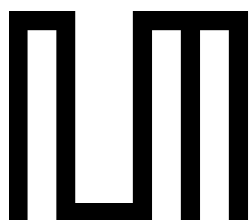


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ÍNDICE / TABLE OF CONTENTS

ENSAYOS / ESSAYS

CHERYL ALEXANDER MACOLM - The Ugly Sister Talks Back: Eavan Boland's (Re)Visions of Ireland	9
SAIKAT MAJUMDAR - The Alien Insider	21
EMRON ESPLIN - An Assertion of Individuality: Reading Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's Green-eyed Woman as a Sublime Object	35
JASON CAMLOT - Mammals and Machines: Michael McClure's Embodying Poetics	53
NANCY ROSENFELD - "Who peyntede the Leon?": The Olde Wyf confronts the Wife of Bath and Criseyde	69
AMANDA CAGLE - Looking for Love on Samuel Beckett's Stage: Homoeroticism, Sterility and the Postcolonial Condition	83
MARÍA MERCEDES ANDRADE - Crossing Identities in Severo Sarduy's <i>De donde son los cantantes</i>	95
INGRID MATOS-NIN - La importancia del tema sobrenatural en María de Zayas y Sotomayor	103
ANDREW MARTINO - The Errant Auto-biographer Reflections of the Author in Umberto Eco's <i>The Island of the Day Before</i>	115
LEWIS CACCIA, JR. - The Spirit of William Stafford: A Countertradition to Modernism?	123

CUENTOS / FICTION

HUGO RÍOS - El puñal, Parábola de fuego, El otro, Migas . 139

POEMAS / POETRY

CHRISTOPHER KELEN - from *Macao - A Map of the Seasons*..... 147

ENSAYOS / *ESSAYS*

THE UGLY SISTER TALKS BACK: EAVAN BOLAND'S (RE)VISIONS OF IRELAND

Cheryl Alexander Malcolm

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.... It exists or appears to exist objectively, in the public sphere, and consequently confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes "merely" of the private self. (Ostriker 317)

In case anyone should think from the feminist critical interest in revisionist mythmaking that it is necessarily a feminist activity, Alice Ostriker reminds us that Shelley, Keats, Yeats, Pound, and Eliot used it long before Eavan Boland ever did. What is feminist in "The Gorgon's Child" and "Ode to Suburbia" can however only be understood through an appreciation of the particular use which Boland makes of revisionist mythmaking. This essay demonstrates how to recognize revisionist writing, read revision against the backdrop of original myth, and ascertain its function within the text. In conclusion, Boland's poems will be shown to present a view of the world which radically differs from the one which is commonly associated with the myths that she employs. They will also be shown to reflect new views of nationhood in response to socio-economic changes in the "new Ireland."

The obvious question then is: "Why use myths at all if they are false?" Elaine Showalter explains that "male writers can forget or mute half of their parentage" because the "dominant culture need not consider the muted" (Showalter 265). Women writers are a different sort. They may, in the words of Virginia Woolf, think "back through" their mothers but they also unavoidably think back through their fathers as well (Showalter 265). The presence of myth in "The Gorgon Child" and "Ode to Suburbia" can be read as attesting to the dominance of the latter. However, this is not to say that Boland is

promoting a patriarchal order any more than belief in the myths contained in these poems. Thus in "The Gorgon Child," Medusa is presented as a powerful but not destructive figure and, in "Ode to Suburbia," Cinderella's sister is ugly but not subjected to ridicule. In both poems, Boland directs us to look upon female images which we have been told to turn away from traditionally because they are said to be either evil or unworthy. Central to the construct of both texts is a repossession of myths in order to poetically reconstruct a female view of the world.

In an essay entitled "Imagining Ireland," Boland speaks of the special difficulties for herself as a woman writer. "It is much easier to make your identity and, if you are a poet, your poetry, from the past and not the present," she writes (Boland 21). The problem with the present is that it does not fit anything in the past or what Boland says she "had come to think of as a national literature and a national identity," although her life as a young mother in Ireland's new suburbia "would have been recognizable to any woman" (Boland 21, 20). In "The Gorgon Child" and "Ode to Suburbia" she treats subjects which are conventionally regarded as especially recognizable to women: childbirth, motherhood, and domesticity. Through Boland's revision of myths, however, a *breaking* with conventions is implied from the start in the particular form these treatments take.

Feeling an increased dissatisfaction with "conventional interpretations" and a lack of connection between her personal experience (particularly of motherhood) and its depiction in poetry led Boland to conclude that "being a woman, I had entered into a life for which poetry has no name" (Boland 21). Similarly, Boland sees the continued rural mythmaking of Ireland as being out of touch with the emergence of suburbia whose exclusion on any literary map "must call the very act of cartography into question" (Boland 22). As if to redress these imbalances, female experience and urban living are the subjects of "The Gorgon Child" and "Ode to Suburbia." An urgency to communicate truths just understood, a distinctive feature of much twentieth-century women's identity writing, takes the form of a mother telling her daughter about her birth—and mother's consequent new sense of self—in "The Gorgon Child" (Gardiner 184). In "Ode to Suburbia," Boland personifies suburbia as Cinderella's "ugly sister" to give this uncharted place both a literary and literal form.

1. Motherhood

In "The Gorgon Child," female identity is presented as something to be understood through physical experience, the act of giving birth being directly equated with the birth of new consciousness for the mother. Boland depicts this mental journeying through images of physical separation from the child. In contrast to many depictions of the woman as motherland (for example in Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union" a woman during childbirth is envisaged by the male speaker as taking on the very shape of Ireland's landscape), there is no such elevation of the mother figure in this poem. When Boland has her speaker say to the child "As you are my horizon,/I your earth," there is no obvious political or national dimension rather it reinforces all previous images of separation and return which prepare us for the final revelation of the speaker "how by separations/love survives/its own stone hour,/its gorgon birth."

Divided into two parts, the poem depicts the birth of a child and the mother's new found knowledge as a result. While images of transformation make up an integral part of the poem, the power associated with the child differs from that of the traditionally destructive Medusa who turns men to stone. Nonetheless, the focus on separation lends a violence to the depiction of childbirth in part one which culminates in the mother's realization ("the bitter truth/that giving birth/was our division").

Boland revises the myth of Medusa in two principal ways. A woman, not a man, is looking at it. The act of doing so is constructive rather than destructive because knowledge is gained rather than life lost. In this poem, there is also a break with the tradition in which the women featured in the work of male Irish writers had, according to Boland, been "passive, decorative, (and) raised to an emblematic status" (Kibert 606). First, the mother figure is not silent but the speaker in the poem. Second, she is depicted as active during the birth. The presence of the active voice throughout the poem never allows us to think that this woman is a passive figure. The pattern is set for the poem's seventeen stanzas in these initial lines:

I wove under the lights
my lace of sweat.
Lifted, I looked down
at the snaky wet
my legs beheaded,
the slick, forked tongues
of your head
and for a glance

I petrified with the season.

Even after first gazing at her newborn daughter (“the gorgon child” of the title), there is no aspect of passivity in the mother’s transformation. Boland writes: “I lay back/to a cluck of nuns,/to a stone knowing.” The words “stone knowing” suggest *hard truth* or *cold fact* with no hint of evil but every indication that this revelation, based as it is on experience, is based in reality, not fabrication.

The second part of the poem concerns the early days of motherhood once the speaker and child have gone home from the hospital. A night feeding is the subject of these stanzas in which the focus moves from separation (in part one) to return. The significance of the mother’s speaking for herself is that it achieves a personalization of experience which becomes universalized through Boland’s use of everyday details, such as the image of “The milkman [who] hums away/to his doorsteps,/his empties.” The other effect of Boland’s use of domestic imagery is a grounding of the speaker’s experience in a suburban reality which is never extended to any form of national significance. “Separation” and “return” or “*reunion*” are never equated with the Irish state, its division into north and south, or unification.

A refusal to employ domestic imagery for national ends is in keeping with Boland’s handling of nature images in the opening stanza where she writes:

It was the dark month
when ice delivers from the earth
crocus by quick crocus
snow’s afterbirth.

Nature here is not nationally metaphorical, as it might be in a poem of national rebirth, but rather physiologically so. It points to the individual woman’s body, not the body politic.

The words “delivers” and “afterbirth” serve to introduce the birth scene which follows. Additionally, nature is shown to govern our sense of time. According to what grows (i.e. crocuses) we know the month. This formulation foreshadows how what grows in a woman’s body alters her vision of the world thereby governing her sense of herself in relation to it. With motherhood, the woman becomes a producer literally of life and an intimate of life’s order. Not only is she presented as physically active but also mentally engaged in understanding the meaning of the event. What motherhood reveals to the speaker is that a woman is not merely a vessel to carry and be emptied of life. She has the capacity for creating new bonds as well through nurturing. Although she is a part of the nursery world of “bears and rag dolls,” the speaker sees herself as distinct from simply

decorative things. The lines “we flesh/to warm fact” refer to the active joining again of mother and child in the shadows and that being flesh makes them powerful beyond mere objects.

It is important to note that the repeated use of “we” by Boland’s speaker in the second part of the poem expresses not only the bond between mother and child but also between two women. For the title “The Gorgon Child” suggests from the start that a daughter is born and is the “you” being addressed throughout the poem. The specific gender of the child is significant on two counts. First, the mother’s lack of passivity is matched by the powerful image of the newborn daughter emerging from the womb like a mythological being with the power to turn onlookers to stone. Women are thus presented as being naturally strong, leaving open to question traditional conceptions of women’s innate passivity and feebleness and directly contrasting late nineteenth-century nationalist representations of Ireland as a woman in bondage. Second, since the speaker imparts her knowledge of specifically female experience to another female, Boland can be said to be reworking the gorgon myth as a piece of women’s oral history. If revision is understood as rewriting, then Boland’s empowering of her female figures suggests a rewriting of history both personal and national in which the image of Ireland as a helpless woman is called into question.

The predominantly female setting of the poem has important implications as well. In contrast to a male figure “delivering” the woman of a child, the only attendants at the birth are nuns. The inclusiveness of this intimately female world is hardly disturbed by the milkman who remains literally an outsider, permitted to venture only as far the doorstep of the speaker’s home. Unlike the nuns who are regarded by the speaker as “knowing” what she would also learn from giving birth, the milkman is characterized by his empty bottles. The latter suggest a lack or absence (i.e. of knowledge) in contrast to the “fullness” of the speaker, which may be represented by a woman’s ability to lactate. The milkman’s humming suggests wordless songs or tunes. In contrast to the speaker whose sole purpose is to convey a message of significance, the milkman’s sounds are essentially devoid of meaning. These juxtapositions and the dominance of female figures in the text amount to a reversal of the peripherizing of women or their subjugation as objects of idealization.

In “The Gorgon Child,” we find perhaps the two most recurrent features in women’s writing which treats the subject of gender difference. These are the *connection* between the body and identity and the significance of the mother/daughter relationship. In her essay

“On Female Identity and Writing by Women,” Judith Kegan Gardiner observes that such texts “inevitably return to the special nature of the mother-daughter bond” and that the “current proliferating literature about motherhood stresses that the daughter’s identification with and separation from the mother is crucial to the daughter’s mature female identity” (Gardiner 186). Where “The Gorgon Child” diverges from the rest is the way in which Boland has the daughter give knowledge to the mother, another reversal in addition to her reworking of the gorgon myth from a destructive to a constructive force.

Boland’s choice of title additionally directs us to think in terms of the origin of identities. Although the figure of the Medusa is commonly reduced to the snake headed image which Perseus beheads and is fixed to Athene’s shield, the word “child” reminds us that this gorgon was not born monstrous but made so. As the only mortal born to Phorcys and Cato, she was beautiful and loved by Poseidon. But this incurred Athene’s wrath, which resulted in Medusa’s being transformed into the shape more often associated with her name. Thus the title alone alludes to the concept that identities are born and made. A child is made but so is the mother remade in the process. Similarly, a nation is made and remade through history and myth making.

The vision of the world as a series of metaphorical departures and returns is rendered through images of its physical occurrence during childbirth. Allusions to Medusa’s snake-like head make for an unflinchingly vivid picture of a new born infant “slick” with blood and embryonic fluid. The sheer violence of delivery is conveyed by the paralleling of the mother with Perseus and the pushing of the child in the world and a beheading. While the latter signifies death, the birth scene is no less momentous for signifying life when Boland writes “and for a glance/l petrified with the season.”

In the final lines, the speaker concludes “from now our meetings/ would be mere re-unions,” once again reaffirming that sense of strength and gain over loss which runs throughout the poem. Instead of sentimentality, a strength and matter of fact tone resounds particularly in this first section which declares that knowledge is power. This is yet another example of revising male notions in that it tellingly inverts the Foucaultian message that “power and knowledge directly imply one another” and that power produces truth (Foucault 175, 205).

To conclude that “The Gorgon Child” is a piece of feminist writing on the principle that “describing experience typical of women is a feminist act” is too much grounded in 1970s’ notions of

consciousness-raising to satisfy many feminist critics today (Moi 207). To quote one:

To believe that common female experience in itself gives rise to a feminist analysis of women's situation, is to be at once politically naive and theoretically unaware. The fact of having the same experience as somebody else in no way guarantees a common political front.... The millions of soldiers who suffered in the trenches during the First World War did not all turn pacifist—or socialist or militarist—afterwards. (Moi 207)

Even the entry on Boland in a popularizing volume like the *Pocket History of Irish Literature* (1997) distinguishes between feminine (subject matter) and feminist (treatment) in her poetry:

The poems of Eavan Boland (b 1945) are written from a self-consciously feminine, often deliberately feminist point of view. They explore the possibility of creating a new woman's pastoral; she thinks that women are deprived without their own cultural rituals, that there is an alienation from cultural roots in modern Irish urban society. (Jeffares 152)

Emphasis on the physiological is regarded by this male critic as “feminine” and he goes on to cite Boland's use of “previously taboo-in-print-outside-women's-journals words (such) as masturbation and menstruation” (Jeffares 152). A resentfulness toward men as evinced in the poem “Mastectomy” combined with its physiological subject matter is given as an example of her “feminism” (Jeffares 152).

Such differentiating between the “feminine” and the “feminist” as the difference between subject matter and its treatment is integral to an understanding of the function of revisionist mythmaking in Boland's poetry. As “The Gorgon Child” illustrates, old myths can be used to convey new messages. They are not the exclusive domain of male writers, nor do women writers have to employ them according to their example.

In her essay, “A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition,” Boland contends that Irish literature has traditionally edited out the reality of womanhood (Kiberd 606). As we observe in “The Gorgon Child,” hard realities are very much “the stuff” of her writing. Here as in other revisions (such as “The Women Turns Herself into a Fish,” a reworking of Yeat's “The Song of Wandering Aengus”) Boland would seem to be redressing what Declan Kiberd calls “the fusion of the feminine and the national in previous Irish poetry (which) seemed to simplify both in ways that were unacceptable” to her (Kiberd 606).

Boland is certainly not alone in her efforts to reconstruct both a

female and a national identity (Belfast-born Medbh McGuckian and the Irish language poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill are equally notable in this regard). Neither is this the mission solely of contemporary Irish woman writers. In American literature, for example, a deliberate confrontation of the selflessness of the “mammy,” which had epitomized womanhood and African American identity for so long, has given rise to a proliferation of new constructions by African American women writers (Davies 135). But what Boland has in common with writers who question or seek to redefine images of women in literary texts is a necessary plurality (directly presenting women’s experiences and simultaneously borrowing from male myths to do so) because there is no exclusively feminist or female space from which she can speak (Moi 205). The revision of myth in “The Gorgon Child” is a perfect example of the reappropriation of male “space” for female ends.

2. Suburbia

The first intimation that “Ode to Suburbia” is a piece of feminist revisionist mythmaking comes in the opening stanza where Boland writes:

Six o’clock: the kitchen bulbs which blister
Your dark, your housewives starting to nose
Out each other’s day, the claustrophobia
Of your back gardens varicose
With shrubs make an ugly sister
Of you suburbia.

Comparable to the opening of “The Gorgon Child,” Boland immediately overturns commonly accepted assumptions that ugliness is to be equated with evil or, at the least, that a woman who is ugly is undeserving of attention. What is made apparent from the title and opening lines of the poem, is that suburbia is the focus of attention although there is no doubting that she is not beautiful.

By describing the back gardens as “varicose” with shrubbery, Boland evokes an image of the backs of women’s legs which are marred by varicose veins. In the third stanza, this image is further extended to the whole of the woman’s body

You swelled so that when you tried
The silver slipper on your foot
It pinched your instep and the common
Hurt which touched you made
You human.

The expansion of the suburbs is thus equated with pathological

growth such as the abnormal dilation of veins or the effects of oedema which is a common complication of pregnancy. While neither exclusively effects women, both are generally associated with female ageing or pregnancy and detract from conventional ideals of beauty such as faultless skin and slenderness.

In spite of these features, Boland does not ask us to conclude that her subject is abhorrent because it is not outwardly attractive. On the contrary, imperfections make this subject more human than its unnamed opposite, Cinderella. Whereas in the classic fairytale, it is a moment of cruel hilarity when the ugly sisters try and fail to fit their feet into the glass slipper proffered by the prince, in Boland's revision, the words "the common/Hurt which touched you made/You human" make this scene invoke our compassion. By inference, Cinderella (with whom we are conventionally meant to identify) is less human, more removed from reality, than her ugly sister. One reason for this is the impossibility that Cinderella's beauty would be so undiminished and bear no marks in spite of her hardships. The other concerns her fantastic rescue.

Boland's picture of suburbia is thus presented from the start as being one which we can trust to be true. Warts and all, it will be a true portrait. Even the regularity of each six line stanza seems to reinforce a sense of solidity as opposed to fantasy. This is further supported by the recurring juxtaposition of the ugly sister with Cinderella in order to give meaning to the former in lines such as these:

No creatures of your streets will feel the touch
Of a wand turning the wet sinews
Of fruit suddenly to a coach,
While this rat without leather reins
Or a whip or britches continues
Sliming your drains.

No magic here.

As in "The Gorgon Child," the implication is that women's lives cannot be told through images which are any more purely female than the language of their making. Like Caliban, the feminist writer finds her power in turning the master's language back upon itself. The fairy tale of Cinderella is employed as a text to contrast with and give substance to a reality which otherwise could not be communicated. On the basis of what it is not, suburbia takes its shape. From the first three stanzas, we learn that suburbia is not beautiful. From the fourth and fifth stanzas, we are led to understand that this is not a place from the realms of fantasy.

Yet, what is also clear from the final two stanzas is that suburbia is not without significance. The last image is consistent with the minutiae on which the poem has been based (“A dish, a brush, ash/ The gape of a fish” etc.). Yet in a change from the listing of detail in earlier stanzas, the image of a housecat is more fully developed and takes up two stanzas. This change coincides with an almost camera-like spanning first of exteriors (“back gardens,” “windows,” “streets”), then interiors (“in every house,” “beside the coals”). Along this route, we are told of suburbia’s “mystery” and “powers,” which small details “defined.” The figure of a housecat is thus linked to suburbia in a way that previous images had not been.

Appreciate the cat’s existence, Boland suggests, and we can comprehend all that suburbia is. By implication, Boland implies that suburbia is overlooked and wrongly underestimated. This comes from the correlation of the cat’s existence with a suburban reality. Both appear to be harmless if not powerless, decorative, and on the peripheries of the centers of power. Yet the effect of the final image of the cat catching a mouse is to challenge these suppositions. This is no mere decorative pet but a beast with the power and will to crush the life from another. This image is in keeping with the picture of suburbia encroaching on “The shy countryside” which is “fooled” by its “plainness.” The effect of these lines and the allusions to Cinderella’s “ugly sister” amounts to a revisionist view of our perceptions of geographic space. The inference is that cities and countryside may have traditionally drawn the most attention, but that suburbia is just as deserving although the criteria for evaluating it may be different. It may be lacking in beauty or history, but it is rich for being the space in which so many people live their lives.

Boland’s depiction of suburbia leads us to revise conventional assumptions about space much as many feminist critics have asked us to read women’s texts differently from those written by men. Ireland’s new suburbs may not have the historical significance of the General Post Office in Dublin, scene of the 1916 Easter Rising, or even those landscapes in Connemara still barren it would seem as an eternal reminder of the Great Famine. Yet by making suburbia the subject of this poem and others, Boland is challenging the exclusion of “ordinary” over “extraordinary” subject matter as worth writing about or indeed reading. Concurrently, Boland is challenging the dominance of symbolically female experience (as it is presented in Heaney’s “Act of Union” for example) over authentically female experience in much Irish literature.

In conclusion, the very existence of “The Gorgon Child” and

“Ode to Suburbia” should make us reevaluate common assumptions about the connection between subject matter and the literary worth of a text. The fact is that a conflict between what may be perceived as male and female values did not cease when Virginia Woolf first pointed out its bearing on literary valuations. Summing up the way differing (male) life values become literary values, Woolf writes:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (Woolf 80)

If, as many feminists argue, “the automatic devaluation of women’s experience and consequent attitudes, values, and judgements springs from an automatic devaluation of women per se,” these revisions of the gorgon myth and “Cinderella” can also be read as revisions of a world order (Russ 41). Whether or not we choose to accept the view presented in these poems, their revaluation of “female” subject matter through the revision of myth reminds us that perceptions of women outside literature still influence what is written, how it is written, and how we read.

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Cheryl Alexander Malcolm
University of Gdansk
Poland

THE ALIEN INSIDER

Saikat Majumdar

In the “Lordship and Bondage” section of *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel writes: “Self-consciousness is primarily simple existence for self, self-identity by exclusion of every other from itself. It takes its essential nature and absolute object to be Ego; and in this immediacy, in this bare fact of its self-existence, it is individual. That which for it is other stands as unessential object, as object with the impress and character of negation” (Hegel 231). A little later, he classifies this duality of the subject and the other in the celebrated model of the master-slave—“The one is independent, and its essential nature is to be for itself; the other is dependent, and its essence is life or existence for another. The former is the Master, or Lord, the latter the Bondsman” (234).

Like many other strands of the project of Enlightenment Reason, the construction of the Subject in terms of its dialectic with the other has been fundamental to the complicity of discourse and power, the detection of which has been central to much twentieth century literary and cultural theory. This discussion has been widely prevalent in existentialist philosophy, as in *Being and Nothingness* by Sartre, where the terms are used to define the process of identity-formation. More significant to the application of theories of subject formation to the detection of the workings of discourse and power in postcolonial literatures are Freudian and post Freudian analyses of the formation of subjectivity, predominantly in the work of Jacques Lacan. Especially significant are the parallels between Lacan’s “other” and its efforts to construct its identity through the mirror stage with the colonized “other,” the process of whose identity formation is contingent on the gaze of the imperial “Other” or the subjective centre of the Empire which in turn corresponds to Lacan’s “grand-autre”. This is the dialectic of identity formation, termed “othering” by Gayatri Spivak that is central to the discourse concerning coloniality/post-coloniality.

As has been often observed by many of its commentators,

J.M. Coetzee's fiction tempts the reader to read endless variations of this subject-other dialectic in it. Coetzee's location with respect to the established canons of Western literature, of course, may be the genesis of such readings (as for instance discussed by Derek Attridge in "Oppressive Silence"), but what excites their further possibilities is the clear play of the motifs of power and subjectivity (and subsequently of ethics, in the mutual relationships and obligations of such conflicting subjectivities) in almost all of his novels. Once again, originating in the colonial and postcolonial milieus of such novels, the *raison d'être* of such readings is constituted by, not only the explicit motifs of historical power struggle between the colonizer and the colonized, the classes of differential privilege, racial and gender groups, but by almost abstracted versions of the dialectic of conflicting subjectivities carried out even when the explicit historical/topical paraphernalia are taken away (leading, doubtless, to the reading of such fictions as allegories). However, all this has been much discussed. What I'd like to argue in this paper is the way Coetzee problematizes the dialectic of the colonized 'other' and the colonizing 'Other' (or the Lacanian *grand-autre*) in various ways, notably through the creation of characters who fall in a limbo between the two, and by the manipulation of narrative distance so as to shape/direct readerly empathy in ways that unsettle such dialectic. The result of such problematizing of the subject-other dialectic is the creation of the kind of character I like to call the 'alien insider,' those who exist, sometimes, on the periphery of the colonizing subject position (even though there is no doubt about their existence within the matrix of such positions), and on other occasions, when they move more towards the centre, have their own subjectivity violently ridden with disintegrating forces. There are several other variations of this problematizing process, some of which are discussed below. Either way, the expected 'Other' in such locations, seems ill-equipped to play the role of the Lacanian 'grand-autre,' whether or not the texts ascribe the role to figures more suitable to such positions. These alien insiders seem to cause Coetzee's fiction to move farther from the Hegelian dialectic of the master-slave (which is not to say there aren't instances of the Hegelian process of subject-construction in Coetzee's fiction; there are—but they are not of interest to me here), and in a troubled way, align itself to the more democratic phenomenology of Alexandre Kojève: "It is only by being 'recognized' by another, by many others, or—in the extreme—by all others, that a human being is really human, for himself as well for others" (Kojève 9). The tortured, often self-deconstructing subjectivity of the alien insider in Coetzee's fiction makes contingent the formation of differ-

ential centres of subjectivity in an irregular hierarchy of power, rendering the absolute position of the imperial centre almost irrelevant or ineffectual, at least so within the paradigm of such fictions.

The classic case of the (novelistic) centrality of the alien insider, to my mind, is *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Postcolonial theorists have often singled out this novel as an instance of 'othering,' or to use a more recent term brought into currency by Spivak, the 'imperial soul-making,' mainly focusing on the decisive actions of Colonel Joll. It is said that Joll's entire project concerning the 'barbarians,' absurd in practical terms, as there is really no border trouble before the arrival of the 'Third Bureau,' "is in the business of *creating* the enemy, of delineating the opposition that must exist, in order that the empire might define itself by its geographical and racial others" (Ashcroft *et al.* 173). Such active process of 'othering' clearly establishes the classical Subject-other duality, placing a figure like Joll at the imperial centre of the power structure. However, of higher significance in the novel and greater relevance to this paper is the figure of the magistrate, who is aptly described as being 'situated at the edge of the 'empire' (Ashcroft *et al.* 173). He is, to my mind, the classic Coetzee protagonist, given supreme importance in terms of the narrative (constituted as the novelistic 'subject,' one may say), but clearly positioned on the margins of the matrix of decisive, operational power that moulds the circumstances, in this instance, the Empire. It is this curious, sometimes ironic gulf between the fictional centrality/Subjectivity of such protagonists and their peripherality within the systems of power engaged in the imperial soul-making that is of interest to me, especially in terms of their interaction to the 'colonized' other(s), with whom they seem to be engaged in a soul-making of a different kind, one that reflects, to my mind, Kojève's phenomenology (or his reading of Hegel's) more than that of Hegel himself as discussed above. Though undoubtedly in a superior power position with respect to such colonized 'others,' their interaction with the alien insiders seems to be a process of a construction of mutual subjectivity, rather than that of the subjectivity of the 'other' in the gaze of the imperial 'grand-autré'—and this is a process which necessarily lacks the conventional hierarchy of power embedded in the Lacanian process. The washing of the 'barbarian' girl's feet by the magistrate seems to me such a Kojevian moment of mutual construction of subjectivity where in fact the magistrate seems to have more at stake than the girl. There is no doubt, of course, about the magistrate's position in the matrix of functional power of the system—it is even institutionalized. He is the magistrate, though clearly the provincially of his jurisdiction and its distance from the central-

ized high-command places it literally on the margins of Empire. But more interesting is the way his imperial subjectivity, or whatever fragmentary, peripheral agency of such subjectivity he is vested with, is conjoined with his centralized subject-position in the novel as its protagonist, a recurring process in several of Coetzee's novels. Even as there is no way of denying Joll's superior or more effective imperial agency, the foregrounding of the troubled and marginalized subjectivity of the magistrate (and our close narrative distance to him, to recount Wayne Booth's term) is almost Coetzee's way of drawing attention to the alien insider who problematizes the very subject-other dialectic through the unique fictional privilege ascribed to him. Menan Du Plessis, while concurring that Colonel Joll is engaged in the futile process of 'creating' the enemy (futile because the barbarians refuse to enter this combat, remaining elusive and invisible) so as to delineate the contours of the Empire through the consequent dialectic, feels that the magistrate, "as the citizen of one of Empire's outposts," might be "one of Hegel's pseudo-masters—a slave without a master, a master without a slave" (Kosew 119). This is perhaps another way of stating the reality of the figure whom I call the 'alien insider,' and I would eventually agree with Du Plessis that "if Coetzee is working through these forms of the Hegelian dialectic, it is always as part of a project that is directed towards a repudiation of the Right-Wing Hegel."

In the early parts of the novel, when the magistrate is still in his position (though jolted by the arrival of Joll), a relative illusion of his proximity and kinship with the Empire is maintained, though through his humanity and his ethical concerns (still relatively unproblematized, as the sense of his alliance with the imperial subject leads to questions of ethics in terms of his behavior to that which is consequently constituted as alterity, a constitution which soon begins to crumble with the problematization of his alliance with the imperial subject), he is set apart from the inexorable system of the Empire, of which Joll is a more representative (and barely recognizable as human) face. But even then, it is clear that his interaction with the girl is something other than the exercise of the power relation that exists between them, and more significant to this argument, divergent from the process of demarcating her as the clear 'other' so as to expedite the strengthening of one's own Subject position, as might be expected from the impression of his still relatively unimpaired alliance to the Empire. Rather during the epiphanic process of washing the girl's feet, there seems to be a dissolution of all subjectivities:

I lose myself in the rhythm of what I'm doing. I lose awareness of

the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present. When I come to, my fingers have slackened, the foot rests in the basin, my head droops. (Coetzee, *Barbarians* 28)

As the novel moves on the illusion of the magistrate's real alliance to the Empire is progressively shattered. A representative movement is the expedition to the land of the barbarians which he leads, one that contrasts itself starkly with Joll's project in that it is not directed towards seeking out the barbarians in an effort to 'create' them, but an effort to return the girl to her people whose existence he is already assured of. It is an action which pushes him farther out on the margins of the empire (but never quite out there with the barbarians), as it earns the disapproval of those in power, thus revealing with greater directness and clarity, his position as the alien insider. And by the end of the novel he can clearly enunciate this deconstruction of subject-other position that the empire plays out, or more importantly, his desire for it:

I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that this is cause for shame? (Coetzee, *Barbarians* 154)

The unforgettable Eugene Dawn of *The Vietnam Project* in Coetzee's very first book is just as clearly situated within the matrix of imperial agency. He is working on the project of carrying out a successful psychological warfare directed towards the Vietnamese against the backdrop of the US-Vietnam war (Coetzee's interest in different historical variations of imperialism may be an indication of his interest in the idea of imperialism in an almost abstracted form, less so than in specific historical incarnations, even though South Africa presents a peculiarly detailed and complicated situation in his fiction. It is instructive to remember his complaint that perhaps it is "that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a 'South African novelist.'"). The actual preoccupation with motifs of subjectivity and a rather Lacanian idea of a forbidding father figure for the Vietnamese in Eugene Dawn's contribution to the "New Life for Vietnam" is indeed striking. Dawn's work, as such, is rather sophisticated—not the typical imperialist's roughshod ride over the identity-construction of the colonized (or sought to be colonized) and the thoughtless imposition of western models of subjectivity, widely divergent from the indigenous paradigms, on them. In a striking gesture of relevance to the anti-foundational critique of the Enlightenment carried out by post-structuralist philosophy, Eugene

Dawn acknowledges the ineffectuality of the voice of the Western subject in the role of the propagandist as that he describes in the following words: "It is the voice of the doubting self, the voice of Rene Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world and the self who contemplates the self" (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 21).

Aware of the discrepancies in western and Vietnamese paradigms of subjectivity, Eugene Dawn is busy in devising better ways of intensifying the effectiveness of the father figure which will eventually subjugate the disobedient subjectivities of the colonized as they emerge, as it were, from the imaginary to the symbolic order, in a venerating submission to the phallic Law of the Father:

The father cannot be a benign father until his sons have knelt before his wand.

The plotting of the sons against the father must cease. They must kneel with hearts bathed in obedience.

When the sons know obedience they will be able to sleep.
(*Dusklands* 28)

The official location of Dawn within the matrix of imperialist agency is matched with his privileged narratorial position within the novella. *The Vietnam Project* is his story, first and foremost. He is the first person narrator, and as such the only character into whose mind we are allowed a direct glimpse. The problems we encounter in the novella are all his problems, even though we are aware that there are other pressing issues at hand, including his wife Marilyn's discontent, his son Martin's unhappiness, not to speak of the whole troubled history of the US-Vietnam war. But they are clearly relegated as secondary by the narratorial privilege of Eugene Dawn, and inducted into this fictional universe, we are willing to buy this primacy of his issues.

Dawn's 'alienness' within his status as an 'insider,' in the matrix of imperialist power, however, is a little different from that of the magistrate. Coetzee's intense preoccupation with the internal and the psychological in his earlier fiction (*In the Heart of the Country* being the other notable instance of this preoccupation) leads Dawn's destabilization in his position to being more overtly a matter of the inner construction of subjectivity and the consequent power relationships that come into existence than a working of the concrete forces of administrative and political power as in between the Magistrate and Joll. This is not to imply that that relationship is not without its psychological motivations, just that it seems to transpire in a world of real action more than that of Dawn and his superior, Coetzee. He writes, "Here I am under the thumb of a manager, a type before

whom my first instinct is to crawl" (*Dusklands* 1). The crabbiness of a professional life under the strictures of a demanding, even tyrannical manager is not enough to explain this literal disintegration of the personality; I feel that this disintegrating weakness is rather a permanent constituent of Dawn's self, and this brings us back to the ironic gulf between the affiliation of the alien insider with imperialism and his tenuous, peripheral position within it. Why, Eugene Dawn "cannot help" being Eugene Dawn—or not being so, one would think! Dawn's manager Coetzee's position here would indeed approximate Joll's, representing the impersonal (and hence more effective) agency of Empire and contrasting with the peripherality of Dawn, like that of the magistrate. While the perspective of the novel in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is predominantly the magistrate's, it is at least told in the third person, but in "The Vietnam Project," the ironic gulf of power/subjectivity is deepened by Dawn's narration of it, creating the classic case of the unreliable narrator. Dawn's position with respect to the Empire is threatened even more seriously than the magistrate's as the state comes after him over his irresponsible behavior with regard to his wife and son—he who was intent on carving the absolute Father figure over the Vietnamese turns out to be a hopelessly inadequate father himself! The emasculated individual who cannot effectively constitute his own subjectivity (let alone with respect to alterity), is barren ground as far as procreating or nurturing future generations as much as the positivity of eros, and hence the deadness of his sexual motions with his wife:

Before the arrival of my seed her pouch yawns and falls back, leaving my betrayed representative gripped at its base, flailing its head in vain inside an immense cavern, at the very moment when above all else it craves to be rocked through its tantrum in a soft, firm, infinitely trustworthy grip. The word which at such moments flashes across the heavens of my never quite extinguished consciousness is *evacuation*: my seed drips like urine into the futile sewers of Marilyn's reproductive ducts. (Coetzee, *Dusklands* 8)

Parenthood (or at least its basic responsibilities, carried out in a more stable past outside the framework of the novel) is a more successful affair with Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, but her location within the matrix of agency/subjectivity is no less problematic than any of the other alien insiders of Coetzee, if only in a drastically different way. Along with race, class and empire, gender is an issue which interests Coetzee deeply, as we also see in *Foe*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Disgrace* and the quasi-fictional lectures involving Elizabeth Costello. The position of women usually enables him to further explore issues of subalternity, power and exploitation, and more

importantly, problematized subjectivities, and occasionally, critiques of such subjectivities and modes of discourse, as in *The Lives of Animals*. *Age of Iron* is told in the first person, a feature which immediately draws attention to the subjectivity of the narrator protagonist, but also demonstrates, to a much greater degree than the narrative of Eugene Dawn, a desire (often bordering on success) to assert mastery over her narrative, to give shape to it, a desire immediately corroborated by the fact that it is in fact in the shape of a letter written to her daughter, an actual effort at creativity and communication that is a stark contrast with Eugene Dawn's infertile inability to communicate with his progeny. Her position with respect to the tramp Vercueil would, at first sight seem to be one of the classic subject-other binary, with consequent ethical awareness of one's responsibility to the 'other' almost in the manner of Emmanuel Levinas, reminiscent of the magistrate's initial responses to the barbarian girl. While Vercueil is immediate and close, the community of the black South Africans under apartheid constitutes a kind of a collective 'otherness,' to whose oppression Mrs Curren's horrified, morally outraged attention has suddenly been drawn in the last years of her life, the time that the novel frames. Fictional structures reinforce the feel of this duality, what with the first person narration by Mrs Curren and the occasional luxury of philosophizing, often framed within the meaning and power of the classical allusions strewn throughout the text.

But that is where the limits of Mrs Curren's active power/agency lie. In the context of the real imperial/racial struggle (significantly, this is Coetzee's only novel, apart from *Disgrace*, written about contemporary South Africa, indeed, both a product of and a response to the times), Mrs Curren is hardly vested with any real agency, apart from her racial (and that of class, possibly) affiliation with the colonizers—nothing at all even in comparison with the troubled agencies of the magistrate and Eugene Dawn, who at least are real, official vehicles of imperialism, whatever might be their psychological identification with it. An old woman, dying of cancer (her death, as we move closer to it towards the end of the book, can be seen as a literalization of the final dissolution of her subjectivity), left alone in a deserted house, in a country that seems to be deserted by its capable youth, in an atmosphere of decay and despair. The irony of the situation of the alien insider is her realization of the horrors carried out by the colonizing race with whom her relationship is troubled and tenuous—she is racially connected to them but has lived in relative ignorance of their imperialist oppression, much less with any kind of sympathy or agency with such oppressions; whatever knowledge she has had being indeed invested in opposition to such

imperialisms. The blurb of the Penguin edition puts it well: “Mrs Curren has been opposed to the lies and brutality of apartheid all her life, but has lived insulated from its true horrors.” The unfortunate result of this realization in the sad twilight of her life is the sense of guilt, a classic mental state of the alien insiders who can never align themselves to either the subject or the other—guilt felt on behalf of her race, as it were, that which impels her to help the colonized and their activists and also subjects herself to a sad sense of historico-ethical determinism that makes counter-racial injustices seem proper and inevitable, though not to the extent David Lurie and Lucie seem to feel such determinisms in *Disgrace*.

With respect to the central symbol of ‘otherness’ in the book, Vercueil, the disintegration of Mrs Curren’s imperial subject position, or whatever weak vestiges of it are left in her, is steady and decisive right from their first meeting. It is almost ironic, the way the ethical guilt of the oppression by her people carried on the likes of Vercueil (a guilt not possible, in the first place, without a degree of subject-other binary) turns into a degree of kinship with him that effectively leads to the dissolution of such a binary. It is a process not entirely dissimilar to that between the magistrate and the barbarian girl, and it is interesting how the reversal of gender positions keeps corresponding nuances alive in the two relationships, if in inverted forms with respect to each other. Of all the alien insiders, Mrs Curren clearly moves closest to the ‘other’ by the end of the novel, even more than the magistrate. The final gesture of her and Vercueil’s embrace almost at the moment of her death becomes a simultaneous ritual of eros and thanatos—the physical death of the subject (symbolic, perhaps of its final severance from the agency of colonization) combined with an identification with the subjectivity of alterity.

One could continue with the observation of such alien insiders in Coetzee, as with Susan Barton in *Foe* or Magda of *In the Heart of the Country*, both of whose gender and inter-subjective conflicts, among a hundred other things make both of them ideal instances, or with Elizabeth Costello of *The Lives of Animals*, “The Novel in Africa,” and “What is Realism,” but for the sake of brevity I’ll refrain from discussing them in the present paper. It’ll suffice to say here that Elizabeth Costello, clearly alienated between such widely divergent and conflicting ‘subjectivities’ as those of animals, the straight white upper middle class American professional/intellectual family and the black male novelist from sub-Saharan Africa, is an especially interesting example of this figure I’ve been discussing throughout the paper, not only because of the superior power and intellectual agency she

possesses, but because of the way she uses such power to carry out a discursive analysis and critique of the complicity of subjectivity, discourse and power (no doubt, made easier by the generic structure of the works she appears in) of the ostensible subjectivity of global capitalist imperialism, but also of that of the supposed alterity, of the post-colonial novelist from Black Africa and his 'performance.' Truly an alien insider, Costello cannot align herself to either side, and is seemingly qualified, more than any other, to inhabit that interstitial space between madness and reason that Derrida felt was necessary to Foucault's project to speak about either with any degree of fairness.

What is the meaning of highlighting such alien insiders, of making them the fictional centres of the novels? One can make an endless number of conjectures. Is it an effort to present a more human face of the empire, implying that the real human beings vested with imperial agency are in fact pathetically ill-equipped to do justice to such agencies, that the real 'grand-autre' is the impersonal, non-human system which perpetrates itself without any real investment in actual human beings? Not likely. If the magistrate and Eugene Dawn are the troubled middle-subjects on behalf of such an impersonal imperial system, the human features of Colonel Joll or Coetzee of *Dusklands* are discernable enough, or, for that matter, that of Jacobus Coetzee, whose narrative in my mind demonstrates most directly the process of the Hegelian construction of subjectivity in the negation, indeed, the physical annihilation of the rival subject, of the bondsman by the master. Or is it Coetzee's way of deconstructing the established paradigms of stability and coherence of the process of imperial soul-making, as might be evident from the disturbed subjectivities of such figures as the magistrate, Eugene Dawn, or Mrs Curren in spite of their clear location within the imperial/privileged class? Again, the unlikelihood of this implication is indicated by the relative coherence and functionality of the figures that illustrate the Hegelian or Lacanian models of soul-making, as those mentioned above. Is it then a foregrounding of the poststructuralist notion of the subject as a 'site' than a 'centre' or a 'presence,' where the 'self' is disintegrated, and following the loss of its status as a source or master of meaning, emerges more like a construct? Such notions of subjectivity approximate the more egalitarian phenomenology of Kojève, as indeed evident in Jonathan Culler's statement: "Even the idea of a personal identity emerges through the discourse of a culture: the 'I' is not something given but comes to exist as that which addressed by and related to others" (Culler 33). Joll and Jacobus Coetzee may exist, and so might Daniel Foe (I do not wish to suggest,

as my repeated allusion to these figures might be guilty of implying, that their 'soul-making' is necessarily unproblematic; it is only relatively so compared to that of the alien insiders), but the author's narrative emphasis on the troubled 'sites' of selfhood might indicate a relative sympathy with the poststructuralist paradigms.

Either way, it is instructive to relate the problematic locations of such alien insiders to Coetzee's own position with respect to the established canons of English literature, or, for that matter, within the historical milieu of South Africa, which by itself holds a uniquely problematized position among postcolonial communities—if it can indeed be called one. A white South African, but not one of English origin, of predominantly Afrikaans ancestry, with a troubled childhood and conflicting cultural influences...Coetzee's position clearly does not possess the degree of clarity that can be afforded by either that of an Achebe or a Kipling, and both volumes of his autobiography, *Boyhood* and *Youth* bear ample evidence to this problematic location. The young protagonist's troubled experience in school, the complicated process of Anglicization his family goes through, eventually creating the cultural forces that shape him (including, possibly, his decision to write in English), carry over to his unique marginalization in England as an aspiring author from the periphery of Empire (not only the center of imperial power but also perceived as that of the cherished paradigms of culture), and significantly, the relative lack of an indigenous cultural tradition (or access to it, anyway) as independent from the colonizing West that renders impossible such gestures as Ngugi's return to Gikuyu...all these autobiographical facts indicate the status of an alien insider who is inherently disempowered to align oneself clearly to either the colonizer or the colonized.

The alien insider of Coetzee's fiction seems to be of a similar breed as that of many of the protagonists of Graham Greene. The direct correspondences between Henry Scobie of *The Heart of the Matter* and the magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is indeed striking, but several other figures, like the priest in *The Power and the Glory* and to a lesser extent, Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* also demonstrate comparable instances of the troubled subject, often located on the periphery of the dominating order in the context of colonization or class, race or gender struggle. The big difference is that with Greene's protagonists the struggle and the process of disintegration seem to possess an overtly moral dimension, especially with regard to an order of morality that is heavily Catholic—notions and actions relating to 'guilt' and 'sin' abound with respect to such protagonists.

In Coetzee, even though expiation is a running, if implied motif, it occurs more in a historical context (that of colonial and racial oppression), as suggested by the gestures of the magistrate washing the barbarian girl's feet and the help and cooperation offered by Mrs Curren towards Verceuil and the young activists and less in a personal context, much less guilt in a Catholic, or any religious sense. Even so, the moral dilemmas (not to speak of the commonality of the 'colonial' locales) of many Greene protagonists, and their gradual fall, almost in the manner of Greek tragedies, have striking correspondences with the destabilized subjectivities of the alien insiders of Coetzee, whose conflict however seem more of a phenomenological and a psychological nature rather than of a moral one (Ethics, however, is a large part of this conflict, inasmuch as it relates to one's interaction with/obligation towards alterity, but the ethics of such relationships, necessarily contingent on the construction of the subject and the other, is also considerably complicated following the problematizing of the subject-other duality by the very existence of such alien insiders). Another writer whose position in the English canon (rather his position before he was suitably canonized by Leavis and company) seems comparable to what Coetzee probably holds today is Joseph Conrad, the Pole-turned naturalized British subject, writing in his third language, English, and often dealing with issues of colonial power and identity construction. It would in fact be interesting to read Conrad's protagonists as alien insiders, as some of them are indeed placed on the margins of an imperial power system, but they are, all the same, engaged in the process of the imperial soul-making in the colonies, whether as weak intermediaries, or purveyors of private dreams, as Jim or Kurtz. *Lord Jim*, like many of Conrad's novels, has been often read in terms of the patterns of classical, especially Greek tragedy—the Aristotelean good man with a single flaw, his hubris, the fall and the expectation of anagnorisis and catharsis. Such readings, put in conjunction with contemporary analyses of the political situation in which the novel is set can yield a narrative of postcolonial discourse if we filter the flaws and falls of the Aristotelean hero with the kind of challenges with which Michel Foucault confronts the European Enlightenment. The determinate nature of the tragic path which, for all its insistence on the power of destiny and the furies, ends up glorifying the individuality of Oedipus or Medea (though maybe not to the extent Renaissance humanism glorifies a Hamlet or a Lear), in this interpretation, gives way to a critique of the notions of progress, reason and the munificence and efficacy of pastoral power, notions which the protagonist can be seen as possessing in a naïveté not dissimilar to the brittleness of the

Cartesian Cogito. Still, the Conradian hero (significantly, almost always white and male) seems to have his subjectivity constituted relatively unproblematically (compared to those of Coetzee's anyway), and is somewhat better qualified to play the role of the Lacanian 'grand-autre' than Coetzee's magistrate or Eugene Dawn—or at least masquerade for it. They are even, as in *Lord Jim*, motivated by notions of 'progress' and the subsequent wielding of the pastoral power on the colonized people, though their fates often end in a tragic demolition of the romance of such progress, reason and goodwill, as is the fate of both Jim and Kurtz. Still the relative integrity of their subjective constitution, and their 'progressive' optimism, coupled with their privileged racial and gendered make up, place them at a considerable distance from the position of the alien insider—the insider who comes to grief is not necessarily an alien insider! Equidistant on the other side of the alien insider would be a protagonist like Achebe's Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart*, who remains firm, almost in the manner of an Aristotlean hero, till his death, in his refusal to have either his subjectivity or his fate shaped by the gaze of the colonizing Grand Other, in a gesture of truculent independence that resonates with Frantz Fanon's conclusion in *Black Skin: White Masks*: "I am my own foundation. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom" (Fanon 231). A comparison of such widely divergent, indeed conflicting subjectivities (what might have happened if Okonkwo and Kurtz figured in the same novel is best left to one's bloodthirsty imagination, a situation, however, perhaps no more potentially explosive than one in which the Ibo tribal leader might meet Kipling's Gunga Din!) helps us get a better sense of the alien insider, truly caught in between the conflicting forces of power-struggle and imperial soul-making, for which Coetzee's fiction remains one of the most striking sites in contemporary fiction, especially among works dealing with the processes historically invested with the motifs of subjectivity and subalternity.

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Saikat Majumdar
English Department
Rutgers University
United States of America

AN ASSERTION OF INDIVIDUALITY: READING GUSTAVO ADOLFO BÉCQUER'S GREEN-EYED WOMAN AS A SUBLIME OBJECT

Emron Esplin

In her study on the female side of Romanticism, *Las románticas*, Susan Kirkpatrick connects Romantic authors from several countries by claiming that regardless of their many differences all male Romantic authors desired to assert their subjectivity by portraying themselves as individuals (9). Anne K. Mellor explains that the British Romantics pushed for individuality by making an object of woman. The Romantic, she states, "ignores her human otherness" in hopes of obtaining "absolute possession of the beloved" (27). Mellor's complaint and Kirkpatrick's observation appear especially intriguing when studying the work of the Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. Even a casual study of Bécquer shows that women are essential to his work because they are his work. Indeed, woman serves as Bécquer's driving metaphor throughout his poetry, prose, and theory.

Bécquer continually establishes his selfhood by transforming woman into a beautiful object. Specifically, in *Cartas literarias a una mujer*, he objectifies woman by claiming that she is poetry. He states "poesía,... poesía eres tú!" (*Obras completas II* 349). With this statement, Bécquer creates a barrier between himself and the woman who serves as his inspiration. He is the human individual who can be inspired by beauty, but the woman he admires is merely an object that motivates him by stirring his emotions. James Mandrell describes Bécquer's famous decree in a slightly different manner by claiming that his words "relegate women to the role of muse and helpmeet" (70). *Muse* has a more positive connotation than *object*, but it is still negative and degrading for the woman because it does not recognize her existence as a subjective being. Bécquer repeats his claim that woman is poetry in his "Rima XXI," and in "Rima IV" he states, "mientras exista una mujer hermosa/ ¡habrá poesía!" (*Rimas, Leyendas, Cartas desde mi celda* 11, 22). Clearly, Mellor's complaint that British male Romantics deny female subjectivity can also be

applied to Bécquer for his repeated objectification of women.

The fact that Bécquer objectifies woman seems undebatable, but focusing on his use of woman as a beautiful object can be reductive because this approach ignores another recurrent theme in Bécquer's work—the sublime. Bécquer does not always deal with the small and controllable, and although he does not directly claim to be delving into the sublime, several of his pieces deal with issues of vastness and the inability to use words to capture experience. Bécquer's writing frequently reveals the frustration he suffers due to his inability to encompass the vast and infinite.

I find the strongest example of Bécquer's use of the sublime in his short story "Los ojos verdes."¹ Manuela Cubero Sanz claims that all of Bécquer's women are beautiful (370), but the woman Bécquer creates in "Los ojos verdes" is more than a beautiful object; she becomes an object of the sublime through which Bécquer seeks to control the sublime nature of his own mind. Reading the green-eyed woman as a sublime object provides greater insight into why Bécquer constantly objectifies women. This interpretation also creates an interesting double reading which empowers the green-eyed woman, according to Edmund Burke's version of the humbling sublime experience, and simultaneously degrades her, paralleling Immanuel Kant's version of sublime transcendence. Ultimately, this reading is important because it adds depth and understanding to Bécquer's use of women as both beautiful and sublime objects by showing how he, like other Romantic authors, creates these women to establish his individuality as a subject and a poet.

Examples of Bécquer's Use of the Beautiful Woman to Control the Sublime

Before focusing on the green-eyed woman, it is necessary to note Bécquer's preoccupation with vastness and show how a beautiful woman can begin to relieve, but not completely alleviate, his fixation. In his famous theoretical piece "Introducción sinfónica," Bécquer provides a clear example of his frustration with the sublime by comparing his thoughts to children who are never born or seeds that never sprout (*Obras* 475). Here, the sublime is found within the vastness of Bécquer's own mind. He is tormented by his thoughts

¹ Bécquer's stories "El rayo de luna" and "El Miserere" provide similar evidence of Bécquer's preoccupation with the sublime, but I choose to focus on "Los ojos verdes" because it is the most poignant example.

because he cannot bring them into physical reality. He laments, “¡ay!, ¡que entre el mundo de la idea y el de la forma existe un abismo que sólo puede salvar la palabra y la palabra tímida y perezosa se niega a secundar sus esfuerzos!” (475). In the terms of Immanuel Kant, Bécquer’s frustration between thought and word can be described as an effect of the sublime. Kant claims that an important element of the sublime is that it “cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation” (202-203). In “Introducción sinfónica,” Bécquer suggests that his ideas are so immense that he is inadequate to reproduce them in written language, the medium of a poet. His inability to express his thoughts as words grieves him because he realizes his lack of control as an individual subject. When Bécquer admits he lacks control, he recognizes, even as a poet, that he cannot deal with the sublime nature of his thoughts by himself, and through this confession, he acknowledges the deterioration of his subject.

In his renowned poem “Rima I,” Bécquer faces the same gulf of separation between thought and word that he describes in “Introducción sinfónica.” The poem begins, “yo sé un himno gigante y extraño.” The second stanza shows his desire to write the hymn, and in the third stanza he mourns “[p]ero en vano es luchar; que no hay cifra/ capaz de encerrarle” (*Rimas* 6). Again, Bécquer is unable to write down what flourishes in his mind. He is unable to transform his thoughts into characters that convey meaning in the real world. Bécquer’s frustrations grow when he tries to control the sublime by himself through written figures, and as an individual, he cannot do so because he cannot write his thoughts. Still, he never claims that *spoken* words fail him—but to speak, he needs an audience. He needs another person, one who will listen rather than reply, to whom he can prove his subjectivity by verbally sharing his vast thoughts.

“Introducción sinfónica” ends as a fragment where Bécquer is still fighting the infinite alone, but in the last stanza of “Rima I,” Bécquer finds an audience that helps him overcome the sublime. The person Bécquer finds to help him cross the chasm between the sublimity in his head and the rigid reality of the physical world is a woman. “Rima I” triumphantly concludes when Bécquer claims that if he were alone with the beautiful woman, holding her hands in his, he could sing the hymn in her ear (6). Through the beautiful woman, Bécquer is finally able to share the vast thoughts which have churned

within his head. The woman does not reply when Bécquer sings her the marvelous song. She does not show her selfhood by explaining how the hymn effects her. Instead, she receives Bécquer's words in silence. Bécquer only identifies her by calling her "beautiful," so her identity does not seem important to him. She is only valuable to Bécquer because she allows him to release his tormenting emotions by listening to the sublime thoughts he converts into spoken words. The woman becomes an object because her value is based upon the fact that she hears the poet and, thus, gives him a way to express his subjectivity. With her help, Bécquer can control the vastness of his own mind; he can restrict what seemed to be infinite and sublime.

"Rima I" and "Introducción sinfónica" introduce Bécquer's frustration with the vastness of the mind. He does not overtly claim that the sublime torments him, but his fear of not being able to communicate because of the infinite nature of his thoughts resembles descriptions of the sublime experience as described by both Kant and Burke. It is interesting that Bécquer finds control of the infinite through physical communication with the finite. In other words, he controls the sublime by communicating with the beautiful. He uses a beautiful woman as inspiration, and only through a physical touch of her hand can he explain the immense thoughts and emotions of his imagination. His use of a woman as a beautiful object is similar to that of other Romantics throughout Europe, but Bécquer goes one step further in his quest to control the sublime and prove his subjectivity. In "Los ojos verdes," Bécquer creates a woman who encompasses the sublime. This woman controls the male character who comes in contact with her, but she is also a narrative object that Bécquer controls.

In his seminal book *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel claims that "[i]t would be hard to overestimate the presence of the Romantic sublime in the nineteenth century" (5). Weiskel's statement suggests that a fascination with the sublime was an important part of several countries' versions of Romanticism, but in his analysis of the sublime in Romantic literature, he specifically examines the British Romantics through the lenses of Longinus, Burke, and primarily, Kant. Like Weiskel, John Rosenberg employs Burke and Kant's explanations of the sublime, but he does so in order to discuss Romanticism in Spain. In the third chapter of *The Black Butterfly: Concepts of Spanish Romanticism*, Rosenberg traces the history of the idea of the sublime in Spain. Following his chronology, Longinus' work "was well known in Spain" by the middle of the seventeenth century, Burke's study had been published four times in Spain between 1801 and 1842, and Kant's name, if not his work, was known

by the Spaniards as early as 1799 (82-83). Spanish Romanticism did not reach its apogee until the 1830s, but Bécquer's work came even later. He was the last of the Spanish Romantics and did not begin to publish until 1857. By this time, Burke's interpretation of the sublime had been circulating Spain for over fifty years, and almost sixty years had passed since the Spaniards began to hear about Kant. While we might assume that a well-read artist like Bécquer would have analyzed and discussed the popular aesthetics of the time, the point is not that Bécquer could have read Burke and Kant, but that he used his poetry and his fiction to deal with similar issues of infinity and transcendence even though he did not specifically label them as sublime.

In my double reading of "Los ojos verdes," I rely on the terminology of Burke and Kant to conduct my literary analysis. I use Kant and Burke as my primary experts on the sublime rather than Longinus for two reasons. First, the differences between Kant and Burke's explanations of the sublime create an interesting contrast that allows me to read the green-eyed woman as a sublime object in two distinct ways. Second, although Longinus appears to be the originator of the term, his description of the sublime was vague at best. James B. Twitchell states that "Longinus was supposedly the first to discuss the sublime, but in fact he said precious little about what was to be considered sublimity" (13). By juxtaposing Burke's version of the sublime with Kant's explanation, I can analyze both the positive and negative effects that creating a sublime object has on the green-eyed woman and Fernando, the man who seeks after her affection. Finally, I can use both Burke and Kant to discuss how Bécquer creates the green-eyed woman as a sublime object to affirm his power as an acting subject.

The Green-eyed Woman as an Empowered Sublime Object

In his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke contrasts the characteristics of the sublime with those of the beautiful. One important distinction is that sublime objects are huge while beautiful objects are small (124). This definition causes a problem when reading Bécquer's green-eyed woman as a sublime object because all humans are small when compared to the vastness of nature. Although she is physically small, the green-eyed woman's sphere of power, a mystical fountain called los Álamos, is vast. She still qualifies as a sublime object because an encounter with her requires her visitor to

enter her realm which is large enough to compensate for her size. Even more importantly, she offers negative pleasure to those who visit her, and pleasurable pain is a significant qualifier for a sublime object. Another problem arises with the sublime reading of the green-eyed woman—she is extremely beautiful (*Rimas* 64). Can a woman be both beautiful and sublime at the same time? Burke argues that beauty and sublimity are so different that he finds it nearly impossible for them to exist in the same object “without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other of the passions” (114). Still, his claim does not deny that an object can have both sublime and beautiful characteristics if one trait outweighs the other. Such is the case with the woman in “Los ojos verdes.” Although she is beautiful, her beauty is outweighed by her sublime characteristics.

The green-eyed woman’s fountain home masks her small size and begins to qualify her as a sublime object. In the opening scene of “Los ojos verdes,” Íñigo, the master hunter, tries to dissuade his lord, Fernando, from following a wounded deer to the mouth of the fountain. All of the local hunters and peasants fear to approach los Álamos, and Íñigo claims that anyone who approaches the “fuente misteriosa” will be cursed. Along with the other hunters, he refuses to follow Fernando to the spring (*Rimas* 60). Although they have never been to the fountain themselves, the hunters are willing to offend their master, thus risking their lives to his anger, to avoid the fountain. Their terror of the fountain’s supernatural power outweighs their fear of the physical punishment their lord could inflict upon them. The fountain of los Álamos, then, can be described as a sublime setting according to Burke because it causes tension and terror (134). The hunters’ terror can be blamed on their superstitious nature, but if they are willing to accept possible censure and punishment from Fernando—something they have probably experienced and know to be real—in order to avoid a fountain they have never seen, their superstition itself takes on sublime attributes. Whether the actual fountain or the hunters’ superstitious beliefs about the fountain cause them to fear it, their fear resembles the type of terror caused by the sublime.

Fernando is not initially affected by his servants’ fear. He ignores Íñigo’s counsel and follows the wounded prey to los Álamos (*Rimas* 61), and by doing so, he experiences the sublimity of the scene first hand. For Fernando, one of the fountain’s sublime elements is its size. Days after his first journey to los Álamos, he describes the area to Íñigo by saying “todo allí es grande” (62). The size of the fountain area makes it sublime because Fernando cannot take in the whole

scene at once. Burke explains that large areas or “visual objects” have a sublime effect because the human eye cannot capture the entire area at the same time. The eye must move rapidly over the object and focus on several disparate points. This rapid movement causes small repeated amounts of pain that lead to great pain and “produce an idea of the sublime” (137). Following Burke’s reasoning, Fernando is filled with feelings of “soledad” and “melancolía” because of the vast nature of los Álamos (Rimas 62). The fountain’s size overwhelms him and pains him in the form of deep sadness, and he cannot overcome this gloom, even when he is away from the fountain.

The green-eyed woman’s fountain appears even more sublime as Fernando explains the confusion the fountain causes. He claims that he does not know what he has heard while sitting at the fountain’s edge even though it sounded like “lamentos, palabras, nombres, cantares” (62) all at once. The multiple sounds of the fountain overpower Fernando the same way the fountain’s size affects him. His senses are burdened to an extreme, and he cannot take in all of the sounds at the same time. Burke claims that such an array of sounds creates a sublime effect. He states, “[t]he noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery” can produce the sublime, while “[t]he shouting of multitudes has a similar effect” (82). The mixture of sounds the fountain produces overwhelms Fernando and leaves him confused. His confusion can be labeled as a lack of understanding that is similar to what Burke calls “vacuity” or a mindless, vacuum-like state. For Burke, vacuity is terrible, and like other privations, it can be linked to the sublime (71). The noises from the fountain add to the already immense effect of its size to produce a setting that confuses Fernando because it is visually and audibly sublime.

The green-eyed woman controls the sublime fountain, but *she* is also sublime because she creates negative pleasure. The term “negative pleasure” comes from Kant’s ideas on the sublime (202), but Burke says essentially the same thing in different words. He claims, “that the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation [...] and that no pleasure from a positive cause belongs to it” (86). A sublime object or event, then, produces a negative delight because the person who encounters the sublime feels threatened but somehow knows that he² will not die. The emotional rush caused by the danger

² I repeatedly refer to the person who experiences the sublime as male because both Kant and Burke limit the possibility of encountering the sublime to men.

excites the individual, and this excitement is enjoyable because the person still feels the shelter of distance. Up close, the sublime loses its pleasurable capability because the person feels uncontrolled terror instead of terrible excitement. Thus, from a distance, an individual receives pleasure from something that could destroy him.

In "Los ojos verdes," the green-eyed woman provides negative pleasure for Fernando in two ways. First, she creates a desire in Fernando that threatens to separate him from everyone he knows and loves. Fernando tells Íñigo that he adores the strange woman's eyes more than anything and that he would gladly give up the love of his parents and the love of all the women in the world for a single glance at her eyes (*Rimas* 64). This desire is negative because Fernando is willing to renounce the attention of all other humans and cut the bonds between himself and his parents just to see the woman's green eyes. Fernando's desire is also pleasurable because he is experiencing it from a distance. He is not at the fountain when he tells Íñigo of his wish. The distance between himself and the sublime woman at that moment makes an encounter with her seem exciting. From this distance, Fernando feels threatened but knows that for the moment he is safe and will not actually lose all contact with other people. Íñigo sees the negative side of Fernando's desire in Fernando's serious and sad countenance, but Fernando feels both the negative and pleasurable sides of his wish to see the woman's eyes when he mourns, "¡cómo podré yo dejar de buscarlos!" (64). The threat of separation from others is not fatal, but the risk of going through a complete world shift is definitely negative for Fernando unless it is experienced from a distance.

The green-eyed woman also provides negative pleasure in a more dramatic fashion by threatening Fernando's life. The final time that Íñigo speaks with Fernando, he again warns Fernando that his continued visits to the fountain will lead to his death. Fernando still ignores the hunter's advice and returns to the fountain where he sits by its edge and speaks to the woman who stands on top of the water (63-65). Even at the fantastic fountain's edge, enough distance remains between Fernando and the green-eyed woman to create negative pleasure. Fernando has been warned that contact with the woman will be lethal, but the distance between her floating figure and the rock where he sits makes the threat of death enticing. He is close enough to her to fear her power but far enough away to still deny the fact that she will destroy him.

Fernando tries to increase his negative pleasure by speaking to the woman and begging her to respond. He tells her that he will

always love her even if she is a demon rather than a woman (65). Fernando's promise increases the negative and pleasurable aspects of his current situation by fusing two opposites, a demon and love, into one desire. The idea of the woman actually being a demon is inherently negative, but Fernando hides this negative feature by claiming that he will share his most positive emotion, his love, with her. Fernando's effort to increase his excitement works, and the woman responds to his plea by speaking to him for the first time. She tells Fernando she will reward him for visiting her fountain by sharing her "cariño extraño y misterioso" with him (65). At this moment, the negative pleasure culminates to a point where Fernando can no longer resist the woman. He ignores the danger and concentrates only on the pleasure the woman offers him.

Finally, the green-eyed woman's sublime nature comes forth in true force when she destroys Fernando just as Íñigo prophesied. She invites Fernando toward her watery abyss, wraps her arms around his neck, kisses his lips, and then sucks him below the fountain's surface (65). This deadly kiss can be read in the same way we read the capital punishment a siren pronounces on an enchanted sailor, but the green-eyed woman is more than a *femme fatale*. Like other sublime objects, her fountain creates visual and audible terror. She offers negative pleasure or pleasurable pain, and she finally destroys those who ignore distance and get too close to her. She may appear to be small and beautiful, but the pleasurable terror she causes outweighs her human characteristics, and thus, she embodies the sublime.

Fernando's inability to grasp the fountain's physical size, understand its multiple sounds, and comprehend the power of its principal resident—the green-eyed woman—is comparable to Bécquer's difficulty in writing down his immense thoughts. Both men confront situations where their finite humanity is overwhelmed by infinity. The author and his character want to connect with the sublime, and they both do so through physical contact with a woman. In "Rima I," Bécquer takes a woman by the hands and whispers his sublime thoughts in her ear. Fernando also embraces a woman, but by doing so, he literally touches the sublime and dies as a result. Although Bécquer's experience has a positive effect while Fernando's encounter ends in tragedy, both experiences require the men to humble themselves before the sublime and, thus, humble themselves before the women who provide their access to the sublime.

Burke claims that power and the sublime are so deeply connected that "nothing [is] sublime which is not some modification of

power” (64). Bécquer’s quandary in “Introducción sinfónica” and “Rima I” and Fernando’s sublime experience with the woman of the fountain support Burke’s claim. The green-eyed woman has the power to destroy Fernando just as Bécquer’s thoughts have the power to constantly torment him. Burke uses God as the ultimate example of sublime power. Following his logic, we know that God is good and just, but if we approach Him in thought, we focus on His power and “shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him” (68). Thus, from Burke’s viewpoint, a sublime experience is a humbling one. The individual who confronts the sublime recognizes his own insignificance and submits himself to the sublime’s infinite power. The individual leaves the sublime encounter, not empowered by it, but awed and humbled by the vastness of his recent experience.

Such an understanding of the sublime experience empowers the women of “Rima I” and “Los ojos verdes” even if they are regarded as objects. The woman in “Rima I” is a beautiful object, but she offers Bécquer a way to communicate his vast thoughts. She releases Bécquer from his pain, which, in turn, empowers him. Still, she maintains the real power. Without her presence and the touch of her hand, Bécquer is overwhelmed by his thoughts and cannot communicate anything. Bécquer must humble himself and admit that he, alone, cannot express infinity. He shows his humility by admitting that he cannot write the sublime hymn and by claiming that with her help, he can finally reveal the infinite thoughts within his brain. The green-eyed woman is a sublime object and is much more powerful than her beautiful counterpart from “Rima I.” Her sublimity empowers her by giving her control over all those who approach her. Being in her presence is like sailing in a violent storm on the ocean or running from an avalanche or forest fire. Such an experience is exhilarating, but it shows man how small and weak he truly is. Fernando willingly and eagerly accepts the green-eyed woman’s lethal invitation because she awes him into submission. The visual and audible greatness of her fountain and the negative pleasure that she provides ultimately humble Fernando to the point where he will do whatever the woman desires. Much like Burke’s explanation of how man humbles himself before God’s power, Fernando accepts his own nothingness, obeys the woman’s wish, and is annihilated by her. Following Burke’s explanation of the sublime, reading the green-eyed woman as a sublime object gives her godlike power.

The Green-eyed Woman as a Transcended/Controlled Sublime Object

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant also analyzes the sublime and the beautiful. His version of the sublime is much like Burke's, but his analysis breaks away from Burke's on several key issues. Kant claims that the sublime experience happens when the human mind or imagination cannot grasp something in nature, and he calls the sublime encounter "an outrage on the mind" (202). This explanation of the sublime is similar to Burke's, but Kant believes that the cause of the sublime moment is the human mind or imagination, not the object nor the natural event that the mind fails to understand. He states, "the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas" (207). For Kant, the importance shifts from the object to the subject, and the subject's inability to comprehend the object becomes the real cause of the sublime experience. He suggests that the mind causes the sublime experience because it finds no "finality" in nature, but it eventually creates a feeling of "finality" within the self (203). Kant's shift of focus from the object to the imagination of the subject creates a different kind of sublime encounter than the humbling experience that Burke describes. Kant's sublime experience is one of transcendence through which the individual proves that he is greater than nature. Kant declares, "[s]ublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us" (221). Kant's sublime experience exalts the individual instead of humbling him.

Kant's version of the sublime creates three problems for reading the green-eyed woman as a sublime object. The first problem is a question of limits and form similar to Burke's focus on the vastness of the sublime. Kant claims that the sublime "is devoid of form" and "a representation of *limitlessness*" (201 his italics). Again, it is impossible to claim that the green-eyed woman has no form or limits, but she overcomes form and limits by controlling her enchanted fountain and exercising her own immense power. She literally has a form, but her power defies definition. Kant also says that the sublime creates "negative pleasure" because "the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby" (202). The green-eyed woman's power clearly mirrors Kant's definition of negative pleasure. When she convinces Fernando to come to her, he hopes to join her even though he has been told that she will kill him. Her deadly invitation is attractive and repulsive at the same time. Her

capacity to convince Fernando to willingly sacrifice his life to be with her shows both the negative pleasure she offers and the limitlessness of her power. Her power and the pleasurable pain it produces mask her form and make her seem limitless and sublime.

The fact that the green-eyed woman is a literary creation produces the second problem that Kant's version of the sublime brings to the surface. Kant states that "we must not point to the sublime in works of art, e.g. buildings, statues and the like, where a human determines the form as well as the magnitude" (209). This statement makes reading the woman as a sublime object difficult because she is Bécquer's creation. Bécquer constructs her shape by making her a woman, and he defines her magnitude by giving her extensive power. Thus, she is limited because she is the creation of a human who has decided what form she will take. Kant's argument about the lack of sublimity in art makes some sense because a product of human invention should not challenge the imagination to the point where a sublime experience takes place. For example, while reading "Los ojos verdes," it would be difficult for me to receive such a shock to the mind that I would be baffled by the infinite power of the green-eyed woman but finally overcome the negatively pleasing sensation of my confusion by saying, "Ah, yes, I now comprehend her. I have transcended her." This will not happen because, from my perspective, she is a fictional character. I cannot overcome my constructed reality and really feel threatened by her, nor can I transcend her. This example of Kant's point, however, ignores an important factor. For Fernando, the green-eyed woman is not a fictional character. She lives and breathes in his world and is just as real to Fernando as his own existence. So while it might be difficult for the reader to have a true sublime experience when reading "Los ojos verdes," the green-eyed woman is the cause of Fernando's sublime experience. Within the story, her power is limitless, and only she can control it.

Finally, Kant's version of the sublime creates a causality problem. If the sublime is found within the mind, how can the green-eyed woman be called a sublime object? How can she cause a sublime experience? According to Kant, she should not be called sublime because Fernando's imagination, not her power, makes their encounter sublime. He claims "that true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging Subject, and not in the Object of nature that occasions this attitude" (213). Here, Kant restates that the sublime resides in the mind, but he admits that the mind cannot be pushed toward its sublime capabilities without the presence of an object whose power brings about the sublime attitude by denying

the imagination's initial comprehension. The object does not cause the sublime experience, but it is an indispensable part of the encounter. Kant also acknowledges that "we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace" (218). Thus, Kant believes that the sublime is found within the imagination, but he realizes that the objects which spur the mind to reach the sublime are often labeled, even by himself at times, as sublime. The green-eyed woman, then, can still be called sublime because she is the object that pushes Fernando's mind into its sublime state.

Now the woman in "Los ojos verdes" can be read as a sublime object even in Kantian terms, but Kant's version of the sublime provides a reading that turns the first reading of the sublime, green-eyed woman on its head. Kant's sublime is not a humbling experience for the subject, but an aggrandizing one where the subject places himself above the object by finally grasping and understanding it in his mind. This experience can be considered positive for the subject and neutral for the object if the object is merely a part of nature. However, when the sublime object is a person, the green-eyed woman in this case, the subject's transcendence over the object is negative. Both Fernando and Bécquer transcend the sublime through their contact with and creation of the green-eyed woman.

Fernando's experience with the woman of the fountain can be seen as negative for her from the beginning because he continually approaches the fountain in search of pleasure. Fernando first visits the fountain while trying to catch the deer he has shot (*Rimas* 60-61). He is a Spanish nobleman for whom the hunt provides sport and diversion rather than needed food. When he nears the fountain, his goal is to take the life of the deer for pleasure. He wants to possess the animal to show his superiority over it and his supremacy over other hunters as well. After meeting the woman at the fountain, he returns to the fountain various times, hoping to do the same thing to her. He does not want to kill her, but he wants to place her in terms that he comprehends, and thus, understand and possess her. In a phrase, he wants to love her. He says, "[h]áblame; yo quiero saber si me amas; yo quiero saber si puedo amarte" (65). Ultimately, Fernando fails to comprehend the woman, not only because of her large and boisterous fountain, and not only because he has heard that she has the power to kill him, but also because he does not know whether she can be loved. He does not know if he can possess her the way he possessed the deer. His mind is outraged, in Kantian terms, because he does not know if the powerful, green-eyed woman will become his object by accepting his love.

The sublime woman finally comforts Fernando's mind by answering his questions. She tells Fernando, "yo te amo más aún que tú me amas; yo, que desciendo hasta un mortal siendo un espíritu puro. No soy una mujer como las que existen en la tierra; soy una mujer digna de ti, que eres superior a los demás hombres" (65). She verbally praises Fernando and empowers him mentally. Now he understands her. His mind is no longer shocked and confused, and he knows that he can possess her because he believes that she loves him. Fernando steps forward to claim his prize, and feels "unos brazos delgados y flexibles que se liaban a su cuello, y una sensación fría en sus labios ardorosos, un beso de nieve" (66). The long anticipated contact that Fernando finally receives from the green-eyed woman is literally a kiss of death, but according to the Kantian sublime, this ultimate negative pleasure is not the real cause of this sublime moment. Instead, the experience is sublime for Fernando because his mind finally understands the woman. She kills his physical body, but not before his imagination grasps her words and makes him feel that he comprehends her. Following Kant's version of the sublime, Fernando mentally transcends the woman and places himself over her as her superior. Even in death, Fernando is able to place himself above the woman because he understands, and for a moment, possesses her. His transcendence reaffirms that he is an acting subject, and by possessing her for only a moment, Fernando objectifies the green-eyed woman as his gratifying possession.

Reading the green-eyed woman as a sublime object continues to be degrading for her when we look past the fictional world of the fountain and consider Bécquer as the woman's creator and master. The woman in "Los ojos verdes" has the power to control a massive fountain and to destroy Fernando, but she is actually a puppet in the hands of Bécquer. All of her power revolves around his desires and the choices he makes for her. Within the story she is omnipotent, but in reality, she is just a fictional character. Her existence follows Kant's idea that the sublime cannot be found in art (209) because nothing she does can harm or help anyone outside her fictional frame. Her unlimited power is limited by Bécquer's decisions and biases.

Bécquer's authority over the green-eyed woman takes any real power away from her because he can manipulate her actions to form a story to his liking and to establish his power and subjectivity. The green-eyed woman is different from the beautiful woman in "Rima I" although both women exist as objects of relief for Bécquer. He requires a physical touch from his beautiful object to be able to express to her the sublime thoughts that torment his mind, but the mere

creation of a sublime object in “Los ojos verdes” allows him to express his unborn ideas *through* her. By giving the woman unlimited power, Bécquer, in a sense, gives himself infinite power and authority because he creates and oversees her sublimity. She is the physical and written expression of Bécquer’s mind.

On his own, Bécquer is incapable of expressing the sublime, so he creates female characters that he uses as objects to help him transcend the sublime. “In Rima I,” he creates a beautiful object that listens while he verbally expresses the gigantic hymn that afflicts his mind. In “Los ojos verdes,” he gives shape to the sublime by forming an all-powerful female. Bécquer does not necessarily transcend the green-eyed woman—as her creator he already controls her—but he uses her to transcend the vast confusion he finds within himself. Through her character, he is finally able to express his mind’s vastness in written words. The sublime, green-eyed woman is Bécquer’s creation, but she is also the proof of his existence. Through her, Bécquer controls his own mind and shows that he is an individual subject, a poet and author with the power to ponder infinity, seek to understand it, and strive to recreate it in his writing.

Whether negative or positive, the green-eyed woman’s fountain, her immense power, and the negative pleasure she offers Fernando qualify her as a sublime object in both Kantian and Burkean terms. Following Burke’s ideas, this woman is a terrible object with omnipotent power that produces both fear and pleasure in her admirer. She makes her encounter with Fernando a sublime experience. In Kantian terms, she is an extraordinary object that causes Fernando’s mind to plummet into a state of shock and then rebound and soar above her. She is the object that helps Fernando’s mind reach its sublime potential. Putting the views of these critics aside, the woman of “Los ojos verdes” represents Bécquer’s ultimate attempt to deal with the tormenting vastness of his thoughts in written language. To verbally combat the void between his mind and reality, Bécquer looks to the beautiful, but to be capable of writing his infinite thoughts as words, he seeks to contain the sublime within the body of a female character. If he can compartmentalize the power of the sublime within a human form, perhaps he can capture his thoughts in the form of written language.

Bécquer is disturbed by what Burke and Kant would term the sublime, but like other Romantic authors, he uses his vexation with the sublime to assert his individuality. In *Romantic Horizons*, Twitchell claims that the Romantics looked to the sublime to understand their existence: “To the romantic artist the sublime was a way to span the

abyss between inner and outer, and outer and 'the Beyond.' It was in part a way to resolve the most pressing epistemological dilemma of the time—the disjunction between subject and object. In fact, the sublime experience itself is an attempt at the farthest perceptual extreme to reconcile subject and object” (11). Bécquer’s main frustration lies in his inability to express his thoughts, and this inability leads him to question reality and his existence as an acting subject. In “Introducción sinfónica” he laments, “[m]e cuesta trabajo saber qué cosas he soñado y cuáles me han sucedido” (*Obras* 477). Instead of looking to nature for a sublime experience to combat the confusion within his mind, Bécquer creates the woman of “Los ojos verdes” as the bridge “between inner and outer” or the link between his mind and the written word. By capturing the sublime in written language and enclosing sublime traits within a human body, the body of the green-eyed woman, Bécquer connects the sublimity of his mind to his world of written forms. Bécquer asserts his individuality by creating the green-eyed woman as an omnipotent character, and then, controlling her. She is a representation of the infinite thoughts that torment his brain, and by controlling her, Bécquer better comprehends infinity and accomplishes his ‘Romantic’ goal; he proves to himself that he is a creator, an individual subject.

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Emron Esplin
Brigham Young University
United States of America

MAMMALS AND MACHINES: MICHAEL MCCLURE'S EMBODYING POETICS*

Jason Camlot

Michael McClure was only twenty-three when he read his poetry at The Six Gallery in San Francisco and, along with Allen Ginsberg and others, helped initiate the San Francisco Beat movement. Since that time he has authored over forty volumes of poetry, fiction, essays and plays, and continues to experiment with the performance of poetry, most recently in his collaborative work with keyboardist Ray Manzarek (previously of the rock band The Doors). McClure's poetry has been consistently experimental, with an aim towards communicating thought and emotion in as visceral and physical a manner as language will allow. Born on the twentieth of October, 1932—"the same day as Rimbaud" (McClure, *Ghost Tantras* 109)—in Marysville, Kansas, McClure grew up in Seattle, where he developed an interest in wildlife and the environment. As a child he dreamed of becoming a naturalist. He moved to San Francisco in 1954, enrolled in Robert Duncan's poetry workshop at San Francisco State College, and published his first book of poems, *Passage*, in 1956. Like the poetry of Gary Snyder, McClure's poetry manifests a deep concern with nature, but McClure's main interests lie less in a descriptive poetry of natural scenery than in developing ways to awaken the mammalian consciousness he believes is dormant in all human beings.

A primary and oft-stated motive of McClure's art is the discovery and communication of the materiality of consciousness. Given the different media McClure employs in pursuit of this goal, I feel it is worth asking whether or not the way this motive manifests itself in McClure's poetry is dependent upon the specific medium in which his poetry appears. At times, McClure seems to level the distinction between the poem on the page and its oral delivery. For instance,

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according to his “Author’s Note” to *Rebel Lions* (1991), McClure’s impulse to center his poems “allowed the poems to have a body language on the page, and with the voice when they are spoken aloud” (McClure, *Huge Dreams* 168). In this note he attributes to the centering technique an analogous effect in both print and oral performance. Elsewhere, however, he posits a poetics that is aware of the alternate means by which a poem is projected into the world in relation to a theory of expression that hopes to convey the materiality of thought and emotion by replicating the sensory field of our bodies in other (unfleshly, but still material) media. This concern for materialization in McClure’s poetics makes his work especially interesting for a critical exploration of the means by which the mammalian body (McClure’s term for the initial material form of our senses) comes to be replaced by alternate machines and technologies during the process of creative expression. My main effort in this essay will be to flesh out McClure’s own critical conception of an embodying poetics, and to consider some of the formal, expressive tactics in print and oral performance he has used in his attempt to accomplish such embodiment. I find it interesting that McClure’s articulated poetics is one that attempts to transcend the boundaries between print and oral performance by exploiting the material attributes of each mode of communication, and by rendering each medium its own adequate case for what he would call “mammalian pleasure.” Writing of the performed word, Charles Bernstein has argued that “[i]n sounding language we ground ourselves as sentient, material beings, obtruding into the world with the same obdurate thingness as rocks or soil or flesh” (Bernstein 21). It is precisely this motive to ground language and consciousness in the affective, gestural and performative body (whether the body of text, or of “flesh”) that characterizes McClure’s videos of his live performances, his poetry books and his sound recordings.¹ McClure proceeds with a faith in his ability to achieve the materialized word that Bernstein identifies with oral performance in all of these media.

Running with the poetic license provided by Olson’s re-conception of the poetic line in terms of breath, McClure develops an approach to poetic production that conceives of the poetic media (written text, recitation) as an enactment of the poet’s own physical

¹ Among the more widely available videos of McClure’s readings are *Love Lion* (1991) and *The Third Mind* (1997).

presence.² To recall a moment from Olson's essay, "PROJECTIVE VERSE" that would have had particular resonance for McClure:

[B]reath [says Olson] is man's special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but the life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size. (Olson 25)

Projection might be another term used to describe McClure's embodying motives, the goal being to *project* the self ("his physiology," "the life in him") in poetic productions that ultimately function as a surrogate body for that of the poet who produced them. McClure exploits the specific attributes of different media of poetic expression (print, oral performance) in order to fulfill his vision of a poetics that is not so much based upon literary tradition (what Wordsworth, in the 1802 "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, called "a family language which writers in meter seem to lay claim to by prescription" [251 n36] as upon a material enactment of a mammalian tradition of thoughts, feelings and desires emanating from the body (there is no direct Wordsworthian equivalent for this, but we can refer to Wordsworth's stated desire that by his poems, he might keep his reader "in the company of flesh and blood" [250]). If this rather unlikely pair, Olson and Wordsworth, provided McClure with a vocabulary by which to formulate ideas about the possibility of an immediate even unmediated expression of the physical self in language (what I am calling his "embodying poetics"), the work of William Blake—one of the most significant sources of McClure's poetics—helped McClure take into account the specificity of the various media through which the poet's body might be extended.

Mammalian Philosophy/Blakean Aesthetics

Blake's early poetic and graphic productions, and especially the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789/1794) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1792), were important models for McClure, representing an artist's attempt to capture the oral and environmental aspects of poetic expression (whether they were songs, conversa-

² McClure describes the importance of Olson for his own conception of poetry in this way: "Olson's recognition that the mind is a construct of the heart, of the nervous system, and his interest in the energy charge that we derive from the subject, whether in mind or in the world, was a help. Also his recognition that the syllable is a unit of measurement rather than the foot or the word." ("Writing the Body" 15)

tions, or orally transmitted Proverbs) in a textual and graphic medium. In these early works of Blake one finds a repeated concern with what it means to collect songs and lore from an oral tradition and transform them into print. Arguably, Blake's own use of words that signify differently in oral and print manifestations (through the double meanings they possess when spoken), and the dialectic he develops between images and the message of the words that appear in their midst were, for McClure, significant models of presenting body across different media of expression.

In describing the success of Blake's own creative strategies as regards the communication of his mammalian presence, McClure is unequivocal in his praise of Blake, his description of the effect of Blake's work suggesting a strangely literal understanding of the idea of an artist's expressive corpus. As McClure puts it:

Blake is as present today as if he were biologically alive. His works are extensions of himself [...] Blake's works, like the artifacts of all high artists, are his body. Gestures come so directly from his physical being that their presence is real and physical. (McClure, "Wolf Net," 325)

Elsewhere, McClure explains that the value of this function of the literary work as an extension of the poet's self lies, first, in the broadening of the poet's own sensorium and, second, in the broadening of "the sensoriums of other individuals who read it." "In other words," McClure explains in a rather Blakean manner, "the function of poetry, as I see it, is to create a myriad mindedness" (McClure, "Writing One's Body", 6). While he is speaking of the text versions of his poems here, he speaks elsewhere of the oral performance of poetry as having an analogous transforming effect, describing the oral performance of poetry as "a man standing up repeating for an audience the organic extensions of himself, which have subtle and beautiful interplays within themselves" (McClure, "The Beat Journey," 138). What McClure has in mind when he speaks of broadening the "sensorium" can best be explained in terms of what he calls "the biological self" or "our mammalian nature", an idea that he was developing in the years just preceding his composition of *The Ghost Tantras*.

As Rod Phillips has explained, McClure's *Meat Science Essays* of 1963—published just a year before *The Ghost Tantras*—mark a turning point in McClure's environmental politics, and ultimately in his materialist poetics. This collection of critical essays ranges in content from a manifesto aimed at freeing "the word FUCK from its chains and strictures" (McClure, *Meat*, 7) and an essay on "Revolt" with analogies to worms, to a critical attempt to re-embody Artaud's

voice,³ and a series of “Drug Notes” that chronicle the transformational properties of Mushrooms, Peyote, Cocaine, etc., with the ultimate aim of “revolt against habitual ways of feeling and action” for the sake of “more direct gestures” (43). *Meat Science Essays* also marks a shift away from McClure’s initial vision of man’s universal interconnectedness with the natural world and “kinship with all creatures,” to a more narrow conception of his role as “mammal”, entailing a greater acknowledgment of the difficulties in bridging the differences between humans and non-mammalian creatures.⁴ Perhaps most significantly, these essays spell out a political and aesthetic distinction between the cultural and the biological self which goes a long way to explain precisely how poetry, for McClure, can be understood as an alternative manifestation of the poet’s material body. In an interview from the 1980s, looking back on these terms for the self, McClure explains the social and political significance of his conception of artistic creation. He says:

[T]he more you discover your biological self, the more value you can be to yourself, and the more value you can be to those around you. People fear such acts because they believe that their biological self is a monster. That is certainly not the case. I mean, we’re social primates, and we have distinct social patterns. The more we find those deeper patterns and the less we are robotized by the cultural patterns, the better we’ll be (McClure, “Writing One’s Body”, 11).

This idea that through a heightened awareness of the body an individual may extend him or herself into affects and experiences that one’s cultural, robotized self inhibits us from knowing, is exemplified by the compositional strategies that McClure has employed in his writing and performance of poetry.

³ The essay, “Artaud: Peace Chief” from *Meat Science Essays*, and the context in which Artaud’s “anti-body” poetics was (paradoxically) been embraced by “body” poets such as Burroughs and McClure, has been discussed recently by Douglas Kahn (322-358).

⁴ As Phillips puts it: “*The Meat Science Essays* mark for McClure a turning point, as he begins to move from the vision of universal interconnectedness (i.e. the ‘uncarved block’ of Tao) first posited in the St. Geryon poems, to a refined and somewhat more narrow view of his role as ‘mammal.’ While he in no way abandons his earlier monistic view of nature (and would, in fact, occasionally return to it throughout his career), as McClure notes in his essay ‘Reflections After a Poem,’ the complex differences between humans and creatures vastly different from ourselves prevent humans from fully knowing or understanding them. After first pointing out ‘our kinship with all creatures,’ he reserves his true feelings of empathy for species more closely related to humans.” (109-110).

Textual and Oral Strategies of Extension

The most obvious formal characteristic that belies his desire to convey body in text is McClure's ubiquitous tendency to center his poems, to alternate line-length, and to apply shifts from capitalization to small case lettering for effect. McClure repeatedly explains this visual presentation of his poetry as a means of giving "body language to the poem itself" (18). He describes his discovery of his mode of lineation, and especially of the centering effect as an intuitive response against the "justified"—one might say robotized or mechanized—and in McClure's words inherently "uncreaturely" format for most poetry books whose "rigid endless right at left margins [...] fill up pages mercilessly" ("The Beat Journey" 134). His manner of centering poems, on the contrary, allows the poem to resemble a biological organism. And often his account of this tactic makes claims that go beyond mere resemblance:

A poem can be an overall organism, the direct extension of our biological selves in the sense that Jackson Pollack or Franz Kline imagined Abstract expressionism to be [...] an extension of the arm's energy leaving a trail of paint. I picture poems being the same kind of extension. ("The Beat Journey" 132)

Of course, the problem with this last analogy is that a painting (as opposed to a mechanical print of the painting) is more literally an imprint of the artist's body than a poem that has been typeset and printed (no matter how the words have been arranged on the page). A handwritten poem may be truer to the idea of the analogy, but McClure is actually suggesting tactics of extending body into the world without a need for imprinted artifacts, but rather by literary modes that convey the body despite reproduction, and even across very different materials of expression.

McClure's description of his tactics of oral performance are equally literal in their conception of the materializing potential of language. While he has never experimented in an extended manner with oral composition (by speaking into a tape recorder), at the core of his development of his poetic "beast language" (most extensively performed in the *Ghost Tantras*) is a conception of language as a medium of gestural sound, as much as a medium of semantic communication. In a very practical sense, oral performance is understood by McClure to be useful for maintaining the ambiguities of meaning, and ultimately for transforming language into physical sound in ways that are sometimes not possible with printed text (McClure, "The Beat Journey", 131). The repetition of words breaks down one kind of meaning into another that is of a more purely

affective or physical kind. If you repeat the same word again and again, McClure says, “the meaning does crumble. As a matter of fact, the meaning disappears. Then the meaning becomes ritual... Then the meaning becomes a metric. Then the meaning becomes a sound pattern; it no longer has justifiable significance. Then it returns to significance” (“Writing One’s Body” 19). McClure has described this effect both in terms of his practice of recording the sounds of actual animals (most notoriously, at the San Francisco Zoo), and in terms of the development of a listening practice that focuses on the sound as opposed to the meaning of quotidian human speech.

Regarding the former, the zoo recordings, McClure again describes the sounds of the animals in terms of physical gestures, (“I am surrounded by the physicality of [the leopardess’s] speech. It is a real thing in the air [...] Her face and features disappear and become one entity with her speech” [“Wolf Net” 336]), and, interestingly, in terms of the space that vocal sound can occupy. Speech here functions as a physical means of establishing spatial territory that includes, not only the sounds of animals, but the sounds of the city, of the general environment. McClure identifies “location” as a kind of auditory version of perspective, one that gives sound a physical dimension. Sounds come to have a spatial and reciprocal life of their own, animate objects and inanimate ones all negotiating their positions in relation to each other. Listening back to a recording he had made at the San Francisco Zoo, McClure describes the spatiality that informs and defines what he hears: “Three-quarters of the way into the tape is the clear piercing crow of a bantam rooster making his reply to the *wise-en-scene* about him—to the calls of the ladies, to the sparrows, to the sounds of traffic, to the growling leopardess, to the morning sun, to the needs of his own being to vocally establish his territory” (McClure, “Wolf Net”, 337). Similarly, a striking aspect of the *Ghost Tantra* recordings is that we can actually hear the physical environment in which the poems are performed and recorded, the environment of a San Francisco apartment, with traffic sounds entering the room from the window in the spaces between McClure’s beast recitations. Heard in the context of McClure’s critical statements about recording and oral performance, these environmental sounds highlight the sense of a voice in a locale, and provide his sounded words, grrrs and growls with an aspect of physical extension. We hear a voice speaking, a body emitting sounds, but never in a vacuum.

The idea that sound conveys (perhaps even represents) exten-

sion into space and a particularity of locale can probably be applied to all literary sound-recordings insofar as the voice of the recitation is enveloped by a particular acoustic environment that is audible to the careful listener. This is arguably so even with certain experimental recordings delivered from rather abstract, technologically fabricated locales such as Allen Ginsberg's recording of "A Mad Gleam" (which sounds as though it is spoken from a poorly received radio signal) and especially certain recorded monologues of William Burroughs like "Last Words of Hassan-I-Sabbah" (which, acoustically, suggests speech from inside some sinister machine, which may be the now robotized version of Hassan's previous self). A sense of space and locale are certainly conveyed in many documentary Beat recordings, that of Jack Kerouac performing his "American Haikus" in New York (1958) or, most obviously, the recording of Ginsberg reading "America" at Town Hall Theatre in Berkeley in 1956, where the voice is heard to speak from an historically identifiable space or scene. In this last recording, Ginsberg is more than occasionally on the verge of slurred laughter in response to his own words, and there are chortles and guffaws throughout in response to the many funny lines, and especially those which defy standard American values through their stated identification with Marxism, or advocacy of mind altering substances. This vocal repartee suggests a concern for spatial territory as the poet and his audience negotiate the relative positions that they may occupy in this particular literary scene.

No moment of the recorded Ginsberg reading is more substantial in this regard, and none of the responses to Ginsberg's poem more raucous, than when he delivers the lines: "It occurs to me that / I am America! / I am talking to myself again." The tone of self-satisfaction (even self-involvement) and amusement that infuses Ginsberg's delivery of this line, followed by an intense wave of laughter and applause from the audience that drowns out Ginsberg's voice for fifteen seconds before he can deliver the next line of the poem enacts a *mélée* of vocal subjectivities, an absorption of the individual poet by the space that surrounds him at the instant he seems to be identifying himself as his own sole interlocutor. This moment is especially poignant for its inversion of the regular motives associated with the trope of apostrophe. Here the object of address that serves as the apostrophic refrain of the poem—"America"—is no longer the resurrection of something or someone absent, but a playful recognition of the malleability of all poetic objects of apostrophe, forwarding the credible idea that our constructed presences and interlocutors are always, in fact, merely aspects of ourselves.

The trope of apostrophe as it is heard in sound recordings, as opposed to read on the page, is particularly interesting in relation to McClure's focus on the materializing potential of language across media, again because of the implicit sense of locale that seems to accompany vocalization. Charles Bernstein has identified location to be the auditory version of visual perspective, and argues that this sense of location is "a constitutive element of the medium of the poetry reading" (Bernstein 11). It is as though the trope of apostrophe is automatically literalized, and the object of address materialized in a sound-recording of a performance, and especially of a recording made before an audience.⁵ The recordings (and printed versions) of David Antin's talk poems exemplify this point, for in these poems, when he is addressing someone, he is quite literally addressing someone present in the hall with him. For example the opening lines of his transcribed talk poem, "a private occasion in a public place":

i consider myself a poet but im not reading poetry as you see
i bring no books with me though ive written books i
have a funny relationship to the idea of reading if you cant hear
i would appreciate it if youd come closer because this is not a
situation where i intend to amplify (231)

The talk poems of Antin are all situations of verbal interaction, and perhaps most explicitly so in their audio format, when one can hear the feedback of the microphone, the coughs and snuffles from the audience, the physical situation from which he is talking. When the talk is transcribed and put in its new context on the page, the public situation in which it was uttered is no longer there in such a literal sense, but the idea of the audience, and the gestures of address are still present, and so Antin's poems (if we allow the generic identification for his genre-blurring mode) remain deeply dialogical, and relatively concrete in their sense of locale and direction. Like McClure, Antin employs certain techniques of typography in his transcriptions (for example, he avoids traditional punctuation and left-justified margins) in order to imitate the immediacy of the original, improvised performance (see Perelman 203). Subsequently, even in a written transcript of one of Antin's talks, when Antin employs the second person one has the sense that he is quite literally addressing someone at the moment of utterance, speaking to his audience, as in the

⁵ For an extended discussion of the trope of apostrophe in relation to Antin's poetry, please see my essay: "'The Talk' as Genre: David Antin, Apostrophe and the Institution of Poetry." *Recherches Semiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 22 (1-2) (December 2002).

quote above, where he directs them to change their physical positions so that he can be better heard. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, it is mainly when the idea of audience is lost that abstraction in discourse ensues. Commenting upon “the level of abstraction to which the dream of a common language descends” in the age of media (again, with reference to Wordsworth’s “Preface”), she accurately states that “poets are precisely those who, faced with the abstraction and emptying out of [...] media speak [...],” strive to reaffirm the primacy of feeling in language. (Perloff 40-41). The persistent presence of the performative situation in Antin’s written texts is one tactic that tends to keep his work from gravitating toward this kind of abstraction.

The printed versions of McClure’s *Tantras*, on the other hand, are not as easily grounded in a specific locale of discursive performance and exchange. The material grounding of this work is not so obviously a dialogical one, but seems to emerge from different sources, shifting between a kind of neutral objectification (that is, thingification) of language (but not an abstraction in the sense that Perloff uses the term) and a loading of language with interactive, gestural significance. In his essay, “The Problem of Speech Genres”, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests a formula for the changing aspects of words that might be useful to recall at this point. Here Bakhtin argues that words exist for in different aspects, depending upon their relative location or status between speaker and listener:

[A]ny word exists for a speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other’s* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. (Bakhtin 88)

McClure is suggesting that seemingly neutral sets of words (neutral because on their surface they are non-semantic, they are nobody’s words) are in fact loaded with the gestural information of the body, imbued with mammalian expression. In his instructions for how to read the *Ghost Tantras*, McClure is not prescriptive, but rather he presents his poems as a template into which the reader may pour his own accent and affect: “Pronounce sounds as they are spelled and don’t worry about details—let individual pronunciations and vibrations occur and don’t look for secret meanings. Read them aloud and there will be more pleasure” (McClure, *Ghost*, inside back cover). The poems function, in this regard, as a mode of praxis, like yoga, or scream therapy, with the purpose of turning words that seem either *neutral* (for their meaninglessness) or *other* (for their strangeness)

into an individual's encounter with his mammalian core. In the *Ghost Tantras* McClure is attempting to write a poetry that oscillates between a psychological meaning that we identify with listening and a physiological meaning that might be identified with hearing. In the shifts that occur between a recognizable English and a more purely sonorous beast language, we come to hear meaningful words for their sound, and we attempt to listen to beast for significant meaning.⁶

In addition to serving as a mode of expressive performance, McClure has described "beast language" as an auditory approach to human interaction, as a mode of listening which may provide a cue for how to tap into the meaning of his poems as they are conveyed in his recordings. McClure presents an example of this mode of "beast hearing" in the following description of a couple having an argument:

An invisible watcher is in a room with a man and a woman who are arguing ... If the invisible observer closes his ears to the *meanings* of the words and listens only to the vocalization as *sounds*, a thought occurs to him:

He is listening to two mammals. It might be two snow leopards, two bison, two wolves. It is a *mammal* conversation. The man and woman are growling, hissing, whimpering, cooing, pleading, cajoling, and threatening. The specific rite and bio-melodic pattering of meat conversation rises and falls in volume [...] The game that the man and woman are enacting, and the ritual, is as old as their plasm. ("Wolf Net" 333-334)

At the heart of this method of listening is something analogous to Bernstein's proposal that we approach the oral performance of poetry "as its own medium" (Bernstein 17). If we do so, Bernstein suggests, then we become aware of the "iconicity" of language, that is, "the ability of language to *present*; rather than represent, its meaning" (17). Keeping this term in mind, then, we can think of McClure's motive toward the animalization of language in relation to Bernstein's conception of a new aural prosody, a mode of "close listening" that actually entails the negation of listening in a psychological and semantic sense, and replaces it with a material, affective (in McClure's language, mammalian) mode of hearing. That is, a mode of encountering a language for its isochrony (its "unwritten tempo whose beat

⁶ This shift between modes of hearing and listening are identified by Bernstein with the poetry reading, and what he calls "the poetic mode of listening." As he puts it: "In the poetic mode of listening, there is an oscillation (or temporal overlap) between the materially present sound (hearing: the non-speech mode) and the absent meaning (listening: the speech mode): this is a satisfaction of all reading aloud, as when we read stories to children" (Bernstein 18).

is audible in the performance as distinct from the text” [14]), its iconicity, its ani-melody, for the “matter of language” which McClure would go on to say, is an embodiment of our inherent mammalian knowledge, a rendering of that being in a new, material form.

Ghost Tantra #51

On the back cover of the first edition of *Ghost Tantras*, McClure asks the reader to look at Tantra 51 as an example of how to read the poems in his book:

Look at stanza 51. It begins in English and turns into beast language —star becomes stahr. Body becomes boody. Nose becomes noze. Everybody knows how to pronounce NOH or VOOR-NAH or GAHR00000 ME. (*back and inside back cover*)

The turning of English words into beast words, described as a kind of organic development (or a celebrated regression), gets to the root of McClure’s desire to transcend a mimetic poetry for a primal, mammalian one, for “a poetry of pure beauty and energy that does not mimic but joins and exhorts reality” (*Ghost, back cover*). The gleeful confidence with which he states that “everybody knows” how to pronounce his beast words belies a faith both in his mammalian philosophy, and in what Bernstein would call a poetics of presentation as opposed to representation. Tantra #51 is particularly characteristic, not only of McClure’s attempt to implement (typographically) some of the poetic ideas I have just sketched out, but also of his thematization of the issue of trans-substantiation and extension across media by tactics of synaesthesia. This poem was first published in 1964, and then recorded by Michael Kohler on August 30th, 1978, at McClure’s home in San Francisco. The Cassette Recordings of this performance were released by S-Press, in 1979. I cite the poem in its entirety as it appeared in the first edition of *Ghost Tantras*:

51

I LOVE TO THINK OF THE RED PURPLE ROSE
IN THE DARKNESS COOLED BY THE NIGHT.

We are served by machines making satins
of sounds.

Each blot of sound is a bud or a stahr.

Body eats bouquets of the ear’s vista.

Gahhhrrr boody eers noze eyes deem though.

NOH. NAH-OHH.

hrooor. VOOR-NAH! GAHR00000 ME.

Nah drooooooh seerch. NAH THEE!

The machines are too dull when we
are lion-poems that move & breathe.
WHAN WE GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOR
harm dree mykethoth sharooo sreee thah noh deeeeeemed ez.
Whan eeethoooze hrohh.

In the opening line of this poem we move from “thinking” of the rose, to visualizing it, the “red-purple” giving it a kind of visual shading or depth, which is further deepened as the enjambment here brings us into locale, and temperature, creating a three-dimensional environment, enwrapping the image, giving it a sense of touch, a sense of the cold. The enjambment separating the next two lines (lines three and four) has an equally concretizing effect, as the “machines” (tape machines feeding tape/textiles of sound?) which are simply “making satins” up until the enjambment, are suddenly “making satins/into sounds”, turning something material into something auditory and perhaps giving us (the readers of the poem) a sense of how sounds can carry a material, satiny residue. The next line (line five) marks the moment at which the imagery of materialization, which is functioning on the level of metaphor up to this point, is enacted by the language of the poem itself, as it shifts from English into (a still semantically comprehensible) beast language: “Each blot of sound” (a phrase that suggests sound as individual ink blots, and perhaps even utterances of voice as equivalent to the prints of our fingers) “is a bud” (something about to open out, to have extension) “or a stahr”. This last word, “stahr,” appears as if the potential extension suggested by the image of the bud has now been realized on the page. The metaphor of the bud becomes the manifestation of aural extension in the form of an sonorously expanded, yet still semantically recognizable English word (although the spell-checkers on our computers will not allow it). Further, as McClure notes in his suggestions for how to read these poems, the appearance of “stahr” represents a *becoming*. A word we are more familiar with is becoming something else, something beastly, that the reader should come to recognize as a meaningful, non-mimetic, expressive sound.

The line that follows this first intrusion of sound into sense— (“Body eats bouquets of the ear’s vista.”)—seems to comment upon what is happening in the poem, and to the reader as he becomes immersed in a process of materialization enacted by the words he reads. This line suggests an association of the physicality of eating with the act of hearing, the diamond shape of the bouquet of flowers penetrating the body through the ear (which is doubling as a mouth, according to the sense of the line) stems-first, and at the same time, serving as an icon of the vista, the actual spatial territory of the ear’s

sensory field. From here we move again from a metaphor depicting the physical presence of sound to the beast growls that enact what the metaphor describes, the beast language materializing language until we reach lines eleven and twelve:

The machines are too dull when we
are lion-poems that move & breathe.

Before the poem reverts again to being creaturely, with movement and breath in its final lines, the couplet cited above seem to suggest a distinction between the mechanical media of sound reproduction, and the mammalian extension of material experience across (or even, without) media. The flat tapes that are themselves material embodiments of sound (audio tape has its own extension, its own materiality) are inferior to the aesthetic embodiment that occurs when we tap into our bio-selves, when the poems themselves (whether in written or oral form) become creatures with movement and breath.

It is in this way that McClure employs (and even thematizes in his poetry) the media available to him to convey a poetics that ultimately hopes to transcend these duller machines for an expression of the mammalian body itself. McClure's is a poetics that purports to move beyond material vehicles, and (thinking back to his description of Blake) beyond time itself, by accessing the primal, gestural significance of language. Emerging out of a scene that defined itself in performance—the Six Gallery reading, where Ginsberg first read “Howl”, and where McClure read as well—his poetry on the page is written with a motive to convey physical presence and the accentual and affective sounds inherent in the spoken word. What is ultimately absent in his poetics is a sociological awareness of the particularities of reception, an acknowledgement that one person's mammalian plasm (so to speak) may not be the same as another's due to cultural or even personal circumstances. McClure would ultimately deny such a possibility of difference.

This absence is probably most evident in the maleness of the sexuality expressed in his poems, such as his poem commemorating Marilyn Monroe's passing (Ghost Tantra #39) which, although well-wishing (“Farewell perfect mammal./ Fare thee well from thy silken couch. ...” [*Ghost*, 46]), works itself into an ecstasy of *ahhs* and *ohs* that (especially in the recorded version) may seem indecorous given that the effusion of the poem is delivered upon a woman's dead body. While one need not read the effusive beast sections of the poem in this way—they may be heard as a voicing of Monroe's own sensuality, still alive despite her factual death—the legitimate possibility of the less generous reading suggests that as McClure

moves to surpass the various media of communication he employs, he is also disregarding certain problems of cultural and social mediation. While no one (myself included) wants to be thought of as prudish, questions of social decorum often provide some of the most interesting avenues of inquiry when it comes to accounting for the sounds of vocalization. Thus, in McClure's embodying poetics, and to a large extent in Bernstein's conception of "close listening" and of the poetry reading as a unique medium, the motive to highlight the "matter of language" may sometimes come at the expense of what matters most in language, that is, the social nuances that are conveyed in language at a distinct moment. This said, there is much to learn from a poet who has worked so persistently with an ear to the heart that the sounds of the body in language seem to resound in him (and from him) as a second nature.

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Jason Camlot
Concordia University
Montreal
Canada

“WHO PEYNTEDE THE LEON?”¹ THE OLDE WYF CONFRONTS THE WIFE OF BATH AND CRISEYDE

Nancy Rosenfeld

It is a commonplace of Chaucerian criticism that the Wife of Bath's Tale is the first member of the "Marriage Group," followed by the tales of the Clerk, Merchant and Franklin, all of which portray relations between the sexes. At the same time, *Troilus and Criseyde*, for hundreds of years Chaucer's most admired poem, is often compared to the Knight's Tale; both, according to Julian N. Wasserman, share a cosmos based on "the traditional conflict between Providence and Free Will."² While these groupings are clearly useful, I should like to suggest that a careful examination of *Troilus and Criseyde* vis-a-vis the Wife of Bath's Tale (hereafter referred to as the Wife's Tale, subsuming the Wife's Prologue and her section of the General Prologue) yields a number of significant parallels between Criseyde and the Wife of Bath. Furthermore, the issues raised by these parallels are resolved in the relationship between the Olde Wyf of the Wife's Tale—"the Hag," as she is often known—and the Knyght. The parallels between Criseyde and the Wife interrogate the following issues: equality between the sexes, possessions (ownership), possession (jealousy) and appearance.

In light of the lack of scholarly attention paid to the similarities between Criseyde and the Wife, it may be necessary to justify the attempt to discuss these seemingly different women in tandem. The first point of similarity is, of course, family situation. Both women are widowed and possibly childless. While Shulamith Shahar notes that

¹ *The Canterbury Tales*, 3.692. All citations of Chaucer's poetry are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988). Citations of *The Canterbury Tales* are to fragment and line/s; citations of *Troilus and Criseyde* are to book and line/s.

² Julian N. Wasserman, "Both Fixed and Free: Language and Destiny in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, eds. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989), p. 195.

the maternal role of married women is rarely mentioned in medieval literature,³ modern readers find the absence of a child in the life of either woman to be significant. The narrator, after all, provides his readers with a wealth of detail about each heroine, but chooses not to mention children; and this at a time when effective contraception was not available. Widowhood and childlessness frame the woman, block out the encumbrances of daily life; in much the same way a painter will often place his subject against a simple curtain or a quiet garden scene in order to concentrate the viewer's attention on the portrait itself.

Another framing device which Chaucer uses in both poems is clothing; in the late Middle Ages fashion was often extravagant and dress forms wildly exaggerated. One of the most memorable vignettes of the General Prologue highlights the Wife of Bath in bright scarlet hose with her hat "As brood as is a bokeler or a targe" (1.471). Criseyde, unlike the Wife, is apparently barred by her widowhood from wearing bright colors; but the very blackness of her dress ("so soore hath she me wounded,/ That stood in blak" 2.533-4) focuses both Troilus's and the reader's attention on Criseyde in much the same way as do the colors of the Wife's extravagant outfits.

In spite of the presence of these frames marking off the heroine from her immediate surroundings, whether physical or cultural, the wider background is palpable in both texts. As Arlyn Diamond notes, *Troilus and Criseyde* can be seen as a response to a period of "social chaos and violence brought on by the disintegration of feudalism and exacerbated by war."⁴ Chaucer's portraits, in the words of C.D. Benson, unite the clarity of medieval allegory with "a new immediacy and realism."⁵

There are poets, as H elene Cixous argues, "who would go to any lengths to slip something by at odds with tradition—men capable [...] of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence 'impossible' subject, untenable in a real social framework."⁶ Could Chaucer possibly

³ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: a history of women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 98.

⁴ Arlyn Diamond, "Troilus and Criseyde: The Politics of Love," *Chaucer in the Eighties*, eds. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986), p. 94.

⁵ C.D. Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 86.

⁶ H elene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 249.

be one of these poets? The concept of equality between the sexes as we know it was foreign to Chaucer's time, and yet the idea of companionship in marriage was not totally unknown in Church literature of the Middle Ages; according to Shahar, Peter Lombard, writing in the twelfth century, postulated that woman was created from man's rib in order to emphasize her place at man's side, rather than above or beneath him.⁷ Chaucer's concern with sovereignty and *maistrie* in the complicated tissues of relationships between man and woman is central to many of the Canterbury stories: while the Wife posits two possibilities—the man dominates the woman or the woman dominates the man—the relationship between Troilus and Criseyde is predicated on a kind of equality.

In the commonly-held view, delineated by Muriel Bowden in her discussion of the General Prologue, the Wife is coarse and uninhibited, friendly and goodhumored.⁸ The Wife, however, reveals a sensitivity that is unexpected in the light of this view when she tells her audience that Jankyn's oft-repeated verbal attacks on women were very painful to her: "Who wolde wene, or who woude suppose,/ The wo that in myne hert was, and pyne?" (3.786-7) This woe and pain lead the Wife to tear pages out of Jankyn's "cursed book" (3.789) and then punch him in the face and knock him down. Jankyn's response, a hefty blow to the ear, is the direct cause of the Wife's deafness (3.792-6).

In "Alisoun Weaves a Text" Peggy A. Knapp applies one of the central metaphors of current literary theory—the identity of text and texture—to the Wife's Tale. Knapp teases out the feminist "thread" woven through the Prologue, in which Alisoun is seen as "a layered, 'realistically'-conceived character defending her life without altogether hiding its ragged edges";⁹ the Wife defends her position as an independent woman controlling her own property and person, while at the same time playing "her game for ascendancy primarily by managing men through sex."¹⁰ In her discussion of the fight between Alisoun and Jankyn, Knapp observes that the two "reach accord when he agrees to burn the book and she agrees to stop acting it out."¹¹ Lying on the floor, recovering from her husband's blow, the

⁷ Shahar, p. 67.

⁸ Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 214.

⁹ Peggy Knapp, "Alisoun Weaves a Text," *Philological Quarterly* 65 (1986): p. 391.

¹⁰ Knapp, p. 392.

¹¹ Knapp, p. 399.

Wife “understands that a man will be attracted to her in a state of supine helplessness” and therefore “uses her victimization to gain power.”¹² Nevertheless Alisoun and Jankyn do not achieve genuine accord; the Wife, rather, takes (back) power, after a round of fisticuffs which culminates in her partial deafness.

The Wife’s awareness of “the wo that is in mariage” (3.3) generally and her own woe and pain in particular does not bring her to seek that equality which the modern reader would recommend as the cure for her suffering. Her return to *maistrie* after a comparatively short period during which her husband rules the home is bought at the price of a loss of hearing which can be seen as a loss of sensitivity. Indeed, the impairment of her sense of hearing is a figure for her lack of sensitivity. This, Chaucer seems to be hinting, is the price of being part of hierarchy; he (or she) who has *maistrie* over others will of necessity be limited in his (her) ability to hear the voices of those who rank lower. Susan Crane argues that Alison “revels in the attractions of power”; Crane finds the Wife’s attempt to redefine women’s sovereignty to be “rhetorically and culturally significant”; yet “Alison’s apparent confusions propel her convictions beyond traditional discourses toward a realm of expression where there is as yet no language.”¹³ The Wife is ultimately limited in her ability to rise above the conventions of her time; as Crane notes, “the most Alison can tell us about her ideal of female power is that it is not present.”¹⁴

The Wife, nevertheless, expresses her desire for power quite articulately; at no point does she lack the language needed for “revelling in the attractions of power.” Alisoun, however, does not seem to be aware of her own “apparent confusions.” It is the narrator who calls the reader’s attention to a serious fault in Alisoun’s concept of power: the Wife’s deafness leads the reader to acknowledge the impaired ability of the higher-ranking member of a hierarchy to be sensitive to those beneath. This impairment limits the possibility of accord between man and wife; while the Wife claims that at last she and her husband “fine acorded by us selven two” (3.812), the emphasis should perhaps be on *two* rather than *acord*.

Walter C. Long makes a fairly convincing case for the Wife’s role as a “constructive moral agent,” arguing for “the morally revolution-

¹² Knapp, p. 398.

¹³ Susan Crane, “Alison’s Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *PMLA* 102, 1 (1987), p. 20.

¹⁴ Crane, p. 27.

ary concept of sexual equality.”¹⁵ Aware of the danger of “irrationally confounding sovereignty and equality,”¹⁶ Long suggests that the traditionally patriarchal nature of Chaucer’s audience forced him to make a “proto-feminist” statement through the Wife’s use of self-irony and indirection.¹⁷ This line of argument, however, ignores the significance of Alisoun’s deafness: the result of her struggle with her husband was not equality, but *maistrie*, gained, moreover, at the cost of insensitivity, of an impaired ability to hear, not only herself, but her partner.

While sometimes stressing the Wife’s role as an independent, even liberated woman, modern critics tend to emphasize Criseyde’s passivity. She is, after all, subject to the protection and authority of a man, whether Hector (“youre body shal men save”—1.122), Troilus, her uncle, her father or Diomedes. Gretchen Mieszkowski contends that when Criseyde “imagines loving, she thinks of herself as acted upon. [...] Loving is painless violence for her—as if she were submitting to a painless rape.”¹⁸ Although I do not claim that the relationship between Troilus and Criseyde is predicated upon that political-economic-social equality which defines twenty-first century conceptions of sexual liberation, it is possible to find in their love an equality of feeling: the two lovers share the same emotions at a number of points. It is not surprising that we find this unity of feeling in book 3, in which the lovers’ sexual unity is described. There was little need for speech, we are told, because “It semed hire he wiste what she thoughte/ Withouten word” (3.465-6). Troilus and Criseyde are compared to a tree and ivy; but if the image of a (male) tree and (female) vine making love was commonplace, Chaucer’s version emphasizes the equality of the two parts of the figure, rather than depicting the clinging vine as a parasite upon the strong, independent tree: “with many a twiste [...] Gan ech of hem in armes other wynde” (3.1230, 1232). Later on the equality inherent in their lovemaking is expressed directly, without recourse to symbol: “ech of hem gan others lust obey” (3.1690).

Ownership of property was an important issue for Chaucer, who at one point in his varied career earned a living as comptroller of customs and foreign trade during a period of economic develop-

¹⁵ Walter C. Long, “The Wife as Moral Revolutionary,” *The Chaucer Review*, 20, 4 (1986), p. 275.

¹⁶ Long, p. 274.

¹⁷ Long, p. 281.

¹⁸ Gretchen Mieszkowski, “Chaucer’s Much Loved Criseyde,” *The Chaucer Review* 26, 2 (1991), p. 116.

ment and change. Questions of property rights and control of possessions are, of course, intimately connected with notions of control of one's own person. The Wife of Bath treats with this question directly, while Criseyde, who also seems to be a woman of substance, addresses the problem of possession implicitly.

Luce Irigaray has argued that woman represents a mystery "in a culture that claims to enumerate everything, cipher everything by units, inventory everything by individualities."¹⁹ Possession is delineated in both the Wife of Bath's Tale and *Troilus and Criseyde* by means of imagery centering on looking and mirrors. Chaucerian scholars have made much of the scenes in which Alisoun is on display in church and Criseyde in the temple. Bowden points out that the Wife is "conspicuously overdressed" in church on Sundays in order to draw attention to herself and her success as a businesswoman.²⁰ The narrator of the General Prologue notes the importance which the Wife places on being observed by her fellow townspeople as she makes the weekly offering in church: "In al the parisshe wif was ther noon/ That to the offrynge bifore hire shold goon" (1.449-50).

If Ovid were reading Chaucer, according to Michael Calabrese, "he would want to argue that Criseyde went to that temple that day for the same reason," i.e. to be seen.²¹ Calabrese contends that the Wife attempts to return to the Golden Age which was, according to extant antifeminist tradition, brought to an end by female greed and male domination. The Wife, in his words, would go "beyond treachery and the claims to authority and power that prevent love."²² Yet Alisoun is quick to notice "oure apprentice Janekyn's" "crispe heer, shynnyng as gold so fyn" (3.304). Having inherited her gold from her numerous husbands, the Wife does not intend to yield it; you shall not, she announces to her (mostly male) audience "be maister of my body and of my good" (3.314): the Wife's retention of power over her *good* (which puns with *gold*) does not sound like a wish to go beyond power and authority, even at the price of preventing love.

One of the central metaphors in current criticism figures woman as a mirror, a reflection, and in one sense Criseyde serves as a mirror

¹⁹ Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," trans. Claudia Reeder, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 101.

²⁰ Bowden, p. 216.

²¹ Michael Calabrese, *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994), p. 94.

²² Calabrese, p. 82.

image of the Wife. Both heroines succeed in keeping their own goods while yielding their bodies to men; but while the Wife struggles to retain control of her property, Criseyde appears to keep her own goods (her mansion in Troy) without effort. And while Alisoun yields her body to her various husbands as a matter of course, Criseyde grants Troilus possession of her body as one who bestows a great treasure.

Mieszkowski, moreover, argues that Criseyde is a mirror of men in general: "She responds to the men around her and mirrors them, but she is not someone herself";²³ Criseyde is "Simone de Beauvoir's quintessentially appealing woman of Western culture: emptiness of being reflecting being, the Inessential that mirrors the Essential."²⁴ Yet Criseyde herself compares Troilus to a mirror: "she felte he was to hire a wall Of stiel, and sheld" (3,479-80). Walls of steel and shields serve a protective function; but *steel* and *shield* also recall the shiny surface which reflects as it protects. If Criseyde does in fact see Troilus as a mirror, a reflection of herself, this may be an example of being reflecting being, rather than emptiness reflecting being. Although Criseyde had hesitated to enter into an affair with Troilus because "I am myn owene womman, wel at ese" (2.750), by envisioning her lover as a mirror of herself Criseyde is able to remain the owner of herself.

Jealousy, the wish to possess another person, is an integral part of the tissue of relationships of which Criseyde is a part. The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, consciously uses jealousy to achieve certain ends. Alisoun tells her audience that she accused her elderly husbands of running after "wenches" in order to explain her own "walkynge out by nyghte" (3.397). The Wife gleefully notes that this charge doubly pleased the husband by hinting that he was interested in pursuing women despite his advanced age; at the same time, the charge was perceived by the husband as a sign of his wife's fondness for him.

The Wife's apparent acceptance of the validity of her husband's expectation that she be faithful contrasts with her earlier statement that: "He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne/ A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne" (3.333-4). Perhaps Alisoun does, in fact, suffer from the same kind of jealousy of which she accuses her husbands. What might be the nature of the Wife's jealousy? She has,

²³ Mieszkowski, p. 107.

²⁴ Mieszkowski, p. 129.

after all, made it clear that she set no store by the lovemaking of her elderly husbands (3.203). Nevertheless she becomes jealous when she is denied: when the Wife is refused something that she desires, its price at once goes up and she will “crie al day and crave” it (3.518). This image is reminiscent of the Wife’s use of the figure of the husband as debtor, obligated by the marriage vows to pay his debt to his wife by having sex with her. The husband must “yelde to his wyf hire dette” (3.130); “paye his dette” (3.153); “be bothe [...] dettour and thral” (3.155). The repetition of the figure may lead to a perception of the Wife as mercenary and manipulative. Yet theologians, as Shahar notes, often justified sexual relations within the bounds of marriage as a mutual obligation (*debitum*) for the spouses, which moreover implied recognition of the woman’s sexuality.²⁵ It is thus possible to discern in the Wife’s insistence on being rendered her debt an expression of jealousy, based on her awareness of her own sexuality and her wish for her partner’s recognition of it.

When Criseyde first considers the possibility of entering into a love affair with Troilus a major cause of hesitation is her memory of a husband’s jealousy: “Shal noon hosbonde seyn to me ‘Chek mat!’/ For either they ben ful of jalousie/ Or maisterfull, or loven novelrie) (2.754-6). It is ironically prophetic of Criseyde’s later betrayal that in order to bring the lovers together Pandarus tells her that Troilus suspects her of betraying him; i.e. Troilus allows a falsehood to be told and thus leads Criseyde to believe that he is suffering from jealousy. Criseyde herself figures jealousy as —“that wikked wyvere” (3.1010). While *wyvere* is glossed as *snake*, the pun on *wyf* is clear. Indeed, the reflexive irony is palpable: Criseyde warns her lover of the dangers of jealousy—and he is presumed to be the jealous party at this point—by using the conventional figure of jealousy as a snake. Yet the pun on *wyvere/ wyf* indicates the presence of jealousy within Criseyde herself. Is it intentional? Perhaps we are intended to see it as the proverbial Freudian slip, revealing concerns of which the speaker is not fully conscious.

In any discussion of a female character it is impossible to avoid asking: What does she look like? Do others find her appearance attractive? Does she see herself as beautiful? Were I attempting to make movies of the stories of the two heroines I would probably photograph the Wife of Bath’s Tale in color, while filming *Troilus and Criseyde* in black and white. The Wife’s Tale is suffused with color: scarlet and gold are its dominant hues. There is Alison’s scarlet hose

²⁵ Shahar, p. 70.

in the General Prologue; on her various outings she wears “gaye scarlet gyter” (3.559); Jankyn, as already noted, has hair which the Wife compares to gold so fine that it might almost be a crown. Scarlet and gold unite in the Wife’s retelling of a dream which she had previously told to a prospective husband in order to attract him (3.575-84). Alisoun exposes her motives to herself when she describes her manipulative use of a dream which she did not, in fact, have, and then explicates it for her audience: “Blood,” the Wife notes, “bitokeneth gold” (3.581).

The color red is also associated with the Wife’s body. She tells her audience that “have I Martes mark upon my face,/ And also in another privee place” (3.619-20). Mars, the red planet, has apparently imprinted a red birthmark on Alisoun; this may be taken as a sign of pugnacity, certainly present in the Wife’s character, although Mars would conventionally be associated with the supposedly more aggressive male. Blood, nevertheless, is surely evocative of the female. In the Wife’s narrative the color gold (wealth, power) thus conflates with red (violence, femininity), emphasizing the connection between outward appearance and some of the threads woven into her narrative.

In contemporary criticism the text is often figured as woven cloth; indeed, the identity of text and texture is a defining metaphor of current literary theory/ theories. Bowden notes that the narrator’s claim of the Wife’s great skill as a weaver may be an “ironical twist,” since in Chaucer’s day West Country English weavers did not enjoy as good a reputation as their colleagues on the Continent.²⁶ The irony, however, may go deeper. Women’s language, according to Irigaray, is predicated on “‘other meaning’ which is constantly in the process of weaving itself.”²⁷ Chaucer’s weaving wife is thus archetypal: the eternal Eve, portrayed as a weaver.

Yet in her Prologue the Wife weaves a tale which reveals the defects of her own erudition; and W.F. Bolton calls attention to the many inconsistencies in her narrative.²⁸ It may not be farfetched to find ironic the Wife’s apparent skill as a weaver of cloth, when compared to the unevenness of her ability as a narrator. Is her discourse truly uneven, however? It may appear so to Chaucer the pilgrim; Chaucer, the poet, on the other hand, was probably proud of his

²⁶ Bowden, p. 215.

²⁷ Irigaray, p. 103.

²⁸ W.F. Bolton, “The Wife of Bath: Narrator as Victim,” *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), p. 61, 63.

creation. He may have felt that, despite its appearance, the Wife's narrative is an honest reflection of reality. When Alisoun asks "Who peyntede the Leon, tel me who?" (3.692) her question displays her awareness of the fine line separating appearance and reality. Are the bright colors a mere layer of paint, spread upon the lion's body, or perhaps like a woven cloth the colors are the essence.

Alisoun's question—"Who peynted the leoun?"—refers to Aesop's fable of the man and the lion, in which a man shows a lion a statue of a man in the process of killing a lion; the lion then asks, "Did a man or a lion make this picture?" The surface meaning of the tale is clear: in modern terminology, a text cannot be interpreted unless one knows the identity, and therefore the agenda of, the narrator. Alisoun is, however, making another point: when a statue or bas-relief is painted, the colors are added to a previously-created essence, which can exist with or without the addition of the colors; and in a so-called two-dimensional painting a layer of color is spread on a cloth, skin or piece of paper. In weaving, on the other hand, the colors cannot be separated from the essence. The tapestry, the very cloth itself, is a synthesis of color and form; without the colored thread the cloth does not exist. The man who "peynted the leon," therefore, claims that color and essence, i.e. appearance and reality can be separated. The Wife, a weaver of cloth, argues that appearance and reality are indivisible.

While the Wife of Bath speaks of "peynting the leon," Criseyde accuses her uncle of using overly elegant, and possibly dishonest language—"this peynted process" (2.424)—to convince her of the truth of Troilus's love. Here, too, there is more than a hint of possible falsity in the addition of color as a separate layer: paint, of course, is often used to conceal. The color-scheme of *Troilus and Criseyde* is not multicolored, however, but rather black and white: Criseyde is draped in widow's weeds when Troilus first sees her; the lady is compared to a bright star under a black cloud (1.175); the heroine herself speaks of "Blake nyght, as folks in bokes rede,/ That shapen art by God in this world to hide/ At certyn tymes wyth thi derke wede" (3.1429-31). The apostrophe to night, which enables lovers to meet but too hastily separates them by yielding to daylight, is a convention of a literary tradition which glorifies illicit love affairs. Yet in the above address Criseyde reflexively compares night to the dark widow's weeds which she herself wears. Surely it is ironic that Criseyde blames the black-robed night for leaving too quickly, since this is what she herself eventually does.

When Criseyde realizes that she must leave Troy she promises

that her clothes “Shul blake ben in tokenyng, herte swete,/ That I am as out of this world agon” (4.779-80). It is, again, ironic that the heroine, who has been wearing black for one man and is about to become a (grass) widow again, speaks of going out of the world; it is Troilus, after all, who is about to go out of the world. In our last view of the hero he is compared to a star, high above, looking down on “this wrecched world,” (5.1819-20), reminding us of our first view of Criseyde, that bright star surrounded by black.

What, then, would Chaucer have us conclude when he suggests that we “Have here a light, and loke on al this blake” ink (2.1320)? The growing darkness all around, which makes “white thynges wexen dymme and donne/ For lak of lyght” (2.908-9), tells us about the nature of reality in the eyes of the narrator. When white is set next to black, Pandarus declares at the beginning of the story, each seems “more” because of the other: “Eke whit by blak, by shame ek wirthinesse,/ Ech set by other, more for other semeth” (1.642-3); when Troilus and Criseyde are set next to each other, each seems more because of the other. Chaucer’s use of imagery based on black and white creates a reality composed of extremes.

Although Troilus and Criseyde were able to achieve a temporary equality, the presence of a strict hierarchy in the wider social framework precluded the possibility of that equality being permanent. The Wife’s tale of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght, too, would seem to strengthen the claim that equality between the sexes is not possible; in the end, according to Carolyn Dinshaw, “the hag has conformed herself—her whole body—to [her husband’s] desire [...]. Men’s desire is still in control,” although female desire must be acknowledged.²⁹

Nevertheless the Olde Wyf and the Knyght achieve an equality prophetic of modern concepts of equality between man and woman. Their relationship is an ideal, not only for the fourteenth century, but for us as well: “thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende/ In parfit joye” (3.1257-8). The Wife, of course, sees the denouement of her tale as a victory for the Olde Wyf, who has achieved *maistrie* over her husband. Yet the Wife’s view of what actually takes place between husband and wife in the tale which she tells is incomplete. The Knyght, of his own free will, puts himself in his wife’s “wise governance;” the Wyf decides, of her own free will, to obey him “in every thyng/ That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng” (3.1255-6). The Wife does not

²⁹ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989), p. 129.

seem able to directly envisage a non-hierarchical love between a man and a woman, although this is, in fact, what the Wyf and Knyght achieve; in the persons of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght, on the other hand, the poet appears to be articulating a love which is outside the framework of sovereignty.

The question of ownership, of possessions, arises in the tale told by the Wife. On learning that he is expected to marry the Olde Wyf, the Knyght complains that she is poor. This leads to a long lecture by the Wyf on the value and advantages of poverty. Her message is twofold: firstly, "Genterye/ Is nat annexed to possessioun;" (3.1146-7), i.e. *gentillesse* is not inherited from wealthy parents, but is a function of individual behavior, and secondly: poverty is a "possessioun that no Wight wol challenge" (3.1200). The poor man, in other words, can be merry, since nobody covets what he has.

Both the Wife of Bath and Criseyde keep their own goods while yielding possession of their bodies to a man; the Knyght at first takes possession of a woman's body by force, for which he almost loses his life. On realizing that he may be forced into marriage—a situation in which women more commonly found themselves—the Knyght pleads: "Taak al my good and lat my body go" (3.1061). The Knyght, however, in marked contrast to the Wife of Bath and Criseyde, does not appear to have much in the way of goods with which to bargain.

While specific information as to the Knyght's finances is not provided, the young man seems to exist in a protracted adolescence, characterized by lack of a regular income, and is eventually made to marry an older woman. By insisting that the Knyght keep his word and marry her, the Olde Wyf forces him into a traditionally female situation: lack of sovereignty over one's body. In her tale the Wife of Bath thus turns the tables on the man, showing him and the males in her audience what it is like to be treated as a possession. The Olde Wyf, however, is generous: by releasing the Knyght from being forced into marriage with an ugly, old woman and allowing him to choose, she mitigates the difficulty of his situation. By granting his wife the possibility of choice the Knyght helps to create a model of marriage in which neither partner is the possession of the other.

If the *Canterbury Tales* is a poem working "toward a code of marital affection that is beyond treachery," according to Calabrese, we must see Jankyn's and Alisoun's mutual cessation of hostilities as an attempt to "look toward a marriage and a romantic world that are free of art and game."³⁰ I would claim, however, that it is really

³⁰ Calabrese, p. 104.

the Olde Wyf and the Knyght who achieve this. When making her offer to the Knyght the Olde Wyf warns him that should he choose a young and fair wife he will have to take his "aventure of the repair/ That shal be to youre hous by caus of me" (3.1224-5). This threat, let us note, is not specific; the Wyf may not be unfaithful to her husband, but the Knyght will have to take his chances. The Wyf is merely warning her husband that if he has a young, attractive wife he may feel jealous. The wife may not give the Knyght genuine cause for jealousy; the husband, however, will probably suffer the proverbial pangs of jealousy because he does not expect an attractive woman to limit her sexual favors to one man.

The problem of jealousy raised by the Olde Wyf is resolved through mutual consideration initiated by the Knyght when he asks the Wyf to choose "which may be moost plesance/ And moost honour to yow and me also" (3.1232-3). The Wyf, as we know, chooses to be both fair and good; the former will give *plesance* to the Knyght and the latter honor to them both, obviating the necessity to manipulate each other's emotions by awakening jealousy. The Wife of Bath is a middle-aged woman, worried by the approach of age which has bereft her of beauty (a supposedly outward attribute) and pith (inner content). Criseyde is said to be beautiful (5.806-826) not only in her outward appearance but in character. The Wyf, who is old and ugly and then becomes young and beautiful, synthesizes youth and age, ugliness and beauty.

The Wife's Tale, let us not forget, is a *bildungsroman*: having undergone a transformation that is difficult, or, some would say, even impossible—from casual rapist to sensitive lover—the Knyght is rewarded by a woman who is both beautiful and good. There is no discrepancy, in other words, between her outward appearance and inner essence. She first demands that he choose between appearance (beauty) and reality (goodness); the necessity of choice is predicated on the idea that the two are not identical, and that outward appearance and inner reality can, in fact, be separated. The harmony reached by husband and wife brings about the eventual unity of appearance and reality in the person of the Olde Wyf.

The correspondences between the Wife of Bath and Criseyde have been synthesized in the relationship of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght in Alisoun's tale. Through this relationship Chaucer indicates ways in which binary oppositions such as mastery/ equality, dependence/ independence, appearance/ reality can be transcended, or indeed invalidated. The Wife accepts the need for hierarchy; she is not capable of envisioning a system of non-hierarchical relations

between men and women. Troilus and Criseyde can avoid issues of hierarchy temporarily, but in the long run they cannot ignore hierarchy. Yet the Olde Wyf and the Knyght finally succeed in achieving equality by transcending hierarchical frameworks.

The Wife uses her own body to gain and retain power over her goods; Criseyde seems to set a value on her body, but ultimately does not rebel against her role as a man's possession. When told that he must marry an old woman the Knyght becomes an object; he must learn first-hand what it means to lose control of his body before he can be part of a relationship in which questions of ownership are irrelevant.

Jealousy is knowingly used by the Wife to manipulate men in order to guarantee retention of her own power. Criseyde does not want a jealous lover and does not herself seem to be jealous; jealousy is used, however, by Pandarus and Troilus to convince her to enter into a sexual relationship with the hero. The Olde Wyf does not appear to be motivated by jealousy, although she takes pains to warn the Knyght that he may suffer from jealousy if he has a beautiful wife. The two, again, transcend jealousy through mutual yielding and consideration.

Underlying the poet's portrayal of the Wife of Bath and Criseyde is the interrogation of the validity of a clear separation between appearance and reality. The Wife is worried that aging will bereave her of "beauty and pith"—appearance and substance—while Criseyde's act of betrayal does taint the beauty of her outward self. In the tale of the Olde Wyf and the Knyght, however, Chaucer demonstrates that the separation of appearance and reality is not always valid, and can indeed be transcended. Appearance and reality, like the colors of a cloth and the cloth itself, are not to be separated. Might not this declaration be another example of the way in which Chaucer, as Bolton declares,³¹ is not only ahead of his time, but of ours as well?

Nancy Rosenfeld
University of Haifa
Israel

³¹ Bolton, p. 64.

LOOKING FOR LOVE ON SAMUEL BECKETT'S STAGE: HOMOEROTICISM, STERILITY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION

Amanda Cagle

While Samuel Beckett's work obviously fits into postmodern classification, *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* are not only postmodern but also postcolonial dramas. Beckett's political agenda in *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* dismantles the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power by exploring the sexual role of the Irish male in colonized Ireland. According to Simon Slemon, postcolonial literature functions as a "form of cultural criticism and cultural critique: a mode of disidentifying whole societies from the sovereign codes of cultural organisation, and an inherently dialectical intervention in the hegemonic production of cultural meaning" (14). Samuel Beckett succeeds in removing his characters and settings from those prevalent in colonized Ireland. In fact, as Yuan Yuan asserts, Beckett's drama, specifically *Waiting For Godot*, functions as a postcolonial text because it is "structured and dominated by absence. The play neither designates any particular location nor does it indicate a specific time in history, and the central character is absent from the scene" (5). By removing his setting and characters from the realistic situation of colonized Ireland, Beckett contributes to the destabilization of the cultural and political authority of imperialism.

In Beckett's plays, the new society created is not one of hope and rebuilding. Instead, his dramas identify the Irish people, males in particular, as a people cut off from their pasts, cultures, and identities. Beckett's work reflects the profound anguish, despair and isolation felt as a result of the decay of western civilization. The characters in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* illustrate the absurdity of man's condition and the futility and helplessness of a humanity removed from itself. After events like the

Holocaust and Hiroshima, the ease with which an imperial power could commit genocide either through systematic killing or, as is the case with Ireland, through systematic eradication of culture became apparent. These factors led Beckett to emphasize “the search for man’s own identity—not the *finding* of the true nature of the self” (Esslin 138). As a means of raising “the problem of identity itself, the confrontation of the audience with the existence of its own problematical and mysterious condition” becomes the fundamental channel through which Beckett attempts to destabilize the influence of the coloniser (Esslin 138).

The problem of identity for the colonized Irish male begins when the English king ascends to the throne and marries the land. The Irish people identify their island as a woman. Therefore, when the king marries the land, he marries Ireland and her women. As Beckett’s work shows, the Irish male suffers because he becomes unidentifiable. The English take on the role of the colonizer, the males, the husbands of the land. The women become the colonized, the submissive wives of the colonizer. But the Irish men play no role in their society. Their women are submissive to the colonizer instead of to them. Irish women, Irish pasts, and Ireland itself remain dead to Irish males. Therefore, the Irish male must attempt to confirm his existence and the existence of humanity through the only available option besides isolation, other men.

In Beckett’s plays, many of the male characters are interdependent. They rely on other characters for needs including emotional and sexual desires. Although the Irish in the 1950s did not recognize homosexuality as an acceptable practice, Beckett uses muted homoerotic desire in his plays to demonstrate the state of the Irish male as man cut off from nature and reproduction because of the influence of an imperial power. According to Eibhear Walshe:

Post-colonial countries like Ireland have particular difficulty with the real presence of the homoerotic. Colonialism itself generates a gendered power relationship and, inevitably, casts the colonizing power as masculine and dominant and the colonized as feminine and passive. One of the consequences of this resistance to the imperial was an increased unease with the shifting and ‘unstable’ nature of sexual difference, and so a narrowing of gender hierarchies ensues. (5)

In *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape* the absence of women serves as a metaphor for the presence of a colonizer. Although Irish males wait for sexual reinforcements and sometimes fantasize about the women formerly present in their lives, the reality that Irish women are submissive to the English, as the colonized is

submissive to the colonizer, leaves nothing for Irish males to hope for in the future. Reproduction becomes an impossibility, and sexuality becomes limited to homosexuality. Therefore, in Beckett's works, the characters obsess about the world being an uninhabited place. For Beckett, hegemonic boundaries lead to isolation and apocalyptic visions.

The relationships between the characters in *Waiting For Godot* exemplify the relationship between the Irish and the English. The bond of Pozzo and Lucky mirrors that of the colonizer and the colonized. Pozzo embodies the character of imperialism. He is a sadistic master who uses power to control Lucky. Lucky, on the other hand, can be viewed as the submissive Irish woman. Although Lucky is cast as a male, Vladimir calls Lucky "effeminate" (Beckett, *Waiting For Godot* 17b). He also insists that Lucky is not bad looking. Nevertheless, the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo illustrates the struggle between the Irish and the English. A rope that not only serves as a material tie but also a psychological tie connects the two. When Vladimir and Estragon ask why Lucky remains submissive, Pozzo has a difficult time explaining the phenomena of colonization:

POZZO: He wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him.

ESTRAGON: What?

POZZO: Perhaps I haven't got it quite right. He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him. No, that's not exactly it either.

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: He wants to cod me, but he won't. (21a)

Unable to explain why he controls Lucky and forces him to submit, Pozzo says, "Remark that I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise. To each one his due" (21b). Pozzo fails to explain his authority over Lucky just as the English fail to explain their authority over the Irish.

While Pozzo and Lucky represent the role of the colonized and the colonizer, Vladimir and Estragon symbolize displaced Irish males. They wait by a tree for a man called Godot. Although the identity of Godot will remain a mystery indefinitely, Vladimir and Estragon have specific ideas about what they expect from Godot. When Pozzo and Lucky fall in front of Estragon and Vladimir, Estragon asks, "Is it Godot?" (48b). Vladimir replies, "At last! (*He goes towards the heap.*) Reinforcements at last!" (48b). Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for sexual reinforcements. Although homoerotic desire exists between Vladimir and Estragon, they are not blatant homosexuals. At times, they even attempt to become aroused by thoughts of women.

However, desire for women subsides because of the role of the English. By making women unavailable to Vladimir and Estragon and by forcing them to express their sexual desires through homoeroticism, Beckett demonstrates the inevitable breakdown of Irish culture and lineage as a direct result of the oppressor's force. The bodies of Irish women are no longer available for reproduction because they are marked for consumption within imperialism's particular brand of patriarchy.

Vladimir and Estragon recognize that their homosexual desires will be unable to save humanity. Vladimir and Estragon struggle not only with the absence of women, but also with their inability to take an active role in the continuation of Irish lineage:

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGO: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh ... (*He reflects*). We wouldn't have to go into the details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born?

Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.

VLADIMIR: One daren't even laugh any more.

ESTRAGON: Dreadful privation. (8b)

When Vladimir presses his hand to his pubis and contorts his face, he symbolically acknowledges the desperate state of the colonized male. Because the Irish are no longer able to function as a distinct cultural group, not only their lineage but also their financial value to the English decreases because reproduction of people and inevitably goods will cease. The colonizer, the play seems to suggest, must eventually face the consequences of what Césaire calls the 'boomerang' effect of colonization: its decivilising of both oppressor and oppressed (26).

While waiting for a change in their situation, Vladimir and Estragon contemplate their abilities to produce. Like Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, Vladimir and Estragon are so desperate that they would be satisfied with the production of vegetation:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGO: (*highly excited*.) An erection!

VLADIMIR: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?

ESTRAGON: Let's hang ourselves immediately! (12a)

Although Irish males are unable to reproduce alone, the logic of Foucault's repressive hypothesis—what is prohibited returns in new and resignifying forms—becomes important. Vladimir and Estragon relocate their desires onto each other and onto alternative forms of sexual satisfaction in order to deal with their repression under British rule.

According to Walshe, “the post-colonial struggle to escape the influence of the colonizing power became a struggle to escape the gendered relation of male colonizer to female colonized” (5). When Estragon tells Vladimir the story of an Englishman who visits a brothel, Vladimir yells, “STOP IT!” before running off of the stage and attempting to masturbate (11b). Estragon stays on the stage and cheers for Vladimir, but Vladimir fails to ejaculate because women no longer play a sexual role in the life of the Irish male, Once Vladimir returns to the stage:

He brushes past Estragon, crosses the stage with bowed head. Estragon takes a step towards him, halts.

ESTRAGON: (*gently.*) You wanted to speak to me?

(Silence. Estragon takes a step forward.) You had something to say to me? *(Silence. Another step forward.)* Didi ...

VLADIMIR: (*without turning*) I've nothing to say to you.

ESTRAGON: (*step forward*). You're angry? *(Silence. Step forward.)*

Forgive me. *(Silence. Step forward. Estragon lays his hand on Vladimir's shoulder.)* Come, Didi. *(Silence.)* Give me your hand. *(Vladimir half turns.)* Embrace me! *(Vladimir stiffens.)* Don't be stubborn! *(Vladimir softens. They embrace. Estragon recoils.)*
(11b-12a)

The desire for women is replaced by desire for men. Whereas Vladimir fails in his attempt to become aroused by the thought of a woman, he succeeds in being emotionally and physically comforted by Estragon.

The interdependence of Vladimir and Estragon appears throughout the play. When they are reunited after a night apart, Vladimir says, “Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? (*He reflects.*) Get up till I embrace you” (7a). The two spend every day together and share a few vague memories that seem to refer to a time when their homosexual tendencies did not threaten the survival of the Irish lineage as it does during the play. While reminiscing, Vladimir asks Estragon to recall the time they were “hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late” (7b). According to Stephen Watt, “memory inevitably signals diminished stature or even personal

losses" (77). Vladimir and Estragon must come to terms with nothing less than the loss of their identities. While the English become the husbands of the land and the Irish women necessarily submit to the colonizer, the Irish males lose all sense of productiveness. Hence, Vladimir and Estragon cling to one another. The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon stretches back for as long as they can remember. Neither recalls a day when the other was not around, therefore, the romantic insinuations made by both characters suggest their desire for one another.

The emphasis on each of the distinct and complementary characteristics of both Vladimir and Estragon supports the idea that the men are inseparable. Vladimir assumes the identity of a man of intellect. He possesses romantic notions and always has trouble with his hat; Estragon always has trouble with his shoes and seems to be a man of factual and rational thought. Vladimir has bad breath; Estragon has stinky feet. They complement each other and rely on one another for intellectual, emotional and sexual fulfillment. In the following scene, the reliance of each character on the other leads to intense physical contact:

VLADIMIR: Did I ever leave you?

ESTRAGON: You let me go.

VLADIMIR: Look at me. (*Estragon does not raise his head. Violently.*)

Will you look at me! Estragon raises his head. They look long at each other, then suddenly embrace, clapping each other on the back. End of the embrace. Estragon, no longer supported, almost falls. (38a)

This complementary relationship also exists between the main characters in *Endgame*. Hamm relies on Clov for movement, and Clov relies on Hamm for food. Stephen Watt notes that Hamm's actions are "complicit with biology in producing desire in Clov, vowing to maintain it at a constant pitch" (81). Hamm gives Clov only enough food to allow him to survive, thereby forcing him to remain dependent on and desirous of Hamm's attention and care.

The most fundamental element linking *Waiting For Godot* with *Endgame* lies in the characters' realization that chances for survival are bleak. Nature does not aid the characters in *Endgame*. Hamm tells Clov, "It'd need to rain," and Clov answers, "It won't rain" (457). Both Hamm and Clov wish for and fear the return of natural reproduction. However, both Hamm and Clov realize that nature, as they previously knew it, has vanished. Like the colonized Irish male, Hamm and Clov understand that natural reproduction and autonomy are hindered by the constant presence of the colonizer, who leaves them

struggling to survive in what they consider to be an aberrant state.

Unlike Clov, Hamm believes that “nature has forgotten us” (459). According to Hamm, nature has forgotten to endow men with the ability to create life. Since heterosexual relationships are no longer available, standard rules of lineage cannot be applied. Throughout the play, Hamm speaks of his role as a father to Clov even though he is not biologically the father. However, Clov, unlike Hamm, rejects the existence of nature all together. He states, “There’s no more nature” (459).

Without women available to repopulate the earth, man will die. Like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting For Godot*, Hamm and Clov search for alternative means of reproduction. Vladimir and Estragon plan to get erections by hanging themselves. They expect mandrakes will grow, but their plans never materialize. Hamm and Clov apparently planned a similar situation in which Clov would ejaculate in hopes of producing some sort of edible vegetation because of the limited supplies of food available. But the plan fails to produce results:

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Did you scratch around to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV: They haven’t sprouted.

HAMM: Perhaps it’s still too early.

CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (*Violently.*) They’ll never sprout! (459).

Both Hamm and Clov believe that they are among the last inhabitants. Hamm realizes, “There’s no one else,” and Clov replies, “There’s nowhere else” (458). Unlike Hamm, Clov understands that their homosexual and experimental procreation techniques will not work. Creation has come to a standstill as shown by the state of Hamm’s dog, who like the Irish male, exists without a sex. Hamm complains, “You’ve forgotten the sex.” Clov replies, “(*vexed*) but he isn’t finished. The sex goes at the end” (467). Clov still hopes that natural reproduction will become an option again. However, because of colonization a new risk has arrived. For Hamm and Clov, the existence of others would bring quicker deaths for the two of them because they have only a small quantity of food and supplies. When a flea is found, Hamm reacts angrily:

HAMM (*very perturbed*): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him for the love of God!

CLOV: I’ll go get the powder.

(Exit Clov.)

HAMM: A flea! This is awful! What a day!

(Enter CLOV with a sprinkling-tin.)

CLOV: I'm back again, with the insecticide.

HAMM: Let him have it!

(CLOV loosens the top of his trousers, pulls it forward and shakes powder into the aperture. He stoops, looks, waits, starts, frenziedly shakes more powder, stoops, looks, waits.)

CLOV: The bastard!

Although Hamm and Clov must now resist the existence of other creatures during the play, at one time, Clov felt differently. He believed that Hamm could have filled Mother Pegg's empty womb and accuses Hamm of failing to impregnate her:

CLOV (*harshly*): When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no?

(Pause.)

You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness. (478)

In *Endgame*, unlike in *Waiting For Godot*, a woman was at one time available. Mother Pegg, who symbolically represents Ireland, dies because her womb remains empty. The light has gone out on the country because of the presence of a dominating colonizer and the inability of the Irish male to recognize his own virility in the face of oppression.

A major difference between *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame* lies in the role of women in the play. During the action of the play, women are once again unavailable. While heterosexual desire exists, it subsists only in the memory. Nell and Nagg remember their engagement, but the existence of sexuality during that time has been ensnared by colonization. Nell and Nagg are no longer capable of physically expressing their desires towards one another because their bodies are contained in barrels. In the following scene, Beckett demonstrates the inability of the Irish male to connect to the Irish woman because she has been cut off from him by her subservience to the colonizer.

NAGG: Were you asleep?

NELL: Oh, no!

NAGG: Kiss me.

NELL: We can't.

NAGG: Try.

(*Their heads strain toward each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.*)

NELL: Why this farce day after day? (450)

Sexual connection is an impossibility in the plays of Samuel Beckett. Heterosexual relationships cannot exist when the colonizer is male and the colonized is female. In order to establish a sexual outlet, Hamm and Clov turn to each other and express their homoerotic desires. Hamm asks Clov, "Kiss me. (*Pause.*) Will you not kiss me?" (475). When Clov refuses, Hamm becomes more insistent, "On the forehead ...Give me your hand at least ... Will you not give me your hand" (475). Clov refuses because he realizes that homosexual encounters will not help the situation. In a description of his anatomy, Clov says, "I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit" (480). Although Clov realizes that his sexual organs are no longer useful, Hamm still relies on him for sexual and emotional fulfillment. When Clov threatens to leave, Hamm becomes sensitive:

HAMM: You're leaving me all the same.

CLOV: I'm trying.

HAMM: You don't love me.

CLOV: No.

HAMM: You loved me once.

CLOV: Once! (458)

Although Clov threatens to leave, he is incapable of surviving without Hamm. The two men rely on each other for continued existence. As in *Waiting For Godot* the characters in *Endgame* are inextricably linked due to the loss of identity they suffer as a result of imperialism. The absence of women forces them to pursue their homosexual behavior and therefore implement a form of anti-procreation in order to break the generation of colonized Irishmen.

Krapp's Last Tape, like *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*, explores the life of a man cut off from heterosexual relationships due to the colonizer's view of the woman's body and Ireland as territory. *Krapp's Last Tape* begins with Krapp choosing a key. He then takes a "large banana ...strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, put end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him" (Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* 312). After pacing and eating the banana, Krapp takes a second large banana and handles it just like the first banana. However, with the second banana, Krapp "puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he

can muster backstage into darkness” (312). Krapp’s handling of the banana is sexually suggestive. The key and banana, both phallic symbols, are representations of Krapp’s homoerotic desire. After handling the banana, Krapp runs off stage and a loud cork pops, suggesting ejaculation.

Krapp differs significantly from the characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*. He has had heterosexual experiences with women, but gave them up when he realized it “was hopeless and no good going on” (316). Krapp, like many of Beckett’s other characters, wonders if “the earth might be uninhabited” (316). Irish men often struggled with their identities because the role of the colonizer as the male in society left no place for Irish men. Like the characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*, Krapp decides to give up women all together. They no longer exist except on his tapes. According to Katherine Worth, the women in Krapp’s life are “all ghosts, really, dependant for their existence on Krapp’s bitter-sweet recording of them. The only female life in the play comes to us only by courtesy of a man’s memory or imagining” (236).

Beckett breaks down the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power by writing plays that explore the desperation of Irish men. With their women and their land subservient to the English, Irish men were forced to find fulfillment in other areas. Krapp masturbates and molests phallic objects in order to be sexually fulfilled, and he relies on art and his tapes as a means of intellectual and emotional fulfillment.

When Krapp plays his first tape, he begins to realize the amount of suffering he has undergone as a result of colonization. Krapp reads “Farewell to—[he turns the page]—love” (313). Krapp has lost the ability to feel sexual desire towards another person. While characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame* resort to homosexuality, Krapp “limits his sexual life to masturbation” (Acheson 74).

By listening to Krapp’s tapes, it becomes apparent that he has struggled with his sexuality for many years. He refers to Bianca as “hopeless business” (314). He combines subjects that seem irrational. When speaking of his plans for the upcoming year, Krapp at 39 says, “plans for a less ... [hesitates] ... engrossing sexual life. Last illness of his father. Flagging pursuit of happiness. Unattainable laxation” (314). Krapp does not differentiate intercourse from other functions of the body.

On tape, Krapp narrates an excellent example of the role of the colonizer on the relationships of Irish males with women:

TAPE: One dark beauty I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator, most funereal thing. Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her—not having been introduced—she threatened to call a policeman. As if I had designs on her virtue! (315)

By threatening to call the police, the woman reminds Krapp of the role of the British in Ireland and in his relationship with women. Although that affair did not materialize, Krapp at 39 speaks with eloquence about the woman in the boat. Strangely though, when Krapp asks her to open her eyes, he says, “the eyes, just slits” (316). Krapp has already come to the realization that there is no use continuing their relationship because of the gender hierarchy in a colonized land. Upon this realization, sex disappears, and she becomes an object rather than a person.

Although women are no longer available to Irish males, Krapp still desires women. He dreams of Effie and refers to a “ghost of a whore” (317). However, none of these women exist. Krapp is alone and must redefine himself and his sexuality in accordance with the terms of the colonizer.

Although Beckett’s work does not appear frequently in the canon of postcolonial literature, many of his works are political. *In Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape* Beckett attempts to break down hegemonic boundaries by exploring the sexual role of the Irish male in colonized Ireland. His dramas explore the consumption of Irish women under imperialism’s patriarchy and the desperate and sometimes absurd actions Irish men must take in order to redirect their sexual and authoritarian roles. Colonization causes Irish men to lose their sense of self and forces them to create new identities as the gender stuck in between the male colonizer and the female colonized. Beckett explores the sexual outlets available to the members of the somewhat androgynous Irish male and the problems he encounters when hopes of continued lineage or even existence appear bleak and unfeasible.

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Amanda Cagle
English Department
University of Connecticut
United States of America

CROSSING IDENTITIES IN SEVERO SARDUY'S *DE DONDE SON LOS CANTANTES*

María Mercedes Andrade

“As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity”—Jacques Derrida, “The Law of the Genre” (*Glyph* 7, 204).

I begin this essay with a line from Jacques Derrida’s “The Law of the Genre.” In it, Derrida describes how the notion of “genre,” broadly understood here as any classificatory category, necessarily implies a limit, a border, a demarcation, a system of oppositions. The notion of “genre” implies a normative prescription to stay within a certain boundary, and therefore, it demands obedience to a norm. As such, the notion of “genre” shows its proximity to the question of “discipline.” In an ordinary dictionary, “discipline” is defined as: “training that develops self-control; strict control to enforce obedience; orderly conduct; a system of rules; treatment that corrects or punishes”¹. Thus, both “discipline” and “genre” are tied to the obedience of norms and conventions and the abstention from crossing certain defined boundaries. In what follows, I will discuss these issues as they relate to the novel written by the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy in 1967, *De donde son los cantantes*.

De donde son los cantantes is a text that refuses to conform itself to the norm, to the requirements of a discipline, to the discipline (the law) of genres. Rather than an “interdisciplinary” text, this text is unruly, un-disciplined, and it takes pleasure in crossing over, cross-dressing, *transgressing*, transforming. It is a text that, according to Derrida’s citation, would be called impure, anomalous, monstrous.

In Sarduy’s text, the incessant “crossing” of boundaries constitutes a powerful reflection on the question of identity, and more

¹ See Webster’s *New World Dictionary of the American Language*. New York: Warner Books, 1984.

specifically, on the impossibility of establishing pure, unmixed identities. Such “crossing” occurs in *De donde son los cantantes* at the level of plot and character construction, and it is a commentary on gender, ethnicity, and on the novel as a genre. Sarduy’s text constantly breaks with the conventions of the novelistic genre and its characters permanently alter their gender and ethnicity. The result is a new model of identity that is not, in dialectical fashion, a final synthesis between different elements. Instead, *De donde son los cantantes* constitutes a post-structural proposal for an identity that is constantly changing and that always includes difference. A closer look at the plot and characters will show the reader how these three levels (genre, gender, ethnic identity) are intertwined. It is necessary to warn that the plot summary that I include below is at best an approximation to a text that delights in ambiguity.

Plot and character

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes points out that in what he calls the “dramatic text” (187), the reader’s attention focuses on the outcome of the story, which is the disclosure of a certain truth. All the elements in the code of actions of a dramatic text are organized in such a way as to postpone the disclosure of a truth until the final moment, the moment of revelation, and the purpose of reading is to finally arrive at the discovery of this truth. “The dramatic narrative,” says Barthes, “is a game with two players: the snare and the truth” (187). If the actions were to be arranged differently, the dramatic effect would be lost. Aristotle explained this already in the *Poetics*, when he set down what would become the norm that ruled the writing of narrative in the West, namely, his idea that a text should have “a beginning, a middle, and an end” (65).

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes equates the reading of dramatic texts with “the corporeal striptease”: “the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy’s dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)” (10). Barthes sees that this type of enjoyment is strictly determined by our cultural expectations of what the novel as a genre (or what a striptease) should be, but it does not constitute the only possible pleasure of reading. Instead, it limits and conditions this pleasure according to a hierarchical, climactic structure. In contrast, says Barthes, “the modern text” (12) is one that subverts the hierarchical organization of the narrative allowing the reader to obtain pleasure regardless of the point of entrance. Consequently, the “modern text”

is one that refuses to follow the conventions of the novel as a genre. It is a text that cannot be read quickly, in search of the outcome, because in it “you want something to happen, but nothing does” (12). In this type of text, the code of actions, the “plot,” is at best secondary, if not absent.

This is precisely what happens in *De donde son los cantantes*: the text cannot be classified as “dramatic,” since there is no enigma to be solved, and the act of reading it is not guided by the “novelistic satisfaction” of disclosing a truth. In fact, the plot of the text is improbable, inconsistent, and contradictory. *De donde son los cantantes* transgresses the rules of the novel as a genre because in it, events are not organized according to the rules of the dramatic text and because it freely crosses over from novelistic conventions to other types of discourse, other disciplines.

The text is made up of separate episodes that may or may not be connected. Each section is constructed in a way that is apparently independent from the rest, and it is unclear whether a temporal sequence guides the narrative. In fact, critics such as Roberto González Echevarría have argued that the final section of the text may actually be a preface to the whole narrative, although it is also possible to view it as a final moment, though not as a conclusion.² To further complicate the matter, there is an “Author’s Note” at the end of the text, which allegedly summarizes the narrative in allegorical terms. However, since the author has been mocked throughout the text, as have been his pretensions of “knowing” what the text is about, the authority ascribed to this note is dubious.

In the introductory episode, titled “Curriculum cubense” (“Cuban Curriculum”), two characters called “Auxilio” and “Socorro,” the two commonplace words that someone in trouble would scream when asking for help, argue heatedly in Baroque verse. They are dressed outrageously and wear nylon wigs, and though at first they appear to be women, the words used to describe them indicate that they may be transvestites, or the two Fates, or life and death (Socorro is called “Parca”, which is the word for Death personified), or all of the above. Socorro leaves her partner and tries to enter the “Domus

² “*El Curriculum cubense* con que se abre la obra debe venir al final de la última ficción: ocurre en La Habana hipermoderna e irreal a la que llegan los personajes. Su función de prólogo o introducción subraya que el orden de la obra obedece más a la convención que a la cronología” (“*The Cuban curriculum* with which the work opens must come at the end of the last fiction: it takes place in the hypermodern and unreal Havana where the characters arrive. Its function as prologue or introduction underlines the fact that order in this work obeys convention rather than chronology”) (69).

Dei” (“The House of God”), but is refused at the door by God’s maid. Discouraged, s/he meets Auxilio at the “Self-service,” and they try to reconstitute their “self” after God’s rejection. Immediately, what is allegedly a second version of the story follows, though it bears no resemblance with the first one. Auxilio is tangled in the medals of a character called “the General” (also, the “Generating Principle,” and simultaneously, a Spanish officer), while they engage in a sexual dance. Their dance is so powerful, that it sucks in a black woman (or transvestite), and a Chinese woman (or transvestite), thus constituting the “Curriculum cubense” (“Cuban curriculum”).

According to the above, for Sarduy, “Cuban identity” is the mixture of four different elements that are blended in a whirlwind: the Spanish, the Chinese, the African, and Death or Fate. However, these four elements are not fused in an optimistic version of *mestizaje* by which different elements mix to produce a synthesis, a new element that differs from its predecessors. Instead, differences are maintained within the new mixture. Thus, the narrator describes the four elements as “cuatro seres distintos y que son uno sólo [...] ¡Qué graciosos!” (“four different beings that are one [...] How funny!”) (103). Furthermore, these elements come together in certain sections of the text and are kept distinct in others in which the characters do not manage to find each other and the encounter is never consummated. The “Cuban identity” that Sarduy proposes is a movement of crossing back and forth, of a fusion and separation of cultural elements. For Sarduy, ethnic identity is never stable and its borders are always fluid. Cuban identity cannot be reduced according to a system of classification; it cannot be disciplined into orderly boundaries.

In the second section, “By the River of Rose Ashes,” a General (perhaps the same general of the introductory section, though the reader is never sure) chases in vain after Lotus Flower, a Chinese actress of “the Shanghai,” a burlesque theater in Havana, while Auxilio and Socorro mock him for not understanding the secret behind her femininity, that is, that Lotus Flower is a transvestite. The whole scene reveals its unreal character when the “author” (“I”) and the “reader” suddenly interrupt: the reader complains that there is a smell of Cantonese rice and dog urine, as well as a Marlene Dietrich record in the background. To this, the “author” (“I”) responds:

“bueno, querido, no todo puede ser coherente en la vida. [...] No van a pedirme que aquí en la calle Zanja, junto al Pacífico (sí, donde come Hemingway), en esta ciudad donde hay una destilería, un billar, una puta y un marinero en cada esquina les disponga un ‘ensemble’ chino con pelos y señales. Haré lo que se pueda”

“well, darling, not everything can be coherent in life. [...] You can’t expect me here, in Zanja Street, next to the Pacific (yes, where Hemingway eats), in this city where there is a pub, a billiard, a whore, and a sailor at every corner, to come up with a perfect Chinese ‘ensemble’”) (110).

The narrative abruptly moves to a rehearsal at “the Shanghai.” A stoned “Director” appears, and he tries to give the performance more verisimilitude by demanding: “¡Atmósfera china, muchachitas!” (“A Chinese ambiance, girls!”) (110). The comments of the Director refer to the performance on the stage, but also to the section as a whole. Auxilio and Socorro, whose appearance and names constantly change, enter the narration as actresses in the Shanghai Theater, and later as prostitutes in the street. The General cannot find Lotus Flower after the performance, and instead, he decides to chase after a substitute, Maria Eng, Lotus Flower’s double, but is stopped by the pimp and pusher “Carita de Dragón” (“Little Dragon-Face”). The section ends when the frustrated General sends Lotus Flower the gift of a bracelet that will cut her veins open once it is attached to the wrist.

In the second section, the verisimilitude of the narrative is broken when the text unexpectedly “crosses over” to the theater. The theater is not merely thematized in the section, but rather, the section itself becomes a play, as it adopts the conventions of adding stage directions and indicating a character’s turn to speak. This constitutes another rupture with the norms of the novel, since it produces an effect of alienation in the reader, who is forced to accept that what s/he has been reading is a fiction to be performed.

Furthermore, the inclusion of theatrical elements is a comment on gender and race. Characters appear and disappear, they mutate and transform themselves in the text, they change their names and their attributes:

se oye el grito de ‘¡Metamorfosis!’ en Si Bemol, y acto seguido aparecen las Dos montadas en sendas Vespas de carrera, a toda máquina, y armadas de ametralladoras Thompson. [...] Lo que sí es ya más asombroso es que cada Una está provista de tres cabezas y siete brazos.

(“at the cry of ‘Metamorphosis!’ in B Flat, the Two appear, each riding a Vespa and carrying Thompson machine guns. [...] What is rather more surprising is that, each One has three heads and seven arms”) (117).

Gender or race (or even humanity), are not essential characteristics, but instead, they are a matter of dressing up, of acting, of speaking, of performance. Behind the “cinco primeras capas de maquillaje”

("first five layers of makeup") (92) of Sarduy's characters, and the countless ones that follow, there is only an absence. The limits of gender and race can be crossed since, for Sarduy, there is no fixed natural border that separates one identity from another.

The third section, "La Dolores Rondón," a parody of Greek tragedy, begins with the epitaph written by Dolores, the black "cortesana y poeta" ("courtesan and poet") (141), for her own tomb. The poem is a "décima," a type of popular verse. Two narrators, presumably Auxilio and Socorro in disguise, or their doubles, tell the story of the mulatta's life. They speak as would the chorus in Greek tragedy, and the entire section, like the previous one, has indications for the performance on stage. The two narrators do not tell the story in chronological order "sino en el del poema, que es, después de todo, el verdadero" ("but in that of the poem, which, after all, is the true one") (142).

In the section, the two narrators discuss philosophical issues such as whether words can really refer to reality, whether the narrator should be visible or invisible in a text, whether a text can imitate reality or necessarily refer to literature, as they narrate the black woman's tragedy. The story of Dolores is the tale of her trip from the provinces to Havana and of her defeated return. The section narrates her marriage to a Spaniard who, again, might be the General (and who, thanks to the structure of the poem, is now called Mortal Pérez), and the tragic end of their political career caused by their forgetfulness of praying to the Yoruba gods.

As in the previous section, the conventions of the novel are questioned, this time through popular poetry and tragedy. The poem at the beginning of the section narrates a story in an order conditioned by the constraints of versification, rhythm, and rhyme, thus determining that the chronological order must be subverted. Again, the reference to the theater breaks the possibility of verisimilitude and distances the reader from the text.

The last section, "The Entry of Christ in Havana", is, as Echevarría points out, modeled after a painting by James Ensor, "The Entry of Christ in Brussels" (*La ruta...*, 125), and at the same time a parody of Fidel Castro's triumphant entry in Havana after the Revolution. Here, the borrowing from the conventions of painting, of historical writing, of colonial chronicles, and of Spanish mystical poetry is what determines the structure of the plot and the appearance of the characters. In the section, Auxilio and Socorro, both pregnant with Mortal's child, search for him through a Spanish landscape. Their transformations are described in terms of the Spanish Mozarabic tradition, and their

search imitates the mystical poem of Saint John of the Cross, "The Dark Night", as well as Columbus's diary. Their desire for Mortal leads them to choose a surrogate (that at the same time is Mortal), a wooden image of Christ. They initiate a pilgrimage carrying the image that rots as they progress, until they arrive at Havana where the section ends when, unexpectedly, "desde los helicópteros llovió la balacera" ("from the helicopters, bullets rained down") (233).

Conclusions

De donde son los cantantes is a text that refuses to conform to the "laws" of the novel as a genre, to the laws of gender, and of a fixed and definite ethnic identity. The transgression of novelistic conventions is accomplished through the rejection of a chronological sequence and of a temporal thread in the narrative, as well as in the crossing over to other disciplines.

This transgression of narrative conventions is also evident in Sarduy's violation of the Aristotelian requirement of "unity of character" or character "consistency" (81). Sarduy's characters do not merely change their names, but rather, they are immersed in a process of constant "metamorphosis" in which their physical appearance, their shape (which at times is possibly not human), their race, and their gender are at all times fluid. Characters are what they perform.

Sarduy's non-essentialist commentary is that gender and race are not natural and immutable, but are rather a question of performing, dressing up, appearing and disappearing. The "identity" that Sarduy's *De donde son los cantantes* proposes is one that questions the possibility of fixed notions of race, gender, and even of what the novel is. His "identity" includes difference and it rejoices in the whirlwind.

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María Mercedes Andrade
C.U.N.Y. Baruch College
United States of America

LA IMPORTANCIA DEL TEMA SOBRENATURAL EN MARÍA DE ZAYAS Y SOTOMAYOR

Ingrid Matos-Nin

La temática sobrenatural está presente en algunas de las obras de María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1590-c.1650). La función que tienen es esencialmente la de capturar la atención del lector y prevenirlos contra los peligros que puede acarrear el amor en la vida del ser humano. Pero detrás de esta prevención, la autora presenta dos ideas que encontramos en la totalidad de sus novelas. La primera se centra en la sujeción que sufre la mujer en su sociedad; la segunda, en las consecuencias de lo que puede ocurrir cuando se llevan a los extremos los convencionalismos sociales que tienen que ver con el amor y el honor.

Zayas utiliza el conocimiento que posee de la materia sobrenatural para establecer su esquema, a la vez que se vale del miedo que provoca la inclusión del mismo en sus novelas para lograr su propósito. Los textos donde aparece la temática sobrenatural explotan el hecho de que el temor es un sentimiento conocido e innato en el hombre (Lovecraft 12). Su percepción se basa en las doctrinas establecidas por la Iglesia, aceptadas por la sociedad y avaladas por la ciencia (Delumeau 388).

No debemos olvidar que esta era una época en que reinaba el miedo debido a las persecuciones que se realizaban en la sociedad, tanto por parte de la iglesia como por las autoridades civiles. La Iglesia, por ejemplo, para cumplir con su misión evangelizadora, establece reglas que el hombre deberá seguir si realmente quiere alcanzar la vida eterna. Entre esas directrices se encuentra la forma en que el ser humano debe comportarse frente a los sucesos sobrenaturales. El temor a lo oculto será combatido, entonces, con la misma arma: el miedo. La Iglesia, para lograr que el hombre abandonara la búsqueda de las artes ocultas, instituyó un régimen de terror.

La Inquisición intentó convencer al hombre de que debía temer

a todo, incluso a sí mismo.¹ Cualquier persona podía caer en las garras del demonio si no se cuidaba debidamente. Uno de los cebos con que el Diablo tentaba al ser humano era el deseo. De esta manera, el hombre debía cuidarse de este sentimiento porque podría significar la pérdida del alma. Pero las autoridades eclesiásticas sabían que ésta era una labor titánica. Optaron entonces por adaptar algunas de las supersticiones que traían las prácticas ocultas.² Esta era una forma de crear un orden, ya que el creyente sólo tenía que seguir las reglas que le dictaba la lógica en que se apoyaba la creencia sobrenatural.³ Por esta razón, entendemos que Zayas adapta ciertos conceptos sobre el tema. Vemos como, por ejemplo, utiliza la superstición aprendida de su sociedad para crear sus “maravillas” y prevenir a través de sus escritos. Por lo tanto, encontraremos que las narraciones que presenta son productos “naturales” de su tiempo.

Las novelas sobrenaturales de Zayas parecen establecer su propio concepto de la realidad femenina en su sociedad, a la vez que podrían avalar la existencia de lo oculto, según lo entiende la sociedad de su tiempo.⁴ Pero, nos preguntamos, ¿cómo podríamos entender el significado de lo que se considera “sobrenatural”? El diccionario nos define claramente este término como, todo aquello

¹ “En una atmósfera obsesiva, la Inquisición orientó a sus investigadores en dos direcciones: hacia los chivos expiatorios que todo el mundo conocía, al menos de nombre, herejes, brujas, turcos, judíos, etc.; y hacia cada uno de los cristianos, ya que Satán jugaba su papel, en efecto, en los dos lados y cualquiera podría, si no tenía cuidado, convertirse además en un agente del demonio. De ahí la necesidad de cierto miedo a uno mismo” (Delumeau 42-43).

² Tobin Sieber habla sobre lo contagiosas que resultan las creencias: “Belief is excessively contagious, and both imitative magic and artistic representation stir individuals to uncustomary flights of belief and convince them of precarious logic and value. Superstition establishes order in the face of disorder with the aid of accusation, and the fantastic author obeys the logic of superstition to compose the plot of his story.” En *The Romantic Fantastic* (London: Cornell UP, 1984) 46.

³ Julio Caro Baroja dice que “Durante el Renacimiento tuvo gran vigencia una peculiar mezcla de supersticiones antiguas y supersticiones modernas. Pero el tronque muchas veces se había establecido por vía erudita. Así, en las clases cultas se hallaba muy desarrollada la creencia en la Astrología. Cosas populares eran la observación de agujeros y presagios, la fe en los conjuradores de demonios y el miedo a los fantasmas.” En *Las brujas y su mundo* (Madrid: Alianza, 1973) 133.

⁴ Según Margaret Rich Greer, Zayas toma en serio la materia sobrenatural: “Zayas, in contrast, presents magic and the living dead with a straightforward seriousness, as unquestioned elements of a cosmology in which divine power effaces the life-death frontier and desperate men and women yield to the demonic lure of magic.” En *María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men* (College Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000) 240.

que sale de los confines de la naturaleza.⁵ La realidad es que la Iglesia fue quien definió, adaptó e impuso los conceptos que se debían entender como sobrenaturales dentro de la sociedad.

En estas narraciones encontramos el miedo amedrentador a través de las tramas sobrenaturales. Ese temor está dirigido a los lectores de ambos sexos. Pero Zayas incluye de una manera más marcada la situación de inferioridad que sufre la mujer en su sociedad. Éstas eran miembros sin voz ni voto dentro del conjunto social paternalista que las sometía a leyes y costumbres donde imperaba el temor. Por lo tanto, es importante estudiar estas narraciones desde el punto de vista sobrenatural. No sólo podríamos, de esta forma, medir el conocimiento de Zayas en cuanto a la materia, sino también probaríamos la maestría que poseía en el manejo de la misma para poder llegar al lector.

Entre los ejemplos que podemos incluir para avalar nuestra aseveración está la actuación del demonio en *El jardín engañoso*. Zayas nos presenta el clásico diablo que se aprovecha de los deseos humanos para trocar sus habilidades mágicas a cambio del alma angustiada. El contrato diabólico era muy conocido en la sociedad, gracias a los milagros que la Iglesia atribuía a San Ambrosio y San Teófilo. El hombre de esta narración había ocupado al demonio para que le ayudara a conseguir el amor de una dama. Pero se arrepiente cuando se da cuenta que, no sólo había infamado a la familia, sino que sangre inocente podía correr por su culpa. El diablo, entonces, aborrece la inconstancia de Jorge y lo releva de la responsabilidad del contrato. Zayas parece decirnos que el alma de un hombre como éste carecía de valor, aun para el demonio.

El engaño diabólico lo encontramos también en *La inocencia castigada*. El demonio no aparece físicamente en esta narración, pero está representado por un moro sin bautizar que conjura y realiza hechizos para capturar a una inocente mujer. Diego es rechazado en innumerables ocasiones por Inés. El hombre se desespera y busca los servicios de un moro hechicero para conseguir los favores amorosos de la dama. El moro fabrica una muñeca en la imagen de Inés. Luego coloca una vela encendida sobre la cabeza de la efigie y la conjura. El hechizo sólo podía ser destruido el día de la fiesta de San Juan. El conjuro funcionaba cuando Diego encendía la vela que la muñeca llevaba sobre la cabeza. Esto causaba que Inés cayera en trance. La mujer salía de su casa a cualquier hora sin tener

⁵ *Diccionario de la lengua española*. vers. 1992, Real Academia Española de la Lengua, 15 de abril de 2002 <<http://www.rae.es/>>.

conocimiento de lo que le pasaba. No detenía la marcha sino hasta llegar a los aposentos de Diego, donde pasaba el resto de la noche. Esto sucedía mientras el marido de la mujer estaba en viaje de negocios. La situación se repite durante más de un mes hasta que una noche Inés es descubierta.

Podemos ver que la narradora tiene conocimiento sobre la materia, ya que advierte, a través del moro, que el conjuro de la vela podía ser destruido sólo en la noche de San Juan.⁶ Zayas también parece estar familiarizada con los tipos de posesión demoníaca. Inés sufre la conocida como artificial e involuntaria; por lo tanto, es una víctima inocente (Caro Baroja 174). En ambas ocasiones encontramos que los abusos cometidos contra Inés son infligidos sin que la dama tuviese culpa o pudiese prevenirlos.

Pero la narradora también presenta dos tipos diferentes de maltrato. El primero involucra lo sobrenatural y el segundo lo social y humano. Por medio de lo sobrenatural, Zayas captura la atención, mientras que el maltrato que sufre a manos de la familia parece ser la protesta de Zayas contra el convencionalismo social. Este maltrato tiene consecuencias devastadoras para la inocente dama. La descripción que hace Zayas después de que Inés es rescatada parece demostrarnos el extremo a que puede llegar el comportamiento social. El deplorable estado en que se encontraba esta inocente víctima convierte la descripción de los hechos en algo macabro. Esto tiene el efecto de servir como amonestación contra los peligros del amor, así como mostrar un ejemplo de lo que sucede cuando éste hace perder el honor.

Encontramos que esta narración contiene muchos de los elementos populares entendidos como sobrenaturales. Zayas parece entender la función que tienen los mismos en la mentalidad de la sociedad de su época.

El clásico hechizo por medio de un muñeco también lo encontramos en *El desengaño amando y premio de la virtud*. Lucrecia tiene una imagen de Fernando con la que aparenta dominar el proceder y entendimiento de este hombre. Las figuras de cera, barro o algún otro material se utilizaban para acercarlas al fuego o para que los

⁶ "Los ritos de la noche de San Juan aportaban múltiples beneficios y protecciones. Las hierbas cogidas durante la noche del 23 al 24 de junio aseguraban durante un año a los hombres y a los animales contra enfermedades y accidentes. La misma virtud se atribuía a los tizones que uno llevaba a su casa, y también se creía, al menos en Bretaña, que las llamas de este fuego excepcional reanimaban las almas de los difuntos" (Delumeau 99-100).

vivientes sintieran las mismas heridas que estos muñecos representaban (Delumeau 95).

Zayas parece estar al tanto de la literatura que advierte sobre la materia de lo oculto en su época. El más conocido de los hechizos que encontramos en esta misma narración es el de enfermar por medio de conjuros. Fernando enferma en dos ocasiones por las artes demoníacas de Lucrecia y muere en la segunda ocasión. Las autoridades atribuían una gran habilidad a estos hechiceros para enfermar a hombres y animales, así como para dañar cosechas (Delumeau 95). Por su parte, Julio Caro Baroja añade a esta aseveración el hecho de que los practicantes de la brujería podían lograr la muerte de sus víctimas (178). Encontramos, también, que el *Malleus maleficarum* distingue entre tres tipos de bruja: “Those who injure but cannot cure; those who cure but, through come strange pact with the devil, cannot injure; and those who both injure and cure” (Sprenger e Institoris 189). Lucrecia cae dentro de la tercera categoría.

Zayas también parece entender la función que tenían las apariciones del más allá. Juana, en esta misma novela, envía por un estudiante de Alcalá para que le ayude a encontrar a un antiguo pretendiente. El estudiante le enseña un conjuro para lograr comunicarse con Octavio. La mujer cumple la encomienda al pie de la letra. Pero, para su sorpresa, aparece el espíritu encadenado del ahora difunto pretendiente. El aparecido asegura haber sido enviado por el cielo para prevenirla, pues perderá el alma si continúa buscando el amor. El espíritu la amonesta, no porque debía dejar a un lado las prácticas mágicas, sino por empeñarse en lograr el amor de Fernando.

Zayas toma esta idea de la práctica religiosa. Esto se debe a que la Iglesia había incorporado ciertas creencias populares como materia sagrada. Entre ellas está la de los espíritus que vienen del más allá para prevenir a los seres vivientes. La Iglesia se basaba en los escritos de San Agustín y en los de San Ambrosio para apoyar su parecer.⁷

⁷ “Bajo la pluma de los defensores del catolicismo, un discurso teológico que trataba desde hacía mucho tiempo de integrar las viejas creencias en la presencia de los difuntos entre los vivos, adquiere ahora todo su vigor y su plena lógica apelando como refuerzo a ejemplos sacados de la Escritura y los testimonios de San Agustín y San Ambrosio. Dios puede permitir a las almas de los muertos mostrarse a los vivos bajo las apariencias de su cuerpo en otro tiempo. Pero todas estas apariciones se producen con el permiso de Dios y para bien de los vivientes. Los aparecidos vienen a instruir a la Iglesia militante, a pedir plegarias que los liberen del purgatorio o a amonestar a las vivientes para que vivan mejor” (Delumeau 125).

Otro punto que debemos mencionar es la inclusión del estudiante de Alcalá y las sortijas donde habitaban los demonios. Algunos críticos de la obra de Zayas aseguran que la presencia de algunos de sus personajes resulta inexplicable. El estudiante de Alcalá parece ser uno de ellos. Pero entendemos que, por medio de él, Zayas demuestra estar al tanto de la situación sobrenatural entendida en su época.

La presencia de este personaje puede explicarse por la circunstancia histórica. Primero, no debemos olvidar el hecho de que Zayas vivió en Nápoles, mientras su padre servía como secretario del Conde de Lemos. Como segundo punto, necesitamos recordar que en esta ciudad, hacia el final del siglo XVI y principios del XVII, se llevó a cabo un concilio auspiciado por estudiosos y maestros, en el que se pretendía regular y separar la magia blanca de la negra. Estos eruditos querían reconocer la magia blanca como un tipo de arte que podía ser aceptado por la sociedad.⁸ El concilio fue controversial, especialmente cuando se llevó a cabo durante la persecución de las brujas en Europa. Las autoridades en muchos países católicos estaban opuestas a reuniones como la de Nápoles. Pero, según Julio Caro Baroja, Nápoles era una de las ciudades más liberales de la época. Las prácticas ocultas no se perseguían tanto como en el resto del Continente. Pero los detractores de esta materia lograron que el intento de regular la magia fracasara.

El estudiante aparenta ser uno de estos eruditos que pretendían saber sobre magia y artes ocultas. Pero, estudiante al fin, todavía no había adquirido la maestría para controlar a los demonios. La propia Zayas parece conocer el propósito del concilio, así como la fama que tenía Nápoles. En algunas de sus narraciones encontramos el resentimiento contra esta ciudad, por parecerle demasiado libertina en las costumbres.⁹

Encontramos otro de los elementos sobrenaturales utilizados por Zayas en las sortijas de piedras verdes que lleva el estudiante para que los demonios adivinen el futuro de Juana. Las piedras

⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis y Arlette Farge, *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1993) 454-455.

⁹ "Hay en Nápoles, en estos enredos y supersticiones, tanta libertad que públicamente usan sus invenciones, haciendo tantas y con tales apariencias de verdades que casi obligan a ser creídas. Y aunque los confesores y el virrey andan en esto solícitos, como no hay el freno de la Inquisición y los demás castigos, no les amedrentan, porque en Italia lo más ordinario es castigar la bolsa." En *El desengaño amando y premio de la virtud*, 362.

preciosas se utilizaban desde la época de los egipcios porque se pensaba que tenían poderes mágicos. Las personas las usaban en diferentes ocasiones, según la conveniencia y lo que pretendían lograr con ellas (Kieckhefer 103). Las piedras llegaron a ser instrumentos tan preciados que en la Edad Media el propio rey Alfonso X, publicó su conocido *Lapidario* (Kieckhefer 105).

Zayas, a través de narraciones como las anteriores, parece encontrar una especie de “ventana dimensional” desde donde, sin salir del “edificio” donde moran las costumbres sociales, expresa su parecer sin que sus detractores puedan acusarla de herejía. Éstos podrán intentar dañar su fama por ser mujer que escribe “maravillas”, pero no podrán negar la sustancia y veracidad de lo que expresan sus narraciones.¹⁰ Es tal vez el mismo principio de la genialidad cervantina, donde el autor, escondido detrás de la locura del caballero, expone ideas que de otra manera no hubieran sido aceptadas por las autoridades de su época. Las locuras de don Quijote se consideran geniales, mientras que el tema de lo sobrenatural también convirtió a las novelas de Zayas en *best sellers* en su época.¹¹

Podemos considerar que lo sobrenatural es una forma extrema de presentar esa dimensión que encontramos en las novelas zayescas: lo maravilloso. Ésta abre un portal desde donde la autora manifiesta una actitud subversiva, ya que sus narraciones, aunque expuestas desde la seguridad de hechos y conceptos conocidos y aceptados, ponen de relieve una queja. El solo hecho de pensar en desaprobación de una costumbre implica cambio. Cuando la sustitución de esa costumbre no es aprobada por la mayoría de las personas en

¹⁰ En el prólogo a sus novelas, Zayas asegura: “Quién duda, lector mío, que te causará admiración que una mujer tenga despejo no sólo para escribir un libro, sino para darle la estampa, que es el crisol donde se averigua la pureza de los ingenios. [...] Quién duda, digo otra vez, que habrá muchos que atribuyan a locura esta virtuosa osadía de sacar a luz mis borrones, siendo mujer, que en opinión de algunos necios es lo mismo que una cosa incapaz. Pero, cualquiera, como sea no más de buen cortesano, ni lo tendrá por novedad ni lo murmurará por desatino.” En María de Zayas y Sotomayor, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000) 159.

¹¹ Marina Brownlee se refiere al éxito de las novelas de María de Zayas en los siguientes términos: “At the heart of Zayas’s presentation is a cultural commentary that exploits the tabloid ethos very visibly. As well as being a powerful writer of fiction and social critic, she is a shrewd marketing strategist who ‘cashes in’ on the sensationalist ethos of the day, becoming the best selling author of the Spanish literary scene after Cervantes, Quevedo and Alemán. By means of her grisly portrayal of bleeding and broken bodies, Zayas offers an early instance of Elizabeth Grosz’s notion that ‘bodies have all the explanatory power of minds’.” En *The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000) 84.

la sociedad, el que protesta se convierte en agitador. Pero Zayas logra subvertir ese orden social por medio de lo maravilloso, demostrando, de paso, una increíble maestría, ya que logra esbozar ese pensamiento disidente utilizando las mismas armas que le diera su propia sociedad.

En los relatos zayescos lo ordinario se convierte en maravilla que intenta cambiar una situación a través de ejemplos sacados de lo conocido y aprendido. Son elementos dados por hecho en los que la duda no tiene cabida.¹² Este elemento maravilloso le imparte credibilidad a los relatos. Tenemos entonces que algunas de las novelas de Zayas, por macabras que las mismas parezcan, resultan fácilmente creíbles cuando se le atribuyen a las fuerzas demoníacas. Esto se debe a que lo sobrenatural, dentro del contexto del demonio y los hechiceros, es un tema muy flexible. Las características, entendidas como inexplicables, suplirán la ausencia de respuesta lógica (Todorov 159). Esta fórmula es lo que asegura que el lector aceptará la trama como válida.

Zayas aparenta comunicarle a sus lectores que la peor condena que puede encontrar el ser humano es el sufrimiento amoroso. Éste puede llevar a la desesperación provocada por la pérdida del honor. Por eso vemos que Zayas hace todo lo posible por convencer a su público por medio de la inclusión del tema sobrenatural en sus narraciones. Esta puede ser la razón por la que Zayas no parece condenar la hechicería tanto como la búsqueda y el disfrute del amor. Este es el motivo por el que el espíritu de Octavio, en *El desengaño amando y premio de la virtud*, amonesta a Juana por perseguir el amor de Fernando, a la vez que avala la predicción de los demonios. Éstos le habían asegurado a la mujer que perdería el alma si continuaba buscando el amor de Fernando.

Sin embargo, las instituciones sociales tenían la última palabra en cuanto al conocimiento. La Iglesia y la autoridad civil dictaban a qué, en quién y para qué creer. Frente a esta situación, la inclusión

¹² Todorov, cuando explica la diferencia entre lo fantástico y lo sobrenatural, dice: "The represented ('dramatized') narrator is therefore quite suitable to the fantastic. He is preferable to the simple character, who can easily lie, as we shall see in several examples. But he is also preferable to the non-represented narrator, and this for two reasons. First, if a supernatural event were reported to us by such a narrator, we should immediately be in the marvelous; there would be no occasion, in fact, to doubt his words. But the fantastic, as we know, requires doubt. It is no accident that tales of the marvelous rarely employ the first person (it is not found either in the *Arabian Nights*, or Perrault's tales or those of Hoffmann, nor is it used in *Vathek*). They have no need of it; their supernatural universe is not intended to awaken doubts" (83).

del tema sobrenatural funciona entonces como el equilibrio dentro del caos que la clase dominante impone a la vida social de ese tiempo.¹³ Cuando esa autoridad impone reglas inflexibles, por tener la seguridad de que la razón que aducen es definitiva, lo oculto resulta ser una bendición. Las personas, especialmente aquellas que carecen de educación, no tienen por qué preocuparse de entender las reglas. Nadie espera que entiendan. La función de la mayoría social era la de seguir las directrices impuestas y aprender a comportarse según éstas dictaban. La ignorancia es, entonces, el elemento que ayudará a equilibrar el conocimiento que imponía la autoridad social. El creer no sólo servía de amonestación, sino de protección, ya que la sociedad continuaba buscando maneras de detener el mal que sus habitantes habían aprendido a reconocer.

Barbara Walker explica la importancia de lograr el equilibrio social por medio de lo sobrenatural. Nos dice que la asimilación de ideas distintas, acertadas por una cultura diferente a la establecida, es lo que hace avanzar a las sociedades que las adoptan. Su análisis intenta explicar los logros de la sociedad moderna a través del folklore y la interacción histórica de los pueblos que nos precedieron. Su trabajo explica cómo los miembros de la sociedad que no están de acuerdo con las reglas impuestas “sobreviven” dentro de ese mismo conjunto social. Los miembros de la sociedad que se aventuran a investigar son rechazados por la mayoría, o simplemente tienen que buscar la manera de hacerse entender apoyándose en las reglas impuestas. Esto es lo que logra Zayas con sus novelas (Walker 5-6).

Esto tal vez pueda explicar, desde una perspectiva moderna, el hecho de que Zayas, para darle contundencia a sus escritos, los enmarca dentro del ambiente sobrenatural. De esta forma el lector, que vivía en una sociedad sostenida por el miedo aterrador, podía identificarse con las narraciones, porque había aprendido de las autoridades sociales los efectos que lo oculto podía tener en sus vidas. La opinión que presenta en sus narraciones es subversiva porque se enfrenta a una autoridad rígida e inmutable. Pero es desde la propia perspectiva social que esta escritora pone de manifiesto el abuso de que es objeto la mujer en la sociedad a causa del amor y el honor.

¹³ “En la lucha común contra la brujería, los hombres de Iglesia aportaron la ideología y el poder laico el arma de represión. En suma, la Iglesia y el Estado hicieron frente común contra un enemigo—Satán” (Delumeau 594).

Zayas, entonces, para que los lectores entiendan su posición, diseña sus novelas como ejemplos por los cuales el público deberá aprender.

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Ingrid Matos-Nin
Boston University
Estados Unidos de América

THE ERRANT AUTO-BIOGRAPHER REFLECTIONS OF THE AUTHOR IN UMBERTO ECO'S *THE ISLAND OF THE DAY BEFORE*

Andrew Martino

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he populates a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.

Jorge Luis Borges
The Maker

To err is probably this: to go outside the space of encounter.

Maurice Blanchot
The Infinite Conversation

Umberto Eco's third novel, *The Island of the Day Before* (originally published in Italy in 1994), examines the notion of narrating or romanticizing a life. In this highly complex and layered novel, Eco explores the role between author-text-reader. Needless to say, the relationship between writer and world takes on the form of a projection. This projection constitutes a degree of fiction imposed upon the "real" world of the novel; the Daphne, a ship Roberto finds himself stranded upon. This essay will explore the projection of a fictional world where the romance allows the *possible* to intrude upon the daily life of the main character, Roberto della Griva. I also wish to suggest that the projection of a world is not just carried out by Roberto in the novel, but by the chronicler, and Eco as well. That is, Eco writes himself into the narrative just as Roberto places himself in the role of hero. In each case we have the multiple mirroring of author and hero.

The plot of *The Island of the Day Before* takes as its point of departure the notion of the castaway. However, true to Eco's style and thinking, this castaway finds himself in the most extraordinary

predicament: he is stranded upon a deserted ship which lies at anchor in a bay that is within sight of an island. I would ask that you attempt to visualize this particular scene: We have a castaway stranded upon a sixteenth century vessel that lies marooned within sight of a beautiful island somewhere in the South Pacific. The two images I would like you to focus on are that of the ship, the *Daphne*, and the island, Roberto's predicament is further complicated by the fact that he is unable to swim. Therefore, he finds himself stranded upon the ship with little hope of reaching an island that is within sight. While this basic plot is interesting in itself, Eco goes one step further and places the island on the other side of the international date line, which, quite literally, places the island in the day before. Therefore, Roberto is both spatially and temporally stranded in a symbolic purgatory. Eco begins *The Island of the Day Before* with an excerpt of a letter written by Roberto to his "lady": "I take pride withal in my humiliation, and as I am to this privilege condemned, almost I find joy in an abhorrent salvation, I am, I believe, alone of all our race, the only man in human memory to have been shipwrecked and cast upon a deserted ship" (Eco *Island* 1). It seems to me that if we are to approach Eco's novel with a critical eye, we must first acknowledge Roberto's purgatorial existence upon the *Daphne*. The very essence of purgatory implies a slowing down of time almost to the point of suspension. This waiting room of existence condemns Roberto to a life where time is slowed to such a degree that Roberto seems to exist in a state of "suspended animation." That is, by finding himself "condemned" to the *Daphne*, Roberto is outside the space of encounter. By "space of encounter" I mean to suggest that "space" which allows people to interact with others. The space of encounter represents the public area of encounter where one finds oneself "in the midst" of others. Moreover, that interaction with others (which defines the space of encounter) constitutes a fundamental aspect of the creation of our self identity, the "social I," to use Lacan's phrase. The "social I" is a projection of the self onto society which is ultimately "inauthentic." I am using the term inauthenticity in the Heideggerian sense which is defined by the rule of how you are perceived by others. With that in mind the question must be asked, in regards to this novel, what happens when there is no "other" to perceive you? Hence, Roberto's predicament. His condemnation to the *Daphne* can be read as a "salvation" through his use and misuse of memory. Therefore, finding himself outside the space of encounter, Roberto has no choice but to encounter others through the agency of narrative; of storytelling. What results, what is projected is a cosmology based upon the chivalric romance.

It is the narrativization of his life that leads Roberto into the realm of the fantastic, or the “romance” as the “chronicler” (Eco’s narrator) states. To romanticize his life, to turn it into a story which has a clear beginning (the siege at Casale), middle (his education first by Saint-Savin, then in the salons of Paris, where he meets and falls in love with Lilia, his lady, as well as his education with father Caspar, the German Jesuit he discovers hiding aboard the *Daphne* (which I suggest is part of a hallucinatory state Roberto undergoes aboard that ship), and finally an end with his descent into the sea. But before I discuss the importance of symbolism in this novel, I would like to pause over the function of narrative as such.

Narrative is the attempt to spatialize time; to turn it into a picture so that it may be beheld, grasped, conquered. The function of narrative in Eco’s novel is fundamentally related to the attempt by the author to gain mastery over time. One of the subplots to this novel (and there are many) revolves around the seventeenth century quest to discover the secrets of longitude. Cardinal Mazarin, who is about to take the place of the dying Richelieu, sends Roberto on a secret mission as a spy for France to discover what an English doctor by the name of Byrd is up to in regards to the secret of longitude. It is not so much the plot which interests me here as the motivation and correspondence between narrative and time. Roberto’s purgatorial existence following the wreck of the ship *Amaryllis*, leaves him nothing but time. In order to fill up his days he writes fictionalized letters to his “lady” (after all, in a good romance the hero must always have a lady) recounting his life and the events which lead up to, and going beyond his shipwrecked state aboard the *Daphne*. Since time has all but ceased aboard the *Daphne*, Roberto’s purgatorial existence cannot come to a completion as such. Theoretically, story-telling must have a completion; something must be resolved. As readers we are promised an arrival to the end in the story through that unspoken contract which writers and readers engage in. However, Roberto breaks this contract in the sense that he places himself in the role of hero in the story. Thus, his double task is one of author *and* hero. Yet the rules of the romance dictate that we can never be the authors of our own stories; that is a role assigned to destiny or fate. Thus, one aspect of Roberto’s errancy is his attempt to write himself into the role of hero for a narrative which tells the story of his life. By placing himself in the story Roberto is also placing himself back into the linear momentum of time. Writing his life story is the only way he can re-enter the space of encounter and escape the crushing solitude which he finds himself at the mercy of aboard the *Daphne*. This crushing solitude forces Roberto to carry on a conversation with

himself through the agency of the romance. According to Bruno Bettelheim in his marvelous book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, tales (he is speaking of fairy tales, but I believe that Roberto's story works as well) can have a therapeutic affect on helping the child overcome what he calls "separation anxiety." Separation anxiety, according to Bettelheim is, "...the fear of being deserted—and starvation fear, including oral greediness, are not restricted to a particular period of development. Such fears occur at all ages in the unconscious, and thus this tale also has meaning for, and provides encouragement to, much older children" (Bettelheim 15). It seems to me that Bettelheim's articulation of "separation anxiety" and its relationship to the tale (Roberto's turning his life into narrative) compliment a part of Eco's novel in a way that has not been thought before. Roberto's errancy allows him to regress into a childlike role of playacting which is fundamental to the growth of his psyche. But Roberto is errant in what particular sense? According to the American Heritage Dictionary (Third Edition) *errant* is defined as "Roving, especially in search of adventure." Likewise, that dictionary defines to *err* as "to sin." The English word "err" derives from the Latin *errare*, meaning "wanderer." Roberto is a wanderer who, in an attempt to gain mastery over time through the agency of narrative, wanders into a fictionalized story of his life. What is ironic about this is his physical condition of being shipwrecked aboard a deserted ship. Once he finds himself aboard the Daphne Roberto can only wander through the re-creation of his life as he presents it in a series of letters to his lady in order to combat his separation anxiety. Could we not say the same, albeit in a slightly altered form, of the novelist and his or her work? In a way, is not Roberto also a literary mirror of Eco in the form of hero?

What may begin as a need by Roberto to reach out to his lady is in fact an attempt to stay within the space of encounter. Roberto begins writing to put off the feeling of intense isolation that he finds himself in. Eco: "To judge by the date of his first letter, Roberto begins writing immediately after his arrival, as soon as he finds pen and paper in the captain's quarters, before exploring the rest of the ship" (Eco *Island* 5). It is only by accident that Roberto stumbles into the captain's quarters early in his shipwreck. Indeed, it seems that it is only "by accident" that Roberto finds himself in many situations and predicaments throughout the novel. In the Land of Romances, which Roberto begins projecting onto the page almost as soon as he arrives upon the Daphne, the author must supply a hero. Roberto breaks the contract by placing himself into that role. But we must ask the question, what harm could that do since Roberto was writing aboard a presumably deserted ship? Eco: "So Roberto was writing

for himself; this was not literature, he was there truly, writing like an adolescent pursuing an impossible mirage, streaking the page with his tears, not because of the absence of the lady, pure image even when she was present, but out of fondness of himself, enamored of love" (Eco *Island* 6). Thus, I ask the question once again, what is the harm, given Roberto's situation, of placing himself as hero into a story that he is authoring? The harm lies in the possibility for madness. We need only remind ourselves of that other great man who saw himself as the hero of some vast and fantastic romance, Don Quixote. Quixote, as we know, read far too many chivalric romances, and transferred his love for that genre onto the "real" world. Dressed as a Knight-errant (the potency of an errancy once again comes into play) he rode out across the fields of Spain to defend the honor of his lady Dulcinea (who was really just a peasant woman) by helping those "less fortunate". It has been commented elsewhere that Quixote is indeed one of Roberto's precursors. Likewise, Dante's composition of the *Commodia* is dedicated to his lady Beatrice. What is ironic about both of these precursors is that Quixote and Dante hardly exchanged a word with their respective "ladies". We are told that Roberto exchanges only a few words with his lady Lilia. The real Dulcinea thought Quixote an old mad fool. History tells us that Dante spoke hardly a word to the "real" Beatrice, and in that word she all but snubbed him. In *The Island of the Day Before* we get the impression that Lilia is, at best, slightly amused by Roberto, but certainly not intrigued enough to fall hopelessly in love with him. In each of these cases the love which inspires the creative act is unrequited. But perhaps an unrequited love is the most powerful form of love one can experience because there is always the hope that that love will be returned.

The inspiration derived from unrequited love, however, is not the only narrative bridge which joins *The Island* to those other two masterpieces. While Roberto may not have been familiar with *Don Quixote* and Dante's *Commodia*, we know that Eco is. Therefore, another type of errancy is coming through in the form of the author—Umberto Eco—placing himself, at least in part, into the text. This is a fundamental yet often misunderstood aspect in understanding Eco's fiction. In *Post-script to The Name of the Rose*, Eco states: "...I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): *books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told* (emphasis mine). Homer knew this, and Ariosto knew this, not to mention Rabelais and Cervantes" (Eco *Name* 511-512). Eco's statement is perhaps the most clear declaration on postmodern fiction we have. Every story,

every book, constantly refers to a myriad of other stories and books always already. Within this formula for postmodern fiction (which could very well be “opened up” to include postmodern art and architecture as well), it becomes impossible to create something totally original. Everything has already been said, and new stories, new narratives are in fact being retold based upon older models. In Eco’s first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, Brother William of Baskerville states: “In order for there to be a mirror of the world, it is necessary that the world have a form” (Eco *Name* 120). The “mirror of the world” must reflect that model from which it draws form. This is precisely what Eco is doing with *The Island of the Day Before*. *The Island* is a novel that is, quite literally, a reflection of a series of ontological sites. Not only is Roberto constructing a mirror of his life through his “adventures” in the Land of Romances, but he is also peopling his world with aspects of everything he has encountered up until his shipwreck aboard the *Daphne*. The *Daphne* functions not only as Roberto’s physical prison, but a spatial one as well. He is stranded upon a motionless ship that lies within reach of an island which exists in the past. Moreover, until Roberto meets Father Caspar he cannot venture outside the ship in daylight due to an injury he sustained during the siege at Casale, which rendered him sensitive to light. What Roberto sees up until that point are only slight nuances of the island and the vast body of water which surrounds the ship. I would like to argue that it is the symbolism attached to the sea which can be read as the dominant factor in Roberto’s construction of himself.

The sea which surrounds the *Daphne* contains multiple meanings in regards to Roberto. First and foremost we can speculate that the sea represents Roberto’s subconscious. His inability to swim forces him to construct a narrative (based upon actual events, but only becoming heroic in the Land of Romances, which is, after all, the realm of fiction—Eco’s role as cosmologist once again becomes prominent) which theoretically allows Roberto to assume the role of hero and author simultaneously. As I’ve stated earlier in this paper, this dual role constitutes an errancy. But let us delve more into the symbolic. The sea contains the vastness of possibility for Roberto. It is off the reflection of that sea that Roberto begins to construct an altered cosmology based upon the “form” of his real life. It is out of the sea that his evil twin, Ferrante, will emerge to pursue the beloved Lilia and thus, supply a hauntingly familiar rival for Roberto. This dualness of personality which Roberto uses to counter his “heroic” self, also functions as that amoral part in all of us (we who think ourselves moral) we constantly try to repress. It is only perhaps in

fiction that we can “safely” manifest our most sinister desires. After all, when asked how he began thinking about writing a novel Eco has stated that he had the image of a poisoned monk. Ferrante is the mirror-image of Roberto, who in turn is the mirror image of Eco.

It is inaccurate to think that once Roberto finally descends into the sea and disappears under the waves that he is never heard from again. The chronicler is careful to inform us that he speaks to us through the centuries, and most likely will continue to do so. By composing a narrative surrounding his life Roberto sought to escape from the solitude of his prison on the Daphne. It is only through narrative that he could complete the task assigned to him by Cardinal Mazarin, and win the hand of his lady as a result. Likewise, it is only through narrative that the author (Eco as well as Roberto) can hope to come to some sort of logical conclusion. However, in life conclusions are hardly ever “logical.” Therefore, the fabrication of a life allows the author to carry out his or her desires to their completion. While aboard the Daphne Roberto is completely cut off from the space of encounter. While writing the novel the author is completely cut off from the space of encounter as well. The differential dynamics of temporality have ceased once Roberto is washed upon the deserted ship. In order to find his way back (again, the island standing as a symbol for the past, for History as such) Roberto must write himself into the past. In his essay “The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” Jacques Lacan states:

This development is lived as a temporal dialectic which decisively projects the formation of the individual into history; the *mirror phase* is a drama whose internal impulse rushes from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, captive to the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality which we shall call orthopaedic—and to the assumption, finally, of an armour of an alienating identity, which will stamp with the rigidity of its structure the whole of the subject’s mental development (Lacan 96).

Perhaps there is no better way to approach the subject of the mirroring of the self in *The Island of the Day Before* than through a Lacanian interpretation. I would add that Lacan’s essay can be read as an outstanding companion to Eco’s novel and vice versa.

Eco’s novel is not only a mirroring of the self through Roberto’s manifestation of Ferrante, and Eco’s manifestation of Roberto, but it is also a mirroring of Eco’s knowledge and life as such. When we read novels we inevitably learn something of the author, despite what has been written concerning the death of the author. Telling stories is one way of mirroring our errancy as wanderers in the world.

It is through that very errancy that we come to develop the cultural artifacts we leave behind; a trace of ourselves declaring that “we were here.” Perhaps this is most tellingly revealed by Eco’s chronicler some two hundred pages in the novel when he states, “Per sopravvivere bisogna raccontare delle storie,” or as William Weaver so brilliantly mirrors those words in his English translation, “To survive, you must tell stories”. We tell stories in order to leave a trace which says that “we were here.” The auto-biography is an attempt to contain our lives through the agency of narrative. Moreover, narratives are much more than just artifacts; they are artifacts which speak.

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Andrew Martino
State University of New York,
Binghamton
United States of America

THE SPIRIT OF WILLIAM STAFFORD: A COUNTERTRADITION TO MODERNISM?

Lewis Caccia, Jr.

In 1914, four prominent American poets were born. Three of them—John Berryman, Weldon Kees, and Randall Jarrell—committed suicide. The fourth was William Stafford. During an interview, Stafford once commented, “The world is such a zestful place, even in its bleakness” (Young 71). The bleakness, perhaps, overcame Berryman, Kees, and Jarrell. But the spirit that blended Stafford’s enthusiasm for life itself with his acute social awareness is the same spirit that enabled Stafford to write some of the most inspired and insightful poetry of the twentieth century.

Although Stafford may not be as well known as Robert Lowell and other modern American poets, he has still received his share of compliments and criticism. “Stafford’s style,” according to Richard Tillinghast, “has been imitated in every Master of Fine Arts program in the country—particularly during the height of his popularity during the 1970s” (10). On the other hand, in a review of Stafford’s *An Oregon Message*, Michael Heller acknowledges the critics who argue that “Mr. Stafford has not been skeptical enough” by agreeing that “some of his subjects lend themselves too easily to oversimplification” (15). However, while the topics and lexicon of Stafford’s poetry are often not difficult for untrained readers, the poetry is still often defined by complexities that include ambiguity, imagery, and suspense. Through this balance of the simple and complex, Stafford provokes thought—working with readers to put the universal into its proper perspective.

Besides being able to both accommodate and challenge an audience, Stafford is a poet with a strong sense of self-esteem. This self-esteem includes a conviction about the purpose of poetry, the confidence that it can say something true about our lives. As Louis Simpson explains,

He is a poet of the people in the deepest and most meaningful sense

... in a time when poets claim our attention because they are unnatural, pitiable, demoralized. His poems are strong and true; rightly understood, they will enrich our lives. (6)

Certainly, the strength and truth of his poetry are evident in poems like “Thinking About Being Called Simple by a Critic,” a poem in which Stafford not only defends a way of writing poetry but also a way of living life. Other poems such as “At the Bomb Testing Site” suggest his poetry may not be as simple as some critics repute it to be. Moreover, the multiple interpretations of his most famous poem, “Traveling Through the Dark,” underscore the need to carefully read the poems so they are—as in the words of Simpson—“rightly understood.” Looking closely at these poems will show how Stafford’s words and techniques exhibit an unbridled joy for writing.

Stafford was once asked, “is it true that you write five poems a day?” Stafford responded, “No, it is not true! Only four” (Heyen 36). Most likely, Stafford’s exclamation was in mock begrudgment to show how he views the writing process with enjoyment but not obsession. In other words, Stafford’s reply may indicate that a poem’s value is determined by much more than the amount of time spent on it. Supporting this interpretation are some additional reflections by Stafford:

I have genuinely felt throughout my life a sense that any acceptance of what I write is a bonus ... I never have felt that I needed to push this stuff into the world. If it’s invited in, then it will come in. If it’s not invited in, fine, it will live at home. (Young 55)

By describing public acceptance as a bonus, Stafford shows how he values writing more for personal rewards than for critical acclaim. Furthermore, by being content with poetry that lives at home and goes no further, Stafford demonstrates a healthy sense of security in which he needs no approval to do something he truly loves.

“Thinking About Being Called Simple by a Critic” (*Oregon Message* 29) demonstrates Stafford’s enthusiasm and assurance. While reading the first line of the one-stanza poem, “I wanted the plums, but I waited,” one might picture Stafford chuckling to himself as he dangles his poem with a little suspense. As the poem continues, the suspense evolves into the mystery of why the poet continues to wait:

The sun went down. The fire
went out. With no lights on
I waited. From the night again—

On the surface, these lines could be addressing the title to show that Stafford is carefully reflecting on the criticisms of his poetry. So far, though, it is unclear why Stafford is analogizing the writing of poetry

to the taking of plums, other than to allude to William Carlos Williams (Kitchen 124). In the following passage, Stafford takes a stand:

those words: how stupid I was.
And I closed my eyes to listen.
The words all sank down, deep
and rich. I felt their truth
and began to live them. They were mine
to enjoy.

By beginning the first line of this passage with “those words,” Stafford may be setting up a direct rebuttal for his critics. At the same time, the vagueness of “those words” suggests that the poet is expanding to issues other than poetry and plums. Additionally, Stafford’s choice of the word “stupid” sets a tone that defines the strength of the poet’s convictions. By closing his eyes, allowing the words to sink, and feeling the truth, Stafford echoes in his poem the same sentiments stated in his interview—that it is self-satisfaction, not acceptance from others, that gives value to what we do.

Throughout the lines, Stafford’s general reference to “words” transforms the vagueness into a breadth that develops as the poem continues:

Who but a friend
could give so sternly what the sky
feels for everyone but few learn to
cherish? In the dark with the truth

These lines build upon the hint that the poem is conveying a message that extends beyond poetry and plums. The phrase “what the sky feels for everyone” raises great questions for interpretation. Beneath the sky, do people share universal issues common to all of their lives? Or are people united because they all have different issues that confront their individual lives? Could it be both? In any case, the idea of failing to “learn to cherish” suggests that the answers to many questions may be obvious, yet overlooked by many.

Accordingly, the breadth of this poem may be more specifically defined in the passage that follows:

I began the sentence of my life
and found it so simple there was no way
back into qualifying my thoughts
with irony or anything like that.

Here, Stafford may be suggesting that people do not need to analyze everything they do in life. In other words, people may be overlooking the obvious because they “qualify their thoughts” by searching for—or even creating—complexities rather than recognizing

ing the simple with an observant eye. Moreover, when writing poetry or serving any other sentence of our lives, to be good at something may not mean one has to confuse everybody else. With these points in mind, Stafford's conclusion suggests that one's perceptions are not fully developed until they are applied to the one's actions:

I went to the fridge and opened it—
sure enough the light was on.
I reached in and got the plums.

The poem as a whole demonstrates qualities that Vernon Shetley believes are prevalent throughout *An Oregon Message*. In his review of the book, Shetley suggests "each poem is ... simple in diction and syntax, direct in effect, but with a deep core of mystery" (87). Shetley expands on this observation with a commentary on Stafford's place as a poet:

The energies of Stafford's style reside just in this unlikely combination of precise form and ineffable content; the poems present a deeply inward burden of feeling in a devised language to communicate immediacy of perception. (87)

Stafford would probably be pleased with this commentary. Indeed, the phrase "ineffable content" could be acknowledging the importance of Stafford's subjects while "a deeply inward burden of feeling" could be taken as a nod to Stafford's social consciousness. Likewise, by linking "devised language" with the "immediacy of perception," Shetley could be applauding Stafford's knack for balancing thought-provoking technique with words that are common to the population's general vocabulary. Without a doubt, Stafford doesn't dispute the value of audience awareness:

I like being straight across from the reader, communicating with a peer—not preaching to someone or worshipping someone, but talking to an equal ... the obligation I feel is to the people I'm writing to. (57-58)

Despite the general congruence of the critic's observations and the poet's reflections, Shetley's praise is not without caution: "Though their ambitions are limited, such poems are as touching and fine as almost any on the poetic landscape today" (88). In terms of limited ambitions, Shetley may be referring to the difficulty he promotes in *After the Death of Poetry*. To explain, Shetley proposes "making poetry more difficult rather than less" because "only by increasing the level of intellectual challenge ... can current poetry once again make itself a vital part of intellectual culture" (3-4). Accordingly, Shetley believes that this difficulty can be achieved through the "relation between author and reader" (4), which contradicts Stafford's obliga-

tion to the reader. Stafford, however, probably wouldn't mind the limitations of Shetley's praise; for him, it could be one of those bonuses with which he views any public acceptance.

Stafford and his more famous contemporary, Robert Lowell, were both conscientious objectors during World War II. After the war, both poets went on to write their share of protest poetry. Stafford's style of protest, however, differed from those of Lowell and other protest poets of modern times. For example, during the height of the Vietnam War, Lowell rejected President Johnson's invitation to participate in the 1965 White House Festival of Arts. In his rejection, Lowell's approach emphasized the impasse between two opposing points of view. Stafford, on the other hand, preferred to seek a common ground:

Stanley Kunitz once said to me that he had advised Robert Lowell not to go to the White House when Johnson was president ... he said, "You wouldn't go, would you, Bill?" And I said, "Yes, I'd *like* to talk to Johnson." I had the feeling of confidence that the language can take us somewhere. (61)

The fact that Stafford would have been willing to speak to Johnson at a time when it would have been very unpopular to do so is another example of the poet's strong conviction that poetry can say something true about our lives. Moreover, his faith in dialogue reflects a philosophy of protest that emphasizes understanding one another instead of simply trying to force one's own point of view onto other people.

"At the Bomb Testing Site" (*West of Your City* 31) is a product of not only Stafford's assurance and belief in dialogue but also of Stafford's sophisticated technique and of his enthusiasm for writing. Some critics describe the work as a "quiet" protest poem. Charles Simic even describes it as "A political poem in which not a single political statement is being made" (219). Simic may be accurate from a literal perspective but not from the metaphorical. Consider the first stanza:

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,
watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.

In this stanza, Stafford provides scenic details that create a level of visual imagery possible only from a writer who truly loves his craft. The time is noon, when the sun shines at its brightest. The lizard is panting, which conjures images of steamy humidity despite the fact that all is still, as indicated by the tense elbows. Additionally, reduc-

ing the focus to a single curve gives this scene a frame. The curve also builds on the image of heat, the haze of tar evaporating from the pavement. Through this haze, the lizard watches as if something might happen. But the something is not specified, so Stafford once again dangles his poetry with an element of suspense.

Beyond the visual imagery, Stafford's details hint that there are larger issues at work here. The lizard not only pants from the heat but in anticipation too. Literally, the lizard anticipates "history"—another term that Stafford refrains from specifying. In response, Jonathan Holden speculates, "The 'lizard' is about to be destroyed by a turn in human history. The apparent perversity of human history may be incompatible with natural history" (44). Incidentally, Stafford's use of the word "might," rather than may, places this scene in the past tense. By introducing suspense to an already-occurring event that Stafford may view as perversity, Stafford could be making a direct, but metaphorical, political statement. To explain, the poet may be calling attention to the indefinite future of atomic warfare to inspire readers to assume a greater responsibility for determining how that future develops.

In the second stanza, Stafford challenges readers to fill in some blanks:

It was looking at something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

By introducing "something farther off," Stafford offers a bridge from the past to the future. Upon this bridge, Stafford could be encouraging readers to look within their own knowledge and imagination to visualize the potential horrors of nuclear war. In his reference to "little selves," Stafford may be focusing on the present, prompting readers to question their leaders or even the true range of human ability. "At the flute end of consequences" could be a play on the definition of flute as a decorative motif in architecture, thus symbolizing the decorative motifs of developing atomic weapons and of other governmental policies. As Judith Kitchen explains, "The lizard knows more about the flute end of consequences than man, with his foolish need to dominate the world" (48).

In the final stanza, Stafford offers an indefinite resolution:

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert.

In this final stanza, Stafford leaves his readers with a little hope—a hope that can be achieved only if humans recognize their responsibility. As Kitchen explains, “the sky ‘never cared less’—but people can care. If something is going to ‘happen,’ then that something will be man-made and it will affect the world beyond the scope of immediate human ends” (Kitchen 48). Additionally, this poem concludes with subtlety as it is easy to overlook the fact that Stafford is still referring to the lizard when the *hands* grip the desert. Giving the lizard a human quality helps to keep the reader focused on the issue at hand. “The careful understatement of this poem means that its impact is all the more effective. It suggests that if the reader can care about the lizard and its steadfast gripping on the desert, he ought to be able to care about his fellow men” (Kitchen 48). Ultimately, the poem ends with the lizard still waiting for whatever is to come, mirroring the open-ended future of real life.

“At the Bomb Testing Site” requires only twelve lines to provoke thought. Succinct yet thorough, the lines employ a conversational tone that refrains from scaring or shaming readers. Instead, the poem encourages readers to raise questions by implying “that if humanity can anticipate, it might survive” (Kitchen 49). Moreover, the poem clarifies Stafford’s point-of-view while allowing readers the freedom to determine their own evaluations. As Stafford explains,

I have always felt that a raised voice was a mistake, in the sixties or anytime.... I thought that, yes, I would like to go talk to Johnson, not stand outside hurling insults. Somehow communication implies hearing as well as saying; it implies listening; it implies understanding. And intellectual life in general implies a lot of intake, not just output. (69)

By lending an ear to his readers, Stafford offers an alternative to the volatile and dispassionate tones typical of other protest poets, such as Ginsberg and Baraka. Through this alternative, Stafford’s audience does not have to feel alienated or subdued; they are given the option to do more than aimlessly vent their anger or give up without hope. For these reasons, Stafford’s poem, written in 1960, remains in the critical consciousness decades later, as evidenced by Leonard Nathan’s review:

For all the dozens of antinuclear poems I have read and forgotten, Stafford’s sticks out in my mind [...] Direct poems on the topic usually leave me with one of two feelings, if they don’t put me off altogether: either I feel helpless before what they prophesy or I feel like rushing out and doing something fast; since there is nothing useful like that to do, this latter feeling itself leads to a sense of futility and finally indifference. (217)

Hence, the test of time has left us with a poem that is emblematic of Stafford's conviction and of his love for the art of writing. In his conviction, Stafford's subject questions an activity that many in society have accepted as a necessary evil. In his conviction, Stafford writes in a style that is dismissed by some as simple and therefore insignificant. From his love for the art of writing, Stafford carefully plants details that work much like the strokes from a painter's brush, enabling readers to envision the desert scene vividly. From his love for the art of writing, Stafford playfully manipulates a deceptively simple vocabulary to challenge readers to delve into its complexity. Together, Stafford's conviction and love for the art of writing embrace the audience in an exploration of social awareness.

"Traveling Through the Dark" is probably William Stafford's most famous poem. Despite its popularity, however, the poet prefers not to emphasize the poem in the context of his poetry: "I don't think I've read that poem for twenty years without it being requested" (70). This is not to say Stafford doesn't appreciate the acceptance his poem continues to receive: "Teachers tell me [...] that it's a good conversation starter in class. I'm glad for that" (70). Still, as a poet who values the process of writing as much as the product of writing, Stafford would rather not repeat old techniques nor does he care to reexamine what has already been accomplished: "it isn't the kind of poem that I feel took me anywhere; I know how to write that kind of poem. I'm more interested in the ones I don't know how to write" (70).

While Stafford may prefer to explore new subjects and new technique, critics continue to revisit "Traveling Through the Dark" more than a quarter-century after its creation. And there has been disagreement regarding the interpretation. According to Dennis Lynch, the speaker of the poem finds "his final decision remains a problematical one [...] for his act there was no easy, pat answer" (129). In the eyes of George Lensing and Ronald Moran, "swerving" suggests "a sense of self-incrimination" because the speaker is a part of the "predatory world of technocracy represented by his own automobile" (198-99).

Responding to those two interpretations, Ronald Giles offers a rather stark perspective—that "the speaker mentally swerved ... but now realizes ... [his] compassionate, but ill-advised contemplation of animal life" (45). Building his argument, Giles cites Stafford's interview with Cynthia Lofsness in which the poet says, "I can't help feeling a little bit closer to people than to animals" ("An Interview" 96). Emboldened, Giles proclaims, "And this, finally, is the attitude of the speaker in the poem" (45).

Contesting Giles's point-of-view, Gill Holland argues, "in context, Stafford's words [from the interview] offer little evidence that the poet is siding with humans against or at the expense of other animals" (56-57). Holland adds that the speaker's realization may not be "ill-advised" but rather "well--advised" (57). In elaboration, the critic explains, "It is difficult to share Giles's feeling that the poet turns around on the speaker at the end and renounces this moment of contemplation" (57). Concluding, Holland parts with a criticism of Giles's reading of the poem itself and of his use of secondary sources: "Giles's reading of the poem ... seems unconvincing on the grounds of both internal and external evidence" (57).

Before jumping into the frays of interpretation, it may be best to have a look at the poem itself:

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow, to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason--
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

(Stories That Could Be True 61)

Without a doubt, this poem carries an element of conflict. The conflict, however, may transcend the one that exists between humans and nature. Considering that the sight of deer is usually a pleasant experience for travelers, the surprise appearance of deer in the first line and its being dead in the second creates a startling effect. As Terry Fairchild points out, "Following the pause at the end of line one and at the beginning of line two, 'dead' receives extra emphasis. Placed where it is in the poem, the word can hardly be pronounced without producing a dull, flat, thud" (166). This jolting contrast could

be calling attention to how expectations in any facet of life do not always materialize as planned, and the narrowness of the road could symbolize the lack of time we have to deal with the unforeseen circumstances we encounter.

On the other hand, Sanford Pinsker raises a valid argument that “Stafford’s very title teases us into speculations of this generalized, philosophical sort, but it is also important to remember that a poem grounds itself in specifics” (20). Granted, there is no overlooking the unborn fawn and the brief question of whether it could be saved. Still, the poem could be serving a dual purpose: raising the specific issue of the struggle between humans and animals for their respective places in the world while raising the general issue of the different situations in life in which we must weigh conflicting interests.

In the concluding couplet, the word “swerving” draws emphasis as it is being used for the second time. This second use could be hinting of the possible duality of the poem. In other words, just as our cars may swerve in response to an unexpected sight, our minds may swerve in response to an unexpected event. Despite the mental swerving, the speaker of the poem pushes the deer over the edge—perhaps symbolizing how we all must sometimes make decisions we can’t be totally comfortable with.

While “At the Bomb Testing Site” offers a perspective for an issue central to all our lives, “Traveling Through the Dark” offers a perspective that may be applicable to the different issues that define our individual lives. This possible reading of the two poems may define the breadth of “what the sky feels for everyone” in the poem “Thinking About Being Called Simple by a Critic.” In any case, regardless of how one interprets “Traveling Through the Dark,” the poem cannot be dismissed as simple. Although the words themselves may not be difficult, the fact that critics still debate a poem written almost 40 years ago underscores the complexity of their use.

While Stafford ranks with the best of modern American poets, critics find it difficult to place his poems in the larger context of contemporary American poetry. As David Young explains, when one thinks of post-World War II poets, “One thinks of Roethke and Lowell, Berryman and Dickey, Plath and Sexton, Ginsberg and Bly” (260). It almost seems that Stafford exists in a historical vacuum, but that is not the case. By living and writing with an independent style, Stafford may actually help define the era in question. Elaborating on the popularity of Stafford’s contemporaries, Young explains,

We wouldn’t want to be without any of them, but we need a countertradition. Our culture is too easily infatuated by hyperbole and

hucksterism, even in the arts. We need poets who pick up on the possibilities of plainness and understatement, who take us into little noticed areas of rich simplicity and calm delight. (260)

In his commentary, Young may be arguing that to overlook Stafford is to overlook a way of life that has existed for at least some people during the last fifty years. For example, not everybody was taking “mind expanding” drugs, not everybody was committing suicide, not everybody was giving in to the cruel sides of human nature, and not everybody was insecure with their self-image. Thus, to discount Stafford’s place in history is to discount a segment of the population, which is to discount existing points-of-view.

Besides the context of history, critics have trouble placing Stafford within a theoretical framework. For example, as Lawrence Kramer explains, it is difficult to determine whether Stafford’s poetry draws upon or breaks from modernism as an artistic resource:

Like many modernist poems, Stafford’s center on a moment of fruition or fulfillment, but unlike its modernist counterparts, Stafford’s privileged moment is neither sublime nor transcendental; nor, for the most part, is it even epiphanic. (53)

Granted, the universal subjects and general vocabulary do not seem to aspire to Shetley’s concept of difficulty, in which “poetry must concentrate on winning back the community of intellectuals” (28). Still, if we look at the handwritten revisions on the original manuscript of Stafford’s “Traveling Through the Dark” (Young 50) in terms of process as much as product, we may more articulately explain how his poems offer a rather impressive intellectual challenge that transcends the awareness of some of his critics. Henry Taylor affirms, “Some readers have called Stafford’s poetry ‘simple,’ as if it had failed to comprehend our civilization’s great variety and complexity” (232).

Evaluating William Stafford, however, may not so much depend on finding a historical or theoretical category in which to place him but rather simply understanding what he accomplishes as an individual poet. Accordingly, to develop a true understanding, one must carefully examine his poetry and question the generalities that have been ascribed to him. Questioning the generalities that exist, Peter Stitt suggests,

William Stafford is not a traditional nature poet, one whose chief goal is to describe and venerate nature. He is instead a wisdom poet who uses the world of nature as a means to an end—he is in pursuit of a truth higher than those perceived by ordinary men leading ordinary lives. (175)

Indeed, in his use of nature as a means to an end, Stafford offers words that are familiar to the average person, but he uses those same words in ways that can be only appreciated by readers with observant eyes.

Throughout his poetry, Stafford truly sits across from his readers. In poems like “Thinking About Being Called Simple by a Critic,” the poet clarifies his position regarding the writing process; at the same time, he uses the basic desire of hunger as an analogy that challenges readers to contemplate the breadth of the poem’s overall message. In poems like “At the Bomb Testing Site,” the socially aware Stafford clearly defines the topic and his point-of-view while forcing readers to use their imagination to delve into the larger consequences and into the roles they can play. Finally, the conflicting interpretations of “Traveling Through the Dark” show that his poetry really isn’t so simple after all.

While allowing each poem to take on a life of its own, Stafford stays true to his conviction, both in his points-of-view and in his style as a writer. Secure in his style, Stafford allows his readers to lose themselves within the lines by offering details of deep imagery, words that play upon their multiple meanings, and elements of suspense that often leave readers to speculate on the undetermined resolution. These techniques reflect a level of thought that could come only from a writer who truly loves his craft—who truly wants to work with readers to put the universal into its proper perspective.

And that is the spirit of William Stafford.

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Lewis Caccia, Jr.
 Kent State University
 United States of America

CUENTOS / *FICTION*

CUENTOS

Hugo Ríos

El puñal

El puñal, una vez concebido de los hierros candentes y la mano anónima fue a dar a una tienda. Una tienda cualquiera en un lugar no determinado. Como todo objeto nuevo pasó algún tiempo en el anaquel de la tienda antes de que un obstinado adolescente lo comprara. El padre del adolescente llevó al puñal y a su dueño de pesca a un arroyuelo cercano. Una vez concluida la pesca, el puñal probó por vez primera la pasión de cortar, suavemente deslizándose por los húmedos pliegos de la superficie del pescado. Una vez hecho su trabajo fue empacado junto a los demás utensilios. De vuelta a su hogar, el puñal y su dueño participaron juntos del ritual de la limpieza del pescado, despedazando la corteza del pescado, esparciendo las escamas por la mesa de trabajo. De este modo el puñal pudo participar de los secretos placeres del corte y vertió la roja sangre de lo que había estado vivo. Ese fue el principio de lo que sería una gran relación. El puñal y su dueño crecieron juntos. El dueño en edad y el puñal en experiencia. Muchas veces compartieron el interior de la corteza de un árbol tallado por puñal y dueño con las iniciales perdidas de algún amor extraviado y efímero.

Llegaron inevitablemente los años turbulentos, años donde sólo el que puede participar en los ejercicios bélicos es capaz de sobrevivir. El puñal y su dueño asistieron a la guerra juntos. Vivieron el conflicto. El puñal vio participación activa en el combate aunque limitada debido a la intervención de las armas de fuego que separaban aún más la difícil tarea bélica de su significativo humano.

Una vez vueltos de la guerra, el puñal y su dueño trataron de reincorporarse a la sociedad, tarea difícil pero necesaria. Un martes, el puñal y su dueño se encontraban en el apacible campo en busca de la paz que la ciudad usualmente niega a las almas diferentes y de cierto modo inquietas. El puñal desvestía una manzana para su

amo, despojándola de su tersa piel, reincorporándola al ciclo de la vida por medio de la muerte. La paz que se respiraba llenaba el infinito espacio y esto ayudaba a la interpretación de ideas y al acuñar de conceptos. Pero, donde hay recuerdos tempestuosos la paz es fugaz. La tensión entre el puñal y los sudorosos dedos que lo sostenían iba en constante aumento, mientras, luego de un lento ondular por el espacio se mezclaba la piel de la manzana con el áspero suelo. El paso del sol por el cristalino lago causaba un alucinante desfile de destellos, que jugaban con el reflejo del puñal.

Una figura apareció de repente reflejada en la hoja afilada del puñal. Una figura que se acercaba cada vez más. Una sonrisa, muy semejante a los labios de un hombre ahorcado, se reflejó en el rostro de la figura, quedando plasmados en el filo de la hoja metálica. Segundos después, el puñal completaría su destino, penetrando suavemente la piel que cubría el corazón de la figura. El filo del puñal acariciaba suavemente los atrios del corazón, mientras un manantial color manzana brotaba y teñía la empuñadura del puñal, consumándose de este modo un destino que era conocido desde la creación.

Todo no es tan simple, nada bajo el inclemente orbe lo es. La consumación del ritual, no sólo terminó un proceso iniciado con la fundición del metal, sino que del mismo modo que unió puñal y dueño, los separó irremediamente.

Algún tiempo después del ritual, el puñal descansaba en el fondo de un río esperando que su amo lo reclamara de las manos de la corrosión.

Parábola de fuego

Un anciano solitario junto a una fogata contemplaba las estrellas del bosque en una típica noche de hojas secas y aire frío cuando tres hombres llegaron junto al fuego y se sentaron. Pidiéronle hospitalidad y el anciano que con un rostro desprovisto de emoción esparcía hierbas sobre el caldero ardiente, accedió con un casi imperceptible ademán. Los extraños devoraron todo el potaje que ardía sobre las llamas y bebieron hasta que sus sentidos se descarilaron. Uno de ellos sugirió una apuesta entre murmullos. Entre risas y tropiezos decidieron atormentar a su anfitrión.

El primero escupió sobre el anciano rostro y esparció su ofensa

arrojando barro, mas el anciano permaneció inmóvil.

El segundo golpeó el anciano rostro cortándole haciendo brotar negra y antigua sangre, mas el anciano permaneció inmóvil.

El tercero golpeó con gran violencia el rostro antiguo, desfigurándolo, y se declaro, único ganador, mas el anciano permaneció inmóvil.

Unas casi imperceptibles palabras se escurrieron de los labios antiguos del hombre maltratado y al escucharlas uno a uno los hombres se fueron desplomando. He aquí las palabras ya borradas por el tiempo: "El potaje que han probado estaba envenenado."

El otro

La señora Olivia de O'Higgins ha dejado a su familia en este mundo. Hace tres días que murió y por dos largas noches su familia observó su cuerpo en la sala de la casa donde ella vivió. Su cuerpo yace en el cementerio de la familia. Sus hijos lloraron tanto que tuvieron que ser removidos de la sala en varias ocasiones. No se le consideraba una persona extremadamente hermosa pero sí poseía bellos momentos. Las causas de su muerte fueron naturales, prolongando su sueño hasta la eternidad. Yo estuve las dos desconsoladas noches allí. Un joven de camisa blanca y ojos desgastados llegó la primera noche y se sentó tímidamente cerca de ella. Esporádicamente miraba y miraba el cuerpo que allí dormía pero siempre se retiraba a un rincón donde frotaba sus ojos con violencia para despejar sus humedecidos recuerdos. Algunos miembros de la familia miraban al joven preguntándose quien podría ser tan extraño visitante. La hermana de la señora de O'Higgins investigó y encontró el nombre del visitante: Javier Rosas. Aun nadie conocía su relación con la señora de O'Higgins. Cuando descubrieron que era de oficio escritor pensaron que sería tal vez alguna de las extrañas amistades literarias de la señora, que mantenía un círculo literario donde se recogía a los poetas deambulantes de la ciudad. El aspecto maltrecho del flácido joven apoyaba la teoría.

La segunda noche fue diferente. El joven apareció de nuevo ataviado completamente de negro, con un largo abrigo y los ojos extinguidos entre párpados lejanos y sendas sombras negras que

bordeaban el sur de su mirada. Desgastado por la impaciencia miraba y miraba el lecho póstumo. Para desagrado de la mayoría de los presentes algún indiscreto reveló la identidad del joven. Javier Rosas había sido amante de la señora ausente. La tinta de la noticia se esparció por los allí presentes, manchando la solemnidad de la ocasión y la integridad de la señora de O'Higgins. Historias de su extravagante pasión acompañada de lecturas de poemas y promesas nocturnas llenaron la sala rápidamente enrareciendo el aire de tal modo que el angustiado joven tuvo que salir a respirar al patio y de allí fue expulsado del precinto por la hermana de la señora. Una rosa negra extrajo el joven y la colocó en el suelo mientras se marchaba con los ojos líquidos y el respirar alterado por interrumpidos sollozos. Los que allí quedaron continuaron comentando y añadiendo historias aun junto al desacralizado féretro.

La mañana del sepelio todos dejaron rápidamente el cementerio. Muchos clamaron asuntos urgentes y otros ni siquiera llegaron excusándose por medio de emisarios. Todos condenaron a la señora de O'Higgins. Nadie comprendió que existe un motivo mas allá de la razón, situaciones que no tienen comprensión y que no la necesitan. La vida es demasiado complicada para que existan significados fijos.

La tarde de aquel día gris encontró dos figuras que miraban la tumba aún caliente. Dos mirábamos la tumba. Sólo dos comprendíamos que no todo se explica. Los ojos nublados del joven Rosas aún sorprendidos se deslizaban del lugar cubierto de flores y la mirada que tenía al frente. Yo, Andrés O'Higgins, miré a Javier Rosas directamente a las nubes de sus ojos y comprendí que ambos, él y su amante necesitaban estar solos. Di la vuelta y regresé a la casa ahora vacía a escribir estas líneas.

Migas

Una señora ya entrada en simpáticos años fue arrestada en el parque junto a la iglesia. La gente consternada reaccionó con violencia contra los insensibles policías que molestaban a la agradable anciana. Todos en el lugar conocían que todas las tardes, desde hacía ya algún tiempo, la viejecilla se sentaba a darle migas de pan a las palomas. Cierto que las palomas habían estado mermando

recientemente pero siempre había una que otra que visitaba a la longeva benefactora de animales en la banca del parque para comer. Al preguntársele al jefe de la policía local la razón por la cual se procedía de tal manera contra tan inofensiva dama, éste se limitó a entregar al periodista más cercano la bolsa de migas de la señora y a invitar con un gesto de la cabeza, a la inspección de la misma. Dentro de ella, triturados y mezclados con algunas migas de pan, se encontraban pequeños fragmentos de vidrio que probablemente las palomas engullían y luego iban a morir a algún lugar lejano.

Hugo Ríos
Universidad de Puerto Rico-Mayagüez
Puerto Rico

POEMAS / POETRY

FROM MACAO: A MAP OF THE SEASONS

AUGUST 2002

Christopher Kelen

first ferry for Macao

float down from mid-levels,
day escalating...
fire's up when the harbour comes

a single junk slips the sea in its pocket
rocking forth and back
and in an order remembered
without even thinking
we do

Bemvindo

everything's slower here
there's waiting for the rain to lighten
bright and dark puzzle us to our places
tiles from the back room give you the rhythm
hammering somewhere
—that's for distance

the money machine in the wall
says
'relax, take your time
we do

not in Hong Kong now'

Gung Hey Fa Choi

just these few weeks
heaven turns up the air con

mortals make smoke day and night
world's our tinder

one outing per garment
this winter is precious

the sky comes tinsel

lai see, lai see
your students call
half mocking, half hoping

all the barbers still shut, all the pronto-a-vestirs

the day is a red pocket
every future is trapped
ten patacas worth

when the world re-opens
at a new beast's behest

the day has gown into a tree

neither leaves nor fruit
but the day bears red pockets

too awkward to heave into the skip
the tree will gutter

the pockets unfilled
themselves will be landfill

when heaven, so recently charred,
starts to drip

February

this is that season
when bones creak
brain's too damp to fire

there's no more carting round clouds
when you're in them

how much depth to the rain?

the town climbs through it
like a sea in stages

the sky in its speech
is shy
but unending

how much height to the rain?
there are no eyes up
no cupped hands to catch

between skies
out of doors
umbrellas come open

then heaven lets down with its rope

dark of office
 I hear this adjusting
like an old building
lost in thought
 of how to preserve
its nonchalance
 knowing the ivy
holds it up

the world sticks to me
too much this day

Macao: Apostrophe

Macao

I would like you to stop at the crossing for me
and without cursing
and not just for me
what-the-hell
for yourself

Macao

I would like you to smoke less
not to spit the bones out on the table
to clear your throat less noisily
what do you expect? I'm a gweilo

Macao

if your mobile goes off once more
in a concert
I'm going to crush it under my big cowboy boot
I know it will be noisy but think of my pleasure
and how we might then all hear the song

Christopher Kelen
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
University of Macau
China

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