accepts the will of the dead as its law is, however, very much complicated in the three caskets test, the very embodiment of that will. The test, introduced in 1.2, is the most relevant alteration to the source story as found in *Il Pecorone*.⁵ Where in the Italian story we find a widow who has herself made a law according to which every gentleman

⁴ Death has a very strong presence in *The Merchant of Venice*, as Richard P. Wheeler has noted: "[d]eath also casts a darker shadow over *Merchant* than over any other comedy, except, perhaps, *Measure for Measure* ... the authority of Portia's dead father; the death's head Morocco finds in the golden casket; the deathly pallor Freud saw in the lead casket and, indeed, attending the whole casket ritual; the death that Antonio is ready to embrace in confirmation of his love for Bassanio; the death that Shylock would bring into the world as the culmination of his rage; and, finally, the death that Shylock all but dies in his ultimate defeat" (Richard P. Wheeler, "And my loud crying still": *The Sonnets, The Merchant of Venice, Othello*", in Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Shakespeare's "Rough Magic": Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber* [Newark: University of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985], 193-209, 205).

⁵ It has a different origin, which has been traced back to the medieval collection *Gesta Romanorum*. See John Russell Brown, "Introduction", in William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1955 [reprinted Routledge, 1988]), xi-lviii, xxvii-xxxii. All references to the play are to this edition and will be given in text.

who arrives in Belmonte must undertake a test, in *The Merchant of Venice* the test is imposed on Portia and her suitors from the outside;⁶ where in *Il Pecorone* the trial that is forced on her visitors is the expression of the lady's own will, in Shakespeare Portia's will and choice are overcome by her father's, as she states: "O me the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father" (1.2.22-25). By offering a vision of the law as exterior imposition on the individual will, these changes have a great relevance for the definition of the justice of the law in this text. The law's fixity means in fact impossibility of choice for Portia. The caskets ban choice. At the same time, however, the test asks precisely that the suitors *choose* one of three chests, which are respectively in gold, silver, and lead, aided (or misled) in their choice by the inscription that each bears. The difference that the three metals offer, the variety from which to choose, the appeal that they make to the suitors' judgment seem to suggest principles which are in contrast with those purported by the same test when we consider that it is the enactment of the dead father's will, a legislation which would leave no room for choice as such. In the caskets test law and choice are brought together.

The space of the Law is a space of necessity. It is a space of injunctions, impositions which cannot be disobeyed. In *The Merchant of Venice* the origin of the law, in the quality of the will of the dead, is outside the reality that it defines; it is beyond its limits, and in this respect unquestionable by it. Necessity also means that there is no explanation of the lawfulness of the law, no reason for its being law. This is a matter of force and authority. Blaise Pascal pointed this out when he wrote of the "mystical foundation of authority":

Custom is the sole basis for equity, for the simple reason that it

⁶ See the translation of the story from *Il Pecorone* given in "Appendix I" to *The Merchant of Venice*, 140-53.

is *received*; it is the mystical foundation of its authority. Whoever traces it to its source annihilates it.⁷

In 1670, Pascal's *Pensées* present the unfathomability of the source of authority as what gives it its force. No reason or justification is to be found for its lawfulness:

It follows, from this constitutively senseless character of the Law, that we must obey it not because it is just, good or even beneficial, but simply *because it is the law* – this tautology articulates the vicious circle of its authority, the fact that the last foundation of the Law's authority lies in its process of enunciation.⁸

The idea of the tautological nature of the law was already in Michel de Montaigne:

Lawes are now maintained in credit, not because they are essentially just, but because they are lawes. It is the mysticall foundation of their authority—they have none other.... Whosoever obeyeth them because they are just, obeyes them not justly the way as he ought.⁹

Glossing Montaigne, Jacques Derrida writes:

... here Montaigne is clearly distinguishing laws, that is to say

⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, fragment 66 (the numeration of the *Pensées* is according to the bilingual edition *Frammenti*, ed. Enea Bolmas, preface by Jean Mesnard (Milano: Rizzoli, 1983). This translation is from Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority", in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Nelson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 3-67, 12. My italics.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 37.

⁹ Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, "Of Experience", in *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1894), 546-75, 550.

droit, from justice. The justice of law, justice as law is not justice. Laws are not just *as* laws. One obeys them not because they are just but because they have authority.¹⁰

First published in French in 1580, Montaigne's *Essays* appeared in their final form in 1595; they were published in their first English translation, by John Florio, in 1603. In the late 1590s the caskets test in *The Merchant of Venice* puts on stage a law whose characteristic is precisely the mystical, beyond-justice and tautological authority of which Montaigne and Pascal write. In its coming from the dead, and in the necessity to respect it that is made evident in the play, the will of the father in Belmont exemplifies this character of the law.

Yet the law of Portia's father is accepted in the delusion that it is *just*. The text reproduces the fallacious and delusive superimposition of law and justice foregrounded by both Montaigne and Pascal. The caskets test represents a law that has given itself an image of justice. Nerissa says of the test:

Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations,—therefore the lott'ry that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly, but one who you shall rightly love.

(1.2.27-32)

Nerissa speaks of the justness of the test, a 'truth' which Bassanio soon comes to confirm. As she says that the right man for Portia can only choose rightly, Nerissa not only gives choice a character of necessity, but also gives the reason why the father's will must be respected. When Nerissa reports to Portia that the first suitors have decided not to continue in their suit to the heiress unless it can be done "by some other sort than your father's imposition, depending on the caskets" (1.2.100-01), Portia's reply indicates the acceptance of the law without questioning it:

¹⁰ Derrida, "Force of Law", 12.

If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana,
unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will...

(1.2.102-04)

And when Bassanio comes to answer the riddle of the caskets, the 'justice' of this law is made evident and Portia rewarded for her submission to the authority of the law.¹¹ In the caskets test *The Merchant of Venice* foregrounds both the tautological character of the law and its superimpositions with justice.

Portia's acceptance of the paternal will, without a manifest reason as it is, is a matter of *belief*. For Pascal, the belief that prompts the acceptance of the law is the belief in its truthfulness. Slavoj Žižek has commented that this "supposition of a Truth, a Meaning behind the stupid, traumatic, inconsistent fact of the Law" is a "necessary structural illusion".¹² Truth is not there in the law; it is imagined as being there. Law is never a matter of truth, as Hobbes also knew: "*autoritas, non veritas, facit legem*".¹³ Yet truth must be found in law, if the latter is to be accepted. The caskets test is the staging of this relation belief-law, where the senseless authority of the latter is clothed with the explanatory truth (the justness of the test) imagined by the former.

If the acceptance of the law as such cannot exist unless an illusionary meaning or truth is imagined to support it, then the positive outcome of the caskets test, in keeping with the fairy-tale character of the story, is the materialization of that imagined truth. In this sense the test can be read as a eulogy of

¹¹ For Carol Leventen the law's authority relies on this unconditional acceptance on the daughter's side: "Portia herself contains her own potentially subversive tendencies", which she reads in terms of "internalisation of cultural imperatives" (Carol Leventen, "Patrimony and Patriarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*", in Valerie Wayne, ed., *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* [New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991], 59-79, 70).

¹² Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 38.

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, quoted in Samuel Weber, "In the Name of the Law", in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, 232-57, 249.

the law: it gives law a façade of justness, a truthfulness that justifies retrospectively, and that rewards those who have submitted. It offers those necessary explanations to an otherwise incomprehensible acceptance of the law. With them, it covers its absolutely irrational character. Žižek defines this process in terms of repression: “[w]hat is ‘repressed’ then, is not some obscure origin of the Law but the very fact that the Law is not to be accepted as true, only as necessary – the fact that *its authority is without truth*”.¹⁴ In the caskets test, however, the will of the dead at the beginning points to the unquestionable, unfathomable source of the law, to its necessary character, so that its acceptance ‘as such’ is not really repressed here; in fact, it is only later that the outcome of the test will clothe this necessity with justice and truthfulness. In the test are foregrounded two aspects of the law, the mystical foundation of its authority and its justness, one being its essence, the other its appearance, according to Montaigne and Pascal.

The relation appearance/essence is central to the test. It is the modality of the law’s manifestation, and of its enforcement of order. “*All that glisters is not gold*” (2.7.65) is what Morocco, the first suitor, reads in the scroll found in the golden casket that he has chosen, and the motto aptly summarizes the viewpoint advanced in the test, that appearances are deceitful. Each one of the caskets contains something that is quite different from what one would expect by relying on its outer look: the golden chest conceals a carrion Death; the silver one a fool’s head; the lead box Portia’s portrait and, with it, the prize of winning her and her fortune in return for the right answer. The inside and the outside do not correspond, and the former is privileged over the latter as the real thing. In order to get to that inside one must abandon the kind of knowledge that relies on the senses, on vision in this case; the show that appeals to the eye bears no resemblance to the content. Any continuity between appearance and essence has been interrupted here,

¹⁴ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 38. Žižek is commenting a passage from Kafka’s *The Trial*.

replaced by another modality of relation, where the outside is the opposite of the inside.¹⁵ The two suitors Morocco and Arragon, who choose respectively the golden and the silver casket, lose because they fail to understand this different modality, because they still take appearances and words at face value.¹⁶ When they submit to the test, in what they say about the metals and the inscriptions on the chests, they reveal a belief in resemblances between outside and inside, combined with a confidence that language is unambiguous; hence their ruin. Bassanio, on the contrary, chooses “*not by the view*” (3.2.131), as he knows that inside and outside tell different stories, and his choice acknowledges the plurality of meaning: when he chooses the lead casket, its inscription, “Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath” (2.7.9), turns out to enclose also the meanings of the two other inscriptions as understood by Morocco and Arragon, namely the golden chest’s “Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire” (2.7.5), which for Morocco is Portia herself, and the silver casket’s “Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves” (2.7.7), which for Arragon, proud of his merits, is once more Portia; and Portia is in fact found in the lead casket. The hazard that the lead chest demands from the suitor can be seen as this readiness to accept the opacity of the outer look, and to risk all by betting on the possibility of another, different and invisible meaning for the lead and its motto. The riddle of the test relies

¹⁵ Kiernan Ryan even says that this modality echoes “the logic of inversion” that runs throughout the play and that is unmasked by the Shylock plot, that is, that “an apparently civilized society ... [is] premised on barbarity, on the ruthless priority of money values over human values, of the rights of property over the elementary rights of men and women” (Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., [London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995], 21).

¹⁶ Arragon does reflect on “the fool multitude that choose by show, / Not learning more than the fond eye doth teach, / Which pries not to th’ interior, but like the martlet / Builds in the weather on the outward wall, / Even in the force and road of casualty” (2.9.26-30). But then he is brought to error when he self-consciously reads in the inscription “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves” a reference to the worth of the suitor, which must be as much as Portia’s worth (see 2.9.36-52).

on the discrepancy between appearance and essence, and the right answer is the one that acknowledges it.

If the law of the law, the law of the test, is to mistrust appearances, this injunction is to enforce an order that is instead of continuity between show and essence. The solution of the riddle will state the coincidence of the law's authority and its truthfulness, so that the acknowledgment of the difference between inside and outside in the test actually leads to a coincidence of the law's appearance (its imagined truth) and its essence (its tautological lawfulness).

The enforcement of the law, the preservation of fixity, is done in the test through various modalities that should be a disturbance of its order, but that here instead support it. I have already said of how the discrepancy between appearance and essence, the choice that the caskets offer to the suitors, the invocation and exaltation of hazard as a positive quality, can be seen as contrasting the fixed development of a story whose outcome, being the answer to an injunction, is predetermined; in a similar fashion, the static realm of the law is enforced by another disturbing modality, the peculiar link between necessity and choice. In "The Theme of the Three Caskets" Freud wrote of the character of necessity present in the test in *The Merchant of Venice*.¹⁷ Applying to literature the tool of psychoanalytic interpretation as used in the analysis of dreams, he said that the three chests were to be read as three women. Then, after a brief *excursus* through myths, fairy tales, and more examples from literature where the motif of a man choosing among three women recurs, he suggested that these women, of whom it was always the most beautiful and desirable to be chosen, were really the Moerae, or Fates, of whom the third, "the most excellent one", was the Goddess of Death. Freud therefore concluded that the choice of the most virtuous woman is in fact the choice of death, and the theme of the choice itself a

¹⁷ See Sigmund Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets", in *Art and Literature: Jensen's "Gradiva", Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1985), 233-47. The essay was first published in 1913.

substitution for the character of necessity that the Moerae, as ineluctable law of death and dissolution, represent:

Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually. No greater triumph of wish-fulfilment is conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women.¹⁸

Choice in *The Merchant of Venice* would be therefore a sort of cover for what is in fact the unavoidable fate.¹⁹

In the casket test therefore necessity and choice are one each its opposite. Choice and law in the test share a certain ambivalence which puts them in a relation different from that of simple substitution of one for the other. There is ambivalence in the text, as Freud, still discussing the choice of three women, already acknowledged:

On closer inspection we observe, to be sure, that the original myth is not so thoroughly distorted that traces of it do not show through and betray its presence. The free choice between the three sisters is, properly speaking, no free choice, for it must necessarily fall on the third if every kind of evil must not come about, as it does in *King Lear*. The fairest and best of women, who has taken the place of the Death-goddess, has kept certain characteristics that border on the uncanny, so that from them we have been able to guess at what lies beneath.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁹ It is interesting that Freud's essay repeats this modality of the play, while presenting itself as a way to "unmask" the text. On this point see Sarah Kofman, "Conversions: *The Merchant of Venice* under the Sign of Saturn", in Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 142-66. See also Marjorie Garber, "Freud's Choice: 'The Theme of the Three Caskets'", in *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (London: Methuen, 1987), 74-86, where it is noted how "the essay on the 'Three Caskets' is really an essay about substitution that enacts substitution as its own methodology" (79).

²⁰ Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets", 245.

Choice has here become a necessity, the enactment of an unlocatable law. In the caskets test, choice is not free choice, for it is the answer to the test's injunction. The test imposes choice as a law; when the suitors choose they are actually enacting the law. Choice is necessity in Belmont. If each suitor is the maker of his own fortune, this is only an acceptance of the law. Choice is law; the law is to choose. Law (necessity) and choice each exist in the form of the other, *as* the other. For all its concern about appearances and essences, visibility and invisibility, in the articulation of necessity and choice the caskets test becomes the *scene of ambivalence*. Ambivalence annuls the vertical structure surface/depth by having two contrasting aspects both present on the surface, both *manifest*. Necessity and choice, rather than being one concealed by the other, are each exposed by/in the other. In the test, law manifestly offers choice, and, vice versa, choice is manifestly the law's injunction.²¹ At different levels, law manifests itself in both this modality of visibility and the show/essence modality.

The caskets test offers a situation where opposites are one each the enactment and manifestation of the other. And it is at this point that the enforcement of the law, and therefore the guaranteeing of stasis and fixity, are more evidently disturbed by/through their very mode of existence. Here law exists as choice, and promotes hazard. Hazard suggests indeterminacy, a condition quite different from the ordered state of law. Yet in Belmont to risk is the law's imperative, as the right answer to the caskets is the chest with the motto about hazard, a choice which is itself an act of taking chances.²² Bassanio wins Portia

²¹ With a different stress, Kofman also talks of the relation necessity/choice in the caskets test in terms of manifestedness: "the choice to which the suitors must submit cannot, as such, disguise the *necessity* of death: choice, by its very essence, implies luck, whether good or bad, and more particularly the risk, as in the golden casket (and not the leaden casket) of finding a skeleton in place of love. In any case it implies, once more in a *manifest* way, the risk of death, the only proof of a real love ..." (Kofman, "Conversions", 149).

²² Hazard is exalted throughout the text as a virtuous quality. For a lengthy study see Joan Ozark Holmer, "*The Merchant of Venice*": *Choice, Hazard and Consequence* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1995).

because he, more than the others, completely accepts this peculiar situation where to obey the law is not only to agree to undertake the test, but also to choose the lead chest, that is, to act hazardingly, in a manner that by definition defies law.

The law's fixity is unfixed even in its enunciation. Even the modality in which the law gives its injunction is different from what we would expect as the language of law: a riddle. If the enforcement of the law guarantees fixity, and the realm of law is static to the extent that it is unalterable, this stasis exists here not only in its enactment as hazardous choice, but also in the ambiguity and ambivalence that riddles exalt in language. As Catherine Belsey writes:

Riddles ... exploit the duplicity of the signifier, the secret alterity that subsists in meaning. They prevaricate, explicitly deferring and obscuring the truth. Riddles demonstrate that meaning is neither single nor transparent, that words can be used to conceal it.²³

In Belmont, the law is a given, but it takes the deferring and obscuring shape of a riddle. In the form of a riddle, before an answer is given, the law's fixity is open to ambiguity, suspended; but the riddle is the law, and once more we have the ambivalent situation where the stasis of a realm that accepts the univocal law, the dead father's will, without questioning, and what should be its shattering, the ambiguity of language, are the same thing.

Law in Belmont is stasis. It is the absolute and absolutely just, the dead's injunction, to which all must submit. The story (and history) is predetermined, and static in this sense. But law in Belmont combines necessity and choice, obedience and hazard, and expresses itself in the language of a riddle. It promotes the distinction appearance/essence, exalts the hidden as truthful, and if this is only to reinforce at a different level the coincidence between appearance and essence, it disturbs fixity

²³ Catherine Belsey, "Love in Venice", *Shakespeare Survey* 44 (1991), 41-53, 44-45.

nonetheless. To complicate things even more, at the same time the manifestedness of ambivalence is the law's modality. And if the law's static order would mean absence of becoming (at least of an unpredictable becoming, as this is the realm of the given), in the caskets test that becoming is instead made possible; the law itself produces the story by existing in the form of a riddle which will be answered, by combining with choice and hazard, the indeterminate that makes the story possible. The caskets test stages this double character of the law: its immobility, and contemporarily its becoming in its existence as its opposite, as choice and risk. Derrida has written of differance as the inevitable modality where, given two opposites, the one is the other differed and deferred;²⁴ in *The Merchant of Venice* the law-as-choice of the caskets stages differance; its fixity proves structurally analogous to it.

Letter and spirit in Venice: the logic of the supplement

The unalterable, deadly law of Belmont appropriates the unpredictable outcome of hazardous action by legislating it, while in the same gesture its static terms are redefined by the law's existence as choice and risk. That law, however, finds itself accomplished according to its own injunction; its authority is respected to the end. The will of the father is obeyed: what we learn about the caskets test from Nerissa, that the suitor who really loves Portia will choose rightly, is proved to be true, and the whole caskets episode remains faithful to the letter of the law. But when the discussion on law is transferred to Venice, into a courtroom, the letter of the law finds itself taking some drastic turns in the process of being applied, and in the name of justice. A quibble, by exasperating the literal meaning of the bond between Antonio and Shylock, will overturn the situation in the trial. The ending is still presented

²⁴ See Jacques Derrida, "Differance", in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of the Sign*, trans. David B. Allison, preface by Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129-60.

as a triumph of justice, but the legal action taken is different from that equally legal for which Shylock had appealed to Venetian law: Shylock came to exact a pound of Antonio's flesh, and goes away as a defendant who has lost everything. This is the 'static' character of justice, whose letter leads to different endings.

The treatments of the law in Belmont and Venice differ in their starting points. In the trial, the bond is perfectly legal. Shylock has lent three thousand ducats to Antonio for three months under the agreed condition that, if the merchant does not return the loan at the end of the stated period, the usurer can exact a pound of his flesh, "to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" (1.3.146-47). But such bond is outrageous, and the mortal exaction of the pound of flesh cannot be allowed to happen. What looks like an inevitably tragic course of law must therefore be altered, and to this extent mercy is invoked first. At this stage of the trial the relation to the law is evidently different from that put forward in the caskets test; here there is no acceptance of the law as it is; the aim is from the start the *alteration* of the fixity of the law, although this will later appear as still a reinforcement of the law.

When Portia, disguised as the young lawyer Balthazar come to the trial to give his learned opinion on the case, makes her appearance in the courtroom, she declares that, since the bond cannot be impugned by the law, and because of its cruelty, the Jew must be merciful. To Shylock's question on why he must renounce the forfeit of his bond, Portia replies with the famous speech on mercy (see 4.1.180-201); mercy is not imposed, but grows spontaneously in the hearts of men; justice must be mitigated by it because "none of us /Should see salvation" (4.1.195-96) if we were to live by it alone. The first thing about Portia's speech is that it presents the earthly justice as opposed to the heavenly mercy, and in doing so states the superiority of the latter. It distinguishes between justice and good, as justice on its own would bring no salvation for anyone. In invoking mercy, Portia contrasts the more common assumption that justice is good, and indirectly depicts it in a negative way. At

this stage, Portia's speech reveals that certain aspects of justice can be negative features as much as they are good qualities: justice, as law, is strict, intransigent, obtuse to that leniency which is often more welcome and just than any firm judgment. As Portia acknowledges the legitimacy of Shylock's request, her invocation of mercy proves to be almost a confrontation of the law. But it still comes across as a legitimate solicitation, which, if followed, will lead to a solution as fair as the pursuit of justice.

In order to be just in Portia's sense, justice must renounce its accomplishment, accept supplementation by mercy. It is interesting that the figure who opposes law and justice should be Portia, the daughter who in Belmont, in another context, behaves in a totally different way, and willingly submits to her father's law, although this makes her "weary". *The Merchant of Venice* presents two reactions to law. On the one hand, in Belmont, it is the injunction that must be followed, that cannot be and is not confronted; this law is beyond those it controls, and it is so through its acceptance by its subjects: Portia knows the right answer to the test, as the casket scenes make clear, but she never interferes when the suitors are choosing, neither to aid nor to mislead them. Although Portia has the power to breach her father's law, she does not use it.²⁵ In Belmont, law rules through the assent of its subjects. On the other hand, when law is the civil law, the justice of men, although it is said to be unalterable (in the courtroom the Duke and Antonio have already surrendered to it before Portia's arrival), it is nevertheless

²⁵ However, critics have offered contrasting views regarding the scene where Bassanio chooses the leaden chest; in that scene the song that is played in the background, although never mentioning "lead", with its rhymes with that word has often been read as the practical aid for the right choice from Portia to Bassanio. Harry Berger, Jr. gives such a reading but problematizes the scene by writing that there, in the language used in the exchanges between Portia and Bassanio, what is revealed is the heiress's conflict between independence and submission, on the verge of breaking the law but deferring the act (see Harry Berger, Jr., "Marriage and Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Casket Scene Revisited", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32 [1981], 155-62, esp. 157-60).

opposed, said to be defective when on its own, and wanting something to supplement its deficiency, mercy in this case. In Venice, Portia aims at altering the outcome of the written bond, and her alterations are considered just and lawful. Here, the order of the law takes many detours to assert itself, and is, as in Belmont although differently, all but static in its enforcements. Mercy is one such detour; in the courtroom it is in turn invoked, asked from, and apparently performed by different characters - who stand for different factions in the trial- and is employed each time in a different way.

Frederick Turner has classified mercy among luck, hazard, free gifts, the indeterminate; it is dangerous if left on its own, but is necessary to temper justice.²⁶ Portia distinguishes justice from mercy and most critics reproduce that difference. Turner, in particular, by associating mercy with the indeterminate, makes it even more evidently opposite to law as the realm of stasis, order, predetermination, and a confrontation with its authority and power. But mercy can be read in another way too. Last century Friedrich Nietzsche proposed a different understanding of clemency: a community leaves its injurers unpunished only when it feels very strong, and knows that the injury does not affect its power, does not decrease it; at this stage only does it rule by mercy. This is still a display and enforcement of power, and justice combined with mercy is only a sublimation of itself:

The self-sublimation of justice: we know what a nice name it gives itself - *mercy*; it remains, of course, the prerogative of the most powerful man, better still, his way of being beyond the law.²⁷

Mercy, the detour of justice invoked by Portia, is an act of power, and one that only the powerful make.

²⁶ See Frederick Turner, "The Meaning of Value: An Economics for the Future", *New Literary History* 21 (1990), 747-62, 760.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 52.

Many critics have argued for a hypocritical character of the concept of mercy in the play. Indeed, the clement sentence that concludes the trial scene, the request for Shylock's conversion, could be read in accordance with what Michel Foucault says about the shift of target theorized by the eighteenth-century reformers as a means of better punishment: "[t]he expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations".²⁸ The soul, rather than the body, is the means of a total control of the subjected. Richard Wilson has given a Foucauldian reading of mercy in Shakespeare's comedies, which can be placed alongside the Nietzschean interpretation.²⁹ He writes that clemency is also a means of subjection, one whose aim is not only to punish, but to put the punished's life at the service of the established order, for it demanded "in return for life, a subjection as total as it was presumed to be productive".³⁰ Mercy is a means of power, even more powerful than the king's right of death over his subjects, for it produces *assent*, and not just the awe that the spectacles of executions used to arise.³¹ For Wilson mercy is part of the discourse of power, of power as discursive practice, as it was shaping itself in what Foucault calls the classical age and which Wilson identifies, in England, with the Elizabethan and the Jacobean era. In this light, the supreme act of mercy in the play, Antonio's request for Shylock's conversion, is nothing but an assertion of the merchant's dominance, and part of the

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977 [Paris, 1975]), 16.

²⁹ See Richard Wilson, "The Quality of Mercy: Discipline and Punishment in Shakespearean Comedy", in *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 118-57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

³¹ The assent is obtained not only from the "pardoned" victim, but from the audience too. Wilson interestingly links the representation of power as being merciful with genre, and reads the Shakespearean comedy as "a more modern discursive practice than tragedy, since, generating pleasure and relief instead of pity and terror, it secures not simply submission but assent.... the ensuing applause does not celebrate release so much as it salutes the 'new state' of subjection" (*ibid.*, 148).

commercial rivalry between the two, as the conversion "would ideally force Shylock to stop charging interest.... effectively eliminating Antonio's most threatening business rival".³²

Mercy secures a "monopoly of discourse" for authority: merciful sentences reduce the reprieved to silence, whereas the enactment of death penalties offered the condemned the opportunity in their last speech either to defend themselves or to rail against sovereignty, just before being executed, when their voice often raised an attack against power at the very moment when that power was asserting its force over them.³³ For Wilson, Shylock's acceptance of his sentence represents this new, more complete form of subjugation obtained by ruling with mercy:

... Shylock's signature will mark the point at which the Renaissance infliction of corporal punishment is contracted in a modern discursive subjection.... By abolishing the scales and knife of the archaic festival of blood, his [Shakespeare's] Duke denies the condemned the right to make an *amende honorable* or to rail against authority in a gallows speech, and so seizes in the monopoly of discourse a more epochal victory than the monopoly of violence. As Hobbes saw, mercy stifles resistance into compliance....³⁴

The concept of mercy put forward by Portia and enacted by the Duke is a form of total and subtler control.

Portia asks clemency of Shylock but the latter, not being in power, cannot give it without undermining his own rights in doing so. For Terry Eagleton:

... mercy ... disregards the precise exchanges of credit and debt, crime and punishment, in a lavishly gratuitous (grace-like) gesture. This, of course, is what Portia requests of Shylock, who

³² Susan Oldrieve, "Marginalized Voices in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 5:1 (Spring 1993), 87-105, 97.

³³ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 29.

³⁴ Wilson, *Will Power*, 149.

is sensible to be rather wary. For such gratuitousness is a deeply ambivalent quality: if it can creatively short-circuit the harsh equivalences of justice (an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth), it is also, one might claim, all very well for some. Those who wield power can afford to dispense with exact justice from time to time, since they, after all, control the rules of the game. It is less easy or intelligent for outcasts like Shylock, whose sole protection lies in the law, to conjure it away so cavalierly. The victimized need a fixed contract, however hard-hearted that may seem, precisely because they would be foolish to rely on the generosity of their oppressors, who are even more hard-hearted than print. If mercy is gratuitous, then the dispossessed can never quite know when their superiors are likely to be seized with a spontaneous bout of geniality. Gratuitousness, moreover, has a hint of Portia's perverse reading of the bond, an act which equally threatens to erode the essential impartiality of the law.³⁵

Eagleton sees mercy as an act that will more likely come from those in power than from the outcasts; power can afford generosity without being lessened by it, whereas the victimized would have their rights even more weakened by behaving mercifully. Mercy is, once more, a matter of power.

To Portia's request for mercy Shylock replies by invoking the law; he asks that the letter of the bond is respected. For this reason Shylock is traditionally associated with justice, in the form of the Old Testament *lex talionis*, and opposed to Portia's Christian mercy.³⁶ Justice and mercy are indeed presented as

³⁵ Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 41.

³⁶ The distinction justice-mercy has been repeatedly read as exposing the difference between the rigorous Old Testament law and the less severe New Testament one. Walter Cohen has added a historicist valence to that biblical interpretation, reading in the trial the emergence of the contrast between an aristocratic and a bourgeois relation to the law, and in Portia's solution a mediation between the two: "[o]n the one hand, the case acquires such political reverberations because Shakespeare assumes a feudal conception of law, in which justice is the central peacetime conduit of aristocratic power. On the other, Shylock's threat becomes so grave because the trial is based on a bourgeois commitment to binding contracts. Portia's integrative solution reveals the compatibility of rigor and freedom,

opposites in this play, and only a reading as it were 'against' the text, or outside it, as the one offered here through Nietzsche (and Eagleton and Wilson), can put in question that opposition. However, if the duality justice/mercy is set in place in the play, the associations of respectively Shylock and Portia with its terms does not hold. Portia, faced with Shylock's unyielding claim to his bond, will soon abandon her plea for mercy, and assume a more evident position *within* the rigour of the law, such as to disrupt the clear distinction between Shylock and herself.³⁷

In the trial scene mercy is only spoken of, but is never practised.³⁸ First, mercy is asked of Shylock by Portia, to save Antonio's life, as something that, different from justice, tempers its strictness; in that form, however, it is denied to Shylock, when he acknowledges that he cannot have his bond without infringing the law by killing a Christian, and is prepared to renounce his contract, even Bassanio's offer of three times his loan, and only asks for his principal back, without any interest. The *lex talionis* so often associated with Shylock is the form taken by Venetian law as embodied by Portia: if Shylock wanted justice when it meant a cruel action against Antonio, he shall have justice now that its cruelty has been skilfully made to go against himself: "The Jew shall have all justice,—soft no haste! / He shall have nothing but the penalty" (4.1.317-18). Here heavenly mercy has totally disappeared from the scene of justice. But, immediately after, it

of bourgeois self-interest and aristocratic social responsibility. But the profound allegiance to contractual law can make this ideological yoking seem either unjust or precarious, responses that indicate the tension between the limits of reality and the promises of utopia in *The Merchant of Venice*" (Cohen, "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism", 776).

³⁷ For this position see, among the others, Alessandro Serpieri, "Contratti d'amore e di morte in *The Merchant of Venice*", in "The Merchant of Venice". *Dal testo alla scena*, 9-21.

³⁸ Some critics have pointed to the fact that the request of conversion to Christianity was considered a merciful act at the time, and that we should take that into account when reading the play. But that request is too much imbricated with other, more interested ones to be considered a clement act.

reappears again, in the Duke's pardon and, we can say surprisingly at this point, in Portia's words again, when she asks Antonio what mercy he is prepared to offer to Shylock (see 4.1.374). However, in Antonio's requests, and in the Duke's threat to rescind his pardon if they are not met by the Jew, mercy acquires a different meaning: it looks more like a vested interest, and an expedient to secure assent to the law. The New Testament clement law is invoked as the opposite of rigorous justice, but used in fact as its reinforcement. Shylock knows this only too well; when he is 'mercifully' deprived of all he owns, he says:

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that,—
 You take my house, when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house: you take my life
 When you do take the means whereby I live.
 (4.1.370-73)

Shylock's is the best comment on the clemency applied in Venice.

Mercy is a myth in this scene. It switches its position from moderator of the law's rigour to its supporter; it is the word that has no realization in the text, but that forms law as the space of fixity. Paradoxically, it does so by apparent deviation and alteration of the unalterable, static justice.

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As her first appeal to mercy proves vain, Portia resorts to the law itself to save Antonio's life. She will defy Shylock on his own grounds. Portia's quibble introduces a new, fundamental element at the core of law as justice: interpretation. In Belmont, in the caskets test, interpretation is already present, but in the solution of the riddle it is more like decoding, deciphering in order to get to a predetermined meaning, the one given by the father. Portia's interpretation of the bond, instead, moves away from what Shylock, Antonio, and certainly the audience with them, at least from a certain point on, had assumed to be its

sense, that Antonio had put and lost his life in the contract with the Jew. Her interpretation, rather than aiming at finding out a pre-existent and static meaning, produces more meanings, adds different perspectives, alters assumed ones.

The trial scene is apparently an exaltation of justice; not the one obtained by respecting and applying the law, but the gracious justice that is beyond and better than the law, the justice that supplies fair remedies where the fixed law would have none. This true justice was the aim of all sentences passed in the Renaissance Chancery courts, where the judges were prepared to interfere with and alter the common law when they felt that it would not be graciously just. The courts ruled by what was called the equity principle.³⁹ In the trial scene, Bassanio invokes the Chancery courts spirit when he asks Portia to alter the law in order to achieve a "great right":

And I beseech you
 Wrest once the law to your authority,—
 To do a great right, do a little wrong,—
 And curb this cruel devil of his will.
 (4.1.210-13)

But Portia replies that this is impossible:

It must not be, there is no power in Venice
 Can alter a decree established:
 'Twill be recorded for a precedent,
 And many an error by the same example
 Will rush into the state, — it cannot be.
 (4.1.214-18)

In order to exploit it with her quibble, Portia now defends the rigour of the law and, strict as it may be, she argues for its enforcement. Portia at first distinguishes between law and

³⁹ Quite an aleatory principle, it was always very difficult to establish what could be meant by it from time to time. For an account see E. F. Tucker, "The Letter of the Law in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976), 93-101.

justness in the speech on mercy, but her justice will not be obtained by any deviation from the law. She invoked clemency to supplement the law when asking Shylock to produce a different outcome for the trial, but now that saving Antonio's life depends on her she shows no intention of transgressing the law; she prefers to use an interpretation that reveals that the law *itself* demands a capsizing of the situation in the process, with no need for its alteration. In the name of justice, her quibble presents the character and nature of the law's fixity.

Shortly after her refusal to "curb" the law, Portia will alter things in the courtroom and turn Shylock into a defendant; with her legalism she will do so from within the law. At this point, as in Belmont before, Portia is the protector of the law, of its authority and force. With her quibble Portia gives voice to the law even more than Shylock does with his claim to the forfeit of the bond. Alice N. Benston has read Portia's appearance and behaviour in the trial as committed "to protect the law"; it is law and not mercy that prevails under Portia's direction at the trial.⁴⁰ For Benston Portia's quibble is an expedient to exalt the law, perhaps even more than it is a means to save Antonio's life, and Shylock is the victim of this exaltation; it is in fact not enough that he is exposed as unmerciful: "Shylock must be guilty not simply of cruelty, but of some legally punishable fault. And the carefully structured trial reveals that he *is* guilty".⁴¹ The outsider's acts must be proved to be against the law, so that his prosecution becomes the triumph of the law. Benston sees Portia's protection of the law as expression of the

⁴⁰ See Alice N. Benston, "Portia, the Law, and Tripartite Structure of *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30 (1979), 367-85. The quoted phrase is at page 373. Benston argues against those commentators who focus on Portia's speech on mercy, because they leave us "with a situation in which mercy appears to triumph over law. Comically or tragically, we are left with a seeming denigration of law and contract" (368).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 375. For Benston Portia is the guarantor of the enforcement of both civil law and natural law: with her, "[c]ontracts and the courts, the inviolability of personal oaths, and the law of natural succession for the furtherance of life have been assured" (385).

dominant position in the text: the law must prevail; all acts must be expression of that superiority.

To say that in *The Merchant of Venice* the law always prevails is to say that the space of this text is one of fixity, produced by the law's framing and containing of all events, its adjusting of them to its univocal rule. But in the trial scene, with Portia's quibble, the self-identity of the law reveals unsuspected facets. Portia's position within the law is of a peculiar nature. As Antonio has failed to pay back the loan within the agreed three months, by his bond Shylock can legitimately claim "[a] pound of flesh, to be by him cut off / Nearest the merchant's heart", as Portia acknowledges (4.1.228-29). But Portia also reads something else in that same bond, something that has eluded everyone else in the courtroom; when Shylock is ready, with scales and knife, to get his due, Portia interrupts him:

Tarry a little, there is something else,—
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh":
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

(4.1.301-08)

Just a moment before this, when she asks Shylock to have a doctor by to stop Antonio's wounds from bleeding, Shylock refuses to do so as it is not so expressed in the bond:

Por. Have by some surgeon Shylock on your charge,
To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.
Shy. Is it so nominated in the bond?
Por. It is not so express'd, but what of that?
'Twere good you do so much for charity.
Shy. I cannot find it, 'tis not in the bond.

(4.1.253-58)

Here, in the remarks of both, there is a tacit agreement that what is not explicitly mentioned in the contract cannot be law, (Portia herself appeals to charity to have her request respected). Yet Shylock's confidence in the "express'd" as the unalterable guarantor of his rights is soon proved delusive, and this is done precisely by what is expressed in the bond, as Portia uses it.

The relation Shylock-Portia has been read in terms of the opposition between the letter and the spirit of the law because of their different readings of the bond. Shylock wants his bond respected in its literal meaning, his penalty must be "a pound of flesh". Portia's quibble as interpretation of the law (alongside her invocation of mercy) has been read as a search for its spirit, what is meant beyond its letter. Already Eagleton, however, has capsized this reading by writing that it is actually Shylock's bond, and not Portia's legalism, which represents and invokes the spirit of the law:

In interpreting the law creatively, it is usually felt that one should have due regard to its "spirit": judgements should be realistic and commonsensical, not narrowly technical or pedantic. Thus, in *The Merchant of Venice*, it is Shylock who has respect for the spirit of the law and Portia who does not. Shylock's bond does not actually state in writing that he is allowed to take some of Antonio's blood along with a pound of flesh, but this is a reasonable inference from the text, as any real court would recognize.⁴²

Eagleton turns the letter of the law into its interpretation, he arrogates for Shylock what has always been read as Portia's prerogative. The letter is the spirit of the law. Eagleton's reading here is interesting because there is already a suggestion of the non-univocality of the letter, and therefore a capsizing of the fixity traditionally ascribed to it. In this sense Shylock's version of the law can be read as contiguous with Portia's.

If Shylock's letter is spiritual, Portia's spirit uncovers the

⁴² Eagleton, *William Shakespeare*, 36-37.

plurality that is inherent in the literal. The traditional distinction between letter and spirit proposes a fixed and singular meaning for the law, although a hidden one (the spirit behind the letter). The distinction, here, would be once more between appearance and essence, the letter and the spirit of the law.⁴³ But, as we have seen this structure collide with and silently put forward the modality of ambivalence in the caskets test, so here it is possible to read it as the embodiment of the plurality of meaning. What Portia does in the courtroom is to reveal the multiple possibilities of the letter, and not to disclose the spirit of the law, to find its sole and truer meaning behind the letter. Shylock's letter and Portia's spirit are the same text, which in their interpretations offers but two of its many versions. They are both valid manifestations of the law, and can even be said to be supplementary. They both point to the literal, but only to reveal its plural character. The letter of the law is excessive, as it bears at least two different meanings in *The Merchant of Venice*. When we take into account both Shylock's letter and Portia's spirit, we see that in the trial scene the law is neither static nor univocal: together, Shylock's and Portia's versions stage the excessive, plural nature of the law.

The distinction letter-spirit is closely linked to the written character of the law, in the form of the contract. Shylock's various appeals to his bond to have his forfeit invoke the written text as the fixed law. The written form of the contract is the manifestation of its authority and unalterability.⁴⁴ For

⁴³ This vertical structure of the spirit under the letter is repeated by Tucker, when for example he says that the letter of the law is but an "appearance" behind which lies the truth ("reality") of the spirit (Tucker, "The Letter of the Law in *The Merchant of Venice*", 100).

⁴⁴ Leonard Tennenhouse has also briefly commented on how writing is considered the source of authority in *The Merchant of Venice*: "[i]f there is one Shakespearean drama more than any other that declares the political importance of writing, it is *The Merchant of Venice*. For all their differences, the two arenas of dramatic action, Venice and Belmont, have this in common: writing determines what reality is and therefore the role an individual can play. Because contracts underwrite the economic life of Venice, that type of writing is so powerful not even the duke can modify it. In Belmont, similarly, her father's will constrains Portia's behavior, specifies the conditions for her marriage, and determines who shall control the

Shylock, writing has secured the self-identity of the bond, fixed its meaning as self-present.⁴⁵ Portia's quibble proves the written to be something different. It introduces reading in the repetition of the written law:

Portia appears as the Model Reader, who reads the legal code in an unusual way, including the possibility of multiple interpretations, the reader attentive to the linguistic texture of the book, perceptive of the empty semantic spaces left by the text.⁴⁶

With Portia, that is, "[t]he law turns into a rhetorical space".⁴⁷ Locating Portia's act of reading the law within the new modality of observation and verification introduced by Bacon's experimental-analytic model, Daniela Carpi says that Shylock's defeat in the trial is the index of the "wavering of a universe under the blows of a new dialectic attitude, which lies in the opposition between writing and interpretation, the code and its reading"; she therefore sees the act of interpreting as "a process to writing".⁴⁸

But more than disclosing the spirit of the law as something

father's patrimony. While these two places oppose one another in terms of where the authority of writing originates – in economic arrangement or in a father's will – they concur on the fundamental point that authority resides in and operates through writing" (Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* [New York and London: Methuen, 1986], 53).

⁴⁵ Reading the "written" in *The Merchant of Venice* as expression of a desire for the body's presence-in-writing, Howard Marchitello says that in Shylock's bond "writing promises presence in absence and articulates its promise on the level of letteral configurations within the play" (Howard Marchitello, "Disembodied Letters and *The Merchant of Venice*: Writing, Editing, History", *English Literary History* 62 [1995], 237-65, 247). He writes that similarly "Portia's father's will stands as an exemplary instance of a profound faith in the metaphysics of writing, its supposed ability to figure the presence of the body as immanent in writing itself" (245).

⁴⁶ Daniela Carpi, "Il tema dell'interpretazione in *The Merchant of Venice*", in "*The Merchant of Venice*". *Dal testo alla scena*, 75-85, 78. My translation.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* The quotations are respectively at the pages 79 and 78. The translation is mine.

behind, somehow hidden by its letter, and only brought to light by reading, Portia reveals the instability of the written itself. Francis Bacon distinguished between *jus dicere* and *jus dare* as "to interpret the law" and "to make law, or give law", and added that judges should only practise the former: for him this was the only way to remain within the boundaries of the predetermined, whereas to make laws would mean to transgress⁴⁹ them and would be therefore an improper use of authority. Portia's interpretation, however, reveals that the predetermined itself has no stable boundaries, no univocal meaning, and no fixity. Her quibble uncovers the otherness of the self-same. Talking about the undermining of the law as a necessary part of its "voicing", Jonathan Goldberg points to the deferral from itself as being part of the very enactment of the law.⁵⁰ He sees Portia's voice as the site of such deferral, but this is part of writing itself, where are already those "slippages and multiplications which determine and fix only to unmoor again, making all places provisional, all sites relational, all identity a matter of differences scarcely perceivable because forever changing".⁵¹

Alterity is not outside the same, and writing, rather than ensuring a static meaning, represents the eternal deferral of that meaning from itself. This is what the trial scene shows about the stasis of the law, through its presentation as written law. In this representation Shylock's version of the law is just as important, it is a comment on Portia's quibble, it reminds us that the deferral of meaning is always done by/through its very letter. We need to take into account Shylock's insistence on the literality of the law (not the meaning that he reads in it, but its

⁴⁹ Francis Bacon, "Of Judicature", *Essays*, in *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 446-49, 446. For a detailed account of the vision of interpretation with regard to law in the early modern period see Ian Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning in the Renaissance: The Case of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵⁰ Jonathan Goldberg, "Shakespearean Inscriptions: The Voicing of Power", in Patricia Parker and Jeffrey Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 116-37.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

existence as this subversive letter, which flickers even in its very steadiness) to see how the assumption of the fixity of the law is called in question by that very immobility. The law's fixity only exists as difference from itself. *The Merchant of Venice* apparently distinguishes between the letter as the enforcement of a strict law and its interpretation as clement justice, but the two are not separate, and the letter is already a reading (as Eagleton's analysis suggests). That distinction exists, but not in the terms of letter and spirit, with the latter truer than the former. The trial scene rather proves that in the law the literal meaning is at the same time self-assertive and subversive. In this play, "paradoxically to enforce the law means to violate it".⁵² As Ned Lukacher writes about Portia's quibble: "[t]he jot of blood is what Shylock could not read in the very contract he himself forged. It is the *signifier* of the *unreadable* itself".⁵³ The letter exceeds itself; law exceeds itself by being the law.

The text offers a *figure* of this excess of law within the law: the pound of flesh.

The excess of stasis: a pound of flesh

The law's fixity relies on a letter that is in fact undecidable, deferred and deferring, a letter that is already an interpretation, even when it is presented as immutable on Shylock's side. The law's very terms transgress the limits that they impose. This law allows the pound of flesh as forfeit of the bond; the contract between Antonio and Shylock, revealed by Portia to be a breach of the law, is the transgression that is made possible by the law itself.

If Portia's intervention in the trial has as its aim the saving

⁵² Clara Mucci, "'A pound of flesh' e 'an infinite deal of nothing': sul rapporto desiderio/legge in *The Merchant of Venice*", in *The Merchant of Venice*. *Dal testo alla scena*, 143-62, 156. My translation.

⁵³ Ned Lukacher, *Daemonic Figures: Shakespeare and the Question of Conscience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 113. My italics.

of Antonio's life, there is, however, more at stake in her successful efforts to prove the pound of flesh outlaw. The threat to a Christian's life is the only implication of the bond made evident, but the "pound of flesh" produces other associations, and these are what Portia's quibble mainly strives to annihilate. The money-flesh, profit-generation associations that commerce brings, which enter even the fairy-tale world of Belmont - although this believes itself beyond them - but which are more evident in Shylock's world, are the excessive meanings that Shylock's pound of flesh summarizes and that Portia's quibble opposes.⁵⁴ More than that, it is their *normality*, their existence everywhere, even within the realm of the law, that is represented by the pound of flesh and confronted and denied in the courtroom. For the excess embodied by Shylock's pound of flesh is not his prerogative, although constructed as such.⁵⁵

If the bond of a pound of flesh reveals the unseen excessive aspects of commerce in the quasi-identity of money and flesh, at the same time its legal ratification discloses the excess of the law in its *acceptance* of those meanings. The bond is lawful. The contract is legally "seal[ed]" by a "notary" (see 1.3.140-49), and the Duke himself acknowledges that he has no power

⁵⁴ See Shylock's account of Laban's story, and his "passion" at Jessica's elopement, as stating the analogies profit-generation, children-property. The punning language used in Belmont reproduces similar analogies. For readings of these associations see E. Pearlman, "Shakespeare, Freud, and the Two Usuries, or, Money's a Meddler", *English Literary Renaissance* 2 (1972), 217-36, and Shirley Nelson Garner, "Shylock: 'His stones, his daughter, and his ducats'", *The Upstart Crow* 5 (Fall 1984), 35-49. See also Alessandra Marzola, *La parola del mercante* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1996).

⁵⁵ For instance, Shirley Nelson Garner says that castration, which is also suggested by the bond, is the general theme of *The Merchant of Venice*, a figure for the deprivation of power which Antonio first perpetrates at Shylock's expense: "[a]s a circumcised man, Jew, and alien in Venetian society, Shylock is symbolically castrated. Antonio's abuse of him both reveals his castration and reenacts it". The contest for wealth is also always an attack on the body: the enmity between Shylock and Antonio is "an antagonism between men who want power over each other.... Neither is content merely to win over the other; each wants to destroy the other's manliness" (Garner, "Shylock", 35). The pound of flesh discloses what is present not only in Shylock's but also Antonio's activity, just as it reveals the association offspring-monetary interest that runs throughout the play.

against it. The bond is presented as excessive, but the forfeit of human flesh was already accepted by the Roman Laws of the Twelve Tables, according to which creditors could, in some cases, divide the body of the debtor among themselves when the latter failed to pay his debt.⁵⁶ Shylock is legitimately entitled to exact the penalty; the excess that it involves is part of the law. This discloses a particular aspect of the law, one that Nietzsche has described well and that *The Merchant of Venice* reveals and suppresses at the same time: the law's pleasure in cruelty.

Writing on the relation creditor/debtor, and noticing how already in ancient legal systems the creditor could inflict tortures on the body of the debtor, and even cut some flesh off, Nietzsche commented that underlying these prescriptions was the idea of an equivalence between a received injury and the pain inflicted on the injurer, the belief that injury could always be compensated by a certain amount of pain:

... a sort of *pleasure* is given to the creditors as repayment and compensation, – the pleasure of having the right to exercise power over the powerless without a thought, the pleasure “*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de le faire*”, the enjoyment of violating: an enjoyment which is prized all the higher, the lower and baser the position of the creditor in the social scale.... So, then, compensation is made up of a warrant for and entitlement to cruelty.⁵⁷

The legality of the bond, stated until the trial, before Portia's quibble (and in a sense even by it), proves this pleasure-in-cruelty of the law, although then such cruelty is presented as being only Shylock's will.⁵⁸ The pound of flesh is the law transgressing itself. It reveals the law's legislation of cruelty

⁵⁶ See Brown, “Introduction”, xxvii-xxviii.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 44-45.

⁵⁸ Kofman therefore reads Shylock's bond as expression of this pleasure in cruelty but does not see Venetian law as partaking in it (see Kofman, “Conversions”, 160).

and violence, its containing that against which it stands. In *The Merchant of Venice*, “[t]he opposition between the Law and its transgressions repeats itself inside the Law itself”.⁵⁹ The legal bond of the pound of flesh shows how “the only true transgression, the only true negativity, is that of the Law itself which changes all of the ordinary, criminal transgressions, into an indolent positivity”.⁶⁰ The conclusion of the trial scene restores the opposition by turning the bond into a crime, but the pound of flesh has been for too long within the law, and its criminalization can only be the law's ideological manoeuvre to conceal its ‘nature’.

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In *The Merchant of Venice* law stands for fixity. The stasis of the law is treated as a good principle in Belmont, but becomes a negative aspect in the form of the rigidity of the letter of the law in the trial in Venice. In both instances, the rigour of the law prevails: it is in the force of law exemplified by the dead father's will in the caskets test, and in the relation of supplementation between letter and spirit of the law in Portia's legalism, which becomes the site where the strictness of the law is paradoxically supported and enhanced through the exaltation of interpretation. The presentation of the rigidity of the law is, however, non-univocal in *The Merchant of Venice*, as it is introduced in contrasting ways, and serving opposing purposes at the same time: decreeing its own justice in Belmont, and attacked as cruel in its fixity even while reinstating with a legerdemain its rigour in Venice.

The fixity of the law is always unstable. Bacon saw the ambiguity and uncertainty of laws and appreciated the problem of combining “discretion and strict law”.⁶¹ For Pascal, to read

⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “The Limits of the Semiotic Approach to Psychoanalysis”, in Richard Feldstein and Henry Sussman, eds., *Psychoanalysis and ...* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 89-110, 93. Žižek is here reading detective fiction in terms of the Lacanian notion of Law.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶¹ See Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *Francis Bacon*, 120-299, 287.

the Scripture exclusively in its literal meaning, or in its spiritual sense alone, were both to be considered mistakes (fragment 256). If *The Merchant of Venice* stages the two mistakes, it is to present the ambivalence of each, and ultimately the impossibility of the Pascalian distinction. Certainly the text reproduces the commonplace, which had been in place since Aristotle's *Rhetorics*, that truth is the core of the law.⁶² And certainly this truth is offered now as unveiled by interpretation alone, now as evident in the law itself, according to the precept of the manifestedness of justice in the law. After all, in the early modern period the equity principle of the Chancery courts, the biblical idea of mercy, lived side by side with the endorsement of Justinian's interdiction of interpretation of the law in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.⁶³ The articulations of *The Merchant of Venice* present the discrepancies in the representation of the fixity of the law in a culture that comprehends two positions as different as those above mentioned.

Moreover, the law's fixity is disturbed even as it is asserted, for it relies on modalities that oppose determination and that are themselves unstable: the distinction appearance/essence leading into the modality of ambivalence; the coincidence between law and justice, assumed as the law's truthfulness in the caskets test, but suspended by Portia's speech on mercy in the trial scene, where moreover the "quality of mercy" itself is ambiguous; interpretation, and the difference between letter and spirit in Venice turning into their supplementation; and finally the law's modality of containing its own excess, exemplified by the pound of flesh. All these modalities support the (non)static law of *The Merchant of Venice*. The order of law as justice, as realm of the determinate, results non-univocal; in *The Merchant of Venice* its univocality relies on the plural and the ambivalent.

⁶² See Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*.

⁶³ Ibid.

Mariagrazia De Meo

Tra parole e danza:
Dancing at Lughnasa di Brian Friel

Le voci post-coloniali in Irlanda

Tra il 1977 e il 1981 Richard Kearney e Mark Hederman sono stati gli editori di *The Crane Bag*, una rivista a carattere politico-culturale nella quale essi intendevano aprire un nuovo spazio destinato all'incontro e al confronto di tematiche quali la letteratura, il linguaggio, i miti, la religione, la politica e l'identità nazionale. L'Irlanda, divisa geograficamente in quattro province, veniva rappresentata con al centro una simbolica *fifth province* della mente, territorio neutrale valido per il dibattito. Molti intellettuali diedero il loro contributo concentrandosi soprattutto nelle aree della questione femminile, dell'Irlanda del Nord e del recupero della lingua irlandese. Quando l'intenso esperimento della rivista si concluse, essi continuarono a far sentire la loro voce attraverso la pubblicazione di 'pamphlets' nell'ambito della *Field Day Theatre Company*, una compagnia teatrale che nasce a Derry nel 1980 dal sodalizio culturale tra il drammaturgo Brian Friel e l'attore Stephen Rea. L'intenzione principale è quella di costruire nella tormentata città nordirlandese un laboratorio teatrale e di riunire un gruppo eterogeneo di intellettuali per poter mantenere vivo il confronto sulla problematica questione dell'identità culturale irlandese: tra loro vanno ricordati Seamus Deane, Tom Paulin, David Hammond e Seamus Heaney.

Nonostante le diverse proposte sull'atteggiamento da tenere rispetto al passato e alla tradizione coloniale, spesso non

lasciassero trasparire un consenso generale, sia la rivista che i 'pamphlets' della *Field Day* offrono un esempio della nuova volontà di incontro e di discussione che non mira a ridurre le polarizzazioni a soluzioni univoche ed estreme, ma che suggerisce il confronto e la ricerca di una mediazione intelligente tra posizioni contrastanti. Non è più possibile riferirsi alla cultura e all'identità irlandese attraverso attributi di purezza ed originalità: piuttosto la realtà contemporanea si presenta come un coacervo di elementi ibridi e diversi che hanno trasformato questa società, come quelle del resto del mondo, in un'amalgama di voci, suoni ed idee discordanti tra cui non si può più distinguere un ordine di importanza. L'Irlanda, grazie a questi nuovi contributi, è decisamente proiettata verso il dibattito post-coloniale per una rilettura ed una reinterpretazione della propria storia. Gli intellettuali che hanno scelto di muoversi in questa direzione si oppongono decisamente a quanti hanno osservato che per l'isola non possa effettivamente valere questo tipo di critica, soprattutto per non essere mai stata una colonia nel senso più tradizionale, poiché di razza bianca e situata in Europa. Molti sono convinti che il termine 'post' mal definisca l'attuale situazione irlandese in quanto esso dà l'idea della fine e del superamento di un qualcosa a cui ci si può riferire quindi in maniera distaccata: in altre parole, come è possibile parlare della situazione odierna dell'Irlanda del Nord in cui domina tuttora un atteggiamento imperialista di discriminazione e violenza verso le minoranze, come di una questione chiusa e superata? Tutto il territorio nazionale vive ancora oggi una divisione politica e sociale che continua a dare il senso del 'non interamente compiuto', di un 'unfinished business' per la realizzazione di un'Irlanda unita ed effettivamente libera.

La critica post-coloniale, al contrario, nasce proprio dal riconoscimento della mancanza di un senso di compiutezza, nella storia come nella cultura, cosicché quest'ultima perde quelle coordinate lineari basate sulla purezza etnica e sulla netta esclusione dell'altro, ma viene proiettata verso il riconoscimento dell'eterogeneo e dell'indefinito come ingredienti suoi propri. Il discorso post-coloniale può essere

condiviso ormai da tutti i popoli e non solamente da quelli che più direttamente hanno sperimentato nella loro storia un dominio coloniale, pertanto il prefisso *post* non suggerisce un superamento, bensì un approfondimento critico e consapevole che permetta di riconoscere i limiti della mentalità eurocentrica. Ora essa si pone, per quanto possibile, all'ascolto in modo che il tradizionale binomio centro-periferia assuma un valore diverso non più di subordinazione ma di complementarità.

E' proprio da voci periferiche che giungono spunti e contributi di ripensamento di parole come razza, nazione e tradizione, da non interpretare più all'ombra delle rigide gerarchizzazioni coloniali, come concetti statici e distintivi, ma al contrario legati ad un ripensamento dialettico dell'alterità come parte di noi stessi.

L'idea di autenticità e il concetto di essenza sono i veri colossi da far crollare sotto il peso del riconoscimento della comune situazione di dislocazione e di frammentazione in cui riconosciamo il diverso come parte di noi, come l'*unheimlich* freudiano, il lato oscuro del nostro essere:

Stereotyping has caused a long colonial concussion. It is about time we put aside the idea of essence - that hungry Hegelian ghost looking for a stereotype to live in.... Everything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten - re-read. That will enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness but securely Irish.¹

L'impegno di critici come Deane, Kearney, Declan Kiberd ed altri è volto a proporre nuove vie di lettura e di interpretazione della cultura e dell'identità irlandese, svelando i pericoli nascosti dietro l'idea di essenza e soprattutto dietro una fiducia incondizionata riposta nella tradizione. Il discorso post-coloniale rende propri termini quali trasformazione, traduzione, contaminazione, movimento, molteplicità: un nuovo lessico indispensabile a scalfire gli estremismi e a comprendere il

¹ Seamus Deane, "Heroic Styles: the Tradition of an Idea", in *Field Day Company*, ed., *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 58.

valore dell'ibridità. Questo nuovo linguaggio deve prendere il posto di quello vecchio basato su costruzioni stereotipate che rappresentano gli strumenti di una subordinazione ideologica e politica. Inoltre, osserva Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, si tratta di un rapporto reciproco che genera nel colonizzato la costruzione di una rete di stereotipi, espressione dell'odio ispirato dalla consapevolezza della propria impotenza a resistere al giogo del colonizzatore.

What is required is a radical interrogation of those mythic sedimentations from our *past* and those mythic aspirations for our *future* which challenge our *present* sense of ourselves, which disclose other possibilities of being. We must never cease to keep our mythological images in dialogue with history.²

Purtroppo il forte bisogno di ricostruzione e di affermazione di una identità nazionale autonoma in un popolo mortificato dalla dominazione coloniale spesso si traduce nell'adozione di nuovi estremismi. E' proprio nell'accentuazione di antitesi e stereotipi che gli irlandesi del risorgimento hanno trovato le basi per una definizione di identità che potesse dirsi autonoma e distinta rispetto a quella del dominatore, ricadendo in una rigida polarizzazione, figlia di quella mentalità coloniale che essi stessi avrebbero voluto ricusare. E' importante riconoscere che il processo di specificazione della propria identità "is a two way transaction, and that many of the concepts requisitioned by nationalist propagandists in defence of Irish culture are, in fact, an extension of colonialism rather than a repudiation of it".³

Riconoscere l'importanza della riscoperta e valorizzazione delle particolarità culturali ed etniche, della storia e della tradizione è giusto, ma sono le loro potenzialità creative che vanno sottolineate e che, lasciato da parte il nostalgico rimpianto per il passato, vanno rivisitate alla luce di una nuova consapevolezza. E' a questo proposito che Gayatri Spivak, in

² Richard Kearney, "Myth and Motherland", in *Ireland's Field Day*, 79.

³ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 156.

un'intervista con Ellen Rooney, parla di "uso strategico dell'essenzialismo",⁴ che ci consenta di riconoscerci partecipi di una transizione culturale in atto, senza però dimenticare che il nostro intervento nel dibattito porta con sé i segni di una identità culturale particolare e distintiva.

Storici, letterati e politici sono stati impegnati, a partire dalla fine del secolo scorso, a dare una definizione di una originaria 'Irishness' che possa dirsi autonoma dalla 'Englishness' dalla quale l'Irlanda era stata dominata. Nel muoversi in questa direzione non restava che guardare alla tradizione e al passato, recuperando la memoria collettiva di un popolo desideroso di affermare la propria autenticità, stabilire dei nuovi limiti oltre i quali confinare tutte le influenze esterne ed impure; in questa prospettiva la drammatica eredità della divisione politica del territorio e la quasi totale scomparsa della antica e ricca lingua gaelica rappresentano le ferite più difficili da rimarginare. Gli irlandesi si lasciarono accecare dal miraggio di poter tornare ad uno stato pre-coloniale in cui la loro identità potesse nuovamente ritrovare caratteristiche ben distinte.

La religione cattolica ha ricoperto per i nazionalisti irlandesi un ruolo fondamentale nella definizione di una identità autonoma e ad essa è stato concesso sempre più largo spazio nell'organizzazione della Repubblica, dopo la conquista dell'indipendenza, spingendo nella direzione di gravi e restrittivi provvedimenti quali la censura cinematografica, leggi contro la pubblicazione di libri definiti offensivi della morale e contro l'aborto, il divorzio e la contraccezione. L'identità politica viene associata a quella religiosa, considerata come un simbolo di appartenenza; rimettere in discussione l'una implicherebbe un ripensamento anche dell'altra.

La partizione dell'Irlanda in due entità politiche distinte, le sei contee del Nord, di fatto dipendenti dalla corona inglese, e le ventisei contee del Sud che costituiscono il territorio della Repubblica indipendente, è resa ancora più profonda dall'identificazione della prima con la religione protestante e

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

della seconda con quella cattolica. Le tensioni e la chiusura a qualunque dialogo nell'Irlanda del Nord vengono di giorno in giorno alimentati dalle forti discriminazioni messe in atto dai protestanti unionisti, fedeli alla corona, contro la minoranza cattolica nazionalista.

La reazione a questo stato di cose ha portato all'esplosione della violenza che sembra impossibile riuscire a fermare. Gli irlandesi sia a Nord che a Sud del confine, sia cattolici che protestanti, hanno visto riconfermato il loro scetticismo riguardo al fragile processo di pace che dal 1994 aveva portato ad un lungo cessate il fuoco, per lasciare spazio alle trattative pacifiche, a cui anche lo Sinn Féin (il braccio politico dell'IRA -Irish Republican Army-) era disposto a collaborare. Un tentativo interrotto violentemente perché privo della volontà reale di determinare un cambiamento, di cui la maggioranza della popolazione è tuttavia desiderosa. Evidentemente si tratta di una trasformazione che non deve interessare solo l'Irlanda ma anche l'Inghilterra, se quest'ultima cominciasse ad accettare la grande parte di responsabilità nell'attuale stato delle cose, dal momento che, come giustamente osserva Declan Kiberd: "the Irish question is really the English question and vice-versa. The Irish are accused of never forgetting, but that is because the English never remember".⁵

Negli anni '80 Brian Friel prende parte al dibattito concentrando la sua riflessione sull'analisi del significato e del valore del linguaggio, proprio perché era al recupero della lingua gaelica a cui guardavano principalmente i nazionalisti, considerandola il primo e decisivo passo nel cammino verso la riaffermazione di un'identità nazionale irlandese autonoma. Non è un caso che la prima opera messa in scena dalla *Field Day* è stata *Translations* che contiene già nel titolo le premesse per quella svolta decisiva dell'autore nella direzione di una critica anti-essenzialista e post-coloniale.

Friel analizza con lucidità le implicazioni socio-politiche legate ad un possibile discorso sul linguaggio e, pur

⁵ Declan Kiberd, "Anglo-Irish Attitudes", in *Ireland's Field Day*, 93.

sottolineando il profondo trauma che esiste nel passaggio violento da un codice, l'antica lingua gaelica, ad un altro, l'inglese del colonizzatore, desidera spingersi oltre. In questo percorso trova un valido appoggio nelle considerazioni fatte da George Steiner in *After Babel*, quando egli afferma che non esiste nulla di più mutevole ed incostante della lingua di cui l'uomo si serve per comunicare: "Language is the most salient model of Heraclitean flux. It alters at every moment in perceived time".⁶ Se il linguaggio è soprattutto manifestazione dell'essere, in quanto tale esso manca di absolutezza ma segue la strada dell'apparenza e della trasformazione continua; pertanto la traduzione linguistica non rappresenta un tradimento della pienezza originaria ma al contrario esprime la componente vitale della lingua stessa.

Appare evidente l'orientamento di Friel verso la visione heideggeriana del linguaggio come unica dimora dell'essere che si rivela all'uomo attraverso la parola, ingiustamente ridotta "alla dittatura della dimensione pubblica".⁷ L'esistenza autentica si basa proprio sul riconoscimento della condizione di precarietà, di trasformazione e di 'spaesatezza' che ci caratterizza: si tratta di un continuo, incessante progettare verso il futuro.

Nella sua essenza il linguaggio non è l'estrinsecazione di un organismo, così come non è l'espressione di un essere vivente. Perciò esso non può essere pensato in maniera adeguata alla sua essenza.... Il linguaggio è avvento diradante-velante dell'essere stesso.⁸

Il potere espressivo delle parole si spinge oltre la natura finita dell'uomo e quest'ultimo non può avanzare la pretesa di poterne controllare il carattere transitorio e la capacità di

⁶ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Lettera sull'Umanesimo*, ed. Franco Volpi (Milano: Adelphi, 1995), 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

trasformarsi e riadattarsi, sopravvivendo ai traumatici cambiamenti della storia.

It is its great untidiness that makes human speech innovative and expressive of personal intent. It is the anomaly, as it feeds back into the general history of usage, the ambiguity, as it enriches and complicates the general standard of definition, which give coherence to the system. A coherence, if such a description is allowed, 'in constant motion'.⁹

Steiner sottolinea inoltre come ogni forma di comunicazione linguistica si presenti sempre come un atto di interpretazione e di traduzione di un certo messaggio, in cui l'uomo cerca di esternare il proprio mondo di contenuti interiori: "any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation of a verbal or horizontal transfer of significance".¹⁰ Ecco che l'idea di traduzione trascende la consueta implicazione del contatto tra culture e popoli diversi, ma riguarda anche persone della stessa lingua e rimanda al riconoscimento che ogni tipo di scambio linguistico implica comunque una perdita.

La sperimentazione di Brian Friel

Nell'opinione di Brian Friel la funzione del drammaturgo non è quella di rivelare verità nascoste sulla natura della società e dell'uomo, ma di intraprendere un'indagine che per la sua complessità non potrà fornire risposte certe, solo interpretazioni e proposte critiche:

They (dramatists) have this function: they are vitally, persistently, and determinedly concerned with one man's insignificant place in the here-and-now world. They have the function to portray that one man's frustrations and hope and anguish and joys and miseries and pleasures with all the

⁹ Steiner, *After Babel*, 213.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

precision and accuracy and truth that they know: and by so doing help to make a community of individuals.¹¹

Nel saggio "The Theatre of Hope and Despair", Friel si sofferma a spiegare come sia la nostra vita che la percezione che abbiamo di essa siano dominate da un flusso continuo, da considerare 'l'unica vera costante'. Tutte le nostre esperienze sono caratterizzate da uno stato di totale impermanenza: le continue ricerche, in cui siamo impegnati, ci conducono alla costruzione di un nuovo concetto, considerato inattuabile, che ci si affanna ad analizzare e ad esporre per poi inevitabilmente cadere nella disillusione e nel doloroso riconoscimento del fallimento delle precedenti osservazioni. Il teatro oscilla tra la 'disperazione' provocata da questo stato di 'costante impermanenza' e la 'speranza' che deriva dal riconoscere criticamente questa umana condizione. Il drammaturgo vuole rendere evidente il conflitto tra il mondo della carne e quello dello spirito, ma ci chiede anche di riconoscere che "in confusion and disillusion, strength and courage can exist, and that out of them can come a redemption of the human spirit".¹²

Dopo una breve pausa di riflessione, nella quale sente indispensabile allontanarsi dall'ambiente claustrofobico ed opprimente d'Irlanda, Friel torna nell'amata Derry ricco di una nuova consapevolezza da confrontare con i simboli più rappresentativi del nazionalismo irlandese tradizionale, al quale intende ribellarsi: la religione cattolica, la tradizione originaria celtica con la sua lingua, le sue leggende e le sue tradizioni millenarie, intese come inventario fisso piuttosto che come elaborazione dinamica, tutte quelle certezze salde ed assolute baluardo di una 'irlandesità' che chiedeva di essere riscattata.

I had in mind how difficult it is for an Irish writer to find his faith: he is born into a certainty that is cast-iron and absolute. The generation of Irish writers immediately before mine never allowed this burden to weigh them down. They learned to speak

¹¹ Brian Friel, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair", *Everyman* 1 (1968), 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

Irish, took their generic purity for granted.... For us today the situation is more complex. We are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word native means, what the word foreign means. We want to know have the words any meaning at all. And persistent considerations like these erode all certainties.¹³

Sono proprio l'indefinitezza, l'ambiguità e le contraddizioni a costituire, dunque, il vero fulcro dell'identità irlandese, inevitabilmente trasformata dal contatto con una tradizione promiscua di cui ha assorbito le componenti. E' la complessità della situazione dell'uomo che veramente interessa il drammaturgo, l'analisi della natura intima dell'esperienza umana sullo sfondo della famiglia e della società, custodi della tradizione e dispensatori di regole che condizionano il comportamento esteriore dell'individuo, reprimendo spesso il bisogno del singolo di ritagliarsi una propria dimensione. Egli desidera esprimere la perdita di fiducia dell'uomo in una realtà definibile realisticamente e quel senso tanto comune di alienazione da se stessi.

Il teatro sperimentale che presuppone il superamento delle convenzioni realiste, trova in Friel uno dei suoi adepti; egli lo considera quella forma d'arte attraverso la quale è possibile "cross our frontiers, exceed our limitations, fill our emptiness - fulfill ourselves".¹⁴ Friel guarda al teatro come ad un'esperienza fondamentale metafisica, preoccupata non solo di esprimere giudizi morali, ma soprattutto interessata a cogliere la vera e più profonda natura della nostra identità, che perde definitivamente il carattere di realtà stabile e ben definibile. L'inizio di questo viaggio richiede il coraggio di rimettersi in discussione, di guardare al nostro essere senza ipocrisie, intraprendendo una strada scandita dal crollo di quell'architettura di certezze assolute che la società occidentale ha costruito attorno a sé.

It means to conceive of dwelling as a mobile habitat, as a mode

¹³ Brian Friel, "Self-Portrait", *Aquarius* 5 (1972), 21.

¹⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1969), 21.

of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation of an opening whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitute our sense of identity, place and belonging. There is no one place, language or tradition that can claim this role.¹⁵

Rimettere in discussione il nostro essere significa sottoporre alla medesima revisione critica anche il linguaggio, che tanta parte gioca nel senso di appartenenza ad un luogo e ad una cultura determinata. La necessità di sperimentare nuovi canali di comunicazione per opporsi al dominio quasi incontrastato della parola porta Friel a scoprire il potere della danza, della musica e del corpo, elementi che fanno da tramite alla riscoperta del valore di antichi rituali pagani dal potere liberatorio, componenti originarie del nostro passato nelle forme più pure ed essenziali. Questo ritorno alle origini non si deve intendere come un ulteriore tentativo di definizione di un'identità attraverso una chiusura miope e nazionalista. Al contrario nei rituali pagani si intravede un nuovo ponte di comunicazione gettato tra le culture 'altre', la cui diversità viene riconosciuta sempre meno nettamente definibile.

Friel dimostra il suo desiderio di spingersi oltre le parole arrivando a preferire il silenzio, non come negazione della comunicazione ma come un porsi in ascolto per ritrovare il momento pre-verbale e non razionalistico del nostro essere. In questo percorso sperimentale ed innovativo la parola ed il testo conservano, tuttavia, la loro importanza, pur se sottoposti ad un costante processo di analisi, volto a rivelarne i limiti e le mancanze. Il testo resta indissolubilmente legato alla sua 'performance' e il teatro presenta quindi il perfetto equilibrio tra forma e contenuto.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa* la forza dell'espressione e della comunicazione è trasferita al livello della danza, vera protagonista di questo dramma, in cui i personaggi al suono della musica lasciano cadere le loro difese esterne, quel muro di

¹⁵ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

tabù, di costrizioni, di condizionamenti che imprigionano il nostro essere, vittima indifesa di memorie 'negative'.

False memory sends the quester into the land of self-deception, into the limbo of meaningless invention; but true memory gives access to the dancing place, the point of eternal renewal and confident departure.¹⁶

In questo girovagare solitario dell'uomo alla ricerca di una sua interiorità flessibile ed ibrida, che ammetta l'altro come parte di sé, "la memoria e le sue trasformazioni sono a volte d'aiuto e a volte d'intralcio." Essa, infatti, può tradursi sia nella custode di vecchi valori della civiltà occidentale, di quella tradizione originaria alla quale temiamo rinunciare per non risvegliarci in balia di un flusso relativistico, sia in quella facoltà liberatoria che ci porrà in connessione con nuovi significati, consentendoci di riordinare i frammenti del nostro passato in maniera sempre diversa e con la prospettiva di nuove, irrazionali interpretazioni della nostra condizione di esseri in transizione continua.

La tensione tra il modo quotidiano in cui i personaggi conducono la loro esistenza e il forte bisogno di raggiungere una comprensione più profonda e libera della propria individualità caratterizza molte opere di Friel. Riuscire a trovare un canale di comunicazione che renda possibile l'esternazione di tali desideri diventa quasi del tutto utopico in una società in cui tanta importanza viene attribuita alla 'memoria collettiva' di un passato che rifiuta di rimescolare le sue carte e di tradurre se stesso nel presente e nel futuro, come ricordava il maestro Hugh in *Translations*:

It is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language...

We must never cease renewing those images; because once we do we fossilise....¹⁷

¹⁶ Seamus Heaney, "For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory", in Alan Peacock, ed., *The Achievement of Brian Friel* (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1993), 240.

¹⁷ Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 66.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa* Friel lascia trasparire un profondo disinteresse nei confronti della storia, reso evidente dal fatto che alcuni tra i più importanti avvenimenti mondiali, in cui si trovano coinvolti i personaggi, vengono appena menzionati, mentre l'attenzione si concentra sul microcosmo delle cinque sorelle Mundy. Siamo nel 1936, anno del consolidamento della Repubblica d'Irlanda, quando il presidente conservatore De Valera sta dando forma ad una carta costituzionale intrisa di morale cattolica e di nazionalismo, tuttavia il cenno storico è rapido e quasi sfuggente come lo sarà quello alla guerra civile spagnola fatto dal ballerino girovago Gerry Evans, oppure quello alla prima guerra mondiale: tutti avvenimenti di importanza capitale fuggacemente nominati e poi lasciati nell'ombra perché tanto distanti dall'ambiente familiare ed intimo di Kate, Maggie, Rose, Agnes e Chris, figure ai margini della storia e della società.

Il festival di *Lughnasa* è un'antica festività pagana in onore di Lugh, divinità del sole e dei raccolti. La seconda parte della parola 'nasad' vuol dire 'dare in matrimonio'; il festival quindi celebra il matrimonio del dio Lugh con la Signora Irlanda, rappresentata come una vecchia megera trasformata in donna bellissima dalle cure del sole. *Lughnasa*, che simboleggia il risveglio della natura, viene associato alla rinascita del desiderio sessuale ed è significativo che questa ricorrenza cada proprio il primo di agosto, nono mese dell'anno e fine dunque di un periodo di gestazione.¹⁸

La danza è l'elemento trainante della celebrazione pagana, essa viene presentata come libera forma di esternazione sensuale ed irrazionale del proprio essere, tanto da provocare la condanna di Kate, colei che nella famiglia è più legata al rigore della morale cattolica e che reagisce con forza alla descrizione del rito di Lughnasa:

Rose: First they light a bonfire beside a spring well. Then they dance round it. Then they drive their cattle through the

¹⁸ La parola 'Lughnasad' è ancora in uso nel gaelico moderno per indicare il mese di Agosto.

flames to banish the devil out of them....

Kate: And they are savages! I know those people from the back hills! I taught them! Savages. That's what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours! ... It's a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home!¹⁹

La danza offre la possibilità di comunicare i sentimenti e le sensazioni interiori, un mondo spesso dimenticato e represso che ora fa irruzione sulla scena attraverso un moto improvviso e sfrenato che disturba il ritmo lento e pacato dell'attività quotidiana, in cui sono impegnate le sorelle. Nel testo Friel adopera una lunga e particolareggiata didascalia per descrivere questi gesti disarmonici e quasi farseschi delle donne che si lasciano 'penetrare' dal forte e coinvolgente ritmo del *ceili*, musica tanto familiare al pubblico irlandese quanto quei passi di danza resi 'diversi' dalla violenza dell'esecuzione:

They meet - they retreat. They form a circle and wheel round and round. But the movements seem caricatured; and the sound is too loud; and the beat is too fast; and the almost recognizable dance is made grotesque because - for example - instead of holding hands, they have their arms tightly around one another's neck, one another's waist....

With this loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting - calling - singing, this parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced. (p.22)

E' in questo punto che l'immagine frenetica della danza, nella fisicità arcaica dei gesti e dei movimenti sfrenati, fa esplodere l'umanità in tutta la sua potenza di istinti e desideri, come accade per la bigotta Kate, che non sa resistere al ritmo e

¹⁹ Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 16-17. Le successive citazioni da questo testo si riferiscono a questa edizione e le indicazioni di pagina verranno indicate in parentesi.

viene travolta dalla musica. Con questi gesti senza grazia, questi movimenti troppo accentuati e le grida di sfogo che li accompagnano la donna nega il canone cattolico a cui è legata. Costrette dagli schemi della società patriarcale a ricoprire i ruoli di moglie e madre, le protagoniste sono già state presentate da Friel come 'outsiders' poiché non più giovanissime, ancora nubili e di cui una, Chris, con un figlio illegittimo: prigioniera in un mondo che non lascia loro alcuna scelta, ma le costringe a seguire gli eventi con triste rassegnazione e le rende psicologicamente e sessualmente frustrate.

For Irish women the attempt to re-discover their feminine identity has been overshadowed not only by the dictates of patriarchy but also by the 'otherness' of Ireland. The anonymity of the feminine; that is, the difficulty of defining themselves as women, has been further complicated by a national history of colonization, deprivation and culture.²⁰

La festa di Lughnasa non viene sperimentata in prima persona, ma la suggestione ed il potere ammaliatore della musica raggiunge le donne attraverso la radio, che è chiamata a tutti gli effetti a far parte della famiglia e la centralità del suo ruolo è sottolineata dall'essere stata battezzata con il nome di 'Marconi'. Essa rappresenta sulla scena il simbolo della convivenza tra vecchio e nuovo, tra presente e passato: da un lato oggetto del progresso e simbolo della modernità e dall'altro strumento di diffusione di musica tradizionale, impressa nella memoria.

Nei ricordi del protagonista Michael, voce narrante del dramma, i poteri magici della danza vengono associati al mondo pagano, non solo di Lughnasa, ma soprattutto dei riti tribali di cui padre Jack, di ritorno da una missione africana, rende testimonianza alle sorelle attonite. Egli, invece di convertire i primitivi, è stato completamente sopraffatto dal

²⁰ Wanda Balzano, "Irishness - Feminist and Post-Colonial", in Iain Chambers e Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question* (London: Routledge, 1996), 92.

fascino della cultura 'altra'. Jack non ha paura di riconoscere nell'altro quella parte della sua natura che è stata repressa e soffocata, ma che al tempo stesso costituisce l'aspetto più autentico di sé. Il prete ortodosso dimentica gli schemi della religione 'progredita' per abbracciare con viva convinzione quella del luogo: ne apprende il linguaggio, gli usi, i costumi e la mentalità in cui, come spiega, "there is no difference between the religious and the secular"(p.48). In essa ritrova l'equilibrio tra vita interiore e dimensione sociale, necessaria ad una serena visione dell'esistenza. L'allontanamento di Jack dall'ortodossia è rappresentato simbolicamente dall'oblio del suo linguaggio originario, strumento principale del mondo occidentale per la comunicazione. Il suo vocabolario è ormai confuso, fatto di frasi spezzate da termini altri che però ha reso propri, e il tentativo di tradurli si trasforma spesso in uno sforzo insostenibile ed inutile a cui preferirà il silenzio. Una delle parole che Jack non riesce a ricordare è proprio 'ceremony', il momento che racchiude in sé una forte carica espressiva, definita "the offering, the ritual, the dancing - a ceremony! Such a simple word"(p.40).

Well, they begin very formally, very solemnly with the ritual sacrifice of a fowl or a goat or a calf down the bank of the river... Then the incantation - a chant, really - that expresses our gratitude and that also acts as a rhythm or percussion for the ritual dance. And then, when the thanksgiving is over, the dance continues. And the interesting thing is that it grows naturally into a secular celebration; so that almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over. And that part of the ceremony is a real spectacle. We light fires around the periphery of the circle; and we paint our faces with coloured powders; and we sing local songs; and we drink palm wine. And then we dance - and dance - and dance - children, men, women, most of them lepers, ... dancing, believe it or not, for days on end! You lose all sense of time...! (p.47-48)

Il senso di questa esperienza piena e viva trapassa tanto le anime quanto i corpi dei partecipanti, pervasi da un senso di

soddisfazione profonda. La convivenza nel rito tra religioso e secolare come quella tra passato e presente, la loro fusione armonica, tanto da non riuscirne a distinguere i confini, ma anche la flessibilità e la capacità di riadattamento del passato, aprono la strada al discorso post-coloniale, che mira a ristabilire un equilibrio tra tradizione e modernità ai fini di una nuova definizione della nostra identità.

In questo contesto termini come 'ristabilire' e 'definire' richiedono una importante consapevolezza, quella di non poter più far ritorno ad un passato o ad una tradizione intatte ed omogenee, quella di riconoscerci parte di un flusso in continuo movimento e riadattamento che ci fornisce immagini sfocate e confuse. Significativamente Friel descrive le sue opere dicendo:

Flux is their only constant; the crossroads their only home; impermanence their only yardstick.... This is the only pattern of their existence: the persistence of the search; the discovery of a new concept; the preaching of that gospel to reluctant ears; and then when the first converts are made, the inevitable disillusion and dissatisfaction.... And then the moving on, the continuing of the search; the flux. Impermanence is the only constant.²¹

La condizione di donna e madre non impedisce alle africane di prendere parte alla cerimonia, come rappresentanti importanti della comunità che si sta celebrando. Jack ci trasmette l'idea di una società matriarcale in cui le donne non sposate vengono lodate e apprezzate. Una forma pagana di esaltazione della vita, considerata un bene prezioso, pervade gli indigeni; tra loro Michael non sarebbe oggetto di scandalo perché illegittimo, ma definito piuttosto come 'love-child' (p.41).

Le storie blasfeme di spiriti e riti promiscui sconvolgono Kate convinta che il fratello sia vittima di una strana malattia. Jack appare in preda al fascino demoniaco di un mondo di miscredenti, pertanto non è più possibile considerarlo un

²¹ Friel, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair", 18.

cristiano né tanto meno un prete, ma un individuo che, nel giudizio della comunità parrocchiale, bisogna emarginare e condannare. Egli sicuramente non la pensa allo stesso modo, avendo ritrovato dentro di sé la forza del vero predicatore e la serenità del credente, dispensatore di una spiritualità che desidera ardentemente comunicare agli altri ma che le semplici parole non riescono ad esprimere. Solo attraverso la danza il mondo di Jack può tentare un contatto con quello delle sorelle, ma tutto si limita ad una breve intuizione nei fugaci momenti in cui i corpi sono rapiti dalla musica.

E' proprio questo incontro con l'altro ed il rispetto della sua diversità a restituire a Jack una nuova consapevolezza di sé, della propria spiritualità ed omosessualità e a far cadere la rigida struttura gerarchica della cultura del potere:

A sense of crisis can have many exits; a threat to one's sense of being can also lead to an unexpected opening, a further throw of the dice.... It is perhaps in the dialogue that is installed between ourselves and this sense of 'otherness' that our particular selves are most sharply revealed. In such encounters, in an ethics that tries to respect that other voice, language invariably loses its previous anchorage, sense of centre, and direction, as it slips through the openings in dialogue into a wider framework.²²

Attraverso l'ascolto dell'altro è possibile dare un nuovo senso alla nostra identità, perché nel diverso troviamo visibile quella parte oscura del nostro essere che abbiamo represso.

In modo inconsapevole le stesse sorelle diventano spettatrici di un rito, quando spiano l'incontro tra Chris e Gerry Evans, padre del piccolo Michael nonché giramondo inaffidabile e bugiardo che rifiuta le sue responsabilità. Gerry è un ballerino ed è solo attraverso la danza che riesce a comunicare il suo amore, la sua sensibilità ed il suo desiderio di sposare Chris. Egli rifiuta assolutamente la logica delle parole e la razionalità del mondo intorno a sé: "don't talk... Not a

²² Chambers, *Migrancy*, 18.

word"(p.32). La danza riesce a trasportare i due su di un piano irrazionale ed immateriale dove responsabilità e doveri lasciano spazio alla magia del sogno che trasfigura i due personaggi, rendendo la loro gioia evidente anche agli occhi delle sorelle.

Il matrimonio ideale tra Chris e Gerry, suggellato dalla danza, non ha nulla di ortodosso ma offre un parallelo con la cerimonia pagana descritta precedentemente da padre Jack, come risulta chiaro dalle parole di Michael:

Although my mother and he didn't go through a conventional form of marriage, once more they danced together, witnessed by the unseen sisters. And this time it was a dance without music; just there, in ritual circles round and round that square and then down the lane and back up again; slowly, formally, with easy deliberation. My mother with her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open....

No singing, no melody, no words. Only the swish and whisper of their feet across the grass. I watched the ceremony from behind that bush. But this time they were conscious only of themselves and of their dancing. (p.42)

Nel 'rito' della memoria ha preso forma una cerimonia che nella realtà non è mai avvenuta, il matrimonio di Chris e Gerry. Ma *Dancing at Lughnasa* è completamente costruito su una serie di episodi che si animano sulla scena, prendendo spunto dal racconto di Michael. Per Friel, non sono i fatti realmente accaduti che contano, quanto il modo in cui i loro ricordi 'si trasformano' e 'ci trasformano'. "L'uomo è agito dalla memoria, dai suoi ricordi e non viceversa. Ma nel racconto egli li ricompona a suo piacimento".²³ Dal passato dipende il nostro stato presente ma solo nella misura in cui la memoria riesce a dargli una forma cangiante e transitoria.

In questo dramma la sperimentazione frieliana raggiunge il suo apice. L'espedito adoperato anni prima in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* che rendeva possibile al pubblico di entrare in

²³ Carla De Petris, "Friel, il teatro, l'Irlanda", in Brian Friel, *Traduzioni e altri drammi*, trad. Carla De Petris (Roma: Bulzoni, 1996), 91.

contatto con l'interiorità del personaggio attraverso uno sdoppiamento del protagonista, interpretato sulla scena da due attori nello stesso ruolo come nel caso di Public Gar e Private Gar viene perfezionato in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. "Lo sdoppiamento del personaggio avviene *in absentia*: colui che ricorda la storia", e che si trova sulla scena in disparte, "presta la voce al se stesso bambino" circondato dall'affetto delle sue zie, ma fisicamente assente.²⁴

Le considerazioni conclusive di Michael esprimono puramente la natura della memoria purificata dagli avvenimenti reali, che hanno sconvolto la sua infanzia e i membri della sua famiglia: "what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact" (p.71). Grazie al potere incantatore della memoria l'uomo prende la sua rivincita sulle disgrazie, su quelle 'inevitably'²⁵ che la storia ha in serbo per noi:

When I remember it (Lughnasa), I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement - as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary ... (p.71)

Il fatto in sé non ha nessuna importanza ma è il modo in cui esso è stato trasfigurato dalla memoria individuale che lo rende significativo: non sono le parole ad essere protagoniste del ricordo bensì la musica e la danza rituale in cui viene raggiunta quella comunione tra sacro e profano, tra vecchio e nuovo che trascende i limiti sociali e temporali del linguaggio verbale, in un flusso di immagini dal sapore di apparenza illusoria.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Friel, *Translations*, 42.

In order to write, Friel had to translate many of its categories into another dimension; history into memory, language into movement and sound, reality into appearance. It is through these translations that *Dancing at Lughnasa* works.²⁶

Tradurre vuol dire, d'accordo con George Steiner, trasformare e questo potere è proprio della mente umana e, nel caso specifico, del narratore: "In that memory" - riconosce Michael - "atmosphere is more real than accident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory" (p.71). Anche la nostra posizione di spettatori, o nel mio caso di lettore, è, in certo senso, di sospensione e di transizione tra l'oggettività dei fatti storici, che fanno da sfondo, e la soggettività dell'immaginazione, che rende i personaggi e le situazioni mere apparenze. L'atto di ricordare serve ad affrancarci dal peso della storia e della tradizione considerate oggettivamente, nel senso che è proprio attraverso la memoria che riusciamo a ritagliare una dimensione privata del nostro essere, rivestendo di valore soggettivo gli avvenimenti del passato, che siamo liberi di trasformare e di 'reinterpretare' nel nostro presente.

Il rituale della memoria ci consente una rottura degli schemi temporali realistici: infatti, nel monologo iniziale, mentre tutti i personaggi sono immobilizzati in un quadro vivente, Michael parla al passato di avvenimenti che per noi sono ancora futuri riferendosi al destino tragico della famiglia Mundy, che verrà chiarito man mano con brevi cenni nei monologhi successivi. Per la fine di quell'estate Kate perderà il suo lavoro di insegnante per la fama negativa di Jack: intanto una nuova fase di industrializzazione sta cambiando l'economia ancora fondamentalmente rurale del villaggio, uccidendo l'artigianato locale, così Chris sarà confinata al lavoro in fabbrica per risollevare l'economia familiare. Agnes e Rose fuggiranno verso un destino tragico di solitudine, miseria e morte. Questa drammatica elencazione di sconfitte richiama allegoricamente al fallimento delle cinque sorelle di rompere con gli schemi ed i

²⁶ Fintan O'Toole, "Making Time: from 'Making History' to 'Dancing at Lughnasa'", in Peacock, *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, 211-12.

ruoli che la tradizione aveva imposto loro. Il riconoscimento della loro sessualità e passionalità resta una semplice intuizione legata al momento della danza, un attimo fuggente di trasgressione durante il quale esse si abbandonano al trasporto verso una dimensione irreal e quasi demoniaca:

We need an ethics that fully recognizes the body, previously considered as the site of error and evil; that recognizes its languages, written across its surfaces in the alphabets of sexuality, gender and ethnicity; that recognizes its rites and rights, its multiple and differentiated histories. The body is eventually the site of sense. In its desires, detail and differentiation it also presents us with a zone of uncertainty.²⁷

Nell'ultimo monologo di Michael la tristezza provocata dal ricordo del crudele destino delle zie è magicamente dissolta. Nonostante la situazione drammatica, esiste in lui una serenità ed una calma che lasciano quasi stupiti e che contagiano il pubblico.

L'ultima immagine richiama a quella iniziale in cui tutti i personaggi sono presenti sul palcoscenico fotografati in pose abituali ma questa volta in leggera oscillazione, mentre Michael pronuncia il suo ultimo monologo: "*As Michael begins to speak the stage is lit in a very soft, golden light so that the tableau we see is almost, but not quite, in a haze.... Everybody sways very slightly from side to side - even the grinning kites. The movement is so minimal that we cannot be quite certain if it is happening or if we imagine it*" (pp.70-71).

Come la memoria così la nostra esperienza dell'opera è ambivalente. Questo movimento minimale, quasi impercettibile dei personaggi e degli aquiloni fa crollare ogni certezza sull'effettiva esistenza di una realtà fissa e stabile davanti ai nostri occhi. Riceviamo l'impressione del movimento ma non ne siamo sicuri, come Michael non è in grado di distinguere

nelle sue memorie tra realtà e sogno. La differenza è che il suo io adulto non cerca a tutti i costi la stabilità ed il rispetto dell'ordine, ma riconosce l'importanza nella vita di uno stato di sospensione precaria tra finito ed infinito, tra realtà ed apparenza, di una condizione di flusso continuo, in cui è possibile aprirsi al nuovo senza temere cambiamenti e trasformazioni da riconoscere invece come componenti essenziali del nostro essere.

In principio Michael aveva presentato al pubblico le sensazioni di un bambino di sette anni, il quale, messo a confronto con i cambiamenti di quell'estate, parlava di "a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be" (p.2). Il mondo del bambino stava perdendo la stabilità di cui ha bisogno ed egli stava prendendo consapevolezza del solco che esiste tra quella che lui credeva essere la realtà e quella che essa effettivamente è. Deluso nel confrontare l'idea fantastica di suo zio Jack, di quell'eroe dalla risplendente uniforme, con la figura debole e malata che si era trovato davanti agli occhi, egli osservava incredulo il cambiamento che si stava verificando in quelle pacifiche donne, vittime di un potente incantesimo.

Dancing at Lughnasa presenta un processo di crescita spirituale, il passaggio da uno stato di innocenza infantile alla maturità, in cui si riconosce il valore del cambiamento, della transizione e dell'incertezza. Nella memoria non conta stabilire in maniera netta la differenza tra ciò che è reale e ciò che non lo è, ma piuttosto riuscire a godere dell'atmosfera che essa sprigiona, di quel potere invisibile ed inspiegabile.

Le cerimonie descritte nel dramma hanno appunto la funzione di trasmettere una determinata atmosfera piuttosto che l'intenzione di interferire o di cambiare gli avvenimenti, cosa del resto impossibile. Il rito del matrimonio tra Chris e Gerry comunica alla donna la sensazione di essere la moglie del gallese, ma questo non cambierà la realtà, quella di un nuovo abbandono, né tantomeno cancellerà il fatto che Gerry è già sposato:

²⁷ Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1990), 112.

Ceremonies are entered into not just for their effectiveness but for their own sake, the shape and beauty of their form, just as plays are entered into'. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* Friel is avowing the importance of theatre outside of its responsibilities, saying that it can have its place even when it is incapable of changing the world.²⁸

Dancing at Lughnasa può essere letto come una metafora del mondo teatrale. Il teatro come rappresentazione del reale attraverso un uso logico delle parole è fallito, si è trasformato nel 'Deadly Theatre' menzionato da Brook. Ma Friel rende possibile godere di questo fallimento, contemplarlo in maniera spassionata e talvolta divertente. L'inadeguatezza del linguaggio come forma di comunicazione, la mancanza di congruenza tra come le cose sono in realtà e come esse appaiono o sono ricordate, il fallimento del teatro di riflettere il mondo con veridicità ed accuratezza diventano i nuovi soggetti da mettere in scena e con cui far divertire il pubblico. L'atmosfera irreale che si respira sul palcoscenico è evidente nell'espedito di conferire ad un personaggio assente lo stesso valore attribuito ad uno presente: il Michael bambino esiste per il solo fatto di essere nominato e percepito dagli altri, così come gli altri personaggi esistono solo perché ricordati dal narratore. "Things can be defined as much by what they are not as by what they are. *Absence is as potent as presence.*"²⁹

Esiste in questo teatro la volontà di creare quello che Brecht definisce 'effetto di straniamento' sul pubblico, al quale non bisogna presentare una situazione verosimile in cui potersi immedesimare: ma al contrario i meccanismi illusori messi in scena vengono sottolineati, esasperati, per poter incoraggiare al distacco, alla riflessione critica e non alla mimesi drammatica.

E' pur vero che il discorso di Friel, presentato fino a questo momento come sperimentale, non si spinge ancora verso quei punti estremi di rottura con il teatro tradizionale quali possono

²⁸ O'Toole, "Making Time", 213.

²⁹ Ibid., 213.

essere l'improvvisazione oppure il rimescolamento dello spazio della rappresentazione in modo da rompere la distinzione tra platea e palcoscenico, in quanto il pubblico viene chiamato ad interagire con gli attori in maniera sempre più intima. Tuttavia questo suo cauto cammino verso un teatro della danza, del corpo e dell'inverosimile mostra valore proprio perché si presenta sotto forma di un processo graduale che, partendo da un nutrito bagaglio di tradizione e di stereotipi ben consolidati, propone una traduzione di significati ed immagini che Friel intende rendere punto di partenza di nuove considerazioni e di un nuovo teatro in cui alla parola venga affiancata la danza. Un ritmo liberatorio, un moto disarmonico e trascinante che fa cadere le nostre difese e che rende possibile al teatro di innescare un meccanismo critico che perduri ben oltre la finzione scenica.

La sperimentazione del teatro di Friel rappresenta la traduzione sulla scena della decisa propensione ad un discorso post-coloniale che sostituisca alla tendenza tradizionale di ricercare un confine definito tra se stessi e l'altro un percorso difficile e mutevole, certo più impervio, capace di affrontare una critica della situazione odierna in Irlanda. I personaggi portati in scena sono sempre meno nettamente definibili e risulta inappropriato confinarli in una categoria specifica: il ritratto dell'outsider, tanto caro al drammaturgo, sia esso quello di uno straniero inglese o di qualsiasi altro intruso dal comportamento blasfemo e fuori dagli schemi, in un ambiente solo apparentemente armonico, rappresenta generalmente colui che possiede la profonda consapevolezza di aver perduto le certezze originarie e di aver ritrovato nel contatto con l'altro una parte dimenticata di sé. Spesso ridicolo ed inconcludente appare invece il personaggio chiamato a simboleggiare il custode della tradizione e dei valori della comunità, come l'anziano o il padre, statico nell'ostinazione di certi atteggiamenti, ma egli stesso poi disposto all'autocritica. Come Friel così i suoi personaggi giungono a sentire la provvisorietà, il disorientamento ed il senso di esilio come le componenti essenziali di un'esistenza viva ed in continua trasformazione.

Mariasilvia Pasquariello

**Culture, Society and Technology:
the Aesthetics of Decline and the Question of
Representation**

Culture, commerce and the city

Contemporary urban culture is immediately identifiable with the metropolitan realities of consumerism: the languages of television, cinema, fashion, advertising, newspapers, computers that form a shared global grammar of representation. Their symbolic meaningfulness has given voice to previously hidden histories of feelings, tastes, desires and needs, and has moulded the outlook of the city and its physical structures. Pop culture (popular, urban, commercial culture) has called into question the scepticism and the élitist prejudices that since the beginning of this century have accompanied the application of new techniques of artistic production and reproduction, as well as the institutions of *mass culture*, or the so-called *culture industry* to use Adorno's term.

The fact that mass production and reproduction technologies, along with capitalism and urbanization, were substantially transforming not only socio-economic conditions of everyday life but also art and culture in general, was not well received by the supporters of late nineteenth century aestheticism. The latter was based on an idealistic and transcendental view of art and culture, seen as a pure realm, a timeless and autonomous sphere, untouched by history and the materialistic concerns of everyday life. Therefore, those critics sought to maintain abstract rules and canonized notions of quality in order to distinguish *high art* from 'the rest'. This was

also the attitude of the Frankfurt School when in the late 1930s it reappropriated the modernist dichotomy *high art / mass culture*, thus suggesting an irretrievable opposition between the concept of *quality* and that of *quantity*. By the late 1950s it would become clear that the metaphorical barrier separating high art from popular culture, art from commerce, and culture from industry, had collapsed and that the purity and autonomy of all artistic creation could no longer be maintained, in a context that had witnessed the unavoidable insertion of culture in, and its growing dependence on, complex social and economic conditions. If we add the increasing popularity of such art forms as photography and films, designed from the outset for mechanical reproducibility, or the growing appeal of new artistic practices, such as collage and photomontage, it is no wonder that the traditional art work's *aura*, as Walter Benjamin defined it (its authenticity and uniqueness, and its distance from everyday life), was becoming an obsolete notion whose tyranny was destined to be contested.

Metropolitan aesthetics

Contemporary art goes hand in hand with pop and contaminates itself with *worldliness* in its cheap and precarious forms; on the other hand, pop eventually achieves a theoretical appreciation and acquires an aesthetics of its own: a *metropolitan aesthetics*, made up of a variety of styles and meanings resulting from the resilient, versatile, widely available languages of consumerism. The practice of these languages is potentially democratic, open to anyone (at least in those societies whose political institutions purport to guarantee 'open' societies and markets): by becoming experts of these codes, consumers are able to transform commodities into cultural signs that convey particular meanings and messages.¹ Michel de Certeau has

¹ "All aspects of culture possess a semiotic value, and the most taken-for-granted phenomena can function as signs: as elements in communication systems governed by semantic rules and codes which are not themselves directly apprehended in

pointed out that the cultural labour which makes the languages of the city, the languages of commerce *habitable*, fit for our particular ways of being, is a "production of sense" (consumption) that "insinuates itself everywhere, almost silently and invisibly".² Behind the apparently transparent, technocratic urban space there exist shadows, traces, opacities and ambiguities: a complexity well beyond the apocalyptic expectations of theorists prone to technological determinism and cultural pessimism; critics who consider the culture industry as a homogeneous totality and mass products as deprived of any intrinsic cultural value, merely subject to the logic of capital.³ By reappropriating and reworking the established languages of the market and by directing them towards multiple logics not foreseen by the producers of the culture industry, consumers have managed to expose the abstraction of the ideological critique and its insistence on the idea of alienation and passivity of society resulting from a widespread mass culture subject to the laws of the market.

Beginning in the 1950s, in western Europe and the United States, there arose an urgent demand for mass education and, in consequence, the entire machinery of cultural production had to adopt the principles and the structures of industrial organization. In the mid 1960s, university students, as well as

experience. These signs are, then, as opaque as the social relations which produce them and which they re-present. In other words, there is an ideological dimension to every signification ...". See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London & New York: Methuen, 1979), 13.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1988), XII.

³ This was a famous argument put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno in their essay *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, part of which was concerned with emphasizing the dangers resulting from the impact of technology on culture and society (technology as a means employed by the system to submit the masses – and win their consent – by imposing on them the hegemonic view of the world, with the complicity of manipulative cultural forms). The inheritance of the Frankfurt School passed into a form of common critical sense; later on, critics like Fredric Jameson retrieved the idea of a close relationship between power and technology and carried on the idea of the logic of capital as imposing itself on culture and society (*Post-modernity or the Logic of Late Capitalism*).

the organized working classes, were actively laying the foundations for their political emancipation by demanding the socialization of the places in which culture was produced and distributed, and with it the democratization of cultural instruments, in order to allow human knowledge to be accessible to society as a whole.

The most relevant result in the challenging combination between culture and mass reproduction techniques, far from being that of an assumed impending alienation, has been the liberation of art from any privileged, idealistic and metaphysical locality. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the technical reproducibility of art forms has been decisive in the destruction of the traditional art work's *aura*, which has been replaced by a "generalized" and potentially democratic experience of art. This has broken through the confines of the ivory tower in which art was traditionally secluded, for the pleasure of few, select initiates. This also obviously affected the way in which art was received and consumed: the halo of sacredness which surrounded artistic fruition, intended as an event requiring a devoted immersion and a ritual contemplation on the part of the spectator, yielded ground to a down-to-earth, immediate experience of art, whereby quantity was transformed into quality, thus emancipating the aesthetic sensibility from the privileged few.

Since the post-war years, the history of culture has recorded a radical emancipatory shift regarding the individual: the growing availability of a new range of tools designed for a 'do-it-yourself' cultural formation, thus liberating the aesthetic experience from the physical dependence on fixed locality and bringing about a closer relationship between the sphere of art and daily life.⁴

The reconciliation between the supposedly autonomous realm of the aesthetic and ordinary life had already been recommended

⁴ E.g. the opportunity to get to know figurative arts by means of their accurate reproduction in photographic images, and not merely by visiting the places in which they are kept.

by some far-sighted scholars in the mid-nineteenth century. Particularly in Britain, a fervent debate concerning the effects of industrialism on culture and society had been inflaming cultural circles. Arnold, Ruskin and Morris, are some of the names usually associated with sharp intuitions regarding the necessary link between art and society. They actually promoted the idea that the fine arts cannot exist in a debased society; the idea of art or culture in general as a cure for social evils; the search for beauty in daily matters and objects within everyone's reach; the idea of a culture dealing not only with high thought and philosophy, but also engaged with great deeds, that is, with a social task to fulfil.⁵ This underlines the huge contribution of these theories to a modern concept of culture, based on today's commonly accepted hypothesis of a nexus and an interplay between art and the whole way of life of a given society in a particular historical period. Nevertheless, in order to permit culture to be considered not merely an isolated complex of moral and theoretical activities, but rather "a whole way of life", including material as well as intellectual grounding, it was necessary to change the common attitude towards the coeval socio-economic conditions bent on industrialism. Instead of exaggerating in abstract terms the risk of alienation – a theme usually coupled with the nostalgic remembrance of a pre-industrial society or, still, with the hope of a future in which the employment of machines would be restricted – what was needed most of all was the attempt to try and find a *negotiation* with a given, inescapable reality, thus bringing to light, beside the danger, the saving power and the possibilities of liberation implied in machines and technology. In other words, the cultural emancipation of mankind should no longer be seen as something sharply separated from the progress of science and technology, thereby reproducing the dualism between art and technique. Moral and material improvement could run in the same direction to the advantage of both parties, as a result of an increasing contamination between art and industry.

⁵ See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

The avant-garde and the everyday

In this century, the first enthusiastic project aimed at the reintegration of art into life was proposed by the historical avant-garde: the final goal was to destroy the institutional framework in which art was produced, distributed and received in bourgeois society.⁶ By expressing a radical secession from received notions of art and beauty and by ridding themselves of ethic and aesthetic certainties, avant-garde artists introduced in their works what was previously kept at the margins of artistic creations: the profane commodities of ordinary life. Similarly Pop Art, in the 1960s, caught between the fine arts and graphic design for advertising, adopted the new reproduction techniques of the image, in an attempt to bridge the traditional gap between *high* and *low* art. It sought to liberate art from the imaginary realm of the aesthetic, sealed off from the outer world and relations of production, and to rejoin it with the rest of human experience.⁷

If, on the one hand, conservative cultural critics continued to demonstrate a disdainful attitude to what they saw as the ultimate decadence of Western culture and its complete loss of quality and critical substance, on the other hand, many others believed that such artistic experiences could lead to a democratization of art, and to an augmented interplay between art and society. The latter prospect induced beyond any binary logic, beyond the idea that serious art negates reality, so that the whole aesthetic realm, no longer metaphysical or isolated, might be confronted with social labour, economic conditions, and popular practices, including the experience concerned with the supposedly trivial realities of consumerism.

Against pessimistic expectations, technology has proved to be the key intermediary between culture and society, thus

⁶ See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141-143. Pop's realism was inherent in the exhibition of commodities and serial images (Coca-Cola bottles, adverts, film stars or comic strips etc.), as those shown in the fanciful works by Warhol and Lichtenstein.

calling into question the art-life dichotomy and an associated romantic idealism, which had remained largely unaffected since the birth of modernism. However, a further point needs to be raised: techniques of mechanical reproduction, such as those displayed in the new artistic expressions of the twentieth century (photography, cinema, pop art...), did not play a mere *instrumental* role; technology was somehow more than a medium, and participated in the essence of artistry. The aesthetization of technique, the disclosure of its evocative power and its ability to enrich artistic imagery, was to lead to a redefinition of the philosophical conception of art. Traditional aesthetical notions sharply distinguished art from technique: though the artist could not help employing artificial tools, s/he nevertheless did her/his best to make her/his works appear as authentic, natural and genuine as possible. Yet, today the boundaries between *natural* and *artificial* have become increasingly blurred: contemporary arts, particularly those employing digital languages, for example computer art and imagery, demonstrate how the apparently irreconcilable terms of ancient dichotomies now coexist. This challenges the fear that the artificial and virtual character of those works might annihilate the human and spiritual element they contain.

In the age of global communication, the growing dependence of culture on the sphere of technology is experienced by producers as well as consumers. The far-reaching access to universal codes of communication, the huge expansion of information, the recording of world cultures through sophisticated digital means, introduce the individual to previously unknown possibilities of learning and action. Moreover, it allows more and more people to mould and shape their taste and aesthetic sensibility by themselves, through their own representations of reality, mediated by a wide range of pliable languages. The individual approach to human knowledge, then, seems to emerge in an *expertise*, the widespread ability to manipulate technical instruments, which erases the line that signalled the limit between active producers and passive receivers: consumers are themselves actively involved in the production of culture.

Gone are the times in which a few circle of initiates, intellectuals, scholars and critics had the power to distribute human knowledge within largely unquestioned criteria. Today art and culture tend to be affected not so much by the critical reviews of the selected arbiters of taste, as by consumer choices. Works of art have broken through the institutional frame and exceeded official appreciation, slipping into our homes in the guise of records, CD ROMS, videocassettes, gadgets, images, tastes. The shattering of the imaginary glass dome, in which artistic creation had once sought sublimation, eternity and universality, has scattered a myriad of fragments on contingent reality: ancient forms are re-lived and re-cycled and find their historical presence and, ultimately, their redemption through the contemporary languages of consumerism.

In the huge cauldron of popular, commercial products, good and bad taste, the sacred and the profane, high and low culture coexist and are mixed together. Such a *carnavalesque* confusion, in which opposites are held together, undermines previous dualisms and their attempt to flatten the complexity of reality through the adoption of rigid binary schemes. The anxiety of contamination between the supposedly autonomous art work and the culture of everyday life seems, therefore, out of place, and with it the idea of the art work's purity and authenticity, namely its distance from political, economic and social concerns. The sphere of culture has opened onto new horizons of human communication, thus challenging the privilege historically granted to literary production, in virtue of the power of the written word, typical of western culture in the last two centuries.⁸ Recent developments in visual arts have

⁸ For a further discussion on the "Scriptural Economy" in modern Western culture, see de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, chapter X. Here the author argues that, while in the past three centuries the mastery of the written word guaranteed a new power, the bourgeois power of making history and governing political, administrative and socio-economic matters ("producing society as a text", whereas placing things in a rational order also meant imposing one's power on it, the power of ordering), today the scriptural system "is becoming self-moving and

affected the hegemony of literary expressions within the field of contemporary cultural representations, above all due to the growing presence of computer technology (e.g. in cybernetic art).⁹

The intermediate stage between the artistic innovation inaugurated by the historical avant-garde (and its attempt to integrate art and reality in order to achieve a cultural transformation of everyday life) and the contemporary futural and virtual expressions of a techno-industrial culture (in which the substance of human bodies fades away or, better, conceals itself in machines and the prosthetic extensions they provide) is represented by a multiplicity of cultural forms and tastes coming from 'below'.

In the post-war period the proliferation of metropolitan styles, based on consumption rituals, caused the shattering of¹⁰ Culture with a capital C, into more cultures and *subcultures*. The variety and creativity of spectacular subcultures have disavowed the levelling down of society, once supposed to be the most likely outcome of mass culture. As forms of expression closely connected to particular social, political and economic contexts, subcultural styles represented a significant step in the move beyond the traditional aesthetics of a pure, authentic and uncontaminated art. They introduced a *cultural politics*, through which culture has finally been brought into the run of everyday life. An ubiquitous "distracted reception", has

technocratic; it transforms the subjects that controlled it into operators of the writing machine that orders and uses them" (ibid., 136).

⁹ A recent example of such artistic developments would be the "Ars Electronica 97" exhibit in Linz, Austria, in which a number of experimental works are characterized by visual, acoustic, sensorial, tactile, interactive technology, by employing monitors, cameras, as well as visual and sound effects of simulation.

¹⁰ See Hebdige, *Subculture*. In his brilliant analysis of post-war spectacular subcultures in Britain, up to 1970s (beats, teddy boys, mods, punks...), Hebdige emphasizes the intentional symbolic and communicative character of these stylistic expressions. By turning consumerism into the language of style, youth subcultures were able to express "significant differences" (ibid., 101-102). They proposed controversial and disturbing replies, on a symbolic and metaphorical level, to the codified roles of the ruling ideology (ibid., 132-133). See also Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), esp. chapter 1.

supplanted abstract, distant and alert contemplation on the part of the cultivated spectator, requested by official *high* culture.¹¹

Popular, commercial and urban practices, drawing upon a wide range of languages distilled in a democratic approach to the knowledge of the immediate and concrete reality, announced the crisis of Art History with its stable referents, its idealistic traits and its circumscribed fields of research. The idea of Beauty could no longer reside in the immaterial and metaphysical isolation, looming high above the contingent and trivial matters of the material world; it could no longer claim eternity and immortality. It then comes to be secularized, dragged into time and history – *hic et nunc*: in other words, it ‘declines’ into the world, where it lives and dies. This sort of beauty *in progress*, subject to fashions, tastes, and open to change, transformation, and to historical redefinitions leads to the suggestion of an *aesthetics of decline*. Since a huge number of objects of daily use, as well as forms of expression typical of the mass-media, have entered the aesthetic horizon and have claimed artistic significance, we might assume that one of the most characteristic phenomena of our times is the experience of a “diffused”, “expansive” and “expanded” art, increasingly enveloping contingent reality.¹²

The art of repetition

In the light of the increasing secularization of art forms, many

¹¹ See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 242-243: “Reception in a state of distraction ... is increasing noticeably in all fields of art The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one”.

¹² See Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità* (Milano: Garzanti, 1985), 60-61. For a thorough discussion of this concept see also Antonio Banfi, *Filosofia dell'arte* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1962), esp.150ff: the author stresses the aesthetic rehabilitation of the world of machine, previously confined, on the part of bourgeois romanticism. in the field of the utilitarian, whose forms have subsequently assumed an artistic expressiveness, a “human creative significance” (ibid., 155).

of which were being conditioned by political and revolutionary issues, Walter Benjamin suggested the elaboration of a new aesthetic theory that might dismiss the traditional concept of the work of art. As a consequence of its technical reproducibility, the work of art replaces the idea of ‘uniqueness’ with that of ‘experience’. The artist, who increasingly employs machines, is more a ‘technician’, an expert in the use of mechanical devices, rather than a solitary genius, a demigod whose creative power gives shape to raw material thus rendering it unique and unreproducible. In brief, the artist deals with *re-creation*, rather than original, absolute, ‘promethean’ creation.

The myth of the originality of artistic creation, which refers back to a romantic and pre-industrial world, evoked the invention of forms which apparently did not previously exist. After Benjamin, Roland Barthes would argue for “the death of the Author” (i.e. the death of the idea of originality), since each cultural text is the result of a multiplicity of pre-existent writings, re-worked and then collected in a dialogic relationship of negotiation.¹³ This is particularly true for pop music. Apart from the collective technological modes of production, (the industrial assembly line – in this case represented by the arranger, the record producer, the studio engineer, record company distribution) which make it difficult to identify a single source, an obvious ‘author’, the creative stage itself increasingly disperses the lure of authenticity.¹⁴ Since the 1980s, with the widespread employment of samplers, the ‘invention’ or ‘originality’ often consists in the recording of

¹³ See Roland Barthes, “La morte dell'autore”, in *Il brusio della lingua* (Torino: Einaudi, 1988), 55. Barthes claims that, from the last century onwards, we are installed in a movement of repetition and that History just allows us shifts, alterations and refusals (see Roland Barthes, “Dall'opera al testo”, in *Il brusio della lingua*, 57). In other words, if everything has somehow already found its cultural representation, the only thing an author is expected to do, is that of re-arranging pieces and fragments of pre-existing text in a new cultural frame: the critical montage of earlier ‘writings’.

¹⁴ See Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: pop music and popular culture* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 5-6.

real sounds (music, human voices, noises...) that are selected and turned into digital codes, and subsequently manipulated together with other codes, in order to produce new, complicated sound webs. Frequently, the human performance is merely a manipulation of electronic keys: while hands move across the keyboards of synthesizers, samplers and computers, sounds are cut, mixed up, re-assembled with other sounds from other sources. The resulting collage is always open to 'rewriting', change and transformation.

Considering that artists living in the modern metropolis, to a large degree, no longer aspire to *ex-novo* creations, but are more concerned with de-contextualizing and recycling already existing materials (a sort of *biodegradable* or *ecological* aesthetic), it becomes self-evident why technological instruments play a crucial role in the aesthetic domain, a role which goes beyond mere mediation. The contemporary experience of art and knowledge, ridding of the modernist myth of progress – concerning the linearity of time, the unilateral drive towards the future – might be perceived as a journey across the barriers of time and place: bits and pieces of a fragmented inheritance from the past, are never lost, are rather continually re-presented and re-worked within the immediate suggestions of present time. The languages of representation, which constitute the inter- and trans-cultural networks of an increasingly metropolitan world, come to be a shared habitat, a site of transit, in which different histories, memories, cultures intersect and negotiate. Cultural products are caught within multiple historical rhythms, within a space-time dislocation, and emerge as a hybrid mix: a syncretic juxtaposition (rather than a homogeneous synthesis) of apparently irreconcilable elements lifted from extensive historical repertoires of words, sounds and images.

The work of art has ultimately ceased to be perceived as a divine gift, a sort of metaphysical miracle, or as the plausible outcome of the artist's genius; it no longer seeks to enter the transcendental world of everlasting beauty, of absolute and universal values, out of time and place. As human constructions, supposed to arouse a profound understanding of

the living world in which we are cast, art works possess a worldly quality, since they intensify our belonging to the world and its historicity. The aesthetic experience is an experience of falling into time and the transit of Being, to use Heidegger's words, which displays as *event*.¹⁵ Truth manifests itself as something that *happens, be-comes*; some thing "thrown" into the world in the guise of *language*.¹⁶ Having lost its noumenal quality, its presumed purity and its autonomy ("art for art's sake"), the work of art enters the experience of language. The interaction with the public it apparently addresses, opens up further avenues of sense: far from possessing an already given significance, art acquires its meanings in and through the return and repetition of historical performances. Each cultural text finds itself at the point of intersection of different cultural and historical worlds. There it is inserted in a network of diverse texts (intertextuality) whose relationships and mutual influences guarantees for each of them an inexhaustible renewal, a perpetual re-shaping and redefinition, a continual recycling within new frames and configurations.

Ironically, in the technological civilization of today, what tends to be revealed in art is its worldliness and its human-like attribute. Due to their increasing dependence on technical instruments, cultural texts are not merely received by their public in a passive manner, so much as undergo new adaptations to suit individual tastes. The practices through which these texts are re-read and reworked, expose the constructed character of the arts, as well as their subjection to the laws of societal languages and to the mutability of history. Moreover, the application of new techniques, meant to facilitate the access of the masses to cultural realms, has recently signalled the acquisition of new abilities, previously missing in the direct and physical experience of art works. A typical example is represented by computer technology and telematics, which today provide us the possibility, while staying at home,

¹⁵ See Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, 80-81.

¹⁶ See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

to visit museums and art-galleries world-wide, and to explore the virtual space of pictures transformed into three dimensions thanks to software, whose strength lies in the interactive dynamics it supports.

Although multimedia languages have introduced new stimulating approaches to human knowledge, as well as innovative forms of expression in which the medium is also the message (e.g. cybernetic-art), and have managed to reintegrate art into daily life (thus bringing the *ideal* and the *real* to a wholesome confusion) new doubts and ethical uncertainties continue to arise. They concern the way these technologies affect the relationship between the human and the physical. If it is true that this relationship has somehow always been 'mediated', has never been 'pure', nevertheless the high degree of sophistication reached by contemporary technology has radically reduced the materiality of instruments and tools as well as their stability.¹⁷ The medium is increasingly volatile, is difficult to spot and to perceive empirically, it being more and more transparent, untouchable, invisible.¹⁸ If the global, metropolitan network of immaterial services and exchanges has prevailed over the flow and the consumption of goods and material objects (thus meeting McLuhan's expectations about a post-industrial or cybernetic society based on the primacy of information); if computer's interfaces simulate with high fidelity, via the *world-wide web* (w.w.w.), real encounters among people all over the world and the etherial networks of cellular telephones carry out an invisible connection in which wires have become obsolete, thus bringing about a growing dislocation, then what we are experiencing is the disturbing *presence of an absence*, a ghostly sensation.¹⁹ This phenomenon

¹⁷ Again, since the moment we are born, we find ourselves already thrown in an imaginary web of human fabrications sustained by language; see Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", in *Basic Writings*.

¹⁸ See Paul Virilio, *Lo spazio critico* (Bari: Dedalo, 1988). The author argues that the stable image of physical and homogeneous space has almost been replaced by the unstable image (whose duration depends on its retinal persistence) of an accidental and heterogeneous space (*ibid.*, 22-23).

¹⁹ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

has fueled the philosophical and epistemological debate concerned with the hypothesis of a progressive and ineluctable *de-materialization* of reality, or rather its *phantasmagorization*, since the real world is constantly invaded by hi-fi images and by illusory representations, in a word, by *simulacra*.²⁰

The apparently self-referring order of the languages of the mass-media, enveloping the globe with electric cables, satellite aerials, relay stations, captures the physicality and the opacity of the *real* world and gives back only the transparency of images and sound signals. The widespread feeling is that we are losing contact with the real world and with our physical bodies, thus experiencing a sort of obsolescence of material and solid referents that are increasingly overwhelmed by virtual connections within an imaginary environment. The preponderance of reproduced images, copies of copies endlessly reiterating themselves, is for many the sign of an imminent disappearance of reality, killed off by its simulation.

The point of my argument is that, perhaps, it is rather the *metaphysics of the real* that has finally reached a crucial point, namely the crisis of the idea of reality as an absolute and immutable entity (*ontos on*) and its clearcut distinction from its phenomenal representations as portrayed in the earlier dualities of western culture: the real and the represented, reality and simulacra, truth and appearance, the authentic and the artificial. Today, because of the intertwined relationship of reality to the languages of representation and modes of symbolization (the mass-media), previous epistemological certainties have been brought to a state of confusion and exhaustion. All passes through images and representations: the real and the represented merge one into another and eventually *coincide*. In other words, there seems to be no longer any qualitative difference between the effective world and its representations. Our sense of reality has widened and has become more complicated, since it includes within itself its apparent antithesis, simulation, once associated with the idea of falsity

²⁰ See Tomás Maldonado, *Reale e virtuale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1992), 9-14.

(real/artificial, true/false). In spite of its qualities, artificiality and appearance, which deprive it of the ontological weight usually associated with reality, the sphere of simulation cannot be conveniently located at the opposite side of the natural world, given that it is precisely in and through that sphere that we usually connect to our environment.²¹ The emerging culture of virtuality is marked by a fundamental ambiguity: on the one hand cybernetic fabrications carry us away from direct experience and even produce a sort of estrangement in our relationship with the physical world; on the other hand these figurations fall fully within the confines of worldly experience, they are iconic constructions elaborated within the only world we have.²²

The formal distinction *natural/artificial, organic/inorganic* seems out of place in a context that witnesses not only the daily interfacing with an electronic and telematic hyperspace, and the simulated sites of the modern metropolis, but also the intrusiveness of technology into human bodies: biotechnologies and cybernetics applied to medical sciences constantly violate the borders of organic substance. Microphysics and technological miniaturization allow technique and its micro-machines to invade the living, in guise of pace-makers, contact lenses and anatomical prosthesis. Indeed, a closer understanding of the permeability of boundaries between the machine and the living organism will reveal a new condition: that of post-organic bodies, of mutants. In a world characterized by hybrid configurations, by a growing confusion of opposites and a dissemination of intellectual puzzlement (brilliantly evoked by contemporary cult-movies such as *Blade Runner* and *2001 Space Odyssey*), the idea of technology as an alien force opposed to humankind, a force which, to a large degree, prevents humanity from

²¹ See Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

²² Maldonado, *Reale e virtuale*, 67.

having a direct, pure and authentic relationship with the outer world, is a contradiction in terms.

The return of the real

Although today's languages of representation are increasingly those of the mass media, technological mediation, from television to personal computers, is still perceived as a threat to the substance of reality. It appears as a canker that corrupts and mystifies the truth of the natural being by casting over it the ghastly shadow of artificiality and falsity. This theoretical approach, which has marked much recent philosophy, surprisingly counts Jacques Derrida among its advocates.

In his latest interview-book, the French philosopher argues that behind electronic virtuality there lies a "logic of the spectre", a way of appearing that makes our being vacillate.²³ One of the most disturbing aspects of our times – he says – is the redundancy of the standardized image as well as its ghastly and phantasmal features. The apparent siege of reified images lamented by Derrida is clearly just one more argument about fetishism.²⁴ Marx, in his time, had identified the spectre with technique or the industrial mode of production which tore body and soul of the living. In the same fashion, the Frankfurt School had cried out loud the lack of human values in standardized products of the market.

Focusing on television programmes, Derrida maintains that

²³ Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Ecografie della televisione* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1997).

²⁴ One should note how much these reflections bear in common with Baudrillard's views in the essay Jean Baudrillard, *Il delitto perfetto* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1996), according to which all the high technicalness displays the fact that human beings take advantage of duplicates and virtual images, in order to disappear (*ibid.*, 46). Baudrillard claims that the hyper-reality of technical performances exceeds alienation (*ibid.*, 69), since the object, by offering itself in its absolute transparency and free from natural meanings, acquires a spectral power: that of the fetish (*ibid.*, 81).

as real events pass through the filter of television, they are subject to artificial conditions such as cutting, editing, incomplete quotations, selected framing, which actually *mystify* and affect their "purity".²⁵ As a consequence of such complex modes of intervention – he claims – the event is never quite *integral* and the field of experience and perception is actively modified.²⁶ This perspective restores the earlier belief, typical of Western metaphysics, in an original reality and of natural things existing prior to their representations. In his earlier theories, Derrida himself had seriously questioned such a view of the world, based on the hypothesis of already given referents, of fixed meanings waiting to be expressed through the transparent means of language. As a matter of fact, the disruptive theories of deconstructionism intended meaning as a performative event, as something which *emerges* in and through the perpetual semiotic play of signifiers.²⁷ Ironically, Derrida now hints at a fixed referent, a stable reality, challenged by false appearances, in the unfaithful referentiality of television performances. At the core of this view remains unaffected the naïve distinction between *truth* and *appearances*, which beckons to the Platonic dualism between *intelligible* and *sensible*. The 'real' becomes once again "the one basic referent – pure, concrete, fixed, visible, all-too visible", an *a priori*, authentic state of things.²⁸

²⁵ Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecografie della televisione*, 3; 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44. In television actuality, then, there is no place for the "pure event", intended as unexpected, unforeseeable and incalculable happening, since even live programmes undergo manipulations and expectations that annihilate the purity of the event, its "otherness". Again, these reflections might be compared with Baudrillard's assumptions, when he says that virtual constructions are chargeable with the destruction of the "Other" (see Baudrillard, *Il delitto perfetto*, 113; 153), since they just mirror the representations of the "Same".

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *La scrittura e la differenza* (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), esp. 372. For a further discussion of the point, see also Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), esp. 32.

²⁸ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning", in *When the Moon Waxes Red* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 33.

But if, to echo Heidegger, we dwell in language, and language already exists before us, then there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated access to reality. Languages of representation give shape to a multiplicity of perspectives in the real world which do not quite *add up* in a new teleological view, but rather *add to*, in a sort of juxtaposition which avoids closure.²⁹ Here reality cannot be reduced to the original foundations of abstract being, but it is rather something that *becomes*, that emerges through difference.³⁰ This is to suggest a new constellation of sense, in which truth is a shifting horizon of performances, narratives, constructions and representations (the *mobility of the symbolic*, as the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo calls it).³¹

Then, no representation can ever be 'integral', 'pure', fully true or false. Representations are bound to be partial and incomplete or, to put it in Benjamin's terms, "To arrive at the purity of the gaze is not difficult, it is impossible".³² The way television programmes represent the real world can neither be 'honest' nor 'manipulative'; it is just a production of sense, a particular mode of appropriating reality and *constructing* its meanings.

Derrida's recent approach to the problem of representation would seem to induce the gnosiological quest to fall back on modernist binary oppositions (reality/representation, profound/superficial, natural/artificial, truth/appearance...). Perhaps, it reveals once more the position of ontological impasse reached by contemporary philosophy, still entangled in the knots of Western metaphysics and its nostalgia for epistemological certainties. The spectres conjured up by

²⁹ I am referring to the concept of *cultural difference* as expressed by Homi Bhabha, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), esp. 228.

³⁰ See Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 4-5.

³¹ See Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, 36.

³² Walter Benjamin, *Parigi. Capitale del XIX secolo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 609.

Derrida might rather be perceived as metaphorical projections, whose role is not that of filling the void created by the *death* of reality, but that of exposing the permanent loss of the original and stable foundations of abstract being.

If, on the one hand, Derrida admits that virtual realities cannot be simply opposed to the natural world, as once could be done for the matter and form of a *telos*, on the other hand, he argues that the reproduced image is, by no means, an *evidence* of real events.³³ Obviously there is still a widespread misunderstanding regarding the part technical instruments are supposed to play. If we agree with the idea that television broadcasting should provide us with objective information and should prefer truth to interpretations and completeness to partiality, then we are clearly losing sight of the fact that no medium is ever a transparent and neutral means, a mere vector of facts. If "the medium is also the message", this means that the contents of communication also depend on the shape they are given by technical modalities within the media. Television mediation cannot be a transparent reproduction of facts: even those programmes directly concerned with information (the news, interviews) are always involved in a direct *production* of reality, so they actually *inscribe* sense on events rather than merely report them.³⁴ Each 'production' leaves a space for other meanings to emerge.

Meaning can neither be imposed nor denied. Although every film is in itself a form of ordering and closing, each closure can defy its own closure, opening onto other closures, thereby emphasizing the interval between apertures and creating a space

³³ Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecografie della televisione*, 100-106.

³⁴ See Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear and the Lure of Authenticity", in *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 55. The mechanical eye is always, somehow, expected to bear testimony to the real world, to be a guarantee of objectivity, of authenticity. On the other hand, the human eye is expected to identify with the camera eye, and its neutrality, "masking thereby the constructed meaning under the appearance of naturally given meaning..."

in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it.³⁵

The instrumental view of technology obscures the evocative power it possesses, the power to unravel our being, as well as our hopes, desires, needs, fancies and repressed fears. Heidegger claimed that in the universal imposition of the technical world (*Ge-stell*) one might encounter the flash of our being-in-the-world, namely the way our being reveals itself in the world as event (*Ereignis*) through the means of language.³⁶ Today technology has revealed one of the most immediate cultural languages and mode of symbolization; all that passes through technological representation is permeated by new reflections. In this sense, all mediations produce *fabulations*: within the media everything is given in the shape of narratives and perspectives. Mediation is thus another word for *translation*. And if to translate, in Benjamin's words, also means to *betray*, mediation, just like translation, is never pure nor authentic. The presumed 'original' undergoes a change, is affected by the 'foreignness' and ambiguity of the 'other' language; for, "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages".³⁷

Confronted with an excess of sense, a surplus of meaning which remains as a permanent interrogation, or a gap which exposes differences, each translation resists closure. Language becomes the site of a performative event, of a mutual

³⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning", in *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 49.

³⁶ See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Illuminations*, 75. Although the world is marked by language, not everything finds its representation. This is what Benjamin refers to as the "nucleus" of the untranslatable. The "supplement", or the element which resists communication and defies translation, remains hidden; yet, "it does not lie elsewhere, but on the surfaces, in the folds, fissures and flaws of language itself" (Chambers, *Migrancy*, 131). It actually negates transparency, thereby exposing the 'doubleness' all languages possess.

translation which constitutes both *subject* and *object*. No longer a mere instrument of mediation (*techné*), language is the site in which our being is revealed.

In building a technological world we create ourselves, and through the events which comprise this world we enact and live out our experiences of awe and wonder, our fantasies of service and control, our images of exploration and destruction, our dreams of hope and nightmares of despair ...³⁸

As both an instrument and a language, technology is the medium of our world and of our 'selves'.

³⁸ Robert D. Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom & Dream* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 10.

John Rieder

**"Mute Arbitress of Tides":
Aesthetic Judgment and the Politics
of Canon Revision**

One of the most energetic areas of scholarship on British Romanticism in the last decade has been the rediscovery, republication, and anthologizing of selected portions of the very large body of poetry written by women in the years 1780-1830.¹ Within this specialized field, accounts of canon formation and calls for archival recovery almost inevitably employ images of the silencing of women's voices from literary discourse and their exclusion and erasure from literary history.² The accompanying argument runs something like this: the qualities that cause poems to survive are either apprehended or misread, exaggerated or dismissed, according to the more or less ideological promotion or repression of certain norms for

¹ See James Robert de Jager Jackson, *Romantic Poetry by Women: A Bibliography 1770-1835* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

² A few examples in the field of women's poetry from the Romantic period: Andrew Ashfield, ed., *Romantic Women Poets 1770-1838: An Anthology* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), xi-xii; Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxxviii-xliii; Paula R. Feldman and Theresa Kelley, "Introduction" to *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), 6; Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4. The account of canon formation informing my argument is John Guillory's in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), particularly his defense of the aesthetic in chapter 5.

reading, or insofar as the poems embody norms for readers and posit models of the proper subject. Thus the many individual judgments and choices that in their accumulation confer canonical status upon some texts and withhold it from others also end up expressing the collective ideological biases and identity politics of an age or an institution. Because the literary establishment and the critical industry have historically been dominated by males, then, writing by women has been widely and systematically underestimated, both because female competence threatened the dominant ideology of the field, and because feminist themes and representations of the female subject simply did not ring the bells of recognition.

It is all too easy, however, to slide from this argument to the notion that canonical texts themselves embody the values evident in the process of canon formation. For example:

The critical canonization of only six of the literally hundreds of male and female writers of the early nineteenth century reflects certain assumptions deeply imbedded in our political culture. These six male poets have been heralded because they endorsed a concept of the self as a power that gains control over and gives significance to nature, a nature troped in their writings as female. They thus legitimized the continued repression of women and at the same time gave credence to the historically emerging capitalist belief in the primacy of the individual over nature.³

This argument's logic fails with the use of the word "because" in the second sentence. If the canonical Romantic poets (William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats) had earned their reputations because they effectively promoted a common, masculinist and pro-capitalist ideology, it would become

³ Anne Mellor, "On Romanticism and Feminism", in Anne K. Mellor, ed., *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 8. Mellor is summarizing the view worked out in impressive detail in Marlon B. Ross, *Contours of Masculine Desire*; see also Ross's contribution to the *Romanticism and Feminism* collection.

difficult indeed to explain the unorthodox and divergent views of the canonical six or of their major critics. The dynamics of the profession and of women's increasing presence within it over the last generation have perhaps encouraged an overly strong identification of one's preference for certain texts with the privileging of certain values or subject positions and the dismissal or marginalization of others. But it would hardly bode well for feminism if canon formation were or could be reduced to a mere competition between ethical and political positions. Indeed it seems all too likely that, because education as a whole is predominantly a conservative enterprise, one that society supports and funds largely with the view of reproducing dominant values and preserving existing class relations, ethical and political position-taking within a given academic discipline will in the long run be co-opted or neutralized by the tenor of the institution in general. In a simple competition between political and ethical positions, advocacy of radical social change will normally be tolerated within liberal institutions precisely to the extent that it remains ineffectual.⁴

Fortunately, the literary canon is not determined merely by position-taking. It results from a complex variety of decisions about what to teach, edit, publish, anthologize, write about, and so on. Although a dominant ideology no doubt leaves its mark on the process, a significant part of the decisions involved are better classified as aesthetic rather than political or ethical (or commercial) judgments. My main purpose in this essay is to reopen the question of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and political engagement, and more particularly to argue that taking the aesthetic seriously does not mean foreclosing the political.⁵ My emphasis, I should add

⁴ On the conservative character of the educational institution see Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London and Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), and on positions and position-taking, Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," *Poetics* 14 (1985), 13-44, esp. 33-43.

⁵ As is argued, for instance, in Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990).

immediately, is not on the category of the aesthetic as it developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but rather on the problem of judgment and the privileged position given to the aesthetic in relation to that problem by Kant in his third critique.⁶ Kant's linking of the aesthetic to the problem of judgment helps clarify the very close connection between canonicity and gender ideology, as well, and it is in order to establish the contiguity of these topics that I will work my way to the problem of aesthetic judgment by way of a "theory" of textual reception articulated in the work of a recently rediscovered British Romantic poet, Charlotte Smith.

Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* were popular enough to go through ten editions between 1784 and 1800, but by the second half of the nineteenth century her work had faded into obscurity.⁷ There is a certain ironic appropriateness, then, in the fact that Smith's longing for a kind of self-effacement achieved through forgetfulness and oblivion runs throughout these poems. It has usually been understood either as a deplorable excess (as in Anna Seward's complaint that Smith's sonnets were "a perpetual dun on pity") or as a valid expression of her miserable circumstances.⁸ The problem with the latter strategy is that it easily devolves into a moralism which is merely the counterpart of the first — rather than Seward's annoying beggar, we discover a deserving applicant. But such postures of dismissal and protection are rendered pointless if we read

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

⁷ See the introduction to *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xxii-xxiii. Curran opens the introduction by announcing that "Charlotte Smith was the first poet in England whom in retrospect we would call Romantic" (xix).

⁸ Seward is quoted in Stuart Curran's introduction to *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, xxv; Curran raises the biographical defense of Smith in the same introduction, xix-xxv, and in "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, 200.

Smith's fantasies of dissolution as self-consciously rhetorical and critical, rather than merely ethical or emotional, gestures.⁹

Early in the *Elegiac Sonnets* Smith invokes the Ovidian plot of transforming suffering into song by turning a natural presence into the sufferer's metaphor. Sonnet 3, "To a Nightingale," announces Smith's intention to "translate" the song of the "Poor melancholy bird," presumably into a metaphor for her own and other women's victimization. The closing couplet completes this strategy by measuring Smith's poetry against the bird's song: "Ah! songstress sad! that such my lot might be, / To sigh, and sing at liberty — like thee!"¹⁰ The metaphor thus ends up disclosing difference rather than similarity; the poem articulates Smith's suffering but does not metamorphose the sufferer. The nightingale's "liberty" is the opposite, indeed, not just of Smith's imprisonment in her circumstances but also of her inescapable consciousness of them. The exclamatory sigh opening the couplet expresses a wish, not so much for the nightingale's "full-throated ease" of singing, as for its simple animal oblivion.

The closing couplets in the poems surrounding "To a Nightingale" insistently, even monotonously reiterate this desire to escape the consciousness of suffering:

Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favours cost,
If those paint sorrow best — who feel it most!

Another May new buds and flowers shall bring;
Ah! why has happiness — no second Spring?

Oh! that I soon may reach thy [the moon's] world serene,
Poor wearied pilgrim — in this toiling scene!

⁹ I have benefitted from Jacqueline M. Labbe's reading of Smith's self-representation in the *Elegiac Sonnets*, "Selling One's Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry," *The Wordsworth Circle* 25 (Spring, 1994), 68-71.

¹⁰ Smith's sonnets are quoted from Curran's edition throughout.

Ah! no! — when, e'en Hope's last ray is gone,
There's no oblivion — but in death alone!¹¹

Glimmers of hope begin to appear after this — for instance, in the tenth sonnet, where Smith clings to the memory of a female friendship as consolation in her present misery. But nothing ever seriously challenges the opening sonnets' establishment of the wish for oblivion as the sequence's keynote.

Two strategies do, however, shift the emotional tenor of the poems away from wretched self-absorption and towards more specifically literary and traditional preoccupations. The first is her deliberate and ongoing allusion to a male-dominated tradition of sonnet writing and the starkly different possibilities it offers the plot of frustrated hopes and desires. Smith's translations of Petrarch implicitly set the Italian poet's narrative of consuming, frustrated desire and its sublimation into art in contrast to Smith's wishes, not for poetic immortality to enshrine and monumentalize the poet's desire, but for a simple surcease of the ills which consume and waste her. Even the suicidal sonnets from Goethe's *Sufferings of Young Werther* strike a somewhat self-vaunting ethical pose — "O thou! to save whose peace I now depart" (sonnet 25) — which is tied to the Petrarchan conventions of unconsummated desire and therefore utterly foreign to Smith's variety of despair. Instead of the male plot of sexual obsession, Smith injects into her sequence the more distinctively female theme of friendship, thus tempering the pose of sentimental suffering and isolation with more rational and communitarian values.¹²

The theme of friendship is only a minor counter-plot in the *Elegiac Sonnets*, however. A second strategy takes on sublimation and monumentalization through metaphor more

¹¹ Sonnets 1, 2, 4, and 5.

¹² For the association of friendship with female writers and particularly with the so-called bluestocking circle dominated by women intellectuals, see Joel Haefner, "Romantic Scenes of Writing," in Carol Wilson and Joel Haefner, *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 256-73.

directly, and it does so by delineating a process of effacement and recovery. Here let me quote in full sonnet 44, "Written in the church-yard at Middleton in Sussex," one of the *Elegiac Sonnets* most frequently included in recent anthologies:

Press'd by the Moon, mute arbitress of tides,
While the loud equinox its power combines,
The sea no more its swelling surge confines,
But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides.
The wild blast, rising from the Western cave,
Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed;
Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,
And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!
With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore
Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave;
But vain to them the winds and waters rave;
They hear the warring elements no more:
While I am doom'd — by life's long storm oppress,
To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest.

The muted allusion in line eleven to Gray's sonnet "On the Death of Mr. Richard West" ("In vain to me the smiling mornings shine") provides an entry into this poem's startling revision of sonnetting desire and elegiac consolation. The emptied-out objects of natural beauty in the conventional elegy (and Gray's sonnet is thoroughly steeped in classical convention) are metonymies of the free-floating desire which afflicts the mourning subject. That nature calls to Gray in vain does not signify his failure to hear but rather his inability not to search nature for traces of his beloved. In Smith's grotesque reversal of this trope, however, it is the dead themselves who are called to in vain by a sublimely absurd nature which has nonetheless mercilessly and transgressively exposed them to view.

In the conventional elegiac plot, the initial hollowness of the natural image inevitably leads to a reinvestment in nature as well as a recognition of the subject's own transcendent powers, because the very emptiness of natural objects leads meditation

back to its source in the memory of the beloved and thus signifies the survival and productivity of desire. The plot progresses, therefore, from the metonymy of the natural object to the realization of the properly "well-wrought" metaphor of grief and love, the poem. But in Smith's sonnet the inarticulate calls out to the insensible. The ocean deprives the dead of their monuments, writing them into nature instead of sublimating them from it. The most perverse turn of all, perhaps, is the poet's envious gaze upon this bleak scenario. Her wish for "rest" enacts the elegiac turn from natural metonymy to poetic metaphor, but with a drastic difference. When Smith confronts the trope of poetic immortality so dear to Petrarchan convention with the materiality of these violated bones, she introduces a demystified rhetorical economy in which metaphor and metonymy, poem and corpse, no longer stand in a progressive or hierarchizing relation to one another. If the poem is to monumentalize her suffering, these lines suggest, it will only be with the same insensible persistence as that given to the anonymous bones on the Middlesex seashore. Writing may still bring the dead to visibility, but what Smith envies is not a life beyond the grave. It is instead the absolute separation of this impersonal process from lived experience.

Smith thus insists that the poetic image not only represents but also erases or covers over its referent, and therefore the poem's circulation among its readers, a triumph over transience from the public point of view, leaves absolutely untouched the poet's private death. At first glance it may seem that we are merely encountering a variation on a commonplace of nineteenth-century poetics, the image's status as the fallen representative of an ineffable moment of inspiration, as in P. B. Shelley's famous formulation in the *Defence of Poetry*: "The mind in creation is as a fading coal".¹³ But the differences between the trope of obliteration and the fading coal are quite pronounced when we pose the problem of the literary canon to each of them. The Shelleyan image makes canonicity an

¹³ Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: Norton, 1977), 503-4.

immanent property of the poem, because the poetic masterpiece exudes inexhaustible meaning through the ages from its genial source.¹⁴ The trope of obliteration instead insists upon the profound incommensurability between literary production and consumption; the afterlife of Smith's sonnet is a public exposure as impersonal and random as that of the violated churchyard's vagrant bones. In fact, if one were to press the logic of Smith's poem a bit further, one would have to say that a necessary consequence of publication is the death of the author.¹⁵

Why should this particular insight have emerged in a woman's writing, and in pointed contradistinction to a male-dominated tradition's treatment of fame? A historical interpretation of Smith's sonnet could well proceed by invoking the strongly gendered way that publicity and publication operated in the later eighteenth century. Stephen Behrendt has argued, for instance, that if a kind of effacement inevitably afflicts any writer — "The act of literary communication — the writing act and the production of a public, published text — distances both the writer and the reader from the subjective substance that the text mediates by means of language" — this fate of the writer doubly pertains to late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century women writers who violated gender decorum by the very act of becoming public figures: "what

¹⁴ See Shelley on Dante in the *Defence* (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 499-500). I do not mean to insist on a reductively idealist reading of Shelley. The strong tension in his poetic theory between essentialist proclamations about imagination or beauty and his complex understanding of the movement of metaphor, the instability of language, and the aporetic self-reflections of reference are well-established in the critical literature. The point at stake in the present discussion, however, is the difference between Shelley's rhetorical promotion of the poet's status as "unacknowledged legislator" and the way Smith's rhetoric instead leads toward a meditation on the sublime inconsequentiality of the poet's motives.

¹⁵ Perhaps Smith's rhetoric of obliteration is not at all coincidentally allied to the deauthorizing, atheistic themes of Barthes's famous essay — although what appears as the metaphysics of atheism in Barthes presents itself in Smith as the sociohistorical destabilization of gender roles. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 142-148.

could be less womanly, less feminine, than *public-ation*?"¹⁶ Yet it is remarkable that, as the ideological confinement of proper femininity to the private, domestic realm became stronger in the early and mid-nineteenth century, so too did women's writing continue to expand.¹⁷ Literary publication apparently preserves enough of the essential form of privacy that Victorian ladies could indulge in it without violating taboos against public exposure. If gender ideology demanded the death of the female author, this allowed her private self to remain eminently separable from and unsullied by the public text.

We can pursue this hint by remembering Jürgen Habermas's influential analysis, according to which the eighteenth century's emergent bourgeois public sphere took its shape from the tension between two versions of the private: the privateness of the family, on the one hand, and of the market, on the other. Individuals in the marketplace were private in the sense that "they were emancipated from governmental directives and controls, [so that] they made decisions freely in accordance with standards of profitability." This strictly economic autonomy is exaggerated within the conjugal family, however, into "the emancipation . . . of an inner realm, following its own laws, from extrinsic purposes of any sort." The family's intimacy and freedom from social constraints "was the seal on the truth of a private autonomy exercised in competition. Thus it was a private autonomy denying its economic origins (i.e., an autonomy outside the domain of the only one practised by the market participant who believed himself autonomous) that provided the bourgeois family with its consciousness of itself."¹⁸ The guarantor of this consciousness, of course, is the

¹⁶ Stephen Behrendt, "Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, and the Woman Writer's Fate," in Feldman and Kelley, *Romantic Women Writers*, 80-81 and 77. The problem is of course a well-established line of inquiry in the criticism of women writers; my sense of it is particularly indebted to Marlon Ross, *Contours of Masculine Desire*.

¹⁷ The increasing severity of the ideological constriction of women to the domestic sphere is a major thesis of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An*

virtuous private woman, avatar of propriety and protector of the proper name, with the prostitute or fallen woman her inevitable counterpart. Gender ideology is a crucial mode of maintaining and representing this tension between the family and the market, the inner soul and the commodity.

This ideological split in the notion of privacy structures the status of literary publication and the concept of a reading public for all writers in the period. To take one of the most familiar and canonical of instances, Wordsworth's formulation of poetic authority as that of a "man speaking to men"¹⁹ does not adhere to gender ideology merely in its unremarkable subsumption of women poets or readers into the conventionally universalized "man." The difference between a poet speaking to auditors and a poet writing for those who buy and read his or her publications reproduces the opposition between an intimate sphere of authentic, truly human activity and the public realm where communication and representation may become the debased and distorted instruments of commercial exchange.²⁰ Wordsworth's slogan tries to save the poet's utterance from its fall into the marketplace, and in Smith's sonnets we can recognize the same ideological tensions in the way the theme of friendship punctuates the predominant rhetoric of obliteration.

This is where Wordsworth and Smith part ways, however. Wordsworth's man speaking to men imagines publication as the reinvention of a radically democratic scene, a kind of Athens of ideas. The reading public becomes a community of men and women precisely as autonomous, private souls. But Smith's rhetoric of obliteration also undermines the hope expressed in Wordsworth's formula that literature actually can overcome the alienation of the private self into the public text, that poet and

Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 46-47.

¹⁹ *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1: 138.

²⁰ For a sharply different reading of Wordsworth's gendering of terms in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, see Lonsdale's introduction to *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, xl-xli.

reader really do share a virtually familial intimacy. Instead Smith's uncanny graveyard scene, a hyperbolic figuration of gender ideology as it impinges on literary communication and publication, insists on the absolute inaccessibility of the writer's soul. The text is unfailingly hollow, metonymic. Her insight is similar to that of the extraordinarily private poet Emily Dickinson, who three quarters of a century later in Civil-war America would write:

My Splendors, are Menagerie —
 But their Competeless Show
 Will entertain the Centuries
 When I, am long ago,
 An Island in dishonored Grass —
 Whom none but Beetles — know.²¹

Both poets point to a sense of literary reception perhaps more congenial and useful than Wordsworth's to late-twentieth century scholars, a sense of the text's vagrancy, or an intimation that, rather than anchoring the poet's voice in their common humanity, readers may instead appropriate the text to their divergent interests as literary practices drift across generations, classes, and institutions.

The connection between Smith's and Dickinson's peculiarly feminine death of the author and the waywardness of literary reception is also the link between gender ideology and the problem of aesthetic judgment. Before trying to articulate this connection, however, we need to dwell for a moment or two on the relevance of Smith's sense of textual reception to the political aspirations usually connected to the project of canon revision. A sense of the drifting or arbitrariness of literary reception is crucial — that is, both central and crisis-provoking — to the projects of archival recovery and canon revision. It is central because it implies that, even if the selection of canonical

²¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, & Co., 1960), 135.

texts depends upon ideological motives and furthers class or gender domination, these effects can be separated from the texts themselves. Therefore the search to reclaim what has been excluded or ignored in the received critical and scholarly traditions should, logically, also be a way of rescuing the canonical texts from their own ideological effacement. In other words, archival recovery and ideology critique are conceptual allies. But the vagaries of reception may be crisis-provoking because they just as cogently imply that canonical status per se may tend to transfer the forms of authority and mastery inherent in an institutional setting onto the texts which are its mere instruments. What would it matter, then, whose bones were washed onto the seashore, since any such husks will offer the same testimony to the power of the "mute arbitress of tides?" "As the history of Orientalist education demonstrates," according to Gauri Viswanathan, "a curriculum may incorporate the systems of learning of a subordinate population and still be an instrument of hegemonic activity. . . . The acceptance or rejection of other cultures becomes a moot point in the face of the more encompassing motives of discipline and management".²² Far from canonical texts enjoying their status because they purvey a certain ideology, the ideological significance of the material which finds its way into the curriculum may be overpowered, and must at least be overdetermined, by the disciplinary and managerial procedures of literary education.²³

²² Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 167.

²³ What is called for in this context is not simply a history of the canon's inclusions and exclusions, then, but an account such as Viswanathan supplies for nineteenth-century India of its historical and ongoing constitution and deployment at the site of literary education. Other contributions to such a project would include the histories of modern literary education and professional scholarship provided by Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987); chapters 2-4 of Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (London: Macmillan, 1988); and Franklin Court, *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750-1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); and the analyses of the way professional labor has constituted the canon by John Guillory in *Cultural Capital*;

Understanding the institutional effects of the recovery of women Romantic poets, then, involves asking what mode of publication it is to include a text in a syllabus. For the political motives informing the interrelated projects of canon revision and ideology critique imply that some sort of perhaps utopian notion of publicity continues to guide the practice of those engaged in them. In this conception, academic discourse constitutes a kind of continuation or renewal of the Wordsworthian fantasy of the man speaking to men, or, if you prefer, of the best features of the eighteenth-century public sphere as Habermas describes it, a free market of texts open to "rational-critical debate". The classroom, the conference, the scholarly article each unfold the opportunity to mould a public space where the intimacy of private reflection will not be violated, where each person may think and judge as a free individual. In the academic imagination, the project of revising the canon takes on all the energy appropriate to the cleansing and revitalization of such a resource. But of course this free market is no more open to all comers or equal in its distribution of riches than the capitalist market itself. The phony equality of imposing one's class norms as universal truths is as susceptible to deflation here as elsewhere. The most cogent version of this critique as it pertains to canonical revision is one directed at the very category of "literature," which, according to Macherey and Balibar's important formulation, codifies and propagates "different practices of the same language." These differential practices are put to work primarily within the educational system, as a way to help sort out the opportunities and training by which that system tends to reproduce the society's class hierarchies (the same hierarchies, in fact, which restricted access to the bourgeois public sphere itself).²⁴ Thus the

Peter Murphy, "Climbing Parnassus, & Falling Off," in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, eds. Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994): 40-58; and Michael Warner, "Professionalization and the Rewards of Literature: 1875-1900," *Criticism* 27 (1985), 1-28.

²⁴ Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar, "Literature as an Ideological Form: Some Marxist Propositions," trans. James Kavanaugh, *Praxis* 5 (1981), 47.

publication of a text in the classroom, or its selection as an object of professional scholarship, will not only bring it into the dialogue of rational-critical debate, but will also install it within a restricted symbolic economy; in Bourdieu's terminology, the text is thereby consecrated as cultural capital.

If this critique is valid, the conservative aspect of the literary canon formation is not merely a side-effect of this or that critic's enthrallment by the dominant ideology, but rather a structural feature of the entire educational enterprise. And the political aspirations that inform much literary study are susceptible to another kind of deflation as well. The same commodification of culture which transformed the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere into the modern consumer-oriented system of publicity pervades the educational bureaucracy as well. This is not simply a matter of education's having become a commodity — a fact which distinguishes it from almost nothing else — but rather of the specifically bureaucratic demand that all institutionalized educational activities be rationalized within a widespread web of equivalencies that coordinate credit hours with tuition, course coverage across and within the academic disciplines, grades with the certification of competence, the system of requirements and electives with the granting of degrees, and so on. This is what makes the imposition of norms into one of the constant occupations (if not preoccupations) of any teacher or scholar in higher education.²⁵ Not that critical debate or pedagogy itself are reduced to mere commodity status by this embracing system of exchange-values — on the contrary, what reappears in this situation is the tension between the privacy of the individual and that of the market, except that now it takes the distinctly bureaucratic form of a conflict between the scholar-critic-teacher's (or the student's) intellectual autonomy and the heteronomous demands of the institution.

The significance of archival recovery and canonical revision is not at all evenly spread across the spectrum from its

²⁵ See Evan Watkins, *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

calculated intervention in critical debate to its inevitable participation in the consecration of cultural capital and the uneven distribution of literary competence. These latter functions depend neither on the professoriate's good will nor on the political positions teachers and scholars adopt. Treating the project of canon revision as if its social impact were simply a reflex of the poets' or critics' political positions erases this discomfiting fact. Understanding canonical revision as the unmediated projection of a politico-ethical agenda into literary education implies a voluntarism which is also oddly inconsonant (or else disturbingly cynical) when combined with the view that canon formation has historically been inexorably driven by, and straightforwardly expressed, mystified ideological positions. We are left with the unconvincing alternative hypotheses that past generations of literary scholars (at least in the field of British Romanticism) either suffered from profound misunderstanding not only of their own activities but even of the basic significance of the literature they spent their lives studying, or that they willingly and conspiratorially foisted upon their students a canon of literature aimed at "legitimiz[ing] the continued repression of women."

A more credible account needs to distinguish between the political and ethical issues which pervade and inform critical debate and the heteronomous demands which just as surely limit its relevance and effects. Yet it is also important to insist that a certain kind of voluntarism makes sense precisely insofar as it addresses itself to the restricted area of effects governed by literary-critical debate. It is just as much a theoretical error, and arguably a more pernicious one, to completely discount the professoriate's intellectual autonomy as to forget its institutional basis. The problem is not simply to avoid the draconian alternatives of voluntarism and determinism, however, but to articulate the paradox residing in their simultaneous and mutually constraining viability.

This is where the problem of aesthetic judgment can prove useful. According to Howard Caygill's rigorous historicizing interpretation of it, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* attempts to state clearly what Caygill calls the aporia of judgment rather

than to "plot an escape from it" (8), as the critiques of pure and practical reason did.²⁶ The simplest way to formulate this aporia is to observe the impossibility of deciding on the priority between the power of subsuming particular instances under general rules and the power of discriminating in general when it is that particular rules apply. Judgment is guided by rules, but rules are determined by judgment, so that "the exercise of judgement is found always to presuppose judgement: its discriminations require rules, and its rules require discriminations" (4). Thus a certain incommensurability seems to inevitably appear between the act of judging and its residue – or presupposition –, the codification of norms or rules. This aporetic character of judgment is the crux of Kant's analysis of the aesthetic. In fact, Caygill argues, the aesthetic is to some extent simply the privileged location where this aporia is allowed to play itself out. It does so by confronting the judgment of beauty, which in the British and the German philosophical traditions that Kant engaged remained "the crisis-point of judgement since it exceeded judgement" (37).

The crucial role played by the judgment of beauty in Kant's analysis testifies once again to the centrality of gender ideology in the whole problem of reconciling public policy and private desire in Charlotte Smith's society. This alone would seem to suggest that those seeking to understand and undo women writers' effacement from literary history and the academic canon should attend carefully to Kant's paradoxical formulations of aesthetic judgment's character: singular yet universal, legislative yet unable to formulate laws, based on delight but free of interest, purposive but not determined by a purpose. These paradoxes have most often been read as an attempt to articulate and bridge the gap between the teleology of appetite and the teleology of reason, that is, between mechanistic determination and moral legislation. What matters most to the late-twentieth century, as Caygill's interpretation testifies, is Kant's precise exposition of the complexity and instability of the hierarchic relationship between

²⁶ Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). Quotations are identified by page numbers in parentheses.

appetite and reason or freedom and law. For our particular purposes, the incommensurability between, on the one hand, the judging subject's universality and legislative capability and, on the other, the singularity and non-prescriptive status of the enunciated judgment bears an important resemblance to the chasm separating the soul's verdict from the market's evaluation in Smith's demystification of the theme of the poetic afterlife. A revealing comparison is once again provided by Wordsworth's "man speaking to men," for in Wordsworth's case we encounter the fantasy of healing this gap by tracing it in reverse. For Wordsworth, the encounter between literary practice and the capitalist economy amounts to the fact that the exchange-value of the literary work, its status as commodity, has to be disclaimed in order for the private individual to establish its more profound significance, its use. But Smith's poet is doomed to pursuing her ends in the one realm at the expense of having her motives obliterated in the other.

Kant gives this riven position between the contradictions of privacy and the aspirations of publicity a pristine philosophical formulation in his articulation of the "universal subjectivity" which enacts aesthetic judgments. It is an oddly self-obliterating category. Kant says that the judgment of taste presumes itself to be universal because it is communicable. The presumption of universality here assumes only the capacity of a given representation to engage any human subject's faculties of imagination and understanding in a free play upon it. But this abstract communicability is entirely separable from any shared interests or objective knowledge and therefore cannot signify any practical demands. Kant's communicable aesthetics thereby posits a paradoxical form of community which includes all human subjects but excludes all objects of social, political, and economic exchange. The aesthetic's universality includes everyone and no one at the same time; it is an abstraction that can reach material expression only as an element in the more complex experiences of the members of concrete societies. Thus the fate Kant's analysis implies for aesthetic judgment is that its necessary, legislative, universal character will constantly be violated by the actual situation of particular judgments, because of the interests,

the practical demands, and the authority that inevitably adhere to them.

Rather than announcing judgment's escape from contingency, then, Kant's analysis of the aesthetic articulates the impossibility of either extricating literary evaluation from its social context or reducing it to an expression of social interests. Therefore it speaks powerfully to the autonomous yet constricted process of canon formation in the modern school, addressing both the situation of judgment within the ideological battleground of critical debate and the containment or neutralization of intellectual debate by normative bureaucratic demands. The minimizing or outright suppression of the aesthetic which often accompanies the politicizing rhetoric of canon revision no doubt proceeds largely from revulsion against the surreptitious politics of those varieties of criticism which have professed to disengage themselves, and literature, from political and ethical concerns. Nothing could be more mistaken, however, than to confuse the negativity and abstraction of the Kantian aesthetic with the purity and uselessness attributed to the work of art by a more recent aestheticism. What a considered emphasis on aesthetic judgment brings to view instead is the work of art's entanglement with the commodity: "Commodities are works of art and works of art are commodities, but that is to say that both concepts are necessary to define both objects," as John Guillory puts it.²⁷ As a commodity, the work of art is entwined in a web of interests and appetites that erase its specificity and instead trade on its exchangeability; as a work of art, the commodity gives a kind of pleasure that asserts its singularity. The paradoxes of aesthetic judgment name the reciprocity and separation of the two as an inevitable contamination: no hierarchy or mechanistic determination can predetermine judgment, just as no refinement or insulation of motives can free judgment of interests.

It makes sense, perhaps, that the aesthetic would be swept aside in a polemic seeking to emphasize and then contest the rigidity of a received canon. But a canon can be rigid only insofar as the dynamics of judgment have already been exiled from it,

²⁷ *Cultural Capital*, 321.

that is, insofar as judgments about canonical works have been declared to be done with. Here the terminology of the canon debate itself is faulty. In religious institutions, canonicity distinguishes a piece of writing from the apocryphal, the impostor. That such a term could gain currency in literary studies implies the operation of a similarly dogmatic and pious understanding of literary achievement. The counterpart of the literary canon is not the apocrypha, however, but rather the archive. The two terms designate different sites of scholarly labor, not the presence or absence of divine manifestation.

What is at stake in canonical revision is not dogma but rather the way texts have been, and continue to be, valorized by literary critics' labor in the context of educational institutions. Both the deployment of norms and the representation of subject positions must inevitably be implicated in judgments about what texts to edit, interpret, and teach. If the institutional context of these judgments insures that their authority will be normalized within education's overarching function of class reproduction, the judgmental basis of literary norms insures that they will also constitute an area of struggle over the valuation of cultural capital rather than a simple dictation of one or another agenda. The politics of the canon debate, then, concerns the area of effects specific to the academic's intellectual autonomy: the designation of what counts as literary competence, the determination of how and where the next generation of scholar-teachers will certify themselves, the redefinition and redirection of professional productivity.²⁸ Confronting these effects with Smith's rhetoric of obliteration and Kant's aporia of judgment should not discourage commitment to social change but rather help us to situate it as a day — many days — at the office.

²⁸ See for example Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 4: "It will require decades of research and hundreds of books before we fully grasp the intellectual and formal configurations of this terra incognita [i.e. women's writing in the Romantic period]". See Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner's introduction to *Re-Visioning Romanticism*, 11-13; and Jerome J. McGann, "Literary History, Romanticism, and Felicia Hemans," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism*, 226.

Maria Stella

Thomas Hardy, Rome and
"the sense of the past"

The language of the past is always oracular: you will only understand it as builders of the future who know the present.

(F. Nietzsche)

*Go thou to Rome, — at once the paradise
The grave, the city, and the wilderness;
And where its wrecks like shattered mountains rise,
And flowering weeds and fragrant copses dress
The bones of Desolation's nakedness
Pass ...*

(P.B. Shelley)

1.1. Let us imagine — putting ourselves for a moment in the position of the Spirits in *The Dynasts* — we have a "bird's eye view" of Hardy's literary production in its relationship with history.

The vast canon of his novels and tales would immediately extend itself as a long study in local history: the "circumscribed scene" of Dorset/Wessex working as a synecdoche for the life of the nation; the individual lives of its main characters enacting the slow changes connected to the decline and rebirth of an entire community. History going back just that span of two generations indicated as ideal by theoreticians of the

* A shorter version of this paper was read at the International Conference *Poetry and History* held at Stirling University, July 1996.

historical novel.¹ A narration not concerned with the reconstruction of important events and heroic personalities, but interested rather in what Charlotte Brontë had defined as the "secret annals of every rude vicinage", à propos of Emily's retrospective provincial narration in *Wuthering Heights*.²

While catching these general traits at first sight, we would also have to recognize how Hardy's reconstruction of relatively recent history is always based on the perception of a significant archeological past, inscribed both in the geography of the region and in the mental landscapes of its inhabitants. Whether conceived as architectural remains of previous ages (mills, churches, towers, walls, barrows) or as domestic objects and memories belonging to the traditional and oral culture of the forefathers, these signs help us to define Hardy's complex historical map, both in the short and in the long-period perspective.³

¹ The following studies are particularly relevant to place Hardy's prose works in the wider tradition of the historical novel (Scott, Dickens, Eliot, but also Cooper, Manzoni, Tolstoi, Tomasi di Lampedusa, Conrad, Woolf and Achebe): Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1917); Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840-1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Richard Humphrey, *The Historical Novel as Philosophy of History* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1986); Harold Orel, *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Beat Riesen, *Thomas Hardy's Minor Novels* (Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 1990); R.J. White, *Hardy and History* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

² Charlotte Brontë, "Editor's Preface to the New Edition (1850) of *Wuthering Heights*", in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 38-39.

³ For the relationship between history, archeology and architecture in Thomas Hardy see: Ronald Blythe, "Thomas Hardy and John Clare: A Soil Observed, a Soil Ploughed", in Charles P.C. Pettit, ed., *Celebrating Thomas Hardy. Insights and Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 54-68; Lord David Cecil, "Hardy the Historian" in M. Drabble, ed., *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976), 154-161; Simon Gatrell, *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Geoffrey Grigson, "Architecture and Thomas Hardy", *Architectural Review* 88, 1-2 (1940); Harold Orel, "Hardy and the Developing Science of Archaeology", *Thomas Hardy Annual* 4 (London: Macmillan, 1986), 19-44; Peter Widdowson, "Hardy, Wessex and the Making of a National Culture", *Ibid.*, 45-67; Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

Traces of yet another past, significant both for the architect and the local historian, would be discovered in the landscape: fossils, stones, different layers still visible in the structure of the ground speak of the permanence of geological eras. Placed against this ancient and somehow immutable natural background, human events in their everyday dimension acquire a different significance, becoming themselves part of the slow evolution of the earth. Man's generations stretch back into the past, one after another, pointing to an unreachable origin, as the long line of ancestors does in the poem *The Pedigree*:

... And in it a long perspective I could trace
Of my begetters, dwindling backward each past each,
All with the kindred look,
Whose names had since been inked down in their place
On the recorder's book
Generation and generation of my mien, and build, and brow.

... The first of them, the primest fuglemen of my line,
Being fogged in far antiqueness past surmise and reason's reach.⁴

Steeped in this sort of impersonal collective sense of the past, the human individual is absorbed, like any other animal, in the biological fate of its species: and we could quote, for all, Clym Yeobright's immersion in the natural microcosm of the moors in *The Return of the Native*:

He appeared of a russet hue, not more distinguishable from the scene around him than the green caterpillar from the leaf it feeds on....The silent being who thus occupied himself seemed to be of no more account in life than an insect. He appeared as a mere parasite of the heath, fretting its surface in his daily labour as a moth frets a garment, entirely engrossed with its

⁴ James Gibson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 460-61. Hereafter cited as *Complete Poems*.

products, having no knowledge of anything in the world but fern, furze, heath, lichens and moss.⁵

The inhabitants of the region learn the earth's "en-durance", both "tolerating" and "lasting inside" their condition: history and natural history are in Hardy dramatically contiguous, as D.H. Lawrence was to understand and emphasize.⁶

1.2. A different type of attention to history – at the same time more concentrated on a particular historical event and less local – would be discovered in Hardy's literary production if we extended our survey beyond his prose, to his poems. The archetypal reality revealed by poetry – apparently outside history – is often, in Hardy, repeatable in the now, so that time and succession are at the same time affirmed and denied.⁷ The poet is engaged in recording the double process of transformation taking place in the individual psyche of the 'I', in the dramatic interaction of characters, in the collective movements of society. In his first collection, *Wessex Poems*

⁵ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1893), 280-281.

⁶ D.H. Lawrence, "Study of Thomas Hardy", *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. E.D. Macdonald (London: Heinemann, 1936). Hardy's scientific frame of mind is investigated also in J.O. Bailey, "Hardy's Imbedded Fossil", *Studies in Philology* 42, 3 (1988), 663-674; Gillian Beer, "Hardy and Decadence", in Charles P.C. Pettit, ed., *Celebrating Thomas Hardy: Insights and Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 90-103; J.A. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Patricia Ingham, "Hardy and the 'Cell of Time'", in P. Clemens and J. Grindle, eds., *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (London: Vision Press, 1980); Glen G. Wickens, "Literature and Science: Hardy's Response to Mill, Huxley and Darwin", *Mosaic* 14, 3 (1981), 63-79.

⁷ Interesting notes towards a redefinition of the relationship poetry/ history are found in the following studies, dedicated to different context and periods: David Annwin, *Inhabited Voices: Myth and History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, George Mackay Brown* (Frome, Somerset: Hunting Raven Press, 1984); Nelson Cary, *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in American Poetry* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Octavio Paz, "Poetry and History", in *The Bow and the Lyre* (Austin: University of Texas, 1973); Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made* (London: Faber, 1995).

(1898), at least six poems are dedicated to characters, places and situations connected with the effects of the Napoleonic wars, and many of the accompanying illustrations suggest the same atmosphere.⁸

His interest in this particular moment of modern European history, stimulated – as critics have pointed out – by oral narration and family memories heard when he was a child (one of his ancestors had served in the navy under Nelson), transcends autobiographical reasons. In 1881 his novel *The Trumpet-Major* had already found its focus in an ironical treatment of the consequences of the Napoleonic wars on a local English community.⁹ Six years after his *Wessex Poems*, his epic drama *The Dynasts* (1904) extends the treatment of the same subject to the continent, in the ambitious attempt to produce what in *The Life of Thomas Hardy* is defined as "an Iliad of Europe from 1789 to 1815", in an open reference to the Homeric tradition.¹⁰

In spite of the title's allusion to kings and rulers, Hardy's historical imagination is not concerned with famous heroic individuals – who appear somehow dwarfed, unable to change or dominate the events – but rather with war as an extensive mass movement, recreated in the minds and actions of the simple soldiers. He has no Hegelian notion of history as a realization of the Spirit, no teleological view of it. History displays itself as one great network, where the insubstantial and puppet-like behaviour of the powerful intertwines with the peasants' stoic endurance. The life of this monstrous organism is contemplated by the so-called Spirits – the "flower of Man's

⁸ *Complete Poems*, 5-81. See in particular the poems *The Sergeant's Song*, 18, *Valencienne*, 19, *San Sebastian*, 21, *Leipzig*, 26, *The Peasant's Confession*, 31, *The Alarm*, 35, *The Dance at the Phoenix*, 43, *The Casterbridge Captains*, 48.

⁹ See, among others: J.M. Rignall, "The Historical Double: *Waverley*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *The Trumpet-Major*", *Essays in Criticism* 34, 1, (1984), 14-32; Richard E. Taylor, "Historical Consciousness and Pastoral Irony in *The Trumpet Major* (1880)", in *The Neglected Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 76-95.

¹⁰ Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 106. Hereafter cited as *The Life*.

intelligence" – who are not allowed to interfere with it, either in a fatalistic pagan perspective or in a providential Christian one.¹¹ In Hardy's perception of history no objective recording of human facts and actions seems possible, and if possible, exhaustive. No cultural or religious redemptive scheme is offered (as in Tennyson or Tolstoj), and man's passivity and subjection to accident are emphasized.

I will not insist, here, on the accuracy of Hardy's historical documentation in order to write the poem (from his readings of Carlyle and Nietzsche to his interviews with the veterans)¹² nor on the mixture of genres and techniques necessary to portray the vastness of the scene, nor on the consequent fragmentation and renewal of the epic form, because all these problems have already been extensively treated by critics like Samuel Hynes and Harold Orel, and in the Italian area by Mario Praz.¹³

¹¹ See Thomas Hardy, *Notes on 'The Dynasts' in Four Letters to Edward Clodd* (Edinburgh: The Dunedin Press, 1929), 13, where he explains that the Spirits "are not supposed to be more than the best human intelligence of their time in a sort of quintessential form".

¹² Thomas Carlyle's *On History* (1830), reprinted in Fritz Stern, ed., *Varieties of History* (New York: Random House, 1973), and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874), now in *The Complete Works of F. Nietzsche*, vol. V (London and Edinburgh: Foulis, 1909), 3-100, are two fundamental influences on any nineteenth-century definition of history.

¹³ A list of the fifty volumes on Napoleon owned and consulted by Hardy is reported as Appendix B, *Hardy's Library of Napoleonic Literature*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy: The Dynasts*, vol. IV-V, ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 372-375. (Worth remembering in the list: the works of Major General Sir W.F.P. Napier, and of A. W. Duke of Wellington; the classical historical studies of A. Alison, J. Forbes, C.H. Gifford, L.A. Thiers; W. Hazlitt's *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, R. Southey's *The Life of Nelson* (1814), L. Tolstoj, *War and Peace*). On *The Dynasts* see also: Francesco Binni, "L'antimimetismo e il poeta-medium: *The Dynasts* e le liriche" in *Hardy poeta: immaginazione e necessità* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1995), 74-97; Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Thomas Hardy* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987); Susan Dean, *Hardy's Poetic Vision in 'The Dynasts': The Diorama of a Dream*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Barton R. Friedman, "Proving Nothing: History and Dramatic Strategy in *The Dynasts*", *CLIO* 13 (1984), 101-122; Harold Orel, "What *The Dynasts* Meant to Hardy", *Victorian Poetry* 17, 1-2 (1979), 109-123; Mario Praz, "I *Dynasts* di Thomas Hardy" e "Hardy travestito" in *Cronache*

1.3. An overall view of Hardy's general conception of history is necessary in order to focalize better his imaginative relationship with ancient history, and with Rome in particular. Elliptical as his Roman annotations are, if compared with those of other contemporary authors – Henry James's above all, but also James Joyce –¹⁴ they nonetheless reveal Hardy's idea of history as a constant process of interpretation, where past and present reshape each other. There is no doubt that the model behind the rise and fall of Napoleon is the Roman Empire, and that its image, pointing also to the future destiny of the British Empire, is essential to Hardy's reconstruction of modern European history.

Also in the novels strictly concerned with local history, Roman archeological and architectural relics are used by the author to connect Wessex culture with a wider sense of the historical past. The characters establish an ambivalent, never continuous relationship with ancient history, sometimes forgetting about it, sometimes rediscovering its relevance. As Hardy makes evident in the tale *A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork*, both the external and the interior landscapes are haunted by the presence of stratified ruins: a man is pushed by his archeological passion to illegal nocturnal excavations on a hill-fort in Wessex and then to stealing a gilt statuette of Mercury (ironically, the God who protects thieves):

Past and present have become so confusedly mingled by

Letterarie Anglosassoni (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1950); Walter F. Wright, *The Shaping of 'The Dynasts'* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967).

¹⁴ On Henry James and Rome see: Elizabeth Block, "The Rome of Henry James", in Annabel Patterson, ed., *Roman Images: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); James W. Tuttleton and Agostino Lombardo, eds., *The Sweetest Impression of Life: The James Family and Italy* (New York: New York University Press, and Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1990). An interesting comparison between the two authors' theories of fiction can be found in J.T. Laird, "Approaches to Fiction: Hardy and James", in *Thomas Hardy Annual* 2 (London: Macmillan, 1984), 41-60. On James Joyce's relationship with Rome and history see: James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robert Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

associations with the spot that for a time it has escaped my memory that this mound was the place agreed on for the aforesaid appointment... We seem to be standing in the Roman Forum and not on a hill in Wessex: intent upon this truly valuable relic of the old empire of which even this remote spot was a component part, we do not notice what is going on in the present world till reminded of it by the sudden renewal of the storm.¹⁵

Elsewhere in his poetry a "haggard mark of Imperial Rome" can with its "Pagan echoes mock the chime / of our Christian time",¹⁶ revealing Hardy's impatience with churchiness and moralism; his being, as Harold Bloom has pointed out, "a layman in the context of the Bible". In the poem entitled *The Roman Road* there is a sort of visionary possession by – and at the same time of – the past: the objective value of the old road for archeologists and historians, who "delve and measure and compare", is balanced by the affective connotations it acquires when connected with the personal memories of a child, perceiving the road as a maternal figure:

But no tall brass-helmed legionnaire
Haunts it for me. Uprises there
A mother's form upon my ken
Guiding my infant steps, as when
We walked that ancient thoroughfare,
The Roman Road.¹⁷

History from below, in a way: private unrecorded interpretations revitalizing our approach to ancient history.¹⁸

¹⁵ Thomas Hardy, *A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork*, in *A Changed Man* (Guernsey: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1984), 134-141.

¹⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Her Death and After*, in *Complete Poems*, 39-43. Hardy's pagan imagination is studied in F.B. Pinion, "Hardy and Myth" in F. B. Pinion, ed., *Budmouth Essays on Thomas Hardy* (Broadoak: Buchfort, 1976), 125-139.

¹⁷ *Complete Poems*, 264-265.

¹⁸ This and other recent reorientations of history (and metahistory) can be studied in: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

Classical literature is another important form of historical memory: an explicit link with the Roman literary tradition can be found in the *Poems of 1912-1913*, where Hardy connects his elegies in memory of his dead wife to Virgil's archetypal separation between Aeneas and Dido. In the Latin quotation used as subtitle of the collection "veteris vestigiae flammae" (remains of an old flame) – is Hardy's idea of poetry itself to be visualized as surviving ruin. "Vestigiae", then, as literal traces of a burned up passion, ashes of a human body, but also as monumental relics of the ancient poetic tradition, pointing to the residual quality of modern poetry itself. As we know, Horace's lesson in restraint and ellipsis is a constant and definite influence on Hardy's theory of poetry.

The range of associations with Rome becomes more extended and explicit in Hardy's *Poems of Pilgrimage*, a group of eleven poems connected to his trip to Italy, in 1887. Obeying as usual Horace's principle "ars est coelare artem", Hardy's prose comments on his tour are scarce, his notes hardly help us to clarify his expectations and reactions, and the deeper meaning of his journey remains hidden.

There are only a few references on his Roman sojourn in *The Life of Thomas Hardy* and in his letters; and a short direct memory of the city in *The Well-Beloved*.¹⁹ From them we come to know that Hardy the architect spent some time in measuring,

1957), *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963); Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Jerome MacGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); John Hillis Miller, "Thomas Hardy, Jacques Derrida, and the 'Dislocation of Souls'", in Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, eds., *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 135-145; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), *Theories of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

¹⁹ *The Life*, 187-196; Michael Millgate and Richard Little Purdy, eds., *Thomas Hardy: Collected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978-88), vol. IV; Thomas Hardy, *The Well-Beloved* (London: Macmillan, 1957), Part III, 1.

drawing and taking pictures on the Appian way, and that Hardy the man – like James before him in his *Italian Hours*²⁰ – was oppressed by the weight of the past, surprised by the building energy of contemporary Roman life. The *Poems of Pilgrimage* become therefore particularly relevant as the only literary trace of his real journey to the so-called eternal city.

1.4. The arrangement of the poems in a sequence is worth noticing, both in itself and in the context of the collection where it appears, *Poems of the Past and the Present*, published in 1902, and containing one of Hardy's most frequently quoted *Prefaces*.²¹ In fact, the idea itself of a sequence – ordered in time and space – seems at first sight to deny that effect of juxtaposition of “feelings and fancies written down in widely differing mood and circumstances, and at various dates” which Hardy stresses in the *Preface*. A sequence of poems must necessarily have something more than that “little cohesion of thought and harmony of colouring” whose lack in the collection as a whole Hardy does not “greatly regret”.

We should therefore examine more closely the way fragmentation and linearity coexist in the *Poems of Pilgrimage*. From the spatial point of view the sequence starts directly in the north of Italy with *Genoa and the Mediterranean*. It moves southwards, through Tuscany, first in that “neighbourhood of Leghorn, March 1887” indicated by the subtitle of *Shelley's Skylark* and then *In the Old Theatre, Fiesole, April 1887*. It reaches Rome and pauses there with the four poems dedicated to the City, to move back again to the north with poems dedicated to *The Bridge of Lodi* and to Switzerland (*Lausanne, in Gibbon's Old Garden: 11-12 p.m.* and *Zermatt. To the Matterhorn*). The last poem of the sequence, *On an Invitation to the United States*, in spite of the poet's refusal to accept the

²⁰ John Auchard, ed., *Henry James: Italian Hours* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1995).

²¹ Thomas Hardy, “Preface to *Poems of the Past and the Present*”, in *Complete Poems*, 84.

invitation itself, is an imaginary evasion from the European space toward “a modern coast/ Whose riper times have yet to be”.²² The movement is therefore from the continent of old age (the poet's) to that of youth, from the past to the future, and back to the poet's present condition.

Hardy's explicit indication of the dates of composition, quite unusual in the rest of his poems, shows the way the temporal sequence has been reconstructed *a posteriori* for publication, in a double distancing from the time of travelling and the time of writing (most of the return poems were written ten years after the tour). These variations in the most external chronology are accompanied by very complex variations in the time internal to the single poem, and by temporal interconnections between the poems of the sequence itself.

The temptation to read the poems as fragmentary recordings casually juxtaposed, should be resisted by accepting Hardy's suggestion in the *Preface*. While stressing the value of “unadjusted impressions”, he points out that there is a way to truth, however relative: “the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change”.²³ The metaphor of the road is therefore a good one to lead us in this humble re-reading of Hardy's *Poems of Pilgrimage* following his steps towards Rome and the ever-changing truth it records in his work.

A first trace to recover some hidden meanings of the sequence can be found in the choice of the term “pilgrimage”, stronger and more specific than travel or journey. In the light of Hardy's philosophy the word has ironical implications: its original medieval meaning of a journey undertaken on a religious purpose is excluded, since there is no awe in front of the capital of Christianity, and Hardy's vision of Christian architecture is not Ruskin's. The title frustrates the reader's conventional expectations, just as it does in *Roman Gravemounds*, one of Hardy's *Satyres of Circumstance* (1914),

²² *Complete Poems*, 110.

²³ *Ibid.*, 84.

where the expected archeologically relevant tomb is substituted by the historically insignificant act of burying "a little white cat".²⁴

The wider meaning of pilgrimage as travelling towards more fashionable and secularized destinations – typical of the age of the tourist industry and international exhibitions – seems to be equally disregarded by Hardy, who rather enjoys being out of fashion, choosing marginal sights and places of observation.

The choice of pilgrimage can probably be best explained by looking into its Latin etymology: "per- ager" meaning "through the field", through alien land. The original idea behind the word is that of a moving away from the city, from its wall-enclosed spaces, to the open and foreign ones of the countryside. We discover the same movement in Hardy's biography when he decides to leave London to go and live in the country; and in his literary production when he repeatedly concentrates on his characters' wanderings through the Wessex countryside: per-egrinations in their etymological sense.²⁵ Even his first poem, *Domicilium*, based on the experience of settling, brings together family history, poetry and movement in a wild countryside.²⁶ But this backward rather than forward movement, this pilgrimage returning to what was before and outside the city, becomes paradoxical when applied to a literal movement towards that epitome of the idea itself of the City which is Rome.

Hardy's Rome, like Shelley's in *Adonais*, stands for "the city and the wilderness" at once. In Hardy's pilgrimage the etymological lack of direction or finality implicit in the Latin word is affirmed and denied at the same time. Both historical

²⁴ Ibid., 396.

²⁵ On Hardy's perturbing vision of the city see: Michael Slater, "Hardy and the City", in Charles P. C. Pettit, ed., *New Perspectives on Thomas Hardy* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1994), 41-57. On his use of the journeying metaphors see Simon Gatrell, "Travelling Man" in P. Clemens and J. Grindle, eds., *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* (London: Vision Press, 1980).

²⁶ *Complete Poems*, 3-4.

design and historical accident give his pilgrimage its shape. As Jan Ousby has noticed, in Hardy's sequence of poems "the historical imagination and the poetic imagination are so closely akin as to be hardly distinguishable".²⁷

1.5. We would expect, and indeed in some ways we have, a gradual approach to the city through space and time: as we have seen, we move from the periphery, the north of Italy, to its centre, Rome. The return takes us back to the northern border and, for a very intense moment, beyond it, to Switzerland, but this time with a strong memory of Rome itself implicit in the vision of *Lausanne*. In *Gibbon's Old Garden: 11-12 p. m.*, written as the subtitle says, on "27 June 1897. The 110th anniversary of the completion of the 'Decline and Fall' at the same hour and place".²⁸

This back and forth movement, this oscillation between centre and periphery, moment and repetition, the writing of poetry and the writing of history, is a trait common to many *Poems of Pilgrimage*, and is connected by its open geometrical form to other images of historical movement in Hardy's production: it echoes, for instance, the definition of history as "the ebb and flow of feet through the threshold of the mill-house" given in *The Trumpet Major*. It renews the novel's perception of the "unreckoned superfluity" of the lives outside the "stream of recorded history, within whose banks the little things are great".²⁹

Historical facts and historical invention necessarily blend in

²⁷ Ian Ousby, "Past and Present in Hardy's 'Poems of Pilgrimage'", *Victorian Poetry* 18, 1-2 (1979), 51-65. Other interesting insights are contained in: Mara Macejovski, "The Idea of Time in Thomas Hardy's Poetry", *Thomas Hardy Year Book* 10 (1982-83), 60-72; Francesco Marroni, "Prima e dopo il tempo", in *La poesia di Thomas Hardy* (Bari: Adriatica, 1997), 7-38; J. Hillis Miller, "History as Repetition: The Example of *Wessex Heights*", *Stratford Upon Avon Studies* 9 (1972), 342-367; Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry 1860-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Paul Zietlow, *Moments of Vision* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 160-183.

²⁸ *Complete Poems*, 105-106.

²⁹ Thomas Hardy, *The Trumpet-Major* (London: Macmillan, 1957), 27, 111.

men's minds. History needs incarnation: its stream must flow through the veins of the people, and "waves of human impulse" in turn have power over deeds and words. Waves, sweepings, undulations, the sliding of one plane of experience into another: the movement can be either literal or metaphorical, but it is very important in defining Hardy's sense of history, resisting any regular continuous pattern.³⁰

In this sense we would be mistaken in seeing Rome as the linear aim of the pilgrimage itself. There is on the other hand a de-centering of attention, a resistance to accepting conventional and pre-established goals. The reader's eye is diverted elsewhere: the city is seen either from the outside, or from unusual, even irrelevant, points of view. While James is fascinated by Rome's cosmopolitan, aesthetic and intellectual suggestions, Hardy's attention concentrates on the details of landscape and architecture, on the concrete activities of building and digging, exposing the city's "sense of the past". And yet Hardy doesn't want to give us a portrait, a photographic image of Rome, either subjective or objective: he rather tends to make the city a source of dynamic interaction between different ideas of time and history. It is a privileged "spot of time" from which to observe and redefine both past and present.

To the eyes of Hardy the architect, ancient Rome undergoes a process of stratification in time: it appears rebuilt in the forms of Palladian, neoclassical architecture, redrawn in Piranesi's prints, reinvented – and assimilated to British culture – by its influence on the English poets and historians who lived and died there. But at the same time he perceives in it a core of indifference to time, offering no redemption or deliverance: Hardy, the modernist poet translated into Italian by Eugenio Montale, as a precursor of Alberto Moravia's philosophy of

³⁰ The instability of Hardy's text, the increasing fictiveness of fiction, his recognition of the historically conditioned character of any historical interpretation are discussed in Peter Widdowson, "Hardy in History: A Case Study in the Sociology of Literature", *Literature and History* 9 (1983), 3-16.

indifference. Romantic Rome, though present to the poet's mind, cannot be recovered. This is particularly evident in *Rome: Building a New Street in the Ancient Quarter*, where the present building activity and the frail new mansions of the workmen receive more attention from the poet than the ancient quarter itself:

And yet within these ruins' very shade
The singing workmen shape and set and join
Their frail new mansion's stuccoed cove and quoin
With no apparent sense that years abrade,
Though each rent wall their feeble work invade
Once shamed all such in power of pier and groin.³¹

In contrast with the solitude and emptiness of romantic ruins, Hardy's Rome is often the place of disturbing encounters with present everyday reality. The poet, saving the echo of the workmen's song in his own, wants to celebrate the happiness of the living thing and taste for a brief moment the joy of feeling unhistorically.

Even in the poem dedicated to Cestius's Pyramid³² – whose only interest for Hardy resides in its showing the way to the cemetery where Keats and Shelley are buried – there are no notes of nationalistic re-appropriation of the past, but rather a subdued perception of a shared mortal destiny: "For me he is a man who died and was interred / To leave a pyramid". Understatement, melancholy and irony are the accents characterizing the belated poet. Elsewhere more sceptical notes resound, as in Gibbon's comments – via Milton – on the «bastard» state of truth: "Truth like a bastard comes into the world / Never without ill-fame to him who gives her birth".³³

The poem *Zermatt. To the Matterhorn* testifies nature's

³¹ *Complete Poems*, 103.

³² Thomas Hardy, *Rome. At the Pyramid of Cestius near the Graves of Shelley and Keats*, in *Complete Poems*, 104-105.

³³ *Complete Poems*, 105.

indifference to man's attempts to conquer it. The mountain's cosmic time ignores and disregards human history:

When I look at thee, my mind takes flight
To that day's tragic feat of manly might,
As though, till then, of history thou hadst none.

Yet ages ere men topped thee, late and soon
Thou didst behold the planets lift and lower.³⁴

1.6. Even before getting to Rome a process of historical transformation is evident: as Hardy warns in the *Preface*, "chance and change" are forces acting both on the phenomena of life and on our reading of them.

So in *Genoa and the Mediterranean*³⁵ the traveller's eye witnesses the city's decay from the "multimarbled" proud and superb queen of the past, to a woman clad as the Dowd. In the same way, the Mediterranean sea, rich in mythological associations – "O epic-famed god-haunted Central Sea" – is reduced to a small stripe of "classic blue" framed by multicolored houses and hanging clothes. Degradation, carnival, mocking of the heroic, dissolving forms, are effects of the passing of time. And they are reproduced in the operations of the viewer's eye, no longer capable of steady observation, but rather subject to unpredictable flashes and to the deformations of dreams, desire, "soul-subliming powers".

Hardy's final wish for the city that "those eyewounds never be / Where lovers first behold thy form in pilgrimage to thee" sounds therefore particularly ironic, since the wounds have manifested themselves precisely in the speaking "I / eye" of the poem, who is the first "lover" to behold the city's ambiguously seductive form, and to narrate it in his pilgrimage.

An analogous double movement of expectation and disillusionment is embodied in most of the poems. The

³⁴ Ibid., 106.

³⁵ Ibid., 100.

pilgrim's is often an experience of negative signification, where something is missed or gets lost. The most evident example is contained in *The Bridge of Lodi*.³⁶ The poet goes there in the hope of recovering direct memories of the event narrated in the popular English song of the same title, celebrating Napoleon's local battle and victory in 1796. But the entire memory of the historical event is lost for the people of Lodi, no trace whatsoever of the glorious military past remains in the spot: "Lodi's story/ Is extinct in Lodi's street". The poet, frustrated in his pilgrimage and now full of doubts about his own vision of the past, decides to go on singing the old tune, commemorating at least its emotional if not historical value.

In *Shelley's Skylark*³⁷, one of the most complex and famous poems of the sequence, it is the place of inspiration itself – the neighborhood of Leghorn – to vanish in a series of indefinite pronouns, adverbs and adjectives ("somewhere afield here", "where... unknown", "maybe it rests in the loam I view"). Displacement becomes more relevant to the structuring of the poem than identification or recognition of place: the memory of Shelley's residence in the same area is cancelled and distanced from the author's and the reader's perception, just as Shelley's bird and ode are substituted in Hardy by the corpse of the bird ("a pinch of unseen, unguarded dust", "a little ball of feather and bone") and by the poet's perception of the inadequacy of his song. But even in this case the celebration of the last line is ambivalent: the key words "it" and "bard" can refer both to birds and to poetical roles in Shelley and Hardy. While denying his powers of celebration, Hardy's residual word is in fact celebrating itself in the act of giving Shelley a new immortality.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 107-109.

³⁷ Ibid., 101.

³⁸ For a more detailed analysis of this poem see: Giovanni Luciani, "Thomas Hardy: *Shelley's Skylark*", in Agostino Lombardo (a cura di), *La figlia che piange. Saggi su poesia e metapoesia* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1995), 181-193; Maria Stella, *Momenti di visione. Identità poetica e forme della poesia in Thomas Hardy; ottanta poesie con testo a fronte* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1992); Iris Tillman-Hill, "Hardy's *Skylark* and Shelley's", *Victorian Poetry* 10, 1 (1972), 79-83.

During the poet's peregrination through Italy something is constantly lost, subtracted and finally substituted by something else. In *In the Old Theatre, Fiesole*³⁹ this basic movement structuring the sequence is for the first time directly associated with a perception of Rome and Roman history in time. The theatre has a reassuringly measurable geometrical shape, but at the same time is a hybrid place where two different cultures mix:

I traced the Circus whose gray stones incline
Where Rome and dim Etruria intertwine.
Till came a child who showed an ancient coin
That bore the image of a Constantine.

As often in Hardy, we are in presence of "neutral tones": gray is the color of mediation, experience, mortality. Nothing is pure and absolute in itself, and Rome is a melting pot of cultures. The sudden appearance of the little girl seems to interrupt the poet's present meditation, opening a gap between present and past, causing a definite separation of their no longer neutral tones. The chosen icon – a Constantine – is once again an intermediate hybrid figure, in which pagan and Christian Rome are connected. As in Joyce's *Two Gallants* the exhibition of the coin coincides with the moment of epiphany. But while in Joyce and Woolf the momentary revelation involves fullness and intensification of being, in Hardy it is an experience of loss and emptiness – a vacillation of meaning – to be revealed. In this case, there is an uncanny contiguity between here and there, home and Rome, present and past, because the "I" suddenly remembers finding similar coins just by digging in his "distant plot of English loam". Just as in *The Roman Road*, personal memory helps the poet to recover the collective meaning of the historical past:

She lightly passed; nor did she once opine
How, better than all books she had raised for me

³⁹ *Complete Poems*, 102.

In swift perspective Europe's history
Through the vast years of Caesar's sceptred line.

And yet the experience is not fully positive and reassuring. The final sequence of assonant nouns "the power, the pride, the reach of perished Rome» attests, by culminating in the oximoronic adjective "perished", that historical interpretation is always ambivalent and problematic, factual and fictional at the same time, never-ending. Forever lost in the time distance, Rome is forever to be enjoyed in the moment of vision. Cyclical time is transformed into the idea of time as recyclable.⁴⁰

This contemporary presence/ absence of historical time in the experience of the moment tends to be repeated in the series. In the poem *Rome. On the Palatine*, the ruins themselves "beguile the outer sense", appearing to the lyrical "I" in their "pristine glow", but their power of illusion is reinforced by the sudden resounding of a Strauss waltz in their midst. The narrator's perception of the difference and distance between the two forms of art – modern music and ancient architecture – is exactly what allows the pulsating intensity of the moment:

It stirred me as I stood, in Caesar's house,
Raised the old routs Imperial lyres had led,
And blended pulsing life with life long done,
Till Time seemed fiction, Past and Present one.⁴¹

But in Hardy's perspective time *is not* fiction, unity is a momentary impression, and all visions are ephemeral. As the Muse appearing in *Rome: the Vatican. Sala delle Muse* tells the poet:

I am projected from thee,
One that out of thy brain and heart thou causest to be –
Extern to thee nothing.⁴²

⁴⁰ This idea of time is elaborated in Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, (London: Polity Press, 1994), 27.

⁴¹ *Complete Poems*, 103.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 103-104.

Why then should the poet be perturbed by his inconstant worship of either Story, Dance or Hymn? "The essence of all the Nine" muses is to be but parts of one inessential vision, the poet's, which is destined to dissolve. The moment therefore stops the time just to become itself an image of the past, and the poet is the historian of this process.

Verbs, nouns and adjectives indicating destruction, consumption, death abound in these poems: years "abrade", piles "dissolve", streets are "history-haunted", lands are "enchased and lettered as tombs". Even language is signed by its own history.⁴³ Archaisms and neologisms coexist in the same page, in the same line; poetry, history and architecture become interdependent through language: the ruins «outskeleton Time's central city». In this unusual anatomy of the city – laying bare what in *The Ghost of the Past* is defined "that Past my housemistress / [...] a far-off skeleton, / and not a comrade nigh"⁴⁴ – the metaphorical bodies of mistress, mother and matter coincide.

City of ruins and cemeteries, of subsequent burials of different civilizations, Rome is always in Hardy – as in Freud – a trope against death.⁴⁵ What he has to face in his Roman pilgrimage is actually his own death, the end of his own poetic powers. Just like those obnoxious workmen who go on building and singing in spite of time's evident power of destruction, he has to pronounce his own acceptance of death in order to be able to live on and write. Rome requires a continuous readjustment of the poet's mechanism of defense, engaging him in a process of reconstruction, both factual as in the work of

⁴³ On Hardy's use of language see: Ralph Elliot, *Thomas Hardy's English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Raymond Chapman, *The Language of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁴⁴ *Complete Poems*, 308.

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: 1960). In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Rome's stratified ruins are used as a figure of psychic life, keeping trace of different times in the same place.

architects and masons, and fictional as in the recordings of poetry and historiography.

In this sense Rome, where ruins and restoration, memory and loss coexist, is the equivalent of Freud's definition of consciousness as an undulating barrier between life and death in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). As such, it can never be definitely reached and conquered, because as soon as we think we are there, a strong inversion of movement has already taken place and another pilgrimage must begin, through other alien fields.



Fig. 1. A faint image, possibly a scan of a page or a very faded photograph, located below the main text on the right page.

Epictetus is a Stoic philosopher. Epictetus is a slave. One day his master says, "I have guests tonight. Cook for us the best things that there are." When the guests are seated, Epictetus brings in the courses. Crumpled lamb's trotters, ground ox's tongue, goat's spleen, and so on. The host-master calls Epictetus. "What have you done, you foolish wretch? I ask you for the best things, and you serve us nothing but scraps!" "Ah, Master", Epictetus replies, "These are the things that we

architectural and historical monuments in the landscape of
 fiction and historiography. It is a kind of archaeological
 and historical excavation of the past, not just in the
 physical sense but also in the psychological and emotional
 dimensions. The past is not just a collection of
 events and facts, but a living, breathing entity that
 shapes the present. In Hardy's poetry, the past is
 often a place of longing and nostalgia, a place where
 the speaker wishes to return. The past is also a
 place of loss and mourning, a place where the
 speaker mourns the loss of a loved one or a way
 of life. The past is a complex and multi-faceted
 concept, and Hardy's poetry explores its many
 dimensions in a profound and moving way.

of the past is a constant presence in the work of
 the poet. Hardy's poetry is a testament to the power
 of the past to shape the present. The past is not
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Epictetes is a Stoic Philosopher. Epictetes is a slave. One day
 his master says, "I have guests tonight. Cook for us the best
 things that there are". When the guests are seated, Epictetes
 brings in the courses. Casseroled lamb's tongues, grilled ox's
 tongues, roast swan's tongues... The irate master calls
 Epictetes. "What have you done, you insolent wretch? I ask
 you for the best things, and you serve us nothing but tongues!"
 "Ah, Master", Epictetes replies. "Does not the tongue sing the

the sea at the Olympics. Does it not sing the public place,
 persuade the people to follow a wise course? Does not the
 tongue speak the truth about the universe, about human life
 the gods? Then the Master might add: "Does not the tongue
 "But then," the Master added, "tomorrow night you will serve
 I hope to see you at some public place. I hope to see you at
 some public place. I hope to see you at some public place."

Nicole Ward Jouve
Metaphors, Creation and Transitional Objects:
of Tongues ... and the Sea

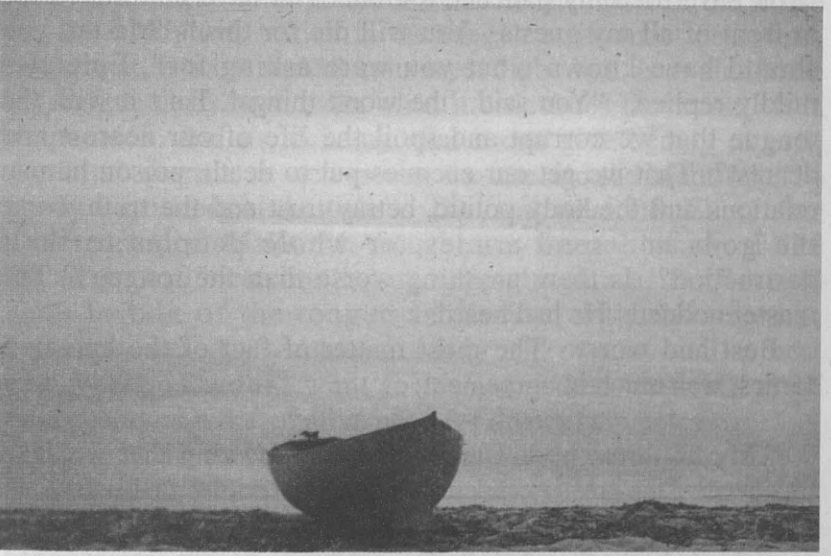


Fig 1: A boat by the sea in the Caribbean (Copyright Cathy Ward).

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victor at the Olympics? Does it not, in the public place, persuade the people to follow a wise course? Does not the tongue speak the truth about the universe, about human life and the gods?" "True", the Master laughed, and so did the guests. "But then", the Master added, "tomorrow night you will serve us another meal, and to our same guests. Let it be of the worst things that there are".

The following evening, after much speculation and wagers, the guests see the dishes brought in. Marinated tongues, grilled, fried, spiced tongues... The master calls Epictetes. "Use that nimble tongue of yours to save your head", he rants. "You have tried my patience too far. You have humiliated me in front of all my guests. You will die for this." "Master, you should have known what you were asking for", Epictetes mildly replied. "You said, 'the worst things'. Isn't it with the tongue that we corrupt and spoil the life of our nearest and dearest? That we get our enemies put to death, poison human relations and the body politic, betray trust and the truth, curse the gods and send armies, or whole peoples to their destruction? Is there anything worse than the tongue?" The master nodded. He had heard.

Best and worst. The most matter-of-fact of the apostles, James, was much in agreement:

My brethren, be not many doctors, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.
 ... If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able to bridle the whole body.
 ... Behold ... the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven by fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm whithersoever the governor listeth.
 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!
 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed of mankind; but the tongue can no man tame
 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?

Can a fig-tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield soft water and fresh.¹

But the tongue does. Human speech is paradoxical, as humans are. "The depository of truth, and an imbecile earth-worm", Pascal will say of *man* sixteen hundred years later. "The glory and refuse of the universe".

We are, as James puts it, "many doctors". It is vital to the welfare of the commonwealth that we handle our little helms as wisely as we can. The commonwealth is the better or the worse for it. Literature, which is the tongue at its most complete, because at its most varied, at its most embodied, is or should be the tongue at its best, even when it articulates the worst. It is its paradox, and its alchemy, that it can give beauty to evil, rhythm to despair, as well as sing the true and the beautiful. "To purify the dialect of the tribe". That was what T.S. Eliot, after the French poet Mallarmé, thought was the poet's task. I like the alchemical metaphor that underlies the phrase. But I would want to talk of the tongue as diverse, rather than pure, especially in today's context. Many and one, as well as best and worst. I would want to insist on the creativeness of multiplicity. Of the creative need for diversity.

Imagine the world of the *Thousand and One Nights*, instead of a world in which embattled and oppressed fundamentalisms are left face to face with the libertarian Babel of Post-Modernism, which is where *The Satanic Verses* left Salman Rushdie. In the Baghdad of Calif Haroun-el-Rachid, an offending story-teller might well have been sentenced to death. But he would have been given a chance to save his head by telling another tale. It would have had to have been a jolly good one. But the wagging of his tongue could have earned his reprieve. It might be utopian to dream of such a world, a world in which there would be the many, and the one. But dreams can be creative: a dream not understood is a message left unread.

¹ James, 3, 1-12.

Speech. Tongue. Language. In French, the same word, *langue*, means tongue and language. As in, "the mother tongue".

As *langue*, language posits itself as of the body. The organ that, in conjunction with teeth and palate and saliva, eats, and articulates words. Feeding tongues to the Master and his guests, Epictetes makes them eat their words, as well as reflect on the tongue, on their capacity to make words: what is "best", what is "worst", what is the difference? By contrast James in his Epistle spreads a metaphorical net: the tongue is the helm of a boat, a horse on whom we can put a bit, a fountain producing poison or sweet water. The strength of the examples or metaphors that Epictetes and James serve up, literally for dishes or as means towards understanding, comes from their being of the body, or close to it: tongue is made to eat tongue, the bit that curbs is placed on the horse's tongue, the fountain produces water as the mouth spittle. Interestingly, the body here is not gendered. It could be that of a man, or a woman.

Metaphor is a trope, or a figure of speech. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, metaphor is the transference of the usual name of a thing to another thing by virtue of their likeness. The tongue can be called a helm because both are very little yet steer large things, a boat or a human being. You need a sentence for a metaphor: one word is not enough. That sentence, or series of sentences, are very important, for they enable what is an illogicality, an impertinence (saying that the tongue is a helm, which is nonsense) to become pertinent. The logical space changes.

Through poetic effects, which have to do with sound, with rhythm, reality becomes transfigured. As sentence adds to sentence, as metaphors multiply and mutate, as the plurality of language, with its unconscious effects, its use of symbols, sensuous, emotional and aesthetic values, which pertain to metaphor, combine with mimetic values, which pertain to narrative, to create the world of the text, which makes the world a world habitable by humans. Thus the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues in a body of work that I find open and congenial. We find ourselves, Ricoeur says, following

Heidegger, thrown into the world. We make it inhabitable through the fables that we make, by projecting our own possibilities onto the world. As readers, we can only come to understand ourselves through

the great detour of the signs of humanity deposited in the works of our culture. What would we know of love and hatred, of ethical feelings and generally speaking of all that we call the 'soi', if it had not been carried into language and articulated by literature?²

To understand is "to understand oneself in front of the text". Refusing to impose upon the text our own finite capacities, we expose ourselves to the text, and receive from it a vaster proposition for living, more appropriate to the proposition of the world. As one had to let go of logic to accept that a tongue is a helm, so as readers we accept to lose ourselves in the text in order to find ourselves.³

What I like about this is the implied dialogue between self-in-the-making and text, the way plurality is recognized, but not incompatible with the construction of self as a subject. And what is said about distance and losing, which seem to me central both to the process of writing and the process of reading. Yet the attractive universality of writing and reading in this account conceals a host of problems.

"There is no understanding of the self that is not mediated by signs, symbols and texts", Ricoeur argues. Thanks to writing, discourse becomes triply independent: of the speaker's intention, of the first readership, of the circumstances of production. It becomes a "*devenir-texte*", read as part of the process of becoming.

How does the mediation occur? Is it so indifferent, who does the reading, who does the writing? And who does the talking?

² Paul Ricoeur, *Du Texte à l'action: Essai d'herméneutique*, II (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986), 116 (my translation).

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

Writing is making a proposition about the world, which makes the world inhabitable, something I can feel at home in. Reading is encountering propositions about the world, and, through the mediation of the text, of its signs and symbols, impelled by its narrative, constructing myself as a subject. As a reader I lose myself in the text, so that I can find myself. I encounter the becoming-text and in the process, I myself become. Many, and one.

Implying as he does that, as epistemological and experiential practices, reading and writing are universal, Ricoeur has a point. Maya Angelou recounts how, a twelve-year old girl from the South of the United States, she had lost speech as a result of being raped by her step-father. She found her way back to language through reading Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." A Black female adolescent is led back to subjecthood and speech by the text of a white Victorian Englishman about the French Revolution. You can be an Indian female, and love Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which is all about men, and colonialism. You can be a European male, and love Clarice Lispector, or the Lady Murasaki. As readers we are many. We understand almost everything. Things we could never be, or know.

But as readers also we read for the one. We read for those important moments where literature gives us words for what we are: the words for what we did not know we were. And what we are also entails class, rich and poor, as Mrs Ramsay would say. It entails racial and ethnic and cultural and sexual identifications. The same is true of writers. The writer is also situated. And in particular, if the writer is female, her relation to the creative act may be different. Partly because the world is full of great literature written by men, to which a man can easily find a filiation. As women, Virginia Woolf suggested, we relate to tradition through our mothers: if so, filiation for a woman is by no means so evident. Furthermore, throughout the ages, at least in the Western tradition such as I know it, woman, the female body, have been used as a mediation, an elaborate set of images or figures of speech, a metaphor in short, whereby the "being-at-home" of texts could be

established. I quote from Gayatri Spivak, in an essay called "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman", which engages with Derrida's essay "Becoming Woman", which itself engages with Nietzsche's reflexions on woman as the metaphor for truth: on woman as hymen, as paradox, as the veil. Spivak is quoting Hegel:

Since it is in thought that I am first at home (*bei mir*), I do not penetrate (*durchbohren*) an object until I understand it; it then ceases to stand over against me and I have taken from it its ownness (*das Eigene*) that it had for itself against me. Just as Adam says to Eve: "Thou art flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone", so mind says: "This is mind of my mind" and the alienness (*Fremdheit* as opposed to *das Eigene*; alterity as opposed to ownness) disappears.⁴

The last twenty five years have seen massive and most impressive debates on the woman question, which Simone de Beauvoir had re-launched with *The Second Sex*. What is woman? Is she second, Other, enigma, truth, Madonna, whore or both, biologically or culturally destined, a sub-category of the universal category Man, a series of sexual deviations from the masculine norm, a heterosexual and prescriptive marker? Does she exist? Should we say, women, since there are such differences of race, of religion, of class, of culture, of sexual identity, of wealth? Should we not use the word at all?

Woman's tongue. How does she create in a culture in which, if we follow the Hegel quoted by Spivak, the figure of speech that represents thought's ability to make the world one's own is Adam's possession of Eve? A culture which ever since Plato and Aristotle, as Hélène Cixous has argued, always places the terms that connote woman as inferior to terms that connote man? Woman is content, matter, flesh, void, object. Man is form, spirit, mind, god.

⁴ Gayatri Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman", in Mark Krupnick, ed., *Displacement: Derrida and After* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1983), 169-195.

As in Valéry's *Charmes* poem, "La Pythie":

Qui me parle, à ma place même?
 Quel écho me répond: tu mens!
 Qui m'illumine? Qui blasphème?
 Et qui, de ces mots écumants
 Dont les éclats hachent ma langue
 La fait brandir une harangue
 Brisant la bave et les cheveux
 Que mache et trame le désordre
 D'une bouche qui veut se mordre
 Et se reprendre ses aveux?⁵

In spittle and in foam, chewing her own tongue and hair, writhing in the fit of possession by the god, the Pythoness is spoken by another. She gives herself the lie. She is the source neither of the blasphemies that she utters nor of the lightning truths that she vents. Valéry is embodying the poetic process. He is also giving form to what we all, as speakers possessed by the drives in language, may at some time or other go through. Lacan did use the end of "La Pythie" to represent the fantasy that it is our own voice that we hear in nature, without any seeming perception of the violent feminisation of nature that such a reading implies:

Honneur des Hommes, Saint Langage ...
 ... cette voix
 Qui se connaît quand elle sonne
 N'être plus la voix de personne
 Tant que des antres et des bois.⁶

This is language at its most pantheistic, reaching towards impersonality, embodying the world. The fact remains that both in the Valéry and in Lacan's quotation it is through investment of an 'impure' female body that the voice which is the "Honour

⁵ Paul Valéry, *Poésies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 119.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits I* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), 167.

of Men" comes into existence. The metaphor does not only act as resemblance: it appropriates and subsumes the female body. The Pythoness is the unknowing vessel and channel through which the god, who is male, speaks. "Who speaks, in my own place?" the Pythoness asks. Can woman speak? Is her silence constitutive of speech? Hélène Cixous, in the seventies, urged women to write, to explore the "Dark Continent" of femininity which, she said, is "neither dark nor unexplorable":

Je m'empare de cette langue à moi qui est aussi ma mère et celle de toutes mes filles.

Et avec elle j'ouvre la bouche des yeux.

Alors tout ce qui voit parle et chaque parole allume un autre monde de sens.

....

Et quoique solidement arimée dans ma bouche ... encore que tu ne puisses changer de lieu, pourtant tu changes de place, tu vaques, tu me ramifies, tu remonte les fils de mes eaux sans ramer ...⁷

Tongue, mother tongue. Tongue, and the mother. We generate ourselves through speech. The speaking muscle in our bodies is permanently immersed in liquid, like the foetus, in the womb. We all come from the inland sea of the womb. We all go through the evolution of the species from the tiny speck of conception through life in liquid through entry into the world of earth and air and fire. What was, in the seventies and eighties, called "*écriture féminine*", writing the (female) body, was not, as it was ironically represented, writing in blood and milk instead of with "the piffle" or "prick", as Rochester and Henry Miller claimed they did, but an attempt to moor the act of writing in a female body that had been, through the ages, presented as the container or channel, never the source, of creation. In the Cixous passage, the speaker-writer is *both* tongue and mouth, rower and boat and river. Ink, let us

⁷ Hélène Cixous, *La jeune née* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 112-113.

remember, used to come from octopusses, swimming in the depths of the sea.

In a psychoanalytic, textual re-reading of Plato's celebrated metaphor of the cavern, Luce Irigaray, in *Speculum*, points out that what is left out of Plato's account is the body of the mother. The prisoners are chained inside a cave, turned to the back of the cave. A fire placed behind them projects images there as upon a screen. Those images are the shadows that we mistake for reality. We need a Socratic philosopher who, acting as midwife (and Socrates was the son of a midwife), would force us to come out through narrow passages into the light of day, the real world, where there are reflections, in water or shadows. Eventually, the former prisoner would be freed from appearances, and gaze upon the Sun, the Idea, or Truth.

It does not take much of a Freudian reading, though it took Irigaray to decipher it, to see that the cavern is like a womb. Irigaray shows that the Intelligible here is reached through eliding the role of the mother's body as also engenderer. The primal scene, i.e. the sexual coupling of father and mother, is avoided. There is no relation between sun and cave. Disembodiment is the condition of Intelligibility. Truth is the absence of any reflection – the sun itself. In order to reach it the maternal body which is conceived as pure materiality, which functions only as screen, or water that reflects, has to be left behind.

Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer!
La mer est ton miroir: tu contemples ton âme
Dans le gémissent infini de sa lame,
Et ton esprit n'est pas un gouffre moins amer.⁸

The poem begins as a hymn to freedom. Did Baudelaire not write that two or three marine miles are enough to give man the idea of infinity? Yet rapidly all that the sea does here is reflect. It becomes a mirror, of the abyss in man. By the end it has

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, "L'homme et la mer", in *Oeuvres Complètes*, I (Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1955), 686.

become an enemy brother, as hungry for death as man. Through the inevitable pun, as old as the French language, "*la mer*" echoes *la mère*, the mother. "*Amer*", bitter, is also *a-mer* motherless. An unmothering, a cruel sea.

The sea, so often central to Baudelaire's poems, he never merges with. He fights it, he rides it. Sea-like, music gets hold of the boat-poet. It leaves him in "calme plat, grand miroir/ De mon désespoir!". Rimbaud's Drunken Boat, though he has wildly gone to sea, scattering helm and grappling-hooks, and tasted the green water, sweeter than to children the flesh of tart apples, though he longs: "oh que j'aïlle à la mer", can no more sink, become lost in the sea, lose his separateness than can Baudelaire's ships. The speaker of Valéry's "Le Cimetière marin", perhaps the most celebrated poem about the sea in the French language, is equally separate, though in apparent control. He stands in his "ownness" above the Mediterranean in a hill graveyard. The metaphors proliferate: the sea is so still it seems solid, a roof on which white sails, dove-like, are pecking. An emblem of eternity, threatening stasis, it makes the poet into what Valéry said the thinker was: a Lazarus, a man dying, and trying to return from death. The sea also gathers in its net of sparks every mythic mirage:

Oui, grande mer de délires douée,
Peau de panthère et chlamyde trouée
De mille et mille idoles de soleil
Hydre absolue, ivre de ta chair bleue
Qui te remords l'étincelante queue
Dans un tumulte au silence pareil

Le vent se lève! Il faut tenter de vivre!

The sea is female. The wind male. The poet tears himself away from the contemplation that threatened death thanks to the wind that ruptures the (hymen-like) surface of the sea, that sends pages of spray flying on to the rocks.

I am not trying to knock those poems. I love Baudelaire, and Rimbaud. I know "Le Cimetière marin" by heart and have

lived with it for years with a mixture of fascination and exasperation. I'm not the metaphor police. I know that as human beings we make metaphor out of everything we are, and that life has made us. We let go of logical sense (a tongue is not a helm) in order to find meaning at the other end, through similitude and fable. *Meta*: beyond, after. Travel and transport are at work in metaphor, as well as being and non-being. Male poets have, throughout the ages, made a glorious job of singing reality. I would not be without their song. But some of the propositions that they make don't leave me room. I need the other sides, as it were, the many repressed sides. Among these, for a more complete, a multiple world, one in which "*Fremdheit*" is not sublated, in which there is contradiction and complementarity, a world in which there could be "an abundance of the other", as Hélène Cixous puts it, I need the woman creator. And she is not so easy to imagine, because of the ways in which woman has been metaphorised as sea as Pythoness as screen as cave as mirror. "Qui me parle, à ma place même?" "Who speaks me, in my own place?": in place of myself?

Can we engender ourselves, as creators, without making another human being, of a different sex or colour or culture, subservient to us? Perhaps a utopian question, but one which has large political implications.

White Mythology: the "usure" of the sea-mother

In "White Mythology" Derrida attacks what he calls the "usure" of metaphor. "Usure" means both the wearing out and the profit, the surplus-value made through usury. There is, Derrida recounts, an Anatole France dialogue in which the characters reflect on how a coin, put to the grindstone, might have the effigy on it effaced, then be sold at an inestimable value. This is what the metaphysicians have done. They started with material, sensuous images, connected them analogically with concepts, then let the concept become abstract, even though it implicitly carried the image that had been bound with it. Thus "breath" has disappeared from

"spirit", "sun" from "God" or "Idea". Any expression of an abstract idea, the dialogue concludes,

can only be by analogy. By an odd fate, the very metaphysicians who think they escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colours of the ancient fables, and are themselves but gatherers of fables. They produce white mythology.⁹

"Metaphysics", Derrida comments:

the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of what he must still wish to call Reason.¹⁰

Metaphysics proceeds by "usure" indeed: the original fable, analogy, covered in white ink, the metaphor worn out, but enabling western man to make profit out of it: set up classifications, systematize forms of power, privilege his own version of things as "Truth", as "*Logos*", as against e.g. Oriental, more image-making forms of thought. Derrida quotes Hegel as making the whole system explicit, especially in his concept of "*Aufhebung*", of "*relève*", meaning both (for Derrida) taking over and raising (a word) from a sensory to a spiritual meaning.¹¹ The central metaphor is that of the sun, metaphorically presented as (e.g. in Plato's *Republic*) the "invisible source of light", "sowing" its "seeds". The sun *as eventually Truth, as eventually Being*, becomes charged with a male, a patriarchal dimension, becomes connected with the eye, death, the "proper name"¹² which then becomes elided, eroded

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 213.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹² *Ibid.*, 242-244.

yet profit-making. Thus oppositions like nature/spirit, nature/history, sensual/intelligible are formed "under the master category of dialectical idealism".¹³

I would like to turn this, not to ideas of 'whiteness', the construction of western metaphysics, as Derrida does, but to how gender works in the metaphors of language and the sea which I have been playing with. For the profit by usury which Derrida says flows from the use of metaphor by Metaphysics is loaded in gender terms: if the sun be indeed the central metaphor, it is privileged as male over, for instance, the earth as female. French Feminisms eloquently pointed this out, Cixous in particular, in her celebrated "Sorties" essay (1975). It is clear that Irigaray, in what she says about Plato's cave and the way it both elides and refers to the womb, and about the Sun as the Intelligible (sower, father, Truth), is unpicking the same 'master categories' as Derrida, though she proceeds in a different perspective. The conclusion however would be similar: it is particularly difficult for women to create, and imagine the creative process, because of the way the imaginary has become bound up with the cultural, the socio-economic: mother, or woman, have been caught as container, recipient, matter, etc. through endless and endlessly re-invented, 'worn' and idealized metaphors, and this happens to correspond with the way in which women have been repressed or suppressed over time: in which women have been told "Can't paint, can't write", as Charles Tansley in Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* tells painter Lily Briscoe. The mythology is not just white: it is patriarchal. It has become so normative that the question of sex has become bound up with the question of creation. No need to expand: thousands of women have written about this, and second-wave Feminism has been particularly eloquent on the topic. What however strikes me when I look at how the figures of the mother and the father, and the creative process itself, are imagined, is that what Irigaray and Derrida describe is not as rigid as they make it, and that it is *the last two centuries perhaps more than others* which have intensified the sense of

¹³ Ibid., 226.

alienation between the sexes, making the creative act more gender-biased than at other periods.

This is, I realize, a historically wobbly statement, and I am not sure where the cut-off point should be – perhaps as early as the seventeenth century, or even the Renaissance? But returning to Dante after many years, with these images of creation on my mind, I am struck by how playful, and paradoxical, and on the side of the mother, his description of poetic language is. He had to choose the mother tongue for his *Divine Comedy*, he said: the mother tongue is "on the side" of the fourteen Italian dialects. He needs to pursue *his own* tongue so as to invent it, as one would ride through a forest in pursuit of a panther "whose scent reaches every corner, but which will never allow itself to be seen".¹⁴ The poetic tongue flees through the forest, a female prey to a male rider, you might say: but she is beloved, she is to be snared in a net, not destroyed, and she is the poet's *own*, not somebody else's... But she is also the "vulgar" tongue (nothing to do with Mallarmé's or Eliot's "purity"). She is archaic (like Kristeva's "semiotic"?). She is like an enveloping medium, the language by which the baby has been fed: and it is a woman who has taught it: "I call vulgar tongue that with which little children are made familiar by those who surround them, when first they begin to form diverse sounds; or to put it more briefly, by vulgar tongue I mean that which we speak without any rule, imitating our nurse".¹⁵

And so, perhaps, metaphors of creation do not have to subsume one gendered entity under another? Do "Mer" and "Mère" only rhyme with "amer" when the poet carries a particular bitter history within himself (or herself)?

What I want to say is that metaphors of creation do not *have to* carry the gender privilege, or gender charge, that the metaphor of the sun is seen by Derrida to carry. Inspired and

¹⁴ Martin Sorrell, ed., *Elles: A Bilingual Anthology of Modern French Poetry by Women* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1995), 251.

¹⁵ Dante, "De Vulgari Eloquentia", in *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, XVI, 1 (Paris: Gallimard), 585; my translation. I found the passage in Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron's "Epilogue", in Sorrell, *Elles*, 241.

enlightening as I find Derrida's manoeuvres, I agree with Ricoeur's critique in the name of "*la métaphore vive*" – of live metaphor. It is not because the metaphoric process has been used by metaphysics to its profit that metaphor must be worn, "*usée*", must lose its dynamism: every time it is re-activated, every time it becomes image-making, and the sensuousness of the sensory term is made vivid, it is re-born:¹⁶ and where does this most happen if not in poetic language? Derrida places the metaphor of the "*demeure*", the dwelling-place, the house, alongside the metaphor of the sun: and yes, you could say that every time a habitation, cave or other, appears, as in Plato, then the womb is not far. And that when Ricoeur says that literature is about making the world habitable, he is transferring to literature a dwelling, a protective, a mothering image: hoodwinked, Derrida might say, by "white mythology". But that is to leave aside the experiential dimension of metaphor, its being born from the paradox of living. That is to ignore that fusion in the womb is a primary experience for both sexes, and that the degree of protection by the mother, or the first environment, and the satisfaction of primary needs, are essential to the development of creativity, whether we are male or female: dependence on the *environment* is the lot of all human beings:

We find that individuals live creatively and feel that life is worth living or else that they cannot live creatively and are doubtful about the value of living. This variable in human beings is directly related to the quantity and quality of environmental provision at the beginning or in the early phases of each baby's living experience.

... here at this point where creativity either comes into being or does not come into being (or alternatively is lost) the theoretician must take the environment into account, and no statement that concerns the individual as an isolate can touch this central problem of the source of creativity.¹⁷

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *La Métaphore vive* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 368-374.

¹⁷ Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 83-84.

What Derrida removes from his critique of metaphor is the way in which experience, for each human being, can renovate metaphor. In the particular set of metaphors I have been looking at, the tongue in the mouth, bathed in saliva as the baby is bathed in the placenta in the womb, is (metonymically as well as metaphorically?) taken as an analogue for the speech which it produces, the writing that it leads to and which can be located in the "house" of literature, which can be a "good" environment, one that makes meaning out of life and induces creativity and individuation. The tongue in the mouth is also like the baby in the womb, the baby in a safe and nurturing environment which enables it to individuate and play (pursue itself through the forest, as in Dante, and be fed by words/milk by its nurse). And in its turn it becomes like the helm in a boat (the mouth, the body), a boat on the sea... The *container* – womb, sea, nurse, chora – may be gendered, but in a special, almost neutral way, as Plato in *Timaeus* describes the receiver that enables all things to be, "the nurse of generation":

... the mother and receptacle of all created and visible and in any way sensible things, is not to be termed earth, or air, or fire, or water, or any of their compounds, or any of the elements from which these are derived, but is an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible.¹⁸

What I am suggesting is that there can be metaphors of the womb as source of all life and trope of the condition for all creation which do not have to be gendered in the oppositional ways described by Derrida or Irigaray. The repeated unconscious human experience of beginnings (repeated in that all human beings go through it, being in the womb; human in that it has become archetypal) does not have to, cannot, equate the gender of child-bearing women. The Mother (as Jung insists) is not to be equated with one's real mother, the "fallible

¹⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, *The Dialogues of Plato*, III, trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1964), 637-638.

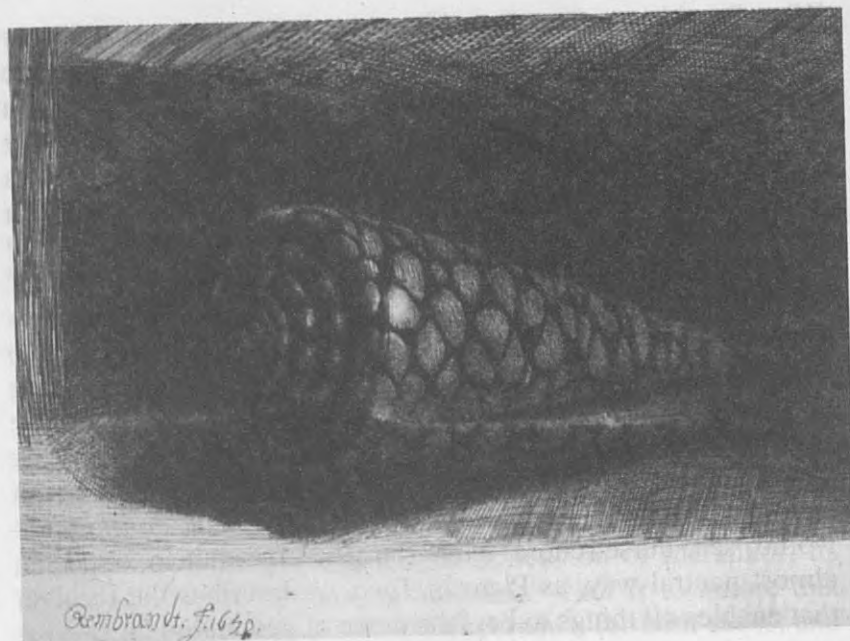


Fig 2: Rembrandt, 'The Shell (*Comus marmoreus*)'.

being" whose history is bound with ours. Live metaphors revive the archetype.

Cannot creativity be expressed by images/objects that do not have to be usury-making, do not have to be gendered?

Transitional Objects

And so, pursuing the tongue, in its sea, and the sea, I would like to dream for a few minutes about shells.

Sea-shells, by the seventeenth century, or so I've read, had become an emblem of the way in which art and nature might combine. Shells were beautiful, sculpturally perfect. They were one, and many. They had contained living creatures of the deep. They were their habitat, their architecture. And so does Socrates, in Valéry's *Eupalinos*, find them. Socrates is in hell, dialoguing with Phaedrus. He now regrets that in life he chose to be a thinker, not a maker. There was not enough body to his

language, he mourns. And for a model of what he would have liked to make, he talks of his encounter, on a beach, with a strange white sculptural object, which he does not name and which the tide had left. Later, Phaedrus evokes a wondrous Phoenician whom he knew, who made ships, that were large bodies adapted to the sea. Shells or ships here, although you could liken them to wombs, are specifically not that: they are intermediary objects, that do not entail a hierarchy of male or female, nor an erasure of the mother's body.

Francis Ponge, the author of poems called *Le Parti pris des choses*, literally "things have made up their minds" but also, "taking the side of things", a poet whom I much liked in my youth, has kept resurfacing whilst I was mulling over all this. His poems meditate on pebbles on beaches, molluscs, sea-shells, snails. The body of the sea-creature is moored to its shell much as the tongue to the mouth in the Hélène Cixous passage. Ponge sings the good proportions of the shell. It is a model of what to Ponge is a good poem, one that is an appropriate house of language for man's tongue, and one that respects the alienness of the world. He imagines the animal inside the shell, its life in the sea – wishes that human beings, who share with sea-shells both fleshiness and the need for hard houses, were able to make dwellings for themselves that would be equally proportionate. He most admires measured writers – "Malherbe, Horace, Mallarmé" ... "because their monument is made of the true common secretion of the mollusc man, the thing most proportioned and conditioned to his body, and yet the most different from his form that could be conceived – I mean SPEECH".¹⁹ Ian Higgins comments:

There is a striking doubleness to language in [Ponge's] metaphors, a paradoxical coexistence of concrete and abstract. Language is a secretion, a substance, part of man and yet different from him, outside him, an exhalation floating round him... [T]hings, in Ponge ... are often characterized by the meeting or "intersection" of opposite ... qualities. The mollusc is such a thing, soft and

¹⁹ Francis Ponge, *Le Parti pris des choses* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), 65.

boneless, yet secreting a hard shell which is part of it and yet so different from it. This doubleness makes it into a "réalité des plus précieuses" So too, by analogy, man is a precious and privileged being because he is a paradox, a soft shapeless mass giving himself form – that is, difference, individuality – through his utterances, so different in form from himself.²⁰

Here I am reminded of Winnicott:

It is well known that infants as soon as they are born tend to use fist, fingers, thumbs in stimulation of the oral erotogenic zone, in satisfaction of the instincts of that zone, and also in quiet union. It is also well known that after a few months infants of either sex become fond of playing with dolls, and that most mothers allow their infants some special object and expect them to become, as it were, addicted to such objects.²¹

Thus does Winnicott introduce what he calls *transitional objects*. His claim is that, whilst it is true to say that the "inner reality" of an individual is constituted by his reaching the stage of "being a unit with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside", and that that inner world can be rich or poor, at peace or at war,²² there is a third area, an intermediate one, the "area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life contribute".²³ The transitional object corresponds to this intermediate state. It can be a bit of blanket, a bit of wool... something "between the thumb and the teddy-bear, between the oral eroticism and the true object-relationship".²⁴ It becomes for the infant a defence against anxiety, helps it go to sleep. Holding and mouthing, "accompanied by sounds of mum-mum, babbling, anal noises, the first musical notes" occur.²⁵ There is

²⁰ Ian Higgins, *Francis Ponge* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), 48.

²¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

an implicit agreement with the mother that the baby has rights over the object. And – Winnicott underlines – "*there is no noticeable difference between boy and girl in their use of the original 'not-me' possession, which I am calling the original object*".²⁶

It is true, Winnicott adds, that "the piece of blanket (or whatever it is) is symbolical of some part-object, such as the breast. Nevertheless, the point of it is not its symbolic value so much as its actuality.... [T]he term 'transitional object' ... gives room for the process of being able to accept difference and similarity".²⁷ It is part of a journey of progress towards experiencing, moving from subjectivity to objectivity.

At a poetic or painterly or more generally imaginary level, the shell could be read as an elaborate analogue to the transitional object. As the house of an animal, of an allegorical figure, it stands for the womb (or breast?). But it is so clearly an object, so distinct from the subsuming power of other womb-metaphors, that it allows a writer like Ponge to make room for the *actuality* of the object, the acceptance of difference and similarity. Though in Ponge's poem the shell ends up standing for the hard structure of language that man, with his mollusc-like tongue, can secrete, there never is any doubt that this *is* an analogy: the "is not" is present in the "is". This is not only a grown-up metaphor (unlike the Baudelaire or Rimbaud metaphors of the boat and sea I quoted earlier, full of longing for fusion with the sea-mother), it is also an ungendered metaphor: as an image of what language can do, it applies to a woman just as much as to a man. Doesn't Winnicott say that there is no difference between boy and girl in their use of the "not-me" transitional object? The mother's body in this case is not elided, not taken for granted. Was it the mark of a wiser, a more grown-up culture, when people (in the Caribbean, I believe) used shells for currency instead of coins? You do not 'use', wear out, make usury out of, shells: at best you might make music out of them, or listen to their sea-sound?

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Another transitional object comes to me as I write this: the orange, which both Colette and Hélène Cixous have written about. It comes to mind because I spent time writing about it....²⁸ No need to spell things out: the (breast-like) globe of the fruit, its juiciness... you hold it, you suck it. In Colette's story *Le Rendez-vous*, whilst the characters pick and devour fruit in a Moroccan orange-grove, an April wind runs "over a fresh desert of salt water, milky and clear like an Armorican sea".²⁹ In *Vivre l'orange*, Cixous celebrates the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector whose writing rejuvenated and inspired hers, fed her juice. Clarice "put the orange back into the desert hands of my writing ... And it was a whole childhood that came back running to get hold of the living orange".³⁰

Winnicott stresses that there is already an element of play in the transitional object. And for him, the capacity to play is bound up with the capacity to be creative. It is not the object that is transitional: it "represents the infant's transition from the state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate".³¹ What is striking about Colette's or Cixous's writing about the orange is that, however charged with motherly connotations the orange can be (triggering the "milky" sea image in Colette, summoning up childhood for Cixous), the orange remains very distinctly an orange.

"It is assumed", Winnicott also says, referring to Joan Rivière, "that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience ... which is not challenged (arts,

²⁸ Nicole Ward Jouve, "Oranges et sources: Colette et Hélène Cixous", in F. Van Rossum-Guyon and M. Diaz-Diocaretz, *Hélène Cixous: Chemin d'une écriture* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1990), 55-73.

²⁹ Colette, *Le Rendez-vous, Oeuvres complètes*, XI (Paris: Flammarion, 1950), 233 (my translation).

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Vivre l'orange* (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1979), 17 (my translation).

³¹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 17.

religion, etc.)".³² In a way then, the whole of literature, and our making for ourselves a house in it, our using it to make the world "inhabitable", is like a relation to a huge transitional object: which is no more gendered, boy-specific, than the smaller transitional object, shell or orange. We can lose ourselves in it as the small child loses itself in the area of "play"... Which is not to say that when it comes to the choice of objects with which to play, the difference between boys and girls might not enter. "Boys to some extent tend to go over to use hard objects" (Winnicott again says), "whereas girls tend to proceed to the acquisition of a family" by means of dolls, soft toys. Reading this I think that shells are hard indeed, and that the ideal of literature that Ponge outlines is very much made up of 'hard' poets (Malherbe, Mallarmé...). As against this, you can sink your teeth into an orange, be filled with its juice, smell... Is there also an element of sexual difference in that Cixous in particular, but also Colette, are inspired by the orange to "babble", make music – to those sounds of desire for the mother's body which Kristeva has linked with the semiotic, but which might more properly be linked with what Winnicott says of the babble that accompanies the play with transitional objects? Are such areas more easily reactivated for girls, because they are of the same sex as their mothers, identify more readily with them?

Whatever may be the case, shells are also there in Colette. In *Le Blé en herbe*, the young adolescents, Phil and Vinca, find shrimps or lobsters in rock-pools on the Brittany – the "Armorican" – coast. Their fishing is always written as a series of relationships, of people, perceptions, bodies, water, sea creatures. Vinca has drawn her playmate Phil's attention to the presence of some beautiful shrimps in a pool:

She leant further forward, and her hair beat, like a short imprisoned wing, her companion's cheek. She moved further back, then came back, with an imperceptible motion, then back again. He seemed not to notice, but his free hand drew Vinca's

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

naked arm, tanned and salty.

- Look, Vinca.... The loveliest one, coming...

Vinca's arm, that she pulled back, slid as far as the wrist inside Phil's hand as in a bracelet, for he was not squeezing.

- You won't catch it, Phil, it's gone away again...

So as better to follow the shrimp's game, Vinca gave back her arm, as far as the elbow, to the half-closed hand. In the green water, the long agate shrimp was feeling the edge of the net with the tip of its paws, the tip of its antennae. A flip of the wrist, and.... But the fisherman tallied, perhaps savouring the stillness of the docile arm inside his hand, the weight of a head veiled in hair that leant for an instant, conquered, on his shoulder, then fiercely pulled apart...

Quick, Phil raise the net! Oh! it's gone! why did you let it go?³³

The shrimps are alive, they have their own movement. They can escape, as desiring girl escapes, or does not escape, boy, and as desiring boy escapes, or does not escape, desiring woman. Throughout the novel Colette keenly retains the boundaries, the distance, between character and character, between earth and sea. The metaphors make you feel and see, but ownness never subsumes alienness:

The great August tide, bringing rain, filled the window. The earth ended there, on the edge of the sandy meadow. Just another effort of the wind, another upheaving of the grey field ploughed with parallel foams, and the house, no doubt, would float like an ark.... But Phil and Vinca knew the August tide and its monotonous thunder, the September tide and its white dishevelled horses. They knew that this tip of meadow remained unbridgeable, and their childhood had every year taunted the soapy thongs which danced, powerless, on the gnawed edge of the empire of men.³⁴

³³ Colette, *Le Blé en herbe* (Paris: Flammarion, 1923), 9-10 (my translation).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36 (my translation).

The "gnawing", as by rodents, gently deflates the uncharacteristic grandeur of "l'empire des hommes".

Colette is uncharacteristic. The confident sense of identity which her texts generate is not that frequent in women's fictions. It may have to do with her extraordinarily strong relationship with her mother. As if somehow the ability to let go of 'home', for the woman writer, had to do with having had it in the first place. That may be true, of course, for both sexes: Winnicott's work makes it clear that creativity has to do with having had "good-enough" mothering. Wandering as I have through images of tongue and mouth, boat and sea, mollusc and shell, as analogues for each other and for the self in literature, the self that creates in language, I have come to see that, whatever "white mythologies" metaphors may carry, there wasn't any necessary gendering of the 'holder', the container: neither the archetypal mother/womb/breast nor the transitional object need be other than neutral, open to the play of imagination of both sexes. It is when we come to the contained – the animal inside the shell, the tongue, the *self* – that gendering becomes insistent.

It is with the *subject* that gender trouble starts. For with the subject History – public and private, collective and individual – begins.

Who am I? How can I create a world of language which will make me be at home in the world? Those questions are even more difficult for women writers than for men. For some of the reasons I have outlined, women often feel at least double, the maker of the sign and the sign, barred from, foreigners in creation. Can you be both Pythoness and speaking God, dwelling-pace and dweller? Yes, if you double up in some imaginary bisexuality as Hélène Cixous does in the passage quoted above, playing at being both tongue and mouth, actor and medium. Or if, like Dante, you are both labile, playful child and the nurse that feeds it words. But such happy doublings are not frequent. The struggle to *be*, and to be creative, have been made difficult for western women at least (but I would venture, not only for western women) by life conditions and gender rules. With little girls, being of the same sex as their mothers, and unconsciously conditioned to behave like their mothers,

patterns have been passed on that make individuation difficult. Women may be less able to separate from an imaginary womb or containment within the real home, to take and accept the distance that is needed to seek for identity, to fashion a world which could be 'home' in the other, larger sense.

If I turn again to images of self or boat at sea, I am struck by how frequently themes of madness, drowning, going under, appear in modern women's writing: from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* to Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* to Atwood's *Surfacing* to Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* to the opening of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*...

The Self at Sea

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes up the silenced history of Mr Rochester's mad wife from Jane Eyre. It chooses to give her the story. It lets her speak in her own voice.

A white Creole, Antoinette belongs to neither Jamaican community: she is neither black nor white: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and the white people did. But we were not in their ranks".³⁵ "[B]lack nigger better than white nigger" her poor black playmate Tia tells her in a dispute that involves Antoinette's ability to turn somersaults under water in the bathing pool at Coulibri, her impoverished mother's place.³⁶ Only in a waking fantasy of Eden can she use the few stable elements in her world to imagine herself held:

I lay thinking, "I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barriers of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers".³⁷

³⁵ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

The black people burn down Coulibri, the house of the "white cockroaches". Later, Antoinette is married to Mr Rochester. Mr Rochester does see the loveliness of the bathing pool. "I'd find myself thinking", he writes, "What I see is nothing. I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing".³⁸ Nietzsche or Derrida might tell him that he wants the truth – the enigma – woman as truth or enigma. This he cannot have: it is his own fantasy. Mr Rochester gets to hate Coulibri, he ships his wife to England. There she'll go mad, roaming the passages of Thornfield, which is to her a cardboard house. She finally sets fire to it, as her own mother's place was set fire to, for only in the world of fire can she escape from non-being in a place that is not-home:

They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don't remember but we lost it. Was it that evening in the cabin ...? I smashed the glasses and plates against the porthole. I hoped it would break and the sea come in. A ... man said drink this and you will sleep. I drank it and I said, "It isn't like it seems to be." – "I know. It never is", he said. And then I slept. When I woke up it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England.³⁹

Sargasso Sea. They say it is a moveable sea where the eels breed. It remains unnamed in the book but is the only one that can, as it were, represent Antoinette, forever unmoored and forever a foreigner. Rhys's book says something both deep and subtle about the difficulty of being a female subject – about processes of exclusion and repression: hence no doubt its appeal in the seventies and eighties. But belonging to two cultures and to neither need not be a curse. Foreignness need not be maddening nor lethal. There is a passage, a navigable channel between two worlds in Michèle Roberts' *Daughters of the House*. There is no doubt that Rhys and Roberts move me

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

because I recognize in them aspects of my own dividedness, belonging as I feel I also do to two worlds. Mediterranean-born but now close to the North Sea, a writer in English as well as my own native French, of fiction as well as criticism, I warm up to the clash of shores and languages, the dream of a deeper language in this passage: 12-year old Leonie is crossing the Channel:

And now the boat, tiny on the black sea, slipped (Leonie) across towards (French). She was hidden inside. She rode on a great crest of spittle, from one tongue, one watery taste, to another. For as they left England so they left the English language behind. Familiar words dissolved, into wind and salt spray, ploughed back into foam, the cold dark sea in whose bottomless depths monsters swam, of no known nationality. Halfway across, as the Channel became La Manche, language reassembled itself, rose from the waves and became French. ... Leonie fought to keep awake, to know the exact moment when, in the very centre of the Channel, precisely equidistant from both shores, the walls of water and words met, embraced wetly and closely, became each other, composed of each other's sounds. For at that moment true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as part of itself, a gold current that connected everything, a secret river running underground, the deep well, the source of life, a flood driving through her, salty breaker on her own beach, streams of words and non-words, voices calling out which were staccato, echoing, with promised bliss. Then the boat churned on. It abandoned English and advanced into French.⁴⁰

In France, what had been foreign becomes normal. Leonie's aunt exclaims, "you look starved. Don't you have proper food in England?", but soon after, "Leonie climbed into the back of the car She'd forgotten how she liked its smell: leather, cigarettes, petrol. She thought: now I'm a foreigner again."

⁴⁰ Michèle Roberts, *Daughters of the House* (London: Virago, 1992), 35-36.

Antoinette could say with Valery's Pythoness, "Who speaks me, in my very place?". Except she hasn't got a place, only a wandering voice. On the ship they've given her a bad drink. A bad mother? Her own lost mother was certainly that. Moving to England she's moved to a colder sea. By contrast, the restorative, lap-like properties of Leonie's sea are wonderful. They enable Leonie to make the passage, to cope with the repeated experience of being foreign. Her confident sense of identity, of the identity of things and people around her (the car with its smells of leather, cigarettes and petrol) is somehow connected with the strength and comfort of that motherly sea-presence. The sea is not a metaphor, but its buoying, watery abundance somehow guarantees the thingness of things, the peopleness of people. There is identity in language, as in the Colette, one that never loses sight of the simile, that does not appropriate.

The sea-voyage in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is more elaborate and painful. James, the 8-year-old boy who at the opening of the novel longs to go to the lighthouse the following day, is only taken there several years later, not by the mother who wished him to have his wish, but by the father who had told him the "truth", i.e. given him a negative, i.e. told him that it would not be fine tomorrow, they could not go. Only three of the characters make it: one daughter, Cam; James; and Mr Ramsay, the father. Between the wish for the voyage, and the voyage, Time has passed; and the Mother who, in the first section, through her open window, received the rhythmic beat of the lighthouse – the Mother, Mrs Ramsay, who was another sort of lighthouse, who animated a hospitable house whose lights shone at dark, showing the way, the Mother has died. Others have died also. The Great War has taken its toll. Women have died as well as men. Three of the survivors only make it to the lighthouse. One daughter, Cam, ambiguous as to her wish to mother her brother; James, the brother, obsessively trying to negotiate a grown-up relationship with his father; and the father, who in his halting way is trying to make up for the lost mother. When their boat gets to the lighthouse, it's not a house of light. It's rock, it's very real, it's not an achievement.

But the voyage has been made. James has had what he wanted from his father, words of approval. Lily Briscoe, the artist, who has loved Mrs Ramsay, and is haunted by Mrs Ramsay's shade, who needs that shade to finish her painting, – Lily remains on shore. She chooses not to be a mother in life, but an artist. She chooses not to go to the lighthouse. And yet, her achieving her painting, her making it cohere thanks to the purple triangle that has appeared by the window where Mrs Ramsay sat, coincides with the voyage. It is at the moment when the boat reaches the lighthouse that in the process has ceased to be a lighthouse, that Lily "(w)ith a sudden intensity, as if she saw (the canvas) clear for a second, (draws) a line at the centre". Both expeditions, to the lighthouse and to the painting, take maximum effort. Both involve the disappearance of the house of light, the Mother. Mr Ramsay and his children only make the trip after the mother's death, perhaps to achieve what she wished them to achieve. The lighthouse in the process of being reached ceases to be what made it so profoundly attractive to James: a rhythmical beam shining in the night. Lily achieves her painting by killing the mother inside herself. She gives her all to art, not to the production or should I say reproduction, of life. It is in the instant that follows the disappearance of Mrs Ramsay's ghostly presence that Lily draws the finishing line. It is vertical, dare I say phallic. It is Mr Ramsay, jumping like a young man, inscrutable to his children, who lands on the lighthouse, and it is his landing that Lily wills on. People often speak of the mother's overwhelming presence in this novel, but it is an amazing combination of male and female, presence and absence, that seem to enable the female creator to achieve her work. Though neither speaks nor appropriates the other.

There are two rhythms in this novel. The one is that of the sea, permanent, often muffled by the other noises of life. Mrs Ramsay hears it when she no longer worries. The "monotonous fall of the waves on the beach" mostly "beat(s) a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts". A "cradle song", it murmurs "I am guarding you". But at other times it beats the "measure of life" "like a (remorseless) ghostly roll of drums" making one "think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment by the sea".

If the sea, in this novel, is connected with an archetypal mother, it clearly is not Mrs Ramsay. It is as much a source of terror to her as to anyone else. The world of *To the Lighthouse* is not guaranteed by a stable motherly presence, as is that of Colette's *The Ripening Seed*, where the adolescents know that the tides will keep to their appointed bounds, will not engulf the land. Mrs Ramsay finds her own rhythm when she can be by herself, silent. "Not as oneself did one ever find rest, in her experience ... but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret". At such moments does Mrs Ramsay look out "to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke". At such moments does she find the pantheistic state that in "La Pythie" is achieved through divine male possession of a delirious female body: she becomes "the thing she looked at – that light for example". Ownness is found through becoming, not appropriation.

In an essay written in 1927, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", Woolf reflects on the limitations of lyric poetry. The "lyric cry of ecstasy or despair", so intense, so overwhelmingly beautiful, is not enough, she feels:

The mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions. That the age of the earth is 3,000,000,000 years; that human life lasts but a second; that the capacity of the human mind is nevertheless boundless; ... that science and religion have between them destroyed belief; that all bonds of union seem broken, yet some control must exist – it is in this atmosphere of doubt and conflict that writers have now to create ...⁴¹

Woolf goes on to dream of the novel of the future, that would take upon itself some of the attributes of poetry. "It will give the relations of man to nature, to fate; his imaginations; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life". It will

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", *New York Herald Tribune* (August 14, 1927).

dramatize those moments that “play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist – the power of music, ... the emotions bred in us by crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or certain people Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed”.⁴²

Woolf calls her novelist of the future a ‘he’ – a universal he, one must assume, since she is describing what she herself is trying to do in her fiction. It strikes me how profoundly Woolf’s vision attempts to accommodate an ideal of the one and the many – a dream, but a vital necessity. Julia Kristeva writes about texts as Polylogues – many-tongued. We read for the many – we also read for the one. We also read for the moment of recognition. We read for those moments when we hear the one-two, or the one-two-three beat of a book, and know that the two beats are interwoven, male and female. It isn’t just ‘or’, but and/or, as in the name Orlando. We read for when the beam strikes across our window, and we know it is our stroke.

To the Lighthouse proceeds to make Mrs Ramsay archaic. In “Time Passes”, the second, and middle, section, she dies. It is a death of the spirit, almost the death of a certain humanity, a certain England, a Europe that perished in the Great War. It is the world of ageing, of children growing up and dying and gone. The house is full of the ghostly noises and presences of “how once...”.

Now, day after day, light turned, like a flower reflected in water, its clear image on the wall opposite. Only the shadows of the trees, flourishing in the wind, made obeisance on the wall, and for a moment darkened the pool in which light reflected itself⁴³

Then a bark appears. It is Mrs McNabb, the cleaner:

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Dent, 1962), 120

As she lurched (for she rolled like a ship at sea) and leered ..., as she clutched the banisters and hauled herself upstairs and rolled from room to room, she sang. Rubbing the glass of the long looking-glass and leering sideways at her swinging figure a sound issued from her lips – something that had been gay twenty years before on the stage perhaps, had been hummed and danced to, but now ... was robbed of meaning, was like the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself, trodden down but springing again, so that as she lurched, dusting, wiping, she seemed to say how it was one long sorrow and trouble Bowed down she was with weariness. How long, she asked, creaking and groaning on her knees under the bed, dusting the boards, how long shall it endure? but hobbled to her feet again⁴⁴

To the Lighthouse is about a voyage. Multiple voyages. Relays of voyages by multiple characters, who are also the creator’s multiple selves. The narrative, the multiplicity and the passing of time of the narration enable the various metaphors to become realized, and to be traversed. Traversed: the novel, crossing from Mrs Ramsay to Lily Briscoe courtesy of Mrs McNabb’s hobbling bark and Mr Ramsay’s boat, straining every nerve and sinew of its creator, invites its reader to travel from the position of reader to that of potential creator. Lily, struggling, not just against the reality that she sees, but against Charles Tansley’s edict, “Women can’t paint, can’t write”, struggling also against the temptation to be Mrs Ramsay, to take over from her; Lily, straining with, together with, in the tow of, the Mrs McNabbs and even the Mr Ramsays of this world, wrestling with the ghosts of time past, achieves her stroke. The painting’s there. It’s very little. It will finish in some attic. It’s taken everything she had. It leaves her gutted. “Yes, she thought with extreme fatigue, I have had my vision”. What a strain, what effort, what calling upon the dead, the subsumed, the unconscious, for the woman creator to posit a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 121-122

many-voiced subject: not ownness; but multiplicity, but becoming...

There is no woman in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. No book written in the last fifteen years so thoroughly deconstructs the term. The novel journeys through halls of refracting and broken mirrors, the images of women produced by centuries of high and low culture, carnivalising each, making the protagonist painfully and disconcertingly traipse through his fantasies and fears of womanhood. Through the mirage and pain of being seen, and treated as, a woman, whilst he is none.

Evelyn is a man. An Englishman in decadent Domsday New York, where gangs of sharp-shooting female guerillas run riot, Evelyn is in thrall to his feminine ideal, screen star Tristessa. Whilst he worships the celluloid incarnations of his Diva (a parodic representation of the screen of the cavern, as re-interpreted by Irigaray?), he pursues and engrosses a black woman, Leila, and persuades her to have a (botched) abortion. He then flees into a parodic Western-style desert, and is captured by a cave-dwelling matriarchal tribe ruled over by a powerful Mother. Mother has neither milk nor lap-like comfort to give. She is an advanced plastic surgeon, and the tiers of breasts that she disports to give herself the archetypal Mother-Goddess look are implants. She operates on Eve, castrating him and making her into an exquisite female, his own arch-phallasm. Eve is a man's dream, and it is Evelyn's ultimate punishment to be made to embody in the flesh, and in his, now her, newly vulnerable body, his own fantasy of womanhood.

New Eve's punishment has only just begun. She now becomes the 8th wife of Zero, a Manson-style arch-patriarch. With Zero and his wives Eve raids Tristessa's Hollywood mansion – only to discover, surprise surprise, that Tristessa the arch-female is a male in drag. In a burlesque double gender reversal, Eve consummates his passion for Tristessa as her passion for him. *The Passion of New Eve* has been seen as a supremely Post-Modernist, Deconstructionist text, propelled as it is by its picaresque carnivalization of womanhood. The

women in this text are always artificial, the product of surgery or cross-dressing. Matriarchy as a dream of empowering female origins is savagely debunked. No Mother-Goddess here, but a parodic castrating Black Mamma literally armed with a Phallic surgeon's scalpel. Desire is self-deceit, both misguided as to its object, and narcissistic. There is no relation to the other. Ownness doubles in upon itself. Carter's *Waste Land* makes images of women, mother, virgin, whore, goddess, into a heap of broken images. Woman may seem many: all are false, and there is none. Eve has no innerness, no character, no identity. She barely travels, if travel is "to" a place. Unlike Valery's *Eupalinos*, the text produces no object that could be an intermediary between nature and art, either shell or boat, whereby a human tongue might be born.

And yet... with all its despair and savagery, the novel ends on a scene of possible travel. On a desire for the one beyond the gutted shadows of the many. After the apocalyptic burning of the cities of California, Odyssean Eve re-encounters Leila, now Lilith. On a beach by the sea, an old crone, a compendium of doughty survivor, Medusa, witch and madwoman, armed in Beckett-like fashion with a folding garden-table, a can opener and a bottle of vodka, sings popular songs of the thirties. Eve has to crawl through the fissures of womb-like rocks, proceeding from cave to cave, tearing up her last illusions as she goes. "For I know now that Mother is a figure of speech and has retreated to a cave beyond consciousness", she says. Groping towards female creation, which is a process of self-engendering, not androgynous as in the Woolf yet carrying multiple genders within it, Mother, like Mrs Ramsay for Lily, has to disappear. Eve's "coming home", on a shore by the sea, is a confirmation of exile. "The destination of all journeys is their beginning", she says. But there, on the shore, the old woman, Mrs McNabb-like, has a skiff. A light skiff. She lets Eve have it.

"We start from our conclusions"; the last chapter begins.

When you get old, Angela Carter was saying to her Omnibus interviewer, shortly before the death she knew was coming, you return to your beginning. Childhood comes back to you. And beyond.

There is quotation, as always in Carter, but is there nothing but parody in Eve's last words, as she is about to embark on her skiff?

"Ocean, Ocean, mother of mysteries, take me to the place of birth".

In a world that literature has made habitable?
And is that boat a transitional object?

Jane Wilkinson

Earthing the Self: Wole Soyinka's Geo-Biographies¹

Belonging and becoming

After his prison notebook, all Wole Soyinka's autobiographical and biographical writings point explicitly to a geographical source. The life of the self is constructed or written around a place, that of the place around a self. Title and subtitle of *Aké: The Years of Childhood, Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years. A Memoir: 1946-1965*² present a similar structure: the name of a Nigerian town is followed by the indication of a period of time, either directly or through the presence of a figure from the past. Together with other paratextual features, the titles act as a threshold of identity, a key to Soyinka's verbal maps or plans, opening up and setting forth the worlds his works are earthed in.

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented, in Italian, at the Conference on the "Cultures of alterity. Africa and its representations" (Bergamo, 2-4 October 1997). I thank Emanuela Casti, the organizer of the Conference and editor of the proceedings, for permission to publish this version.

² Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (London: Rex Collings, 1972); *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* (Ibadan: Fountain Publications, 1989); *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years. A Memoir: 1946-1965* (London: Methuen, 1994). There is a significant difference between the title of Soyinka's prison notes – *The Man Died. Prison Notes* (London: Rex Collings, 1972) – and that of his other autobiographical works. The prison environment is only generically pointed to and occupies a less relevant position. The scenario of imprisonment – and death – is contained within a frame made of humanity and writing ("man" / "notes"). Despite their vulnerability, it is the outer, human elements that provide the horizons to the world the work projects.

But mapping metaphors are only partly appropriate to the author's geo-bio-graphical project. His desire to "earth [his] being" in the local, his insistence on anchorage, rooting, homecoming, is countered by a projection outward and beyond, accompanied by celebrations of movement, incompleteness and passage. Despite the precisely located areas charted and delimited by title and setting, the space of writing, living and belonging is fluid, in-definite and disruptive: a "turmoil agency" in which to "world" the self.³ The language of belonging, already dis-placed through its colonial and post-colonial secondariness, is subjected to further, inventive interventions. Soyinka's works are 'maps' in the "rhizomatic", endlessly adaptable and multipliable sense adopted by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.⁴

The author's life and writing are in fact articulated around two apparently oppositional impulses. Using terms I borrow and adapt from Lawrence Grossberg's theorization of "the space of culture" and the "power of space", I see them as part, respectively, of a "geography of belonging and identification" and a "geography of becoming";⁵ the Soyinkan act of earthing partakes of both.

In all three books, the autobiographical *Aké* and *Ibadan* and the biographical *Isara*, the author presents his intra- or extra-textual narrators and protagonists as "homecomers". The story starts or revolves around their physical or mental return, through memory and imagination, to the town in which they

³ "Ulysses (*Notes from here to my Joyce class*)" in Wole Soyinka, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (London: Rex Collings and Eyre Methuen, 1972), 29. Read through the filter of Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art", the "embrace" between "the world and I" that precedes the definition of the self as a "boulder solitude" rooted in the "turmoil agency" of "wine-centred waves" assumes new meaning, opening Soyinka's images of "earthing" to much richer implications. I am grateful to Iain Chambers for encouraging me to explore the parallels between Soyinka's "earthing" and Heidegger's reflections on the creative strife between earth and world.

⁴ *Rhizome. Introduction* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1976), 37-38.

⁵ Lawrence L. Grossberg, "The Space of Culture, the Power of Space", in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), 169-188.

received their formation and began exploring, interrogating and negotiating their relation to self and other, home and world. But the concept of homecoming is conditioned by an 'origin' of displacement. The representations of belonging, rooting and moorage are projected from a state of separation, reflecting the shifting trajectories and endlessly displaced positioning and perspective of a subject whose return can only ever be partial, a temporary "turning homewards" to an already dislodged home-place before a new departure.⁶

In the first, hardback edition of *Aké*, the place within which and around which the story develops materializes as its actual, physical container. Not only does the name of Soyinka's birthplace provide the title and setting of the book, but a photograph of the Aké parsonage compound takes up its entire dust jacket – back and front – as well as its inner cover, sheltering the openness of the textual "world" in its "earthy" closure. The opening sentence ("The sprawling, undulating terrain is all of Aké"), a description of the town's "terrain" as it "is" in the present, retrospectively temporalizes and mobilizes the paratextual container through its animation of the setting and its adoption of an external, distanced perspective. The relation between text and paratext, founded on the interplay of rest and motion, presence and absence, articulates a struggle between inside and outside. Heidegger's reflections on the "strife" resulting from the opposition of the "self-opening" of world and the "self-secluding", "sheltering and concealing" of earth as the accomplishment of the unity of the work of art, its "continually self-overreaching gathering of [its] agitation", are pertinent here.⁷ In the next edition, the editorial threshold is

⁶ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, 314. On the impossibility of homecoming for those who expose their "language and reason, the house of [their] belonging... to the discontinuous, to the dangers and salvation of a diverse 'worlding of the world'", see Iain Chambers, "Dwelling, vulnerability... the interruption" (unpublished paper) and "An Impossible Homecoming" in *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-8.

⁷ See "The Origin of the Work of Art" in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), 173-175.

transformed. The visual representation of the parish terrain is erased, as are other icons of autobiographical rooting I shall discuss below. Wendy Hoile's depiction for the Vintage *Aké* of a stylised figure, running or whirling through an equally stylised, unidentifiable landscape, suggests a centrifugal, countergravitational force. It recalls the vision of little Wole's school-friend, Osiki, transformed, on two different occasions, into an incarnation of "Speed, Swiftiness!" His "passage through the compound seemed little short of the magical"; Osiki "ran, I was sure, at a speed which surpassed even his usual phenomenal swiftness. Some of the bigger boys had tried to catch him... but [he] outstripped them running lean and light in the wind".⁸ The condensation of lightness and projectile strength, echoing, in a different medium, Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the intensive force of speed in *Mille plateaux*,⁹ suppresses the inaugurating rootedness of the *Aké* compound. What now predominates – but again, only temporarily, since the interpretive arena created by editorial cover and dustjacket designs is always ephemeral – is a transnational, transcultural, nomadic geography of becoming.

In *Isara* a different procedure is followed. The text is framed by the repetition of a single word, "Ashtabula!", *Isara*'s American counterpart or *alter locus*. The action of the story "voyages" back and forth between *Isara* and other, mainly Nigerian, localities and, on a second level – that of the letters sent to Akinyode Soditan, the Nigerian protagonist, by Wade Cudeback, his American correspondent – between the town of Ashtabula and other American places. At the end of the book, *Isara* and Ashtabula overlap. Akinyode and Cudeback meet at last in person, at an *Isara* renamed Ashtabula. Here they re-enact the legendary words and gesture of two colonial

⁸ Soyinka, *Aké*, 26, 35.

⁹ See note 16, below. Wendy Hoile's figure could also be seen as a stylized bowler or pitcher, whose projection onto the landscape of *Aké* stimulates other reflections on the translation and appropriation of the many forms of imperial culture in colonial and post-colonial territory. C.L.R. James on cricket in the West Indies is a case in point.

precursors in the exploration, representation and invention of Africa: Livingstone and Stanley:

The *Isara* teacher had decided on the form of greeting he would use for this encounter... But Wade Cudeback beat him to the salute.

"Teacher Soditan, I presume?"¹⁰

The meeting takes place during the ceremonial procession for the instatement of a modern leader in the traditional kingly role of Odemo of *Isara*. The conception and gradual, piecemeal construction of the procession retrospectively explain the intricate structuring and 'plotting' of the text it completes and in which it is contained. Heterogeneous, spectacular and appropriately mobile, the ceremony is orchestrated and choreographed by Akinyode and a group of former school friends, working both separately and together, consciously and unconsciously, to devise its costumes, props and pageants and prepare its initially unwilling main actor for his role. It serves to ritualize and authorize the figure of the new Odemo, creating the necessary public consent for his instatement, and, at a deeper level, as a strategic symbolization and projection of the new-old *Isara* community to be.

The replay, within the processional spectacle, of a celebrated geographical and historical colonial subtext provides a *mise en abîme* of the larger, hybridizing political and cultural project. Akinyode and Cudeback reiterate but also subvert and 'catachretically' differentiate the previous, 'founding' subtext, with its condensation of nineteenth century histories of the exploration of Africa.¹¹ The form of the Stanley-Livingstone encounter is wrested from its original geographical and historical location and inflected with new, transcultural and

¹⁰ Soyinka, *Isara*, 237.

¹¹ The trope of catachresis, an "abuse of language" defined by Dryden as "wresting and torturing a word into another meaning", is given post-colonial currency by Gayatri Spivak. See, particularly, *The PostColonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. S. Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990), 154, 157, 163.

postcolonial meaning. Through their rearticulation and translation Akinyode and Cudeback produce a representation that is neither that of a foreign expert addressing the curiosity of a foreign readership, nor the essentialist, 'authentic' counter history of an indigenous knowledge-bearer addressing an equally indigenous public. The text they develop is a negotiatory exchange between 'local' and 'foreign'. Wade Cudeback no more "discovers" Isara than Livingstone had "discovered" the Victoria Falls or Lake Nyassa. Instead, Akinyode and Cudeback produce, independently and together, a new, translatable, exchangeable and blatantly intertextual cultural location or identity in Isara (and Ashtabula): something similar to Homi Bhabha's "third space", the "space of translation" or "place of hybridity... [with its] construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*", a process and space that open up "another contentious political and cultural site at the heart of colonial representation".¹²

Isara borrows its subtitle from a play by John Mortimer – *A Voyage Round My Father* – written, like Soyinka's book, in memory of the author's recently deceased father. The titles bring together the motifs of travel and fatherhood; but in Soyinka's case the association may be seen as a sort of biographic pact. In the chronology of the author's autobiographical and biographical writing the book represents a circumambient detour, "a voyage round", but also a retreat. For as well as being a return to the past (containing references to other, earlier pasts) it is also a voyage away from his previous venture of writing about himself.

In physical journeys, detours often serve as stimuli for continuing the journey; retreats as a prelude to a new advance. *Isara* is no exception. Although it interrupts the autobiographical series, the voyage establishes a line of geographical, historical and genealogical continuity. But within the chronology of Soyinka's writing, it plays a particularly complex role, self-reflexively reiterating and complicating the

¹² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37, 25, 33.

motifs of voyaging and fatherhood. As the birthplace of his father and grandfather, the town of Isara acts as parent in the geo-history of the Soyinka family. Conversely, *Isara* the book is an offspring or postscript in the family of the author's writing. Coming after *Aké* in order of composition and publication, it is the "pre-*Aké* narrative", as Soyinka reveals in the foreword to his third book, in which he sought to "perish the thought" of a new paternity. But as a contraceptive device *Isara* is a failure: *Ibadan*, the book it is followed by, is given authorial recognition as the "Son of *Aké*".¹³

The line of continuity is also, specifically, one of social and political engagement. The pattern of the lives of "Akinyode", alias "Essay", and his peers in *Isara* was set "under the compelling impact of the major events in their times, both local and global". While "life was lived robustly", it was also "marked by an intense quest for a place in the new order, and of a far more soul-searching dimension than the generation they spawned would later undertake". Foregrounding their "quite... heroic dimension", Soyinka attributes the genesis of his book to the "compulsion to acknowledge in some form, however tenuously [the previous generation's] seminal role in the development of present-day Nigerian minds".¹⁴

Akinyode-Essay's son, the "Wole" of *Aké* re-presented as "Maren" in *Ibadan*, takes up his father's heritage. As does his author. The decision to write the third book, Soyinka tells us, was due to the dramatic deterioration of Nigerian political life after the events of 1993. And it is perhaps significant that the description of how *Ibadan* came to be written reintroduces the symbiotic union between book, author and place underlying all three works and their complicated, constantly reversible relations: "*Ibadan* tries very hard *not* to be about politics, but does concede that its author was a by-product of the *penkelemes* of Nigerian politics, and, indeed, sociology".¹⁵ The author becomes, explicitly, the object of a discourse that is

¹³ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, ix.

¹⁴ Soyinka, *Isara*, vii.

¹⁵ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, x.

governed – ‘author’-ized – by his book. His work is the subject that produces utterance; and it is also, potentially, the agent of a new political construction or performance.

Rather than a physical return, “homecoming” assumes the sense of a commitment to a political, social and cultural responsibility. In the case of *Ibadan*, by labelling the book as a precisely dated “memoir”, the subtitle anticipates the story’s public, collective dimension. But even in *Aké*, the growth of the child is marked by his transition from exploring, “landmarking”¹⁶ and appropriating his physical terrain to exploring and participating in the construction and transformation of the town’s institutions, its rapidly evolving political, cultural and social terrain. In the words of Soyinka’s most recent book of essays, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, the Nigerian reality is accepted as “a space that must move beyond what a politician once described as a ‘mere geographical expression’ to what my vision dictates as a humanized space of organic development”.¹⁷ “Homecoming” is an ongoing process, subject to the constant renegotiations, affiliations and accommodations required by the building of a “geography” in which “belonging” and “becoming”, “earthing” and “worlding”, intersect and interact.

Founding stories

Although *Aké* has no foreword, the reader’s reception of the book’s first sentence is already oriented by the paratext. The design that occupies the dust jacket and inner cover of the first edition represents the processing or artistic transformation of a document of real life, a photograph of a real place, provided by the author. Further documents appear on the next page, building up a photographic genealogy. Full-face portraits of “The

¹⁶ Soyinka, *Aké*, 59.

¹⁷ Wole Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 133.

Grandfather and parents of the author” look straight from their oval and circular frames into the reader’s eyes, engaging him or her directly. On the opposite page, the book’s title and subtitle and the author’s name provide further variations on the genealogical motif. *Aké* as place and time (“the years of childhood”) is the source of Wole Soyinka; Wole Soyinka is the progenitor of *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. Both author and book are the offspring of Grandfather, Father and Mother.¹⁸

The last paratextual element is the dedication: “For Eniola (the ‘Wild Christian’) and to the memory of ‘Essay’. Also for Yeside, Koyode and Folabo, who do not inhabit the memory span of the years recounted in these pages.” Just as the title translates the landscape design of the book jacket into a verbal representation or toponym, so the dedication converts the photographic images of the author’s parents into names. It provides a bridge between paratext and text, between the people of Soyinka’s life – Eniola and S. A. Soyinka – and the characters of his book – “Wild Christian” and “Essay” – and between a ‘now’, in which Essay is no more and other family members have entered the scene, and the ‘then’ of the years of childhood. Through the dedication, the world of the text is explicitly opened up to the changing and continuing world of history.

The inclusive bridging of heterogeneous elements and the straddling of different times and terrains continue into the text itself. After the assertive but ambiguous first sentence, the narration shifts suddenly backwards, focusing on past reflections and representations. Already humanized as “sprawling”, the terrain is imagined as the uneven, disorderly area spanned by the gaze and then the stride of a gigantic, puzzling divinity.

¹⁸ The location provided by the bio- and geo-graphics of the first edition of *Aké* was precarious. Later editions, as already mentioned above, were to erase the visual representation both of the parish terrain and of the author’s parents and grandfather. The present reading of the text is thus rooted in the most ephemeral of sites; but African art, as Soyinka has frequently recalled, does not seek permanence. The shifting conditions of reception created by the editorial paratexts can be compared to those of Mbari art, described by Soyinka as an art “not built to last”.

After its first sentence, then, *Aké* begins with what could be seen as a myth and image of foundation, reiterating founding gestures of the past. It syncretically mixes acts and qualities of the Hebrew-Christian Creator, of the Christian Son of Man who takes flesh and comes amongst us in an incarnation that is also an earthing,¹⁹ and of Yoruba hero-gods like Oduduwa, who climbed down a rope towards the primordial water, scattering earth upon it so that the gods could then materially descend and occupy the terrain, or Ogun crossing the transitional gulf in order to renew the ruptured connection between gods and men. But the stride of *Aké*'s God belongs to a later era; it is not a single, inaugural event, but a regular, repeated occurrence. God's moving is not across a deep or void, as in the Bible, but over a densely textured conglomeration of places, names and people. It culminates not only in his presence at the three Sunday services of St Peter's church, but in his taking of afternoon tea with the Canon.

The parsonage is consecrated and differentiated from its surroundings by God's weekly visit. But the child who generates the image also undermines it with his questioning, his "puzzlement" and "resentment". Paradoxically, he identifies the "normal" with Western sounds and instruments, the "exotic" with the elements of local culture and belief that surface disturbingly not only in the noisy, crowded, secular markets – babelically challenging sites of movement and exchange – but in the voice of a God who, it is taken for granted, should preferably be prayed to in English. For even the English language evening service is invaded by local, non-Christian, non-English resonances: "the organ took on a dark, smoky sonority at evening service, and there was no doubt that [it] was adapting its normal sounds to accompany God's own sepulchral responses, with its timbre of the *egungun*, to those prayers that were offered to him".²⁰

¹⁹ Soyinka notes a substantial difference between the earthing of Hebrew-Christian and Afro-Asian divinities; see Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Soyinka, *Aké*, 1.

Moving out of the realm of myth, however 'belated' or 'contaminated', the terrain is later remapped and reoriented by a human, horizontal grid as the child stretches its body on the ground, its head and legs becoming the cardinal points of an imaginary compass. The gesture is a variation on the "sprawling" indicated in the opening sentence (together with "undulating") as a constitutive quality of the irregular, rocky terrain of *Aké*. Through its anthropomorphic, calligraphic, electromagnetic or seismic ("undulating") epithets, the land is, from the first, self-reflexively tangled up with the body of its author-inhabitant and the language or languages through which it is aurally and visually represented and translated. For the sprawling, undulating, tridimensional topography of the land is replicated by the sprawling, undulating signs of writing.

From the beginning, "Wole" sees himself and his terrain as both own and other. They are filtered by a multiplicity of other texts – stories, perceptions, representations from a variety of cultures and cultural practices – with which, in turn, he has complex relations of possession and estrangement. The parsonage garden is restaged as the Garden of Eden, complete with snake and apple as identifying props. But there is a constant readjustment and renegotiation of the relation between word and thing, name and fruit. There is no place on the black man's soil for a truly 'original' apple. Only hybrid, mimic, translated, reinscribed versions can be found there. The parsonage children identify the forbidden fruit with the pomegranate, which "transported them to the illustrated world of the Biblical Tales Retold" and

... unlocked the cellars of Ali Baba, extracted the genie from Aladin's lamp, plucked the strings of the harp that restored David to sanity, parted the waters of the Nile and filled [the] parsonage with incense from the dim temple of Jerusalem.

But even the pomegranate is "foreign to the black man's soil",²¹

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

an imported, "impure" product,²² grown from seeds brought to Africa by a white bishop.

Aké's textual soil and subsoil are as complex as the terrain's rocky surface. The garden's "overlapping, interleaved planes, sheer rock-face drops, undergrowths and sudden hideouts of cultivated fruit groves"²³ appear as fractal replications of the process and syntax of its composition. Tactile and kinetic rather than visual, the description self-reflexively foregrounds its textured, fabricated, composite quality. The author 'scapes' his garden with a dizzying, asyndetic accumulation of lexical compounds expressing location and variable or multiple direction through the prepositions ("over"-, "inter"-, "under"-, "-out") and verbal forms ("-lapping", "-leaved", "hide"-) they bring together. Disjunctive topographic – and cultural – elements, projected onto different planes, are temporarily united in an intentionally imperfect blending.

The dialectic of own and other, homely and 'unhomely', running through the opening pages of *Aké* is complicated by the slippage or displacement of what one would expect to be its component terms. The pomegranate worshippers register the distinction between native fruit and imported product, but with no apparent sense of disturbance. The borders of their world are constantly shifting. The parsonage compound has an "air of fortifications".²⁴ But although it is surrounded on its outside by what initially seems to be a continuous wall and traversed on its inside by spatial and temporal boundaries and restrictions, the bulwark is not impermeable. Inside and outside, Christian and pagan, local and foreign interact, breaking up the system of binary oppositions that seemed so clearly demarcated. Moreover, the representation or projection of the *Aké* terrain fixes it in time, subjecting it to a process of shrinkage and decay that alters its proportions and substance. In one of the

²² See James Clifford on pure and impure products in his introduction to *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) 1-17.

²³ Soyinka, *Aké*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

occasional surfacings of the now/then opposition between the time of writing and the time of living, the battlement-like houses of childhood are turned into flimsy, provisional "packing-cases".²⁵ The terrain of the years of childhood comes to being within the mobile, metamorphic geography of memory.

Narratives of the in-between

It is what lies beyond or on the compound borders – the unstable, in-between, interstitial and ultimately transitive existences and spaces and their in-between narratives – that attract the child and that he seeks to extend. Creating intersections and transfusions between the different sites and figures, he comprehends their "otherness" within the flexible frame of the everyday. The "Biblical Tales Retold" (interwoven with the *Arabian Nights* and already contaminated by the process of "retelling") are juxtaposed with Wild Christian's stories of her "oro" (wood-spirit) brother, Osiki's of "egungun" (ancestral masquerades) and Bukola's of her condition and experience as "abiku", an "incomplete" child set apart by her belonging to another world to which, at any moment, she may resolve to return.²⁶

Other in-betweennesses have an economic and social dimension. Semi-nomadic women traders arrive on foot from Isara, introducing the flavours, sounds and smells of an exotic elsewhere into the settled world of *Aké*. They are Wole's aunts, but they are uninterested in any, even temporary, form of integration or rooting. Their relationship is unacknowledged by any form of address or title; deterritorialization is not only

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ The "incomplete" awareness of the *abiku*, a figure that is present in several of Soyinka's works (see for example the "Half-Child" in *A Dance of the Forests*), is discussed in "Climates of Art" in Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), 256. In *Ibadan*, the author describes the community of homosexual, Latin American exiles in Paris as "twilight beings, incomplete existences that vied with the tenuous psyche of the *abiku*" (48).

physical but linguistic. It is only when they are seen on their home territory by the child observer during the family's annual visit to Isara, that their nomadic otherness is divested of its romantic aura and identified as poverty.

On the borders of the regular, organized society of Aké is the marginal, provisional world of the homeless, the outcast and the mad. Paa Adatan, the quixotic "warrior" and self-appointed protector of Aké, is also a metonymic expression or extension of the town: a "rugged terrain", his limbs translated into trees and hills and boulders.²⁷ Other border crossers are Sorowanke, the mad woman, and her vagabond lover, Yokolu, who build a temporary home and family in a simulation of the community structures of the 'normal'. Tolerated as a source of entertainment, they are a latent threat that may break out at any time, ending, inevitably, in the defeat and disappearance of the outcasts. But the fragmentary, discontinuous, suspended stories and alternative, rifted and rifting existences of the inhabitants of the in-between inscribe themselves upon Wole's memory and imagination, becoming a lens through which to review, reinterpret and unsettle his own surroundings.

Defying the orthodoxies of both Christian and pagan, the child relocates the figures of St Peter and two white missionaries gracing the stained glass windows of the parish church, casting them as *egungun*, masked ancestral figures emerging periodically from the bottom of the earth to return to the living community to receive offerings and administer justice. Similarly, Bishop Crowther, a major figure in the history and cultural and religious life of 19th century Nigeria, is identified as an example of *oro*. Resuscitated in a metamorphic animation of the hydrangeas and bougainvillea on the walls of Bishops Court, now a boarding house for the parsonage girls' school, the Bishop's ghost enacts a series of terrifying transformations before the child's petrified, fascinated gaze. Discarding eyes, hair, teeth and skin to reveal his skeletal identity, he offers a new version of the Complete (or Incomplete) Gentleman of West African folklore, also recycled in

²⁷ Soyinka, *Aké*, 114.

a celebrated episode of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Change is not only growth but exsiccation, shrinkage, death and loss: the reality informing both the Aké of the present, that of the adult narrator, and the Edenic Aké of the remembered past, perceived and lived in by the child.

Although the Bible story filter is unconsciously translated and transformed to suit its new, displaced environment, grafted onto local practices and stories in an as yet unconscious repetition of previous African, Afro-American and Caribbean inscriptions and appropriations of "the Book", the fit can only be approximate. The child reacts indignantly to the naming of the rock he sees as one of his "special places" or sites of refuge as "Jonah". He rebels instinctively against its being made part of a common experience and common language through the synecdochically displaced topos of the whale's belly. As a *koiné* through which the reality of Aké is defined and tamed, its otherness 'domesticated', reduced to an alien sameness, the biblical filter constitutes an unsolvable double bind. It cannot express the child's own, personal experience of the rock as *his*, a "private abode", his "own very secret habitat", a mysterious, sympathetic presence.²⁸ Yet for Wole, too, (or at least for the remembering narrator, if not for the "Wole" he remembers), the rock is now Jonah. Names, like language, are an imposition from the outside the child questions, but is able to come to terms with, manipulate and adjust. Inflected with their new usages and contexts, marked by an ineludable supplementarity, they acquire a different dimension, a new etymology, saturated with the ironic and allegoric resonances of the double or multiple vision of the postcolonial.²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁹ For colonial and postcolonial double discursivity, see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, in particular 95-97, 141, 194-195, 231-235. Bhabha cites Walcott's poem "Names" from *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (London: Faber, 1992), in relation to the modes of nomination, re-inscription and translation by means of which minority communities negotiate their collective identities as the "antagonistic supplement of modernity". For the use of irony in *Aké* and, generally, for the relation between the levels of discourse and rhetoric and those of ideology, see Richard Priebe, "On Form and Ideology with Specific Attention to Soyinka's *Aké*", in S. Arnold, ed., *African Literary Studies. The Present State / L'Etat présent* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1985), 123-134.

Other selves and other spaces

The experience of other beings and of beings suspended between their 'own' and 'other' states and sites develops in the later autobiographical volume, *Ibadan*, into the protagonist's perception and experience of himself as other and of the critical moments of his life as lived and acted by a separated form of himself. This splitting of the self into two distinct beings, agent and observer, is replicated extratextually by the author's decision to present this latest addition to his "instalmental" autobiography in the third person and to "masquerade" under a different name, or rather names.³⁰

Separating subject and object, self and other is a narrative strategy serving to complicate and inform the constitution of the individual and collective self. But the division is unstable, the borders fluid: a mutually transformative interdependency links the two 'opposing' poles.

Similarly, in *Isara*, a spatial, geographical form of the process of strategic, ironically self-constituting and self-erasing separation and doubling can be seen in the identification Akinyode comes to make between American Ashtabula and Nigerian Isara, twinning the sites together in a transcultural and transnational geography. It is a process that Soyinka had already experimented in two other autobiographical (and 'located') writings, the poems "Idanre" and "Massacre, October '66, *Written in Tegel*". "Idanre" fuses into a single experience an excursion to the mountain of Idanre and a walk on the outskirts of Molete, separated by three years and two hundred miles. In "Massacre, October '66", a swim in a German lake engenders memories of the holocaust and reflections on ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria, culminating in the elaboration of a poetics of eclectic, cosmopolitan – but also temporary, provisional ("seasonal") "shoring": "I borrow

³⁰ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, xiii. For the definition "instalmental autobiography", see Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, 41.

seasons of an alien land... I borrow alien lands / To stay the season of a mind".³¹

In *Isara*, the toponym of Ashtabula functions less as a proper name than as a shiftable, trans-latable common noun. One of Akinyode's favourite amusements is reading foreign language sentences and names as if they were in Yoruba, forming new, paradoxical, Yoruba texts out of homophones and arbitrary aural associations. In a one-sided or subversively inverted "translation", he abrogates the source language by (mis)appropriating and othering its signifiers in a ludic usurpation. An extension of his translation of Ashtabula into *Isara* and vice versa could be seen in his decoding of his American correspondent's handwriting into figures of his own richly heterogeneous, syncretic world. Names, words, letters, the signs Akinyode probes into, manipulates and transforms, develop into a site of cultural and political inscription and re-inscription, a space – to use Bhabha's terminology – of "intervention and invention".³² Recalling Rimbaud's icastic, chromatic and emotional decoding of vowel shapes and sounds in "Voyelles", Akinyode's 'reading' produces a contaminated, writerly terrain of modernity, cutting across cultures, histories, geographies and languages in what seems already a form of postcolonial bricolage:

Each exclamation mark was like the housepost of the *ogboni* shrine, or a corinthian column in the Illustrated Bible (Authorized Version). His 'I' had generous loops both up and down, resulting in a coracle shape, mildly unbalanced by a wave; akin to a fat cowrie, or a curled-up millipede. Each 'D' was consistently like the cauliflower ear of Osibo the

³¹ Both poems are included in Wole Soyinka, *Idanre and Other Poems* (Methuen: London, 1967).

³² See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 7-9: "the intervening space 'beyond' becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. To engage with such invention, and intervention... requires a sense of the new that resonates with the hybrid chicano aesthetic of 'rasquachismo'... [I]t is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence".

pharmacist while the 'W' was just like an *abetiaja*, or the starched, bristling headgear of the Reverend Sisters from Oke Padi hospital. And so it went on.³³

Through a subtle use of alliteration, Akinyode foregrounds both the heterogeneity and the unity of the different elements of his world. By drawing attention to its own unnaturalness, its historical and cultural constructedness and otherness, the articulate energy of his language produces information. A new network of relations is set up, by means of which alterity is neither erased nor made into an untouchable absolute, but appropriated and manipulated. In Akinyode's reading, Ashtabula is not only or simply a potential synonym for Isara. It is a name that presents its own problematic of own and other, 'identity' and 'difference'. Its initially un-American, estranging appearance is actually the trace of a *native* American origin, telescoping the contradictions and variety of American history into a single word and prompting similar operations for the understanding and *construction* of "Isara".

The possibility of changing and exchanging names presented in *Ibadan* (but also in *Isara*) goes beyond the Yoruba and generally African practice of multiple naming to mark the different phases, condition and relationships of the individual's existence. The creative category the author ascribes his work to is "faction", the "fictionalization of facts and events". Faction must, Soyinka says, "be *anchored* in some recognizable historical reference points", something which is achieved by giving historical figures, places and events their proper names. But the aspect of faction Soyinka tends to bring into relief is rather an unanchoring, unmooring or eradication through re-naming and re-placing: "the deliberate *dislocation* of some actual names and events from their physical moorings and, occasionally, actual time".³⁴ The naming and renaming Maren is subjected to provide him with the opportunity to rethink and

³³ Soyinka, *Isara*, 5.

³⁴ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, xiv, italics mine.

reposition himself: "each one of them [the names] cancels out the others and I can get down to the business of re-naming myself". The object of other people's naming thus becomes the subject of an ongoing process of self-generation and signification. For the re-naming or invention of the self is provisional. Questioned as to the new names his inventiveness has produced, Maren is "still trying them for size".³⁵ Like his experience of homecoming (not a "returning home" but a "turning homewards" or "induction home"),³⁶ or his sense of his country (an "unfinished business"),³⁷ his search for an identity is a constantly evolving, nomadic process of adjusting and becoming, of dis- and re-locating, earthing and unearthing.

Earthing

The metaphors of "earth", present throughout Soyinka's work, only emerges explicitly as "earthing" in two of his works, in *Aké* – in the description of the abiku child Bukola, "earthed through ankles, fingers, wrists and waist" by amulets, bangles, rattles and rings,³⁸ in order to keep her from returning to the spirit world – and in "Idanre", the visionary, autobiographic poem read at the Commonwealth Arts Festival of 1965.

In its various meanings, the verbal form of "Earth" implies a connection with the ground. It suggests both the action of hiding in the earth or concealing something in a hole or burrow, of covering the roots of a tree or plant with earth, or of connecting a conductor of electricity with the earth in order to allow a circuit to be completed, or to cut off the current when a condition of danger develops. Forming a semantic cluster with the motifs of rooting, anchorage and mooring it might appear to signal a return to rest and stasis, closure and concealment,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 314, 194.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, ix. See also "the stubbornly unfinished nation edifice" in Soyinka, *The Open Sore*, 47.

³⁸ Soyinka, *Aké*, 16.

clashing with the ethic and aesthetic of movement and incompleteness that informs the shifting, polyedric corpus of Soyinka's literary and dramaturgical activities.³⁹ Creativity, for Soyinka, stems from the "transitional" space of the "fourth stage": the liminal area separating and connecting the three traditional Yoruba spatio-temporal dimensions of existence. The "movement of transition" is synthesized in the dynamic figure of the Yoruba god, Ogun, a figure of Dionysian "becoming" rather than of "being", of struggle and conflict rather than repose.

But the clash is only apparent. Earth is the transformative, nourishing container of principles of growth and future life and action. Through earthing, the terrestrial element or matter is subjected to an active, performative force. In Soyinka's usage, earthing is a protective and empowering strategy of selfhood. The two impulses, towards repose and settlement on the one hand, movement, voyaging and struggle on the other, are neither contradictory nor alternative in Soyinka's writing. Earthing – rooting in the local – and voyaging – uprooting and outgoing, "taking off", "levitating", "floating"⁴⁰ – are complementary acts and phases, intersecting and reciprocating in the construction and narration of the self.

In the prison poem, "Ulysses", the subject roots himself and therefore "grows" into, *becomes*, a soil seen, metonymically, as part of the global. But the soil is not only the site of the subject's growth and therefore action; it has an agency of its own, is itself the subject or performer of an action. The "I" of "Ulysses" is a "heritage of thought, clay and voices / Passing easily to wind and rain-becoming" and

³⁹ For the aesthetic of movement and incompleteness and a comparison between Soyinka's vision and that of Wilson Harris, see my "Between Orpheus and Ogun. Fragmentation and Renewal in the Work of Wole Soyinka", in *Orpheus in Africa. Fragmentation and Renewal in the Work of Four African Writers* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1990), 179-190.

⁴⁰ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, 357, but also 27, 88 and 159.

the metamorphosis of the self follows an embrace between two subjects – "the world and I" – fused into a plural "we": "We embrace, / The world and I in great infinitudes. / I grow into that portion of the world / Lapping my feet".⁴¹ The "lapping" action, performed upon the clayey, but also – and I think significantly – water-logged "loam" that constitutes the fluid, mobile terrain of the poem, may be taken both in the primary sense of surrounding, or protectively enfolding and therefore sheltering, and in the secondary, more suggestive sense of reiterating the consuming action of sipping or drinking, or the rippling action – made of sound and movement – of waves beating upon the shore, in a complex, chiasmic relationship of reciprocal give and take. The resting and rooting of the poet's mind, "A boulder solitude amidst wine-centred waves", are in the "turmoil agency" referred to at the beginning of this article as the Soyinkan space of writing, living and belonging.⁴² Siting or locating the self in a space that is both local and global, a space of sundered and sundering becoming, opens possibilities of political and epistemological change. The shifting mode of its verbalization, the poet's lexicosyntactic dislocations and substitutions of noun, verb and modifier, turn self, site and writing into an unstable terrain of disquieting, mobile and therefore subversive, productive energy and knowledge, or – in Soyinka's coinage – "transcience", the metamorphic, Joycian blending of transience and science.⁴³

Earthing the current not only provides protection against

⁴¹ Soyinka, "Ulysses", 27.

⁴² Ibid. 29. Soyinka's images and lexicon recall Heidegger's presentation of the "worlding" process as an "instigation of strife": "World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world". In strife "each opponent carries the other beyond itself" and the "unity of the work comes about in the instigation of strife... The repose of the work that rests in itself... has its essence in the intimacy of strife". ("The Origin", 174-175)

⁴³ Soyinka, "Ulysses", 28.

perilous discharges, but it allows electrical energy to be maintained, circulation to be kept going. Since childhood, Wole-Maren has sought out special places: sites of refuge or retreat. They can perhaps be identified with the "territory of the ineffable",⁴⁴ both a state of mind or awareness and a physical, geographic site. "Territories of the ineffable" appear, for example, in "some nights of unusual pulsations", and could "overwhelm him in some torrential storm".⁴⁵ But they may also be identified in the orchard section of the school garden, already marked out as a "different" place by the name it still bears, "Unter den Linden", the trace left by German prisoners-of-war who had projected their nostalgia for their own land, their own town, onto the Nigerian landscape. And a "territory of the ineffable" is also the voice of Paul Robeson singing Blake's "Jerusalem", while Blake himself is a being Maren feels "at home with" as the "possessed stranger"⁴⁶ who is able to share both in the beliefs of the Aké parish and in the fantastic world conjured by the stories of the pioneer Yoruba writer, D.O.Fagunwa, the precursor and perhaps inspirer of Amos Tutuola. Within such places or experiences Maren can withdraw from the time-space of his present surroundings, "create space around himself, large enough to insulate himself from, or confront, the menace of an incipient disorder".⁴⁷

The refuge is a source or store of energy offering both protection from the outside – insulation – and, at the same time, an empowering position from which to face it ("insulate himself from, or confront"). Potentially, Maren's retreats open onto the exterior. They are not only private habitats but a collective resource. The poet's original earthing, in "Idanre", was born of an interpersonal exchange,

⁴⁴ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, 166.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

his union with a wine-seller. In *Ibadan*, Maren accepts a position at the University on returning to Nigeria after five years' absence in Europe, making it his "base", because he sees in it "the obvious space". The post is a form of rooting; one, however, that does not exclude but enables and potentiates future episodes of dislocation and excursion. He feels the need for "a kind of reference point, a reservoir for whatever virtues society chose to jettison in its heedless competition for power and material acquisitions". The University is seen as a "monastery of the mind... of the kind whose inmates took their discoveries *into the outer world* to seminate its grounds where barren and to be recharged in turn by such *immersions in the real world*".⁴⁸

"Earthing", "insulation", and "recharging": the complex, fluid, 'excessive' field of electrodynamics, intersected by that of agriculture, is itself both own and other.⁴⁹ Maren sees himself as "having a preternatural affinity to a lightning rod";⁵⁰ the wine-girl who acts as the poet's earth in "Idanre" reembodies Oya, who was both the wife of Sango, the god of lightning and electricity, and the former wife of Ogun, who as god of iron and metallurgy is also the conductor of Sango's electricity, "drawing warring elements to a union of being".⁵¹ The author's notes to "Idanre" sketch a picture of the encounter, suggesting further considerations on the creative interplay between identity and difference, or on the "cultures of alterity" in the "plural places" of postcolonial Africa.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193, italics mine.

⁴⁹ The observations of Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), on the materiality and fluidity of electronics and metallurgy – "this matter-movement, matter-energy, matter-flow... destratified, deterritorialised" – and the "primary special relation between itinerancy and metallurgy (deterritorialization)", are particularly relevant here.

⁵⁰ Soyinka, *Ibadan*, 17.

⁵¹ Soyinka, "Idanre", 68.

⁵² "The plural place: values, practices, expressions" was the title of the final workshop of the Conference on the "Cultures of alterity. Africa and its representations" (see note 1 above).

Through the creative interplay between earth and world, matter and movement, conflict and composition, the "work" of art comes to being and expression in a "founding leap": "The ritual dance of the union is seen sometimes during an electric storm when from high-tension wires leap figures of ecstatic flames. This is the ideal fusion – to preserve the original uniqueness and yet absorb another essence".⁵³

⁵³ Soyinka, "Idanre", 86. But see also the explanation of the way art "grounds history" and "lets truth originate" towards the end of Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art": "Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of beings in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of its essential source in a founding leap – this is what the word 'origin' means", 202.

DIALOGUE DEBATE DISSENT

Response: 2004
Presentations
Judith Butler
Conservatism
Left Conservatism
In Spring 1998, provides useful insights into the notion of 'culture', by seriously complicating the distinction of the 'cultural' and the 'material' as two opposite experiential regimes.¹

The oxymoron 'Left Conservatism' chosen as a title for the workshop is not a strategic device to acknowledge new forms of sectarianism within the intellectual left, but an invitation to rethink the implications of 'critical closure' in left thought. Critical closure is indeed what must be addressed in an ongoing debate staged around the opposition between foundational and anti-foundationalist positions, but it also touches upon post-structuralism, postmodernism, and deconstructionism, and cultural studies – all intertextually identified with anti-foundationalism, and very often dismissed as apolitical, or regarding political agency.

Chris Connery, the workshop's organizer, defined the term 'Left Conservatism' as a form of cultural conservatism among members of the left, whose sparks are anti-foundationalist

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (California, Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990); *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in the Sublime* (1997); *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in the Sublime* (1997); *Gender That Matters: On the Importance of Posing* (1990); *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Through the various regulars between earth and world, matter and movement, the "work" of art comes to figure and express in a "leaping leap": "The ritual dance to the music of a great orchestra during an electric storm is the most beautiful leap figure of ecstatic flight." (1977, p. 10)

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Marina De Chiara

Response-abilities: an inquiry into "Left Conservatism" with Judith Butler

Presentation

Judith Butler's recent intervention at the workshop *Left Conservatism*, held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in Spring 1998, provides useful insights into the notion of 'culture', by seriously complicating the definition of the 'cultural' and the 'material' as two opposite experiential regimes.¹

The oxymoron 'Left Conservatism' chosen as a title for the workshop is not a strategic device to accentuate new forms of sectarianism within the intellectual left, but an invitation to rethink the implications of 'critical closure' in left thought. Critical closure is indeed what must be addressed in an ongoing debate staged around the opposition between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist positions, but it also touches upon poststructuralism, postmodernism, social constructionism, and cultural studies - all interchangeably identified with anti-foundationalism, and very often dismissed as apolitical, or negating political agency.

Chris Connery, the workshop's organizer, defined the term 'Left Conservatism' as a form of cultural conservatism among members of the left, whose attacks on anti-foundationalist

¹ Judith Butler teaches Comparative Literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books include *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

theory and the critical 'excesses' of post-modernism and deconstruction have often extended into an attack on theory and the legacy of the 1960s as a whole.² This attack has recently been further invigorated by the scandal of Alan Sokal's hoax on the cultural studies journal *Social Text*, and by the positions taken by some leftist critics in response to the incident. 'Left Conservatism' – explains Chris Connery – is a useful concept to describe a position; but "the danger of a Left Conservative position lies precisely in its possible confluence with the critique made by right wing critics", when it implies "that theoretical work that questions, critiques or undermines rationality, foundationalisms, or certain kinds of consensus is wrongheaded, silly, or unimportant; that the fundamental work of theory has already been done; that the work of theorists now should proceed within parameters that have already been established; that certain foundations do not bear looking into".

As a clear example of this kind of critical closure, the 'Sokal affair' – which critic Jacques Derrida has commented as a "sad" episode, doubly sad for linking forever Sokal's name to a 'hoax' and not to the intellectual merits of his research – has been used to ridicule, in the name of 'science', any left academic criticism identified with postmodernism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, cultural studies, anti-essentialist theories and social constructionism.³ A physicist at New York University, Alan Sokal submitted his false article about the new philosophical and political horizons opened up by quantum theory, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", to *Social Text*, which accepted it for the issue "Science Wars", April 1996, n.46/47, without acknowledging, in Sokal's piece, the parody implied in the inaccuracy and the misuses of mathematical and physics terminology. A heated intellectual

² Chris Connery is co-director of the Center for Cultural Studies at University of California, Santa Cruz, where he teaches Chinese literature and cultural studies. He is the author of *The Empire of the Text. Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China*, forthcoming.

³ J. Derrida, "Sokal et Bricmont ne sont pas sérieux", *Le Monde* (20 November, 1997).

scandal immediately followed the confession of the hoax. In the "Afterword" published in the academic newsletter *Lingua Franca* only a week later, Sokal explained the reasons of his hoax as a "small contribution toward a dialogue on the Left between humanists and natural scientists", two cultures "farther apart in mentality than at any time in the past fifty years". After describing his article as an intentional "melange of truths, half-truths, falsehoods, non sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever", Sokal confessed that he wrote the piece because, as an Old Leftist, he "never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class".⁴ Furthermore, as a scientist who believes in the existence of an external world with its objective truths, he feels politically committed to combat a currently fashionable "postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse" which is "inimical to the values and future of the Left". At the same time, however, Sokal's "Transgressing the Boundaries" clearly spells out the broader critical resistances opposed to 'cultural studies' and their interdisciplinary approach.

By pointing out the artificiality and 'vulnerability' of the very norms that regulate disciplinary boundaries, cultural studies insist on the interconnectedness of the various practices by which individuals and communities make sense of the world. For this reason, cultural studies is often dismissed as a form of cultural reductionism, that is an epistemological reduction of 'reality' to a 'merely cultural' phenomenon.⁵ To

⁴ In his article Sokal denies the objectivity of both physical reality and scientific knowledge, claiming that they are both a cultural and socio-linguistic construct, and that his aim is to show the philosophical and political implications of the developments of the theory of quantum gravity in physical science. For his 'false' arguments, he draws examples from quantum gravity theory and links them to the speculations, and the 'authority', of postmodern philosophers who have often recurred to physics for their interpretative models and metaphors, like Irigaray, Derrida, Deleuze, Lacan, Guattari, Aronowitz, Lyotard, Haraway, and others.

⁵ This is a direct reference to Judith Butler's "Merely Cultural", appearing in *Social Text* 15:52/53 (Fall/Winter 1997), and on which Butler's presentation at the "Left Conservatism" workshop is largely based.

the defenders of the separateness and 'purity' of the different fields of knowledge, cultural studies represent the triumph of chaos and the threat of contagion among disciplinary bodies. Meanwhile, the feared invasion of an ill-defined discipline into the closed realm of another raises anxious visions of postmodern vagueness and anarchy.

In "Postmodernism and the Left", Barbara Epstein frames the 'Sokal affair' within what she calls an "arena" dominated by the "distinctive subculture" of postmodernism.⁶ In Epstein's description, this subculture currently seems to haunt academia as a sort of terroristic strategy to isolate anyone unfamiliar with its specific jargon: now as a sort of plague which "is more pervasive in the humanities", but has "ominously entered the social sciences" as well; now as a sort of all-encompassing unidentifiable force, which "cannot be entirely identified with any particular discipline, but in some sense constitutes a world of its own, operating outside or above disciplinary categories". In Epstein's view, the reasons why postmodernism in the academia has been equated with the Left and progressive politics, with interdisciplinary programs and cultural studies, dates back to the late seventies and early eighties, when postmodernism entered the American academy through the appeal of French poststructuralism. The emancipatory horizons opened up by poststructuralism, especially in the important inquiries by French intellectuals, like Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, into the power/knowledge nexus and the notion of the social construction of sexuality, encountered great interest among academics, as well as among feminists and gay and lesbian activists. As Epstein explains it:

The attractiveness of postmodernism, in the late 70s and early

⁶ Barbara Epstein, "Postmodernism and the Left", *New Politics* 6:2 (Winter 1997). Epstein, who helped Sokal working on the piece that disclosed the hoax, teaches in the History of Consciousness Department at UCSC and is the author of *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Non-Violent Direct Action in the Seventies and Eighties* (1990), and *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America* (1981).

80s, had something to do with the cultural and political currents with which it was associated. It was loosely affiliated with avant-garde trends in architecture and art, and also with the impulse of many intellectuals to set aside the old distinction between high and low culture and begin taking popular culture seriously. Poststructuralist theory emphasized flux, instability, fragmentation, and questioned the validity of claims to authenticity and truth.

During the late 80s and early 90s, postmodernism, according to Epstein, turned mainly into a form of aestheticization ("criticism for the sake of criticism", "intellectual and cultural sophistication") which always preferred "the shifting and unstable" to "the unified or integrated". In its strong version, "postmodernist or poststructuralist writing" appears as "an extreme social constructionism, a view that identities, relations, political positions are constructed entirely through interpretation, that there is no identifiable social reality against which interpretations can be judged, no ground in material or social reality that places any constraints on the formation of identities or perspectives".

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* would qualify as an "extreme example of strong postmodernism" in arguing that sexual difference itself, and not only gender, is "constructed 'performatively' – that is, by acts whose meaning is determined by their cultural context". Strong postmodernism – concludes Epstein – is "cultural reductionism: it represents the ambition to make culture the first or only level of explanation".

This last statement clarifies the kind of anxieties, prejudices and logical links which, by invoking the necessity of a 'material grounding', allows the opponents of postmodernism (and by association, poststructuralism, cultural studies, identity politics, cultural constructionism) to dismiss it as apolitical or even reactionary. Ironically enough, on the other hand, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics (ALSC) is ready to embark precisely on a 'de-politicizing' crusade against cultural studies, deconstruction, and gender studies, as responsible for reducing literature to the analysis of the racist, colonialist,

sexist, and homophobic discursive practices hidden in the texts.⁷

Underlying both these attacks is the deep-rooted belief in the 'natural', or essential, separation between the material and the cultural, an ideological split between the 'real' on one side, and 'culture' on the other. Here culture appears as the abstract, immaterial, realm of intellectual sophistication, having little to do with the 'material' sphere of concrete existence: 'facts', 'economic matters', and anything else that can easily qualify as 'real'.

In her presentation at the workshop, Wendy Brown reconsidered this ideological split by interrogating the very materiality of the power/knowledge relationship through which racism, sexism, and homophobia are given material efficacy and form.⁸ Race and gender articulate, and are articulated, within the languages of science, law, policy, pedagogy, and other disciplines and sites, so that they constitute, and reproduce, a racialized and gendered social order. "Seeing these things as other than material" can only delay the struggle against them, and an emancipatory, egalitarian, political left should not turn its back on this recognition. In looking for the reassuring old 'materiality', Left Conservatism is, in Brown's view, "a reaction, and a refusal", primarily against a set of difficult, and insufficiently 'political', theoretical works (Bhabha, Derrida, Foucault, Althusser) whose political theoretical insights "de-center capitalism, or any single force, as the engine of history", and complicate our understanding of power "as more than simply embodied in capital and labor; more than what Lenin called the 'who/whom' formulation

⁷ See Richard Lacayo, "War of Words", *Time* (July 7, 1997). Professor Robert Alter, who teaches at Berkeley, California, is president of this Association which believes, Lacayo reports, "that lit-crit obsessions with race, gender and sexuality reduce imaginative writing to the sum of its crimes against humanity, losing sight of the ambiguous and magical ways in which novels, poems and plays really operate".

⁸ Wendy Brown teaches Women's Studies at UCSC. She is the author of *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995) and *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory* (1988).

(who does what to whom)".⁹ "What is satisfied – asks Brown – by imagining all power to really be invested in something called an oppressor, or an oppressive structure, as opposed to understanding power as diffused through a variety of different sites and sources and channels in culture, and indeed understanding us as vehicles of our own subordination as that power courses through us". All these recent insights, with their strong emphasis on language, discursive strategies, processes of subject formation, at the expense of the 'real' (deeds, forces, events, historical flows), are certainly major new challenges to a Left that has lost its "promises", its "premises", and "dreams", and whose enemy has become disturbingly complex. But this does not necessarily prevent the continuous search for possible alternative visions to the actual world order, even if that has to be at the expenses of "calling into question the very beliefs that we have".

The diffusive ways in which the effects of power relations shape any aspect of our 'economy', or culture, and the revision of the cultural/material split were constantly addressed by the speakers.¹⁰ There was much reference to the important implications of Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony': "One would have thought – comments, for example, Joseph Buttigieg – that given the widespread use of the concept of hegemony by so many different currents of the intellectual left, there would be no longer any doubts about the inseparability of the cultural from the economic. Unfortunately, however, the full significance and fruitfulness of this valuable concept is not entirely recognized".¹¹ Similarly, Paul Bové, who presented a complex critique of Richard Rorty's recent work, remarked

⁹ "The particular form of materialism that Marx defined so brilliantly, through the labor theory of value - explains Brown - turned out not to have been any more exhaustive of the injuries and dynamics of capitalism than it was of the range of other injuries in societies that are striated along lines besides class".

¹⁰ I explain the sense in which I am using this term in the following page.

¹¹ Joseph Buttigieg, a Gramsci scholar, teaches English at the University of Notre Dame. His books include *A Portrait of the Artist in Different Perspective* (1987) and *Criticism Without Boundaries: Directions and Crosscurrents in Postmodern Critical Theory* (1987).

that “a general intellectual’s vocabulary can circulate only because it already participates in what Gramsci and others would help us to call the common-sensical languages in circulation at the time of its own attempted emergence”.¹² This important observation seems to be completely ignored in many leftist appeals to political commitment. Still implying an illusory and impossible separation between political projects (the ‘real’, the ‘facts’) and theoretical principles (the ‘immaterial’, or the ‘cultural’), Richard Rorty, for instance, writes in *The Nation*:

A political left needs agreement on projects much more than it needs to think through its principles. In a constitutional democracy like ours, leftist projects typically take the form of laws that need to be passed: laws that will increase socioeconomic equality. We need a list of First Projects – of laws that will remedy gaping inequalities – much more than we need agreement on First Principles.

Rorty goes on to complain about the abandonment of ‘real’ political action by his leftist students:

Their minds are elsewhere: on what they call ‘cultural politics’. It is easy to talk to them about individualist versus communitarian values, of multiculturalism versus monoculturalism, or identity politics versus majoritarian politics, but it is not easy to get them excited about, for example, a proposed law that would remove obstacles the federal government now places in the way of union organizers.¹³

¹² Paul Bové teaches English at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of *Mastering Discourse: The Politics of Intellectual Culture* (1992), *Intellectuals in Power: A Genealogy of Critical Humanism* (1986), *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (1980).

¹³ Richard Rorty, “First Projects, Then Principles”, *The Nation* (December 22, 1997), 18-19. *The Nation* is the important U.S. leftist weekly often mentioned in the workshop for the kind of conservative positions recently expressed in many of its editorials. Richard Rorty teaches Comparative Literature at Stanford University, California, and is the author of *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in*

Cultural politics figures here as an inferior or secondary form of political commitment, within the framework of an assumed and uncomplicated opposition between theory and practice. This insistence on separating theory from practice neglects the actual practical or ‘performative’ dimension of theory which inquires into the specific sedimentations of the very acts and structures that continuously shape culture as our living/existential ‘economy’.¹⁴ In speaking of ‘economy’, we might make reference to the rich insight – and very useful indeed to this kind of debate – that the connotation of the Greek etymology of the word offers, in putting together the ‘nomoi’, that is the ‘laws’, the ‘rules’, the ‘structures’, with the ‘hoikos’, the ‘ecos’, the ‘house’, the ‘commonality’, the ‘shared space’, the ‘environment’ we inhabit.¹⁵

It is this complexity, enclosed in the very idea of ‘economy’, which is also at work, I believe, in Foucault’s notion of ‘biopower’: the ‘statalization of the biological’, whereby the biological is indeed produced, and re-produced, as a ‘body’, according to the disciplinary needs of the ‘sovereign’ state.

This reference might help us recall the ‘economic’ status of knowledge itself, brought up by Donna Haraway in her intervention at the workshop.¹⁶ She interpreted Sokal’s desire to

Twentieth-Century America (1998), *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (1985), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1981).

¹⁴ Paul Bové’s use of the Gramscian notion of “the common-sensical languages in circulation at the time of its own [the intellectual’s language] attempted emergence” could be here a useful formulation of ‘performativity’. Here, however, I am referring especially to the ways the notion is extensively discussed in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁵ For this absolutely interconnected aspect of the ‘law’ as both a regulatory and productive process, see Judith Butler’s discussion of ‘normativity’ in her *Gender Trouble*.

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, Professor of History of Consciousness and Women’s Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is the author of *Modest_Witness @Second_Millennium. FemaleMan@_Meets_Onco-Mouse™* (1996), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (1991), *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989).

get 'materiality' back as expressing the fear that "social constructionism, in its more exuberant forms, undermines some very deep commitments to the way the world is, whether that be the biological quality of being a sexed human being in discussions of gender, or the questions of what it means to live a body wounded by poverty in the context of NAFTA". Haraway went on to note that science, the most powerful signifier for the 'real', the 'material', and the 'truth', is not at all the kind of neutral, objective knowledge we would like to think of, but a specific practice completely embedded in cultural processes of sense-making. She listed

...three things simultaneously true about the contemporary organization of knowledge-producing practices in the natural and engineering sciences. One: there's never been a time in world history when science has been more thoroughly in the service of the market; the way the world is shaped into objects of knowledge and practice is intimately imbricated, at every material-semiotic level of the onion, in processes of the expansion of the contemporary market. Two: science, and its mode of practice and shaping up the world, is one of the very powerful resources for putting a limit on one - witness the debates about global warming, that the appeal to the knowledge of the way the world works can limit the degree to which people, human beings, our species, as well as certain formations within our species, can exploit the world; the scientific practice is one of the extraordinary resources, in many forms, for naming the limits to the possibility of exploiting the world we live in, and still survive in. And these are absolutely indispensable, 'contingent foundations', for conducting political life. The third is how science works as a knowledge-building practice, which is to say, contingently and through articulation: that is to say, the machines, the people, the meaning-making practices, the imagination of the structure of the world through which you ask a falsifiable question, the way you articulate knowledge practices with finance, with government regulatory agencies, with people who will care in schools or textbook publishing. At every level of the onion is

a concrete worldly practice of stabilizing knowledge in some forms and not others; and not any form of knowledge goes.¹⁷

To recognize that power is pervasive, that power relations emerge unexpectedly in every instance of cultural utterance, deeply complicates the debasing picture of postmodernism as an aestheticizing cultural trend, or an ambiguous political ideology dangerous to the Left, or "the most brazen vanguardism that has ever set foot in American political life".¹⁸ If Barbara Epstein perceives in Judith Butler's work the exaggerations of postmodernism, Haraway comments very differently on it: "One of the most important papers that Judith Butler wrote, in my personal appreciation, has in its title 'contingent foundations', and I've never read her as an anti-foundationalist; indeed, she has gone to an extraordinary length to talk about the simultaneous semiotic materiality of foundations, the necessity of them, a 'worldliness' of them, and precisely, the non-transcendental and necessary quality of living with commitments that do not then become religious transcendentalist positions related to some false enemy".¹⁹

Haraway's insistence on the 'worldliness' of foundations as the simultaneous unfolding of both contingency and necessity, may help us reconsider the connotations of the 'hyphen' in 'post-modernism'; a label which can only attempt - through its split name - to contain the complex manifestations and

¹⁷ Haraway's conclusion explicitly refers to the paranoia created by the 'Sokal affair': "If we took seriously these three dimensions - the way scientific knowledge works in our world: one, naming it as the enemy in some crucial ways; two, naming it as the indispensable foundation for our own work; and three, getting at the way it is a worldly practice and not some kind of signifier of capital and materiality, we will have made a lot of progress beyond ridiculing each other".

¹⁸ Patrick Sand, "Left Conservatism?", editorial in *The Nation* (March 9, 1998), 7.

¹⁹ Haraway's intervention at the discussion session of the workshop starts actually with this comment on Butler's work; here, she is referring to Butler's "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism", in J. Butler and Joan Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

balances of 'stability' and 'newness' in culture.²⁰ Finally, in its portrayal of critical space as an unsheltered territory, the split name memorializes the loss of both the 'seductions' and 'closures' of master narratives.

²⁰ For this connotative richness of the 'hyphen', I am drawing from the notion of 'supplementarity' in modernity, and the way it has been discussed in the works of Homi Bhabha, Salman Rushdie and Jacques Derrida.

Judith Butler

"Left Conservatism"

It seems to me that to call something into question and to call into question its foundational status is the beginning of reinvigoration of those terms. What can they mean, given that there is no consensus on their meaning? How can they be mobilized, given that there is no way that they can be grounded or justified in any kind of prominent way. What is the task for politics, when it invariably must use terms, must use the language of universality? ...

I think that Gayatri Spivak puts this well. She says: "To deconstruct a category is not to eliminate it, it is precisely to make an inquiry into a category that we cannot do without". An inquiry into a category that we cannot do without. So, it is something we absolutely need and we cannot do without it, and yet it is open to a certain kind of inquiry that also is not finally suppressible. If we were to say that there is a certain point at which intellectual interrogation of a category must stop because we must use it, what have we done? We have paralyzed ourselves at that point in order to make use of a category that we cannot possibly believe in and that we cannot possibly discuss. It strikes me that that kind of self-censoriousness is a terrible, terrible move. And I am afraid that, sometimes, anti-foundationalism is either identified with that censoriousness or subject to it. In any case, I would think that if the impulse, as I understand it, is to call things into question, then calling into question something called a postmodernist paradigm would be fabulous. And that would be one of the things that a postmodernist would most celebrate. It would be consistent with the principled

inquiry that guides that self-critical enterprise. So, I welcome it.

I think there are just a couple of things I wanted to say. It seems to me that there are two claims that I have been hearing in the last couple of years, and one of them has to do with a debate within Marxism, which suggests that Marxist scholarship has been reduced to the study of culture. The second one has to do with the notion that new social movements tend to be preoccupied with the domain of the cultural, and that this domain of cultural politics is understood as factionalizing, identitarian, and particularistic; that the vision of a common goal, or overarching aim for the left has been lost in this culturalist and identitarian degradation of leftist politics.

I think there are various forms that this argument has taken in the last years. And one of them is that cultural leftism has somehow abandoned the project of Marxism, and that it fails to address questions of economic equity and redistribution. And that it fails to situate culture in terms of a systematic understanding of social and economic modes of production; that the cultural focus of left politics has splintered the left into identitarian sects, and that we have lost a set of common ideals and goals, a sense of a common history, a common set of values, languages, and we have lost objective and universal modes of rationality.

One of the assumptions obviously at work in this kind of criticism is the notion that poststructuralism in particular has thwarted Marxism, and that any ability to offer systematic accounts of social life or to assert norms of rationality, whether objective, universal, or both, is now seriously hampered by a poststructuralism that has entered into the field of cultural politics. Poststructuralism is then construed as destructive, relativistic, and indeed politically paralyzing.

Now, of course, I think there is a certain paradox in the cultural form that this criticism has taken, in the sense that it has been explicitly opposed to a culturalist position. Indeed, we often hear that cultural studies simply look at media stars, or too many studies of Madonna; that it is concerned with

cultural iconicity. And yet, the cultural form that this critique has taken of course is to achieve media status. It has now become a media item in *The New York Times*, etc. Some people are now establishing their own cultural credentials by virtue of this critique of culturalism. And I think there is an effort to expose the cultural icons of the cultural left, and, of course, to be the one who exposes them is precisely to be the one who acquires and appropriates that very iconicity. So, it strikes me as extremely interesting that the cultural position is denounced precisely by those who have become media driven and media centered, and who now have a place within the media. So, I do see this as interesting because I think there may be a cultural logic at work in this position. We might want to ask what has happened to the structure of leftist debate such that the critique of cultural iconicity is the means by which cultural iconicity is achieved.

Now, is the theoretical effort to separate Marxism from the study of culture, to rescue critical knowledge from the shoals of cultural studies, cultural specificity, is this a turf war? How do we understand this? What I worry about is that the charge that new social movements are 'merely cultural', and that a unified and progressive Marxism must return to a materialism based in an objective analysis of class, seems to presume that the distinction between material and cultural life is a stable one. And this recourse to an apparently stable distinction between material and cultural life marks for me the resurgence of a certain kind of theoretical anachronism, one that discounts the contributions, I think, of the last forty or fifty years of Marxist theory. Certainly it discounts the Althusserian displacement of the base/superstructure model, as well as various forms of cultural materialism, and here I think of Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and, indeed, even locally, I think of the important way in which Donna Haraway's work has insisted on a kind of mutual determination between the semiotic and the material. The untimely resurgence of the culture/material distinction is in the service of a tactic, it seems to me, that seeks to identify some social movements with the 'merely cultural', and then the cultural with the derivative and

the secondary, and what tends to happen then is that an anachronistic materialism becomes the banner for a New Left orthodoxy.

Now, in particular, I just want to talk a little about the disparagement of the cultural, and of how this disparagement of the cultural works in tandem with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the left.

Sometimes, this takes the form of trying to re-subordinate race to class, failing to consider what Gilroy and Hall have argued that race may be one modality in which class is lived; in this way race and class are rendered distinct analytically only to realize that the analysis of the one cannot proceed without the other. A different dynamic, it seems to me, is at work in the critique of new sexuality studies. I think that it is very often considered inessential to what is most pressing in material life; and queer politics, in particular, is regularly figured as the cultural extreme of politicization.

I would like to consider one view briefly here. It is a view of Nancy Fraser's. She has written a book, *Justice Interruptus*, recently, and it is an interesting book; and, in many ways, she is trying to come to terms with some of the issues we are talking about today.¹ She is worried about left orthodox resistances to identity politics. She wants to claim that identity politics is used as a derogatory term for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism. I think that is a correct diagnosis. She also suggests that these movements have everything to do with social justice, and that any left movement must respond to their challenges. But, in the middle of this argument, she reproduces a division that I think gets in the way of the realization of this worthy political goal, namely, she posits a spectrum that spans political economy and culture, and she situates lesbian and gay struggles at the cultural end of this political spectrum. Homophobia, she argues, has no roots in political economy, because homosexuals occupy no distinctive position in the

¹ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

division of labor. They are distributed throughout class structure and they do not constitute an exploited class. She writes: "The injustice they suffer is quintessentially a matter of recognition, thus making lesbian and gay struggles into a matter of cultural recognition rather than equality throughout the political economic sphere". Indeed, it is not a material oppression, it is in her view a cultural one. Now, of course, a question one has is why would a movement concerned to criticize and transform the ways in which sexuality is socially regulated not be understood as central to the functioning of political economy? Briefly, of course, we know that the family, for instance, which involves the reproduction of sexuality and the reproduction of gender, was clearly established by both Marx and Engels as properly part of the materialist conception of social life. And it seems to me that in that Marxist paradigm, that socialist-feminist so profited from, the reproduction of gendered persons, of men and women, depended on the social regulation of the family, and indeed on the reproduction of heterosexual family as a site for the reproduction of heterosexual persons; and that this was indeed part of the analysis of material life, and linked clearly with the mode of production.

But what I want to ask here is simply this: given this very important socialist-feminist legacy, that understood the reproduction of persons and the social regulation of sexuality as part of the very process of production, and hence part of the materialist conception of political economy, how is it that suddenly, when the focus of critical analysis turns from the question 'how is normative sexuality reproduced' – the family, etc. – to the queer question 'how is it that that very normativity is confounded by the non-normative sexualities it harbors within its own terms, as well as the sexualities that thrive and suffer outside those terms'; once that shift is made from normative to queer sexuality, why is it that the link between such an analysis and the mode of production is suddenly called into question? Why does it become 'merely cultural' at that moment? Is it only a matter of cultural recognition when non-normative sexualities are marginalized and debased, or has the

possibility of a livelihood come into play? Is it possible to distinguish, even analytically, between a lack of cultural recognition and a material oppression, when the very definition of legal personhood is rigorously circumscribed by cultural norms that are indissociable from their material effects? For instance, in those instances in which lesbians and gays are rigorously excluded from state sanctioned notions of the family – not that I think we should all be included – but certainly, when they are stopped at the border, deemed inadmissible to citizenship, selectively denied the status of freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, denied the questionable benefit of being a member of the military, de-authorized by the law to make emergency medical decisions about one's dying lover, to receive the property of one's dead lover, to have received from the hospital the body of one's dead lover, is it not the holy family once again constraining the roots by which property interests are regulated and distributed?

Is this simply the circulation of vilifying cultural attitudes, or do such disenfranchisements mark a specific operation of the sexual and gendered distribution of legal and economic entitlements?

I just want to say this, too. What ever happened to all that great work in Marxist economic anthropology, Marshall Sahlins' work, and that of others who actually show that economic formations were deeply sedimented in cultural and symbolic orders and that the separation between them was itself an effect of capital. That that separation should now be heralded as the foundation of a new Marxism strikes me as a failure to read capital historically.

Silvana Carotenuto

**“Reading Historically”:
Excitable Speech and The Psychic Life of Power**
by Judith Butler

This kind of art ... is not produced as a commodity, but as part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future (And, yes, I do live and work believing in a future)

(Adrienne Rich, “Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet”)

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a ‘pure’ opposition, a ‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.¹

Implication, contingency and immanence, enabling deconstruction: this is what constitutes Judith Butler's notion of ‘performativity’. In all her works, the critique of ‘transcendence’ has always been linked with the appeal to the political necessity of working in the historical present, in order to discover its radical potentialities for a more ‘possible’ future. This radicality has been progressively articulated by Butler through different phases of her investigation. Her philosophical heritage provided her with the idea of ‘expansion’, for example of Hegelian dialectical terms, in order to stress the position of those de-authorized subjects and configurations of abjection

¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 241.

which represent feared and unfamiliar identifications that simultaneously support and threaten the subject's right to autonomy and life.² Privileging feminism – “I am a feminist theorist before I'm a queer theorist or a gay and lesbian theorist”³ – she then voiced an intransigent critique of the patriarchal system by means of her notion of ‘transformation’. One way of articulating such radical change took the form of her engagement with the field of ‘Queer Studies’ – especially in the two beautiful essays “Subversive Bodily Acts” and “Critical Queer”⁴ – sustained by the critical language of ‘re-signification’.

In her biopolitical analyses, the supplement of dialectics, the rearticulation of the symbolic horizon – “a temporally dynamic and relatively unpredictable play of forces”⁵ –, the transforming iteration of communicative and cultural practices have affected different fields of knowledge: gender, sex, cultural postmodernism, political hegemony. In 1997, however, her attention turned towards two areas of discussion that were already substantiating her writing and have now become the focus of her critical interest: language and the psyche, which are respectively at the centre of *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* and *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*.⁶

² Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundation: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism”, in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), especially 12-13.

³ Judith Butler, “Gender as Performance: an Interview with Judith Butler”, *Radical Philosophy* 67 (Summer 1994), 22.

⁴ Judith Butler, “Subversive Bodily Acts”, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 79-141; “Critically Queer”, in *Bodies That Matter*, 223-242.

⁵ Judith Butler, “Further Reflections”, *Diacritics* (Spring 1997), 13.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection* (Stanford-California: Stanford University Press, 1997) (hereafter cited as E.S. and P.L.).

A political emphasis

Judith Butler's first text, *Gender Trouble*, starts with the statement that there is no gender identity but only the dynamics of the ‘performative’ that critically recuperate parody, carnival and iteration. Her second text, *Bodies that Matter*, focuses on the categories of sex and materiality, affirming that sex is constituted as a norm, that the norm materialises the body which is not only invested but also animated and confined by the norm; in an active re-usage, this norm can be deviated from ‘within’, as in the radical moment of the reappropriation/expropriation of the past history of a term such as *queerness*: “...the moment of expropriating the discursive means of its own production. The appropriation of such norms to oppose their historically sedimented effect constitutes the insurrectory moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a break with that past” (E.S., 159).

In their ‘objects’ and ‘solutions’, these two important critical contributions reveal an increased interest in ‘re-signification’ and in the complex ways it can prove useful for political discourse. In other words, Butler becomes more aware that politics constitutes a central task for feminism, noting that “the grounds of politics (‘universality’, ‘equality’, ‘the subject of rights’) have always been construed through unmarked racial and gender exclusions and by the conflation of politics with public life that renders the private (reproduction, domains of ‘femininity’) prepolitical”.⁷ At the same time, she is also conscious that, according to an ideological vision, politics can be very problematic in that there are no external positions to power and every emancipatory effort is necessarily immanent in the horizon of power it discusses and criticises. Butler's question is: “Is there a way to affirm complicity as the basis of political agency, yet insist that political agency may do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination?” (P.L., 29-30). *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life of Power* provide us with a possible answer through their textual and performative

⁷ Butler, “Contingent Foundation”, note 1, 20.

researches: the analysis of 'speech position' and of 'subject position'.

The injurious language

'Excitable Speech' is an expression indicating those sentences and confessions that, uttered under constriction, cannot be used in court because they do not reflect the balanced condition of the speaker. Butler uses it to mean that "speech is always in some ways out of control" (E.P., 15). In *Excitable Speech*, this statement develops according to a general theory of the performativity of political discourse, in a declared attention to the current argumentations on the definition of what is marking an important phase of the critical-legal debate in contemporary America: *hate speech*.

According to the definition of *speech acts* in Austin's linguistics, there are two systems of language: the 'illocutionary' in which language is a behaviour that constitutes an act in itself, and the 'perlocutionary' where language has effects which are produced by the linguistic act. *Hate speech* belongs to the illocutionary category: it acts what it says and enacts the violence that it expresses.

The distinction, pertinent to linguistic theory, also relates to the politics characterising conservative America. Butler gives many examples of *hate speech*. First of all, she quotes the case of the 'burning cross': in Israel, it indicates the burning rhetoric used by the media accused of instigating violence, for instance in the case of the killing of Rabbi Yitzhak; in America, when a white boy burns a cross in the garden of a black family as a declared quotation of Ku Klux Klan's practices, it becomes an act which, according to the Supreme Court, is covered by the first amendment to the American constitution: 'freedom of expression' or *protected speech*. Butler says that, in reality, it is the protection of a racist behaviour which is to be attributed to a whole history and culture: "Racist speech works through the invocation of convention; it circulates, and though it requires the subject for its speaking, it neither begins nor ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific name it used" (E.S., 34).

She refers also to the word 'abortion' presently censured in films projected in airplanes because not only is it supposed to offend but to incite the very act of abortion.

Another example is given by the recent arguments which have identified the musical phenomenon of 'rap music' as exemplary of a language which is not only perlocutory but also causative: it provokes urban violence and has a misogynist character. In Butler's opinion, coming from the state in terms of power, this accusation tends to hinder the fundamental analysis of race, poverty and social rage that America needs so urgently today. Ironically, according to the accusation, women's dignity is under attack not because of the weakened rights to reproductive freedom and the lack of public assistance, but because of Afro-American music...

Butler then focuses on the explicit declaration or *coming out* of lesbians and gays in the U.S. Army, where professing a sexual identity is understood as communicative of sexuality itself: nowadays, homosexuals are asked to identify themselves and to add the declaration that they do not intend to behave as such.

The last example touches on the current discussion of pornography within feminism. Butler refers to Catherine MacKinnon's position: "Pornography ought to be opposed because it produces an epistemic atmosphere in which women are not entitled to exercise their rights of equal treatment and participation".⁸ According to MacKinnon, pornographic representations are 'performative', that is to say constitutive of a type of conduct that silences those who are depicted in subordination, invoking and rewriting a structural relation of domination. Pornography enacts domination, becoming the vehicle by which the social structure is reaffirmed.

Butler has two major objections to this position: first,

⁸"A Dialogue between Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler", *Diacritics* (Spring 1997), 5. In "Gender As Performance. An Interview with Judith Butler", 39, Butler identifies C. MacKinnon as the exponent of "the paradigm of victimization, the over-emphasis on pornography, the cultural insensitivity and the universalisation of 'right'".

working according to the idea that 'sexual speech' is a 'sexual act', the vindication of the 'right' against pornography is a way of invoking the intervention of state power against sexually graphic representations in general. Consequently, it might extend attacks to homosexual art – for example, Mapplethorpe's. Second, the moralistic appeal reveals an even more dangerous connivance with power itself: the notion that *hate speech* produces a 'victim class' annihilates the so-called 'victim' by offering it fully to the state which, on its part, will assume complete tutelage over the 'victim' ('state-sponsored censorship').⁹

Rather than needing state intervention or extending its power, Butler supports the idea that we should analyse the gaps between speech and behaviour in order to find "ways of restaging and re-signifying discourse in contexts exceeding those determined by the courts" (E.S., 23). This is what *Excitable Speech* does. Butler's position is that every name, including the injurious name, calls the addressee into existence by interpellation, that is initiating her-him to the 'temporal life of language' (E.S., 2). The existence of the addressee is implicit in a language whose historicity includes a past and a future exceeding the present of the speaking subject. The critical core lies in this 'excess' regulating both the intentionality of language and the effects produced in language. The critical emphasis now turns on difference, interval and interstice:

...the gap that separates the speech act from its future effects has its auspicious implications: it begins a theory of linguistic agency that provides an alternative to the relentless search for legal remedy. The interval between instances of utterance not only makes the repetition and the resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become

⁹ This is an example of what elsewhere Butler indicates as regressive and politically dangerous: "...any theory that fails to think the possibilities of transformation from within that 'systemic' formation is itself complicit with the idea of the 'eternal' character of capital that capital so readily produces". Butler, "Further Reflection", 13.

disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes (E.S., 5).

In particular, Butler wants to investigate whether all *hate speeches* are *always* successful in their effects or if, instead, some 'fracturing lines' might render their power less effective. Her aim is not to minimise the pain as the consequence of *hate speech* but to leave open the possibility that 'failure' in speech might condition new critical responses. To totalizing and nihilistic injurious effects, Butler opposes the possibility of breaking and subverting, *un-doing* the same process of discursive constitution, advocating a de-structuration which legitimises new and future contexts by means of re-iteration, re-petition, re-articulation and mis-appropriation. Again, the philosopher asks:

Is there a repetition that might disjoin the speech act from its supporting conventions such that its repetition confounds rather than consolidates its injurious efficacy? (E.S., 20).

Linguistic vulnerability exists. Nowadays, a metaphorical comparison between linguistics and physicality (where the somatic dimension is assimilated to linguistic pain) affirms that language hurts: 'words wound'. Butler's question echoes: "Which words hurt? What representation offends?". If we need the systemic totality of *speech acts* in its difference between perlocutory acts (which have effects and consequences) and illocutory acts (which do what they utter according to conventions), it is also necessary to understand that, in the register of conventionality, illocutory acts presuppose, in order to last, a ritual or a ceremony which recalls past acts and future repetitions. The historicity of the structure becomes the history of the offending term:

Clearly, injurious names have a history, one that is invoked and reconsolidated at the moment of utterance, but not explicitly told. This is not simply a history of how they have been used, in what contexts, and for what purposes; it is the way such

histories are installed and arrested in and by a name. The name, thus, has a *historicity*, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name, has come to constitute the contemporary meaning of a name: the sedimentation of its usages as they have become part of the very name, a sedimentation, a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force (E.S., 36).¹⁰

“The insult...assumes its specific proportion in time”(E.S., 2). The offensive name acts through a memory or a trauma that is not only remembered but also re-experienced in/through the linguistic substitution. On the level of its circulation, however, this latter can re-direct the course of repetition, giving origin to the radical moment of *agency*: “...the repetition of an ordinary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open”(E.S., 38). In particular, the person responsible for the injurious name is not the sovereign subject placed at the origin of the language any more, but the one assuming responsibility for the citation of the injurious name.¹¹ Such responsibility, which is linked to repetition and not to origination, makes the subject responsible for renovating the linguistic traits of a whole community. In this social sense, the devastating effect of his/her act is the offence itself, but also the fact that the injurious discourse de-contextualizes and provokes disorientation in the offended one. In Butler’s opinion, this is the space where a ‘retro-action’ or a ‘counter-discourse’ can be realised: in time and disorientation, it will indicate that words

¹⁰ Butler explains her idea of the ‘structure’ by means of a Derridean reference: “...a structure gains its status as a structure, its *structurality*, only through its repeated reinstatement. The dependency of that structure on its reinstatement means that the very possibility of structure depends on a reiteration that is in no sense determined fully in advance, that for structure, and social structure as a result, to become possible, there must first be a contingent repetition at its basis. Moreover, for some social formation to appear as structured is for it to have covered over in some way the contingency of its own installation” (ibid.).

¹¹ Here, according to Butler, the category of ‘intentionality’ does not disappear; it only is unable to govern the whole scene, or ‘system’, of enunciation.

can be dis-unified from their power to offend and be re-contextualised in more affirmative ways.¹²

In order to give examples for her reasoning, Butler uses some important references from the contemporary theoretical and narrative debate. She first quotes Elaine Scarry who, in *Body in Pain*, states that the threat of violence is directed at language itself, that pain cannot be expressed, and torture makes the other incapable of speaking.¹³ Starting from this, Butler also recalls Tony Morrison in her Nobel Prize for the Literature Conference in 1993, when she told the story of an old blind woman who was approached by some children who asked her if the bird they kept in their hands was dead or alive. The woman replied she did not know; what she knew was that the bird was in their hands.¹⁴

Morrison interprets this dialogue as a series of violent acts revealing that oppressive language is not only a representation or a substitute for violence, but the enactment of violence itself. Her interpretation is that the woman is a writer who is somehow blind, not knowing how her writing will be read or used; the bird is the language that can be either dead or alive; specifically, the interlocutory scene indicates that we always make language the measure of our life and death. In the scene, the woman’s ability is to move the attention from the assertion of the children’s power to the means by which this power is exercised in its implicit responsibility: the hands. The children, on their part, are not cruel only because they have killed the bird but because they wield power in urging the blind woman’s choice, a power that is then mirrored in the destruction of the bird; hate speech takes place when the woman, as the transfer

¹² Butler here repeats an example from her lesbian politics: “The revaluation of terms such as ‘queer’ suggests that speech can be returned to the speaker in a different form, that it can be cited against its ordinary purposes, and perform a reversal of effects”(E.S., 14).

¹³ Elaine Scarry, *Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ See Nobel Lecture, Dec. 7, 1993, by Toni Morrison, The Nobel Foundation, 1997 - Webmaster@www.nobel.se.

of the act on the bird, is captured in the humiliating moment. The 'temporality' of the children's threat first announces and then inaugurates its power, that is, the very performance of the threatened act.

This scheme clarifies the dynamics by which threats always take place in language and acts always happen between bodies. Butler remembers that, in *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with Austin, or the Seduction in Two Languages*, Shoshana Felman identifies the relationship between language and body according to a specific principle: if the speaker is never absolutely certain that what s/he intends is what s/he will perform, it is the body that marks the limits of intentionality.¹⁵ The separation and opposition between intention and performance, however, is not directed towards their unification but towards their incongruous interrelation: the chiasm. This is the space where the temporal difference between the act of the threat and its realisation shows that the threat itself can fail to produce its act, dangling its efficacy and asking for a reply which is an-'other' performative act. In order to counterbalance violence, exploiting the act of threat is a question of turning – according to Butler, 'turn' has a linguistic and rhetorical trope value¹⁶ – the intention and the non-intentionality of the threat one against the other, confounding the threat's performative power. In so doing, effects can proliferate beyond the subject's control, can doubt the rational transparency of the subject's intentionality, and finally subvert the (self-)definition of the subject itself.

In the span of her reflection, in order to counterbalance the threat with another act, the blind woman refers to the body: her emphasis is on the hands. This is a linguistic act that exposes what is unknown to the threatening children: the illumination of their own blindness, the blindness of their own act.

¹⁵ Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with Austin, or the Seduction in Two Languages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

¹⁶ For the relationship between 'turn' and 'trope', see P.L., note 1, 201-202.

The melancholic psyche

We might say that names function to the extent that they are used within language games in which their functions are already established. Or we might argue that names seek to capture a referent that always eludes the nomination by which that capture is sought. We might say that there is something 'in' the psyche as that which resists interpellation... and we might call this 'The Real' according to Lacanian protocol. On the other hand, is there perhaps an abyss opened by the name that makes possible the contest over its 'right' and 'proper' function? And if so, how might we begin to approach the thinking of such an abyss?

(Judith Butler, "Further Reflections")

The term 'blindness' illuminates the passage to *The Psychic Life of Power* which opens, once again, by a specific question: "What is the psychic form that power takes?" (P.L., 2). Combining theories on power and psyche, linking Foucault and psychoanalysis, the Hegelian phenomenology of spirit and genealogy in Nietzsche, Butler analyses the phenomenon of our blind disposition to power: her position is that if we are submitted to its vision, it is because we are called to power in the very formation of our 'subjectivity'. Power is first external and imposed onto the subject; in order to position the subject in subordination, it then assumes a psychic form which constitutes the subject's identity itself. In this case, Butler's focus centres around the relationship between power and introjection, turning the old 'master-slave' rhetoric into the new discussion on the psychic conditions supporting the 'desire for subjugation'.

As a characteristic of our contemporary world, the phenomenon has attracted many philosophers: Freud indicates a theory of conscience as the psychic operation of a regulatory norm; Althusser links the impulse of subjugation to a divine and authoritarian voice – or 'sanction' – calling individuals into existence through 'guilt' (is there anyone who has not looked back when the voice of a policeman hails someone in the

street?); according to Foucault, power forms subjectivity through constrictions that create an ambivalence as the proper site for the emergence of the subject itself.

In Butler's opinion, in emphasising the unconscious and subjectivity, these visions discard the social centrality of 'childhood passion'. At the origin of her/his life, the child expresses love and dependence on the other. This passion is necessary to existence; at the same time, if the child's survival and growth are to be assured, this passion must be subordinated: that submission will provide the conditions of possibility for the existence of the individual as a 'subject'. If attachment and dependence exist, they must be rejected in order to allow the subject to emerge. The sentence 'I can't have loved this person' – whether parents, guardians or others – establishes the 'I' of subjectivity through a *foreclosure* which, in the imagined impossibility, founds the subject itself.

At the same time, however, this ghostly and threatening impossibility obliges the subject to re-experience her/his love unconsciously, moving the 'scandal' onto other levels of existence and perception, resulting in terrible sufferings. If the subject must exist, the condition of its persistence is linked to the deviation of its desire, placing the subject against itself. This means that, predicated on what it refuses to know, the subject is separated from itself, or is hindered from becoming itself. This also means that, if there is agency, it will be of "a desire that aims at the dissolution of the subject, where the subject stands as a bar to that 'desire'" (P.L., 9).

Through a further image of the *turn* – "turning back upon oneself" (P.L., 168) – this instance marks the emergence of self-reproach, conscience and the contemporary social melancholia of the individual.¹⁷ Many different theoretical problematics

¹⁷ In Butler's analysis, the passage from 'individual' to 'subject' takes place through submission to language. This establishes a paradox according to which, on one hand, the subject loses itself in 'telling' (in the third person) and, on the other hand, also assumes power as the means of its own 'becoming': "That 'becoming' is no simple or continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wagering on the horizon of social being" (P.L., 30). Vulnerability to a language that the subject has not created is inevitable; at the same

gather around this notion of the psychic turn: how regulatory power takes part in the formation of the subject through the incorporation-internalisation of norms; how the submission of desire recalls and establishes the desire for submission; how the 'outside' enters a predate space; how the internalisation of a norm contributes to produce internality, that is, the turn of the norm into a psyche.

Historically, the fabrication of the distinction between internal and external life, the psyche and the social, is associated with the transformation of a previous desire into social existence, the exploitation of 'primary dependencies' by a regulatory power. Many interpretative positions have focused on this dynamics. Strictly distinguishing repression from *foreclosure*, Freud reads the process as the ontological 'realisation' of heterosexuality:

The foreclosure of homosexuality appears to be foundational to a certain heterosexual version of the subject: 'I have never loved' someone of similar gender and 'I have never lost' any such person predicates the 'I' on the 'never-never' of that love and loss. Indeed, the ontological negation, which forms its constitutive melancholia, an emphatic and irreversible loss that forms the tenuous basis of that 'being' (P.L., 23).

At the same time, Freud interprets such 'self-privation' as an impulse turning upon itself to construct an internal sphere

time, language has a 'temporality' where it is possible to realise the need for change. Power acts on the subject, but, at the same time, it also calls the subject into existence. It is the assumption of the temporal dimension that makes the subject emerge as an effect of a preceding power but also as the unexpected possibility of an agency in 'excess': "Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled" (ibid., 30). This works simultaneously as a contingent relationship and also as "a reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs" (ibid., 15). If the conditions of power exist, they have to be continuously repeated, showing the temporalization of the same conditions, which now become active and productive. In this sense, the subject belongs but also exceeds its belonging, crediting a sense of power which is 're-articulated' – "in the sense of done over, done again, done anew" (ibid., 18).

which consolidates through time as 'conscience', self-inspection and reflectivity. Nietzsche, on his part, links reflectivity to self-punishment, producing "the desire for that very circuit, for reflexivity and, ultimately, for subjection" (P.L., 22).

These interpretations focus on the forms that the contemporary 'master-slave' mechanism takes; in Butler's view, attention should instead be given to the effects it produces: melancholy, the impossibility of putting an end to mourning, the loss of the very possibility of love, the establishment of a sociality affected by melancholia, where loss cannot be mourned or even recognised as loss because what is lost has never had any title to existence. In such a society, the regulatory ideal has the absolute power to establish the possible types of love, while rendering others impossible; to produce some subjects and firmly ban others. There is no need to use direct repression; the very reproductive mechanism of existence, its originary violence is sufficient for the purpose. Its violent generality makes sense of the widely-spread references to contemporary guilt (see Melanie Klein), AIDS deaths and the rhetoric of drug-users; more profoundly, this general violence actually defines all possibilities of existence, establishing the social beings' capacity of endurance in persistent subjective submission:

The desire to persist in one's own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one's own (a submission that does not take place at a later date, but which frames and makes possible the desire to be). Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one's 'own' being. Vulnerable to terms that one never makes, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality. If such terms institute a primary subordination, or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself (P.L., 28).

The Psychic Life of Power does not give any 'alternative' to

such social melancholia; Butler's last text can only witness the historicity and futurity of the dynamics of our present. In its immanence, however, it holds that freeing contemporary thought from melancholy would imply the critical re-affirmation of a possible transformation of our social life from within, that is, a deviation of "the citational chain toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world".¹⁸ Different from an 'ideal' return of the child's dependent love, Butler's text speaks of the recovery of the historical and immanent interdependence between critical communal bodies, which are now to be re-signified with future love.

¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 22.

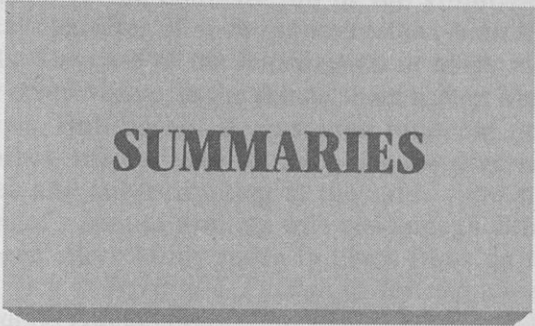
and ...

The desire to persist in one's own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one's own (a submission that does not take place at a later date, but which begins and makes possible the desire to be. Only by persisting in one's own being does one persist in one's "own" being. Vulnerable to injury that one never makes, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that make a primary and inaugural statement in society. If such a world requires a primary submission, or indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, essentially, to be for itself (PI., 28).

The Psycho-Logic of Power does not present alternative to ...

Stuart Hall New ethnicities

Stuart Hall's essay undertakes a serious challenge to black cultural politics, a shift from the struggle to access to the right of representation to the construction of the social. ...



Anna Maria Canale The (Un)Utility of de Law Medallies of Streets in *The Merchant of Venice*

In almost all the analyses of *The Merchant of Venice* that deal with the play's representation of the law there is an acknowledgment of some sort that the law is at least ambiguous, when not openly declared discriminatory and unjust. This essay reads the Venetian trial and the trial scene as the two axes of the institutionalization of the law in the play. It explores law as realm of signs, and shows its articulation with justice, pointing in evidence how the latter is prescribed in the text as something alternatively coinciding with law and different from and superimposed to it. Through an exploration of the distinction appearance/reality that characterizes the Venetian trial and is the foundation of the famous difference between justice and equity stated in the trial scene, and focusing on the contradictions and ambiguities of that structure, the essay also points to the discrepancies and ambiguities that characterize the history of the law in the text, and in this way questions the apparent unambiguity of its code. The law is read as paradoxical realm that contains its own excess, and the "pound of flesh" of Shylock's bond is read as a figure for such reality.

Stuart Hall
New ethnicities

Stuart Hall's essay underlines a crucial shift in black cultural politics, a shift from the struggle to access to the rights of representation to the contestation of the simplifications and stereotypical character of such representation, both by white and black artists. The case of the fetishization of black masculinity is particularly controversial, as the debate about Robert Mapplethorpe's works shows. Hall speaks against 'the innocent notion of the essential black subject' and in favour of the diversity of black experiences and subjectivities, at the same time stressing the complexities of a politics working with and through difference. Such shift has been successfully made in black films on the diaspora experience, such as *Territories*, *Passion of Remembrance*, and, above all, *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

Anna Maria Cimitile
**The (Un)fixity of the Law: Modalities of Stasis
in *The Merchant of Venice***

In almost all the analyses of *The Merchant of Venice* that deal with the play's representation of the law there is an acknowledgment of some sort that the law is at least ambiguous, when not openly declared discriminatory and unjust. This essay reads the caskets test and the trial scene as the two sites of the manifestation of the law in the play. It explores law as realm of stasis, and shows its articulation with justice, putting in evidence how the latter is presented in the text as something alternatively coinciding with law and different from and superimposed to it. Through an exploration of the distinction appearance/essence that characterizes the caskets test and is the foundation of the famous difference between letter and spirit stated in the trial scene, and focusing on the contradictions and ambivalences of that structure, the essay also points to the discrepancies and ambiguities that characterize the fixity of the law in the text, and in this way questions the apparent unalterability of its order. The law is read as paradoxical realm that contains its own excess, and the "pound of flesh" of Shylock's bond is read as a figure for such modality.

Mariagrazia De Meo

Tra parole e danza: *Dancing at Lughnasa* di Brian Friel

In the discrimination and violence of contemporary Irish society Brian Friel's theatre represents the search for a post-colonial perspective in which to consider the value of concepts such as tradition, past, memory and identity. Through his voice we find the courage to recognize in contradiction, ambiguity, transition, impermanence and translation the only possible means to describe today's Ireland. Having strongly refused the idea of essence as part of the dangerous inheritances of colonial power, and having shown the transitory nature and limits of verbal language, he looks at music, dance and the body as unconditioned channels of communication for human experience. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* the magic of dance, that reminds one of ancient ceremonies, melts into the rite of memory to be considered as a continuous flux that does not hold us to an immobile past but pushes us toward an opening to that 'otherness' in which we recognize part of ourselves.

Marialuisa Pasquariello

**Culture, Society and Technology:
the Aesthetics of Decline and the Question of Representation**

In the age of global communication, the growing dependence of culture on the sphere of technology, with its sophisticated digital means, has finally brought to an end the traditional *art-life* split. Technology has played a crucial role in the reintegration of art into the run of everyday life and has led to an augmented interplay between culture and society. Yet, the proliferation of reproduced images and virtual connections within an imaginary environment produces an apparent *de-materialization* of the 'natural' world. For many this is the sign of an imminent disappearance of reality, killed off by its simulacra. Such a belief revives earlier arguments about fetishism and restores, among others, the modernist dichotomy *natural/artificial*. However, in the computer era, the sphere of simulation can be considered as being on the opposite side of the 'real' world only with difficulty.

John Rieder

**"Mute Arbitress of Tides":
Aesthetic Judgment and the Politics of Canon Revision**

This essay reopens the question of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and political engagement by arguing that taking the aesthetic seriously does not mean foreclosing the political. Its point of departure is the exclusion of women poets from the traditional canon of British Romantic poets. Neither the historical exclusion of women poets nor current efforts to rehabilitate them can be adequately understood as the unmediated expression of political or ideological positions. Instead the essay has recourse to the way Kant's third critique articulates the impossibility of either extricating literary evaluation from its social context or reducing it to an expression of social interests. Kant's analysis helps us to understand the autonomous yet constricted process of canon formation in the modern school, addressing both the situation of judgment within the ideological battleground of critical debate and the containment or neutralization of intellectual debate by normative bureaucratic demands.

Maria Stella

Thomas Hardy, Rome and "the sense of the past"

Modern history plays an important role in Thomas Hardy's literary production, revealing his interest both in local history (the Dorset/Wessex culture present in the majority of his novels and poems) and in European events (the Napoleonic Wars, shaping his epic poem *The Dynasts* and the novel *The Trumpet-Major*). After discussing Hardy's general vision of history, the paper focuses on his relationship with ancient history, studying the emergence of Roman history, architecture and literature in different moments of his production, in the attempt to define the complex meanings it acquires and their connection with the author's wider "sense of the past". The poems dedicated to the traces of Roman civilization in England are distinguished from the *Poems of Pilgrimage*, written during (and after) Hardy's visit to Rome and Italy in 1887. Elliptical as his

notations are if compared to those of Henry James and other authors, they nonetheless reveal Hardy's idea of history as a constant process of interpretation, where ruins and restoration, memory and loss coexist, reshaping the individual and collective experience of time. Seen through the eyes of the architect and poet, ancient Rome undergoes a process of stratification, becoming a privileged spot of time from which to observe and continually redefine both present and past.

Nicole Ward Jouve

**Metaphors, Creation and Transitional Objects:
of Tongues ... and the Sea**

The essay interrogates writing as a process by which we make ourselves at home in the world, and in particular the gendered female subject in relation to that process. It focuses on metaphor as a means of exploring this process. Since the Greeks at least, this process of being at home has been expressed through countless metaphors of the world, which place the gendered female subject in a dual imaginary position, as both object (the place where one is at home) and potential subject, seeking to be at home.

The essay explores this long-seated cultural ambiguity through clusters of metaphors (tongue-boat at home in sea-mouth-womb) and traces them in a number of 19th and 20th century poets or writers, both male and female. It disputes Derrida's critique of the 'usury' of Western metaphor in the name of Ricoeur's experiential notion of 'live' metaphor. It draws on Winnicott's notion of 'transitional objects' to celebrate metaphors in which objects replace the imagined womb. It ends up arguing that metaphors of 'being at home' (transitional or otherwise) are not gender-specific as long as the imaginary mother is distinguished from real motherhood. Gender begins to make a difference not at the level of metaphor, but at the level of narrative.

Jane Wilkinson

Earthing the Self: Wole Soyinka's Geo-biographies

Soyinka's biographical and autobiographical writing articulates two apparently oppositional impulses: "anchorage" or "rooting" in the local, countered by celebrations of incompleteness and passage, a movement towards the global. The space of writing, living and belonging is fluid, a "turmoil agency" in which to "world" the self, a terrain of disquieting, mobile energy and knowledge or "transcience", the metamorphic blending of transience and science. Through a creative interplay between earth and world, matter and movement, belonging and becoming and the "excessive" intersection of nature and science in the work of individuation and creation, Soyinka's art-work comes to being in a Heideggerian "founding leap".

Starting from the paratextual "thresholds" of his works, the article shows how Soyinka's voluntarily belated use of myth and colonial history produces a contaminated, writerly terrain of modernity that cuts across space and time, cultures and languages, in a postcolonial bricolage. Bhabha on hybridity, double discursivity and the "third space" as a space of translation, "invention and intervention", Deleuze and Guattari on nomadology and on mapping as an open, rhizomatic, multipliable activity, Spivak's application of catachresis, showing how words, myths, histories and geographies are "wrested and tortured into another meaning", provide the theoretical access to Soyinka's geographies of self.

Marina De Chiara

Respons-abilities: An inquiry into "Left Conservatism"

with Judith Butler

and

Judith Butler

"Left Conservatism"

The term "Left Conservatism", chosen as a title for the workshop held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in January 1998 designates forms of cultural conservatism and critical closure among

members of the left, which often result in the dismissal of poststructuralism, postmodernism, cultural constructionism and cultural studies as aestheticizing and apolitical theoretical trends negating political agency. In investigating the political implications of the ideological split between the regime of the theoretical or 'cultural' and the regime of the material or 'real', the speakers at the workshop also address the debate which followed the publication of Alan Sokal's hoax in the April 1996 issue of the journal *Social Text*.

Judith Butler's presentation at the workshop provides a brilliant inquiry into the complexity of the power-knowledge relationships which give meaning to the very notion of culture.

Silvana Carotenuto

"Reading Historically": *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life of Power* by Judith Butler

This essay focuses on some recent aspects of Judith Butler's political thinking. After having introduced some keywords of her radical theory, the essay reads *Excitable Speech* (1997) in the context of Butler's study of the political value of language, with an emphasis on the discussion around 'hate speech' in contemporary North America. *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) represents instead Butler's interest in the 'master-slave' dialectics transformed into a questioning of our present 'desire for subjection'. This text revives the long tradition of thinkers who have interpreted such desire – Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche, Althusser, Foucault – as well as offering the latest version of Butler's own notion of 'social melancholia'.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Judith Butler teaches Comparative Literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books include *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Silvana Carotenuto teaches English Literature at the University of Salerno. She has a Master Degree in Drama from the University of Essex, G.B. where she also obtained her PhD with a thesis on Shakespearean tragedy. Her publications include *La voce di Mnemosine. Percorsi teatrali da Shakespeare a Bob Wilson* (1990) and essays and articles on deconstruction and women's writing.

Anna Maria Cimitile has recently completed a PhD on Shakespeare at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, University of Wales, Cardiff, where she has also pursued a Master of Arts. She has published articles on contemporary fiction and on postcolonial theory.

Marina De Chiara has recently completed a PhD on postcolonial literature at the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli. She is currently at the University of California, Santa Cruz, as visiting scholar, where she is carrying out her post-doctorate research. She is author of *Percorsi nell'oblio. Poetiche postcoloniali di creolizzazione* (1997) and of articles on postcolonial literature and on modernist drama and poetry.

Mariagrazia De Meo is a graduate of the Istituto Universitario Orientale and is presently finishing a Master in "Translation Studies" at the University of Warwick (G.B.).

Stuart Hall was for a decade Director of the Centre for Cultural Studies, Birmingham, where he edited and co-authored such volumes as *Resistance through Ritual. Policing the Crisis* and *Culture, Media, Language*. Presently Professor of Sociology at the Open University, among his recent publications is *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the left* and the co-edited volume *New Times*.

Nicole Ward Jouve is Professor of English and Related Literature and Women's Studies at the University of York, Great Britain. She has published fiction in France with the Editions des femmes, Paris (*Le Spectre du gris* and *L'Entremise*) as well as a study of the Yorkshire Ripper Case, translated into English as *The Streetcleaner* (Marion Boyars). She has published books on Baudelaire (Macmillan) and Colette (Harvester and Indiana U.P.), and two collections of essays, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue* (Routledge) and recently *Female Genesis* (Polity Press). She is currently working on gender, myth and psychoanalysis.

Marialuisa Pasquariello graduated at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples, with a thesis on metropolitan cultures, identity and the languages of consumerism. "Culture, Society and Technology: The Aesthetics of Decline and the Question of Representation", in this issue, is her first publication.

Maria Stella, Associate Professor of English at the I.U.O., author of *Cesare Pavese traduttore* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1978), *L'inno e l'enigma. Saggio su Ted Hughes* (Roma: Janua, 1988), *Momenti di Visione: identità e forme della poesia in Thomas Hardy* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1992), and of several essays on poetry (from the eighteenth century to the present), on the Victorian and modernist novel, on women's writing. Co-editor of *Viaggi di Donne* (Napoli: Liguori, 1996), she has also introduced and translated into Italian for the first time novels and short stories by M. Lamb, C. Brontë, M. MacCarthy, E. Bowen, M. Sinclair.

John Rieder is Professor of English at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. His most recent publications include *Wordsworth's Counterrevolutionary Turn: Community, Virtue, and Vision in the 1790s* (Univ. of Delaware Press, 1997) and "The Institutional Overdetermination of the Concept of Romanticism" in *Yale Journal of Criticism* (1997).

Jane Wilkinson is Associate Professor at the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples. Her main publications include *Orpheus in Africa. Fragmentation and Renewal in the Work of Four African Writers* (Bulzoni, 1990), *Talking With African Writers* (James Currey, 1992), a history of African literatures in English (Bulzoni, 1995). As well as articles on Elizabethan poetry, Shelley, Conrad, Mansfield and numerous African authors, she has published on exile, errancy, the city, prison poetry, diaries, and transculturations of the Bible and Shakespeare.

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Examples:

Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), 19.

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Emile Benveniste, "La nature des pronoms", in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture", *New Left Review* 50 (July-August 1968), 44.

John Hollander, *Melodious Guile. Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 73 (hereafter cited as MG).

P. D. Brett, S. W. Johnson and C. R. T. Bach, *Mastering String Quartets* (San Francisco: Amati Press, 1989), 32.

Maria Stella, "Il poeta e la lettura del cuore", in *La figlia che piange: saggi su poesia e metapoesia*, a cura di Agostino Lombardo (Roma: Bulzoni, 1995), 169-180.

